Starve a Troll: Teaching and Learning in Contexts of Anti-pedagogical Provocation

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Matthew Thomas-Reid wonders how well we can know students and how we might, knowing our knowledge to be partial and their expressions to be guarded, come to understand student views on social justice through a slantwise strategy. He suggests using trolling as a way into a kind of queer pedagogy. I'm going to start with a slight objection, and that may turn out not to matter much since I think his general approach can be useful. As he reminds us, "trolling" in gay parlance comes from fishing, trailing a lure to get a bite. I think what internet trolls do is quite different and more related to the creatures who hang out under more-than-linguistic bridges to crunch the bones of children. They troll to get a different rise out of us, one that traps us in their disparagement, not one that draws us into mutual desires. I want to preserve some of that old time queer sport, and keep it distinct from internet-troll-related activities, however much I like the occasion of considering what they may have in common. In attempting to preserve queer trolling, of course, I'm making a mistake, assuming that words have stability outside their initial practices and engaging in a hopeless task of stabilizing what one word should mean when another comes in. Call me traditional.

While queer trolling takes a little subcultural skill to decipher, it is perhaps less possible to know what trolls really mean and I think this is why Thomas-Reid uses their expressions as fodder for critical discussion. Without having to speculate on whether we should watch what they do rather than what they say, focusing on how such internet communication might function for various audiences provides an occasion to think about the reverberations of speech, regardless of intention. Thomas-Reid's pedagogical approach, too, has the virtue of at least trying to not recenter or decipher the actual meaning intended by the trolls themselves. This is a useful endeavor, I think, for social

justice classrooms and actually a fairly reasonable approach to thinking about teaching about any communication. We're interested, maybe, in intention, but we might have an easier time, in some respects, to talk about reception, audience, and interpretation, pushing students to think what it might be like to experience utterances from the fragmentary perspectives of various others.

I think about this problem quite a lot. When young men troll, not in the traditional sense, our LGBTQ+ Center, walking the perimeter, not talking to anyone and walking out quietly, I think Thomas-Reid has a point: they look so much like men cruising parks. The difference is that they do it when no one is there and when they think no one is watching. I wonder (because I am watching), are they trying out the possibility of being in the space? I walk into view and I talk to them but they don't turn their heads, they don't stop their walk around the perimeter. I think, are they being hazed by a fraternity or doing some kind of stunt for a conservative group? I don't know, they don't respond to words, they don't turn around if I talk to them as they leave the hallway, they don't come back. Are they trolls? I don't know. I always offer cookies, just in case there was something about the invitation to go down and mess with the LGBTQ+ Center that seemed attractive for more than one reason or that provided some ambivalent or ambiguous motivation. We got a sensor that rings when someone walks in. This odd trolling/cruising/casing has stopped.

These irksome meddlers may be like internet trolls: they may be trying to get a rise out of us. Provocation may be their only purpose, it's hard to tell. Gay trolling was meant to covertly find others, have sex, or create community. Internet trolling, whatever else it may mean, wants to start a fight against a perceived normalization of socially-just communication. Their disruptions, whether nasty in their curiosity, smug in their irksomeness, or even earnest in their hope to reclaim invective, feel like a push back against queer and other interventions. So while they may be hyperbolic and disruptive, their excessively normative stance is not queer. Not all disruption is queer — queering requires upsetting an actual normalized formation, and since social justice ideals have yet to be stably normalized (witness how quickly some aspects of social justice can be dismantled), internet trolls are not queer. I do appreciate the lengths to

which Thomas-Reid has gone to explain the longstanding queer uses of trolling, and I think maybe, that's what we do back: try to find ways into what may now seem like disreputable advocacy positions and to do so in ways that keeps their edge aimed against structural inequalities.

However excessively (which may seem queer) internet trolls refuse social justice claims and terms, they are not forwarding a conversation or even trying to teach. Their provocations do not intend to insert difference into stabilized concepts nor do they intend to start conversations. Trolls begin encounters that are intended to stymie not incite response. Trolls, generally, cannot actually be answered at all and certainly their provocations that have no particular desire beyond, perhaps, incendiary response from their targets that will then create the conditions for the troll normative center to respond, "See, they can't control their anger. Tut, tut."

There are differences, of course, between utterances that provoke double-binding responses and internet trolling that disperses fake news, fake feeling, or just garden variety racism, xenophobia, misogyny, transphobia, whatever in the midst of otherwise fairly reasonable back and forths. I don't think they so much remind us of what people are "really" thinking but rather remind us that people do not actually want us to be thinking and talking together. Trolls do not want to teach and they do not want people to learn from one another. I think Thomas-Reid is right to want to use these in classrooms, but I would aim not so much at what the internet trolls "really" think, but at what the effect is of what they're doing, which is aiming to stop conversation.

Trolls, too, are likely trying to push the line of moderation in a more conservative direction, pushing what would have been, one hopes, unthinkable invective into thoughtful conversation. Most of us have been through troll encounters and know well enough not to feed them. They become the broken windows of our internet experience. It is depressing that someone feels they must break windows but we know that expanding police powers is not going to stop them and that if we do expand those police powers, the terrorists have already won and so on.

Internet trolls, if we do engage them, and here is perhaps another good strategy for teaching using troll materials, will derail a conversation into impossible defensiveness, waste a lot of time and energy, and centralize the troll. Like whiteness, trollness occupies all the space given to it and then we start thinking about what the troll really thinks when in the end, it would really be better to just start to think: what would these conversations be like if they were not there or if they were actually interested in conversation.

I agree with Reid-Thomas, it would be nice for this to be able to end in empathy but I don't think we're being invited by trolls to feel together about their trolling moments. What I think Reid-Thomas does so well here is place trolls in times and places that they may not stay in and to use their utterances to do something more than they intend. Trolling may just be the alienations of noncorporeal discussions working themselves out in frenzied lathers of vitriol. I hope that trolls are not expressing biases that everyone really thinks but don't think they should express. I do hope most people are more thoughtful than that. But trolls at least remind us that those fractures to justice that the trolls embrace have endured and that there are perhaps always destructive people willing to exacerbate structural and relational fractures, no matter the medium. Maybe, more hopefully, those provocations are not even the trolls' last thoughts on the subject. Maybe trolls themselves will eventually learn beyond their damaging theatrics. They do remind us of the difficulties of our contexts of teaching and learning and we would do well to have our students think about distinctions between productive and stultifying provocations: What are their effects on others? How do we turn conversations and actions back away from provocation? How do we engage uncomfortable difference? As we enter into a seemingly new time where engagements across and within differences are being disrupted, we do need to find ways to engage one another but not be trapped by trolls under the provisional sorts of bridges we might be tentatively trying to build.