Dimensions of Dialogue in Places of Learning

While my pedagogical practice has changed and adapted since my earliest teaching experiences, the metaphor of *dialogue* has remained a meaningful node in the unfolding network of practices, conceptions, and convictions that comprise my pedagogy. I believe learning happens most effectively in moments of dialogue between multiple voices in a place of learning, where the instructor participates and facilitates, but does not dictate outcomes. In a dialogic place of learning, the role of the instructor is to create opportunities for the mutual creation of knowledge, or, as Bakhtin described, the teacher "acts as organizer and participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself [sic] the final word" (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p. 96).

Entailed in the metaphor of dialogue is the pursuit of equity. Unlike a monologue, polyphony requires democratic participation. Paulo Freire (1971) explicitly connected dialogue and democracy in places of learning, emphasizing the importance of teachers recognizing their capacity to learn from the experiences and expertises of their students in a space of mutual respect that critically questions the institutional power often conferred upon teachers in places of learning. In my own experiences teaching visual arts, this conviction has helped me recognize the ways students were thoughtful participants in, and curators of, visual culture, rather than vulnerable youth to be rescued from a venal and predatory popular culture by a canon of rarefied art works. Both the students and I could share meaningful artifacts and experiences, and affirm the works from both my and their canons with serious critical attention.

An equitable and dialogic classroom demands a thoughtful reexamination of the role of the pedagogue that avoids simplistic binaries between laisser-faire and dictatorial modes. bell hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of a pedagogy that is aware of social patterns of inequity as it aids all students – including those often denied their voice in society – in "coming to voice" (p. 185). However, she troubled idealistic conceptions of a class as a free-flowing dialogue of diverse voices, recognizing that larger power dynamics inevitably enter the classroom, and superficially 'free' discourses, where the teacher has ceded all responsibility, can often perpetuate traditional power structures. I have often found myself teaching in contested spaces, such as a rural high school outside a former Confederate capital where marginalized students were especially vulnerable. Such experiences have helped complicate my conception of the role I play in a dialogic classroom, and helped me recognize the importance of the teacher's role in troubling unquestioned assumptions, and explicitly highlighting inequity.

More recently, my perspective has expanded to recognize the ways non-human materials participate in the dialogic construction of knowledge. As an art teacher, I have long recognized the need for students to cultivate critical literacies in response to the ideological meanings of visual culture artifacts as texts. I now increasingly recognize the need for students to cultivate critical *sensitivities* to the ideological agency of visual culture artifacts as materials. Non-human agencies and histories have a tendency to recede from critical attention (Latour, 2005). However, our habits of attention are not innate, but developed in cultural contexts (Ahmed, 2010), and a mindful pedagogue can help students dialogically foster critically sensitive habits of attention.

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