Americans "time" their catastrophes. We do this through the use of deadlines—sometimes imposed from the outside; sometimes self-imposed. This means that we have a "safe time" (what catastrophe theorists like Zeeman would call a bifurcation set) within which we are safe from evaluation. Here's the idea:

Time 1: You agree to complete a job for your boss before a fixed deadline.
Time 2: When the deadline arrives, you show her what you've done and she validates that you have done the job or have failed to do so.

Notice that there are four potential catastrophes here (all of which lie in the hands of the boss):

A) At the deadline:
   1) The boss validates that you have done the job.
   2) The boss validates your NOT having done the job.

B) Prior to the deadline:
   1) The boss validates that you have done the job.
   2) The boss validates your NOT having done the job.

Usually, the actor believes that she has done the job when the deadline is reached, making A1 a catastrophic "pleasant surprise" for the boss. When B1 happens the "pleasant surprise" is that of the actor ("You mean I'm done? Already?"). The other two catastrophes are less pleasant. In A2 the boss's status is critical. That is, it is important to keep in mind that the job is a job "for the boss"—a job the completion of which the actor has surrendered to the boss the authority to decide. Thus there is an element of trust here: trust that the catastrophe-at-deadline will be a fair catastrophe. If one submits an article for publication in a journal, one surrenders to the editor and reviewers the decision of whether it is truly a contribution to the discipline. This leaves the editor's fairness (i.e., impartiality) sacred; the actor will refuse to submit to the boss's or editor's judgments if s/he doubts their fairness.

There's really nothing new here, other than that I have described the modernist game that all Americans play to one degree or another. Life is a sequence of contracts within which I do what you want, and at the end you (fairly) acknowledge my having done what our contract says I would do. If you don't play the game fairly, I won't take up contracts with you in the future (fool me once shame on you; fool me twice ...). Sigmund Bauman would call this a "modernist mode of life" insofar as I believe that there is an objectively true state (call it "job completion" or "contribution to the discipline of sociology" or whatever you wish) that you will fairly judge.

It is the fourth catastrophe (i.e., B2) that is most interesting. This is fundamentally unlike the fair catastrophe (i.e., A2) that the actor accepts by virtue of her/his utter trust in the "objectivity" (or fairness) of the other, and sheer faith in the binary nature of reality (i.e., one cannot have "somewhat completion" or "a partial contribution," because at the deadline these things either ARE or are NOT). This is a catastrophe of fairness itself.
"What? How can you judge me? The deadline hasn't arrived yet!!! Give me a chance, here. This is totally unfair."

You felt so safe in the comfort of your bifurcation set—invisible to others’ judgments. Yet it is only a comfort that we Americans delude ourselves into believing. Others continuously judge us. September 11th is the most obvious example here. Our outrage is that we were unfairly interrupted. Soon we return to our comfortable invisibility...until the next catastrophic unfairness reminds us that we are not invisible.

So what is Roberts trying to say here? I'm struggling to give you a theoretical framework for understanding my teaching style—a style of teaching that is different from what most of you are used to. First, you should note that the style does not presume a binary world. As I read your behaviors, I never know if my reading is true to your understandings of your worlds. Since yours are worlds, I cannot but renounce that any one of these worlds is "objectively true" (whatever that means). If you are silent, I "put you on the spot" because I need more data on what you are thinking. What I find curious (though typically American) is how many people react to my questions as B2 catastrophes. "He's already judging us! But the deadline hasn't arrived yet." Must there be a binary world? Couldn't my intended effect be to introduce ambiguity into the binary, or to make the invisible visible?

As a second characteristic, my teaching style doesn't allow you to be invisible. Clearly one cannot teach a skill without closely reading students' behaviors, demonstrating techniques, and providing an ongoing stream of commentary and advice. It is politeness that allows people to remain invisible by either not seeing their incomplete projects (the American version of politeness) or by not seeing their faults (the Asian version). In other parts of the world, being seen is the norm; feigning invisibility is out of the question. My classroom is one of these other parts of the world.

I cannot teach you skills if I ignore what you do and say (or, of course, if you try to remain invisible). This is why I am not polite—never will be. I'm too busy pressing you to think harder, calling you to account, insisting that you never give up. The only saving grace to this never-ending onslaught is that you should realize that I do not expect you to find me invisible either. (After all, why else would I take the time to expose my inner self to you as I am here?) You should not wait until semester's end for my "fair judgment" of your skill; you should come to me as your thinking develops, and discuss how well your writing (e.g., in outlines, drafts, words) demonstrates your mastery. I hope all of you will drop by my office to discuss developments on your term papers. Yet I realize that such premature visibility may be threatening to "the American" in many of you. Nonetheless, I hope more of you attempt to step beyond the shadows of your bifurcation set to a place where your skills are visible to me, and thus where they can be discursively developed. If you don't seek me out, I shall seek you out. Count on being visible. Otherwise, you can count on your not-polite instructor to put on his magician's hat and make the invisible visible again.