

Center for Teaching Innovation and Excellence

Teaching and Learning at Oberlin College (Oberlin, OH)

The Zappa Doctrine: Risks and Rewards in the Classroom

Sebastian Faber, March 14, 2016



Frank Zappa, Tellez, Flickr CC

“My theory is this,” Frank Zappa said in 1984 when he was asked whether he thought of himself as a great guitarist. “I have a basic mechanical knowledge of the operation of the instrument and I have an imagination. And when the time comes up in a song to play a solo, it’s me against the laws of nature. I don’t know what I’m going to play or what I’m going to do. I know roughly how long I have to do it. ... And depending on how intuitive the rhythm section is that’s backing you up, you can do things that are literally impossible to imagine. ... The real fun of playing the guitar is doing it live.” “So every night then is spontaneous for you?” the interviewer asks. “Absolutely,” Zappa replies. “... Think of it the other way. What if you had to play exactly the same notes every night? Isn’t that like punching a clock? Well—who needs that crap?”

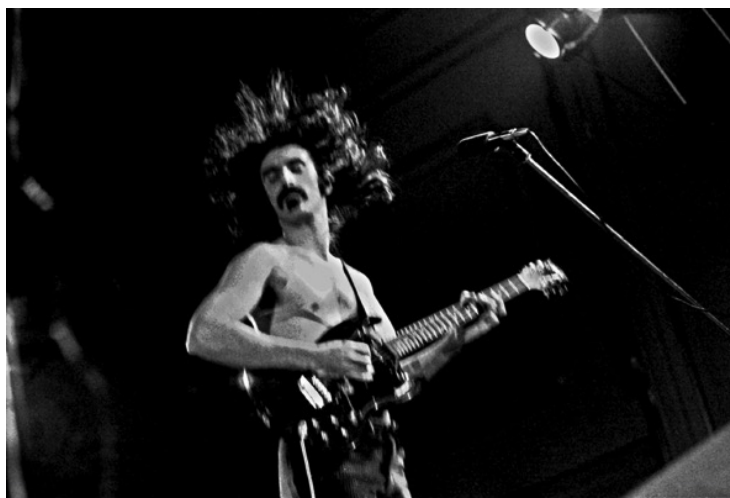
As a teacher I try to live by the Zappa doctrine. I like to think of teaching like playing a live jam session, in which the students are not the audience but your fellow musicians. In principle you know the songs and have the chord progressions down. You even get to make a set list. But you never quite know what kind of night the other players are going to have—and the drummer might decide to change things up at any time.

To put this differently, the key is for the people gathered in a classroom to be willing to take risks. *Safety* is not an essential part of that equation. Trust, however, is. Every semester, I see it as my job to help my students create an atmosphere in which everyone, including myself, trusts each other enough on a personal level to

leave their comfort zone on an intellectual level. The goal of the class is to generate understanding, meaning, sense. Not necessarily to formulate answers, but certainly the sharpest possible questions about issues that matter. This process is creative and collective. Ideas are to share—and to challenge. All positions are tentative. Mistakes are allowed. In fact, they are inevitable and necessary. It's helpful to assume good faith and be generous with granting the benefit of the doubt.

Building Trust

For this to work, it's important to talk about roles and expectations. It is also important to acknowledge that not everyone takes a class with the same goal in mind. On the first day I will often ask students to explain to each other how they see this class fitting into their overall trajectory at Oberlin and their lives more generally. Sometimes we spend part of our first day coming up with tropes for the way we want to think about the thirteen weeks ahead. What are we embarking on? A live gig, an adventure, a train ride, a reality soap? Given where everyone is and where they are heading, is this class a cornerstone or a frill? A trial balloon or a step toward a lifelong aspiration? What investment are people willing to make, and why? What can they expect from each other and from me? Having people define their own roles and expectations gives them ownership—but it also holds them accountable.



Frank Zappa & The Mothers Of Invention, Dezember 1971, Musikhalle Hamburg. Photo: Heinrich Klaffs, Flickr CC

What makes this kind of collaborative, risk-based teaching both easier and harder in my case is the fact that I don't often teach in English. For my classes to go well, it is essential that students feel they have the room to express themselves in a language that for many is not the one they grew up speaking—and a language that, in the United States, is not the one associated with intellectual or political power. I didn't realize what a difference this made until I taught my first class in English, in my fourth year at Oberlin. The class dynamic was entirely different. Much to my surprise, rather than leveling the playing field, using English made it more uneven. Discussions became more gendered; some students began using bigger words than necessary. I suddenly realized that students' willingness to participate, and how they did it, depended at least as much on their classmates as on me. When we have class in Spanish, there seems to be less room for speaking-to-impress or staying-silent-for-fear-of-embarrassment. Also, everyone thinks more before they speak. Because students have to make do with a smaller rhetorical toolkit, they tend to be more to the point. Discussions are often more productive.

Another way to think about this is that speaking in a language that's not your own already involves a significant amount of risk-taking. I sometimes think that everyone's need to cross this initial threshold helps set the stage for an environment of trust from the outset. Switching languages can help to diminish or sometimes even



Pablo Picasso, "Composition" (1949); lithograph. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

invert relations of privilege or positions of power in a classroom. From a pedagogical standpoint, too, the move into another language models what the purpose of a class actually is: to break out of your own self, your background, what you see as your identity, and to open yourself to perspectives that will force you to reconsider what you thought of as truth, normality, nature, or necessity. Switching languages, finally, can help separate ideas from the people that express them. Making things too personal is rarely helpful in the process of a discussion—and some ideas need expressing even if no one feels comfortable associating themselves with

them. (Ideas are hardly ever one individual's creation anyway.)

In a sense, of course, every subject or discipline speaks its own language, and the process of developing fluency in that language is part of the students' learning process. Actually conducting the class in a language other than English brings that point home more explicitly, to the benefit of the class dynamic. It would be interesting to think of ways to bring that same benefit to other parts of the campus. This is actually one of the ideas behind the notion of "languages across the curriculum," which allows students take courses in history, cinema studies, politics, and other subjects in classes conducted in French, Spanish, or other languages.



José Bedia, "Con Licencia" (1991), Ink on amate paper, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

Language and "Cultural Appropriation"

I, for one, can't imagine ever teaching all my classes in English. Still, even at selective liberal arts colleges we constantly have to defend the legitimacy of teaching and writing in other languages. Some colleagues in other fields, for example, have the strange idea that teaching *in Spanish* is the same as *teaching Spanish*, when in fact language-instruction classes take up only about half of our courses. In a country like the United States, in particular, it is also easy to forget that not everything worth knowing or reading is available in English—even when it comes to U.S. history and culture. But there are new challenges, too. In the past couple of years I have heard some students wonder out loud whether someone has the right to use, learn, or teach a language they did not grow up speaking. Thinking from the paradigm of postcolonial studies, they feel that languages are a form of cultural identity that, like other aspects of cultural heritage, is vulnerable to forms of appropriation. Cultural imperialism is real—but to apply that notion directly to language learning is tricky. Unless we want to give up on communication altogether, after all, we cannot do without language. Given that situation, declaring languages other than English off-limits to non-native speakers of those languages only re-affirms monolingualism—a sad form of cultural myopia that, as a symptom, is very much of this time and very much of the United States. It also consecrates English—an imperial language if there ever was one—as a supposedly neutral lingua franca. Finally, it puts the burden on non-native-speakers of English to move out of their language in order to participate in the public sphere.

Rather than questioning the desire to teach and learn languages, my own position has long been the opposite. To me, the struggle against cultural imperialism in the United States begins with breaking down the hegemony of English. This means pushing for a multilingual public sphere—and a truly multilingual campus with a multilingual staff, leadership, and classrooms. Imagine how unseating English from its hegemonic status just a little bit would change an institution like ours, even on the level of power relations.

Suspending Authority

For a risk-based pedagogy to work, the playing field should not just be level among the students. A pedagogical approach in which everyone makes themselves vulnerable also requires something like a suspension of authority on the teacher's part. The class won't work if everyone believes that the person leading the class will always know more than the rest. We have to assume that expertise and experience are always relative, always up for questioning. The fact that everyone is conditioned by their particular position in the world is a given. The double attempt to come to terms with that limitation *and* escape it, is the thrilling, grueling, and risk-riddled process we call learning. Which, in the end, is a form—maybe the only form—of changing the world.



Jarne.Beyls, "Risk Taking," Flickr CC

Suspending authority can be tricky for a teacher, in part because it means resisting the urge to intervene in a discussion, or to directly monopolize it. I often think the best role for me to assume is that of the model student: I listen, respond, ask follow-up questions, defer to others. (In my field, it helps that most of us began

our teaching career in communicative language classes in which even grammar explanations were taboo. Our entire goal was for our students to speak and for us to shut up. Extended teacher-centered monologues—what in other fields is considered lecturing—were never an option.) And if it's difficult for a teacher to suspend authority, it can also be difficult for students to assume it. Often it's easier to defer to the person in charge for answers or explanations. It is also important to realize that the teacher, from her role as *institutionally assumed* authority—she is, after all, the one taking roll and assigning grades—has to actively give that authority up for students to be able to share in it. She also has to know when to take charge again to keep things on the rails.

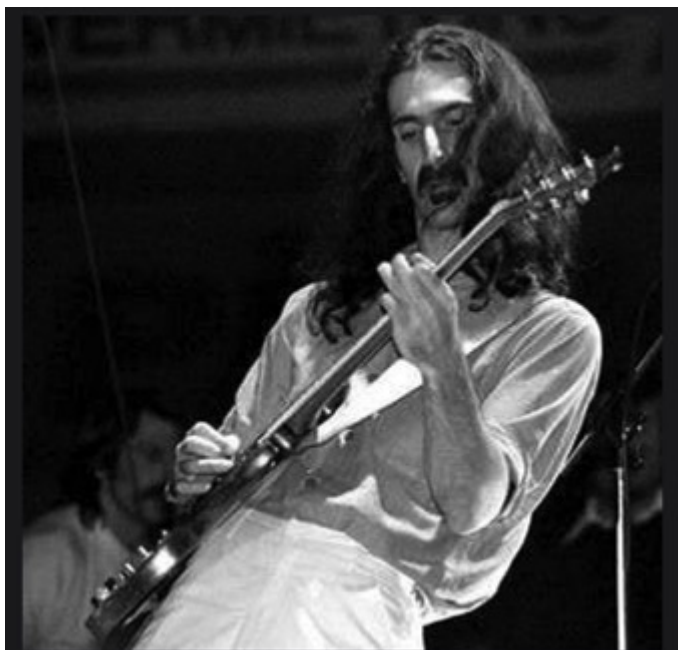
It helps that, in the humanities, expertise and authority are relative almost by definition. A poem, novel, film, or painting always allows for more than one interpretation. Students often discover valuable things that I never thought of. "I'm fascinated with the bass clarinet," a student once said in a discussion about Julio Medem's wonderfully crazy film *Vacas*, which deals with violence in the Basque country. "What bass clarinet?" I asked. "The one in the soundtrack," the student replied—"It always announces something eery." I'd seen the film a dozen times but had never bothered to notice the clarinet. (The student, predictably, was a double-degree double bassist.) What an experience like this underscores is that, when it comes to generating knowledge or insight about art or literature, the difference between the expert and novice can be amazingly—and refreshingly—small. (If anything, what distinguishes the two is the expert's ability to judge how new or original that knowledge or insight actually is.)

Still, suspending authority is a constant struggle. And I've noticed it doesn't get easier with age. The gap between my students and me widens every year, not just in terms of frames of reference—an increasing chunk of my historical memory is no longer theirs—but also in terms of sheer factual knowledge. It's easy to forget that I have had almost thirty years more time to learn stuff. For this reason, I often wonder whether experience actually makes for better teachers. Haven't we veterans lost the energy and creativity of our younger colleagues? Have we forgotten what it felt like to learn as a novice? To be risk-takers in our own learning?

Gigging with Zappa

Fortunately, there are ways to counteract the mental stiffness that can come with age, and to thoroughly undermine one's authority as the single expert in the room. One simple solution is sharing the stage: opening your classroom and syllabus up to colleagues. Some of my best classes at Oberlin have been team-taught.

Team-teaching, when done well, is not less work, to the contrary. It's also twice as scary—it's one thing to screw up before your students, and quite another to embarrass yourself in front of a colleague. But what compensates for all of that is the added depth to the classroom dynamic. As team teachers you can reinforce each other, nuance each other's positions, or flat out disagree. Especially if the team is interdisciplinary, you get to perform your particular scholarly perspective much more clearly than if you're the only one teaching. At the same time, you are little more than a novice on your fellow teacher's turf, learning along with the students. And of course team teaching is also one of the few chances that we teachers get to see our awesome, risk-taking colleagues in action. And that can feel like sharing a solo with Zappa.



Zappa-37, blazeriffic dog, Flickr CC

This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged authority, dynamics, language teaching, performance, risk-taking, Spanish, team teaching, Zappa on March 12, 2016

[<https://web.archive.org/web/20200819014530/http://languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/ctie/2016/03/12/the-zappa-doctrine-risks-and-rewards-in-the-classroom/>].


One thought on “The Zappa Doctrine: Risks and Rewards in the Classroom”



Gabe Cooper

March 14, 2016 at 7:59 am

Thank you for this wonderful post, Sebastiaan.

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