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Working Boundaries: From Student Resistance to Student Agency

Based on an ethnographic study of a writing course taught by a talented instructor who integrated process and critical pedagogy approaches, I argue that many students actively engage with the concerns of critical pedagogy when the classroom ethos strongly supports their agency—their ownership of their developing ideas and texts.

I. Introduction

Composition studies' use of critical pedagogy to promote equity and social justice has been fundamentally called into question.¹ The issue is students' resistance to this pedagogy, as documented by scholars such as Jeff Smith, Russell K. Durst, David Seitz, Jennifer Trainor, and David L. Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald. Smith, for instance, argues that to teach ethically, compositionists must set aside our ideological agendas in favor of students' instrumentalist, professionalizing goals. He holds that because most students pursue, and pay for, higher education to gain the skills and credentials that will enable them to obtain professional positions, writing instructors are obligated to focus on helping students achieve these goals. While more committed to critical pedagogy's concerns, Durst similarly argues that this pedagogy inherently evokes student resistance. He advocates making students' pragmatic, professionalizing

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goals central to our courses, while still incorporating a critical component by asking students to examine the genre expectations, work, epistemology, and institutional functions of their chosen disciplines.

Trainor, on the other hand, retains a stronger commitment to critical pedagogy's core concerns and contends that student resistance stems not from instructors' unethical commitment to those concerns but from teachers' inadequate attention to how critical pedagogy positions students as readers and writers. She argues that to avoid generating student resistance, "we need to be more aware of the rhetorical frames our pedagogies provide for students as they structure identity" (647). If we fail to do that, she warns, we risk mobilizing an explicitly angry, racist consciousness among those white students who see no way to examine their privilege from a rhetorical position that allows them a sense of integrity rather than guilt or self-hatred. Trainor examines two white students' responses to critical pedagogies of race, contrasting one student's rejection of concerns about race relations with the other's willingness to scrutinize her privilege in light of such concerns. She concludes that we must help students find rhetorical stances that allow them to undertake such work while constructing a viable identity for themselves.

In *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*, Wallace and Ewald also emphasize the rhetorical positions our pedagogies open for students, arguing that the answer to student resistance is to develop strategies that create mutuality between teachers and students and so support students' agency in interpreting texts and developing arguments. The most liberatory teacher, they hold, can inadvertently "reproduce traditional teacher student relations" (2). They conclude that such relations undermine the goals of critical pedagogy. For them, a course liberates not through its pedagogical approach but through the classroom relations it fosters: "Transformation emerges from the ongoing interaction of teachers and students in particular classroom situations" (6). The measure of this transformation is how extensively students and teachers share authority in directing classroom discourse and in constructing knowledge within the course. They conclude that three approaches promote mutuality: revising the types of speech typically used in classrooms, redesigning key components of course structure (e.g., reading and writing assignments), and valuing students' agency as interpreters of texts and ideas. Specifically, they argue for maximizing the class time devoted to student comments and the opportunities for students to choose the focus and direction of discussion and for minimizing teachers' use of traditional forms of classroom speech such as lecture and Initiation Response Evaluation (IRE)² (31–67).

After a semester studying an intermediate writing course taught by Justin Vidovic, a particularly talented instructor who integrated process and critical pedagogy approaches, I've concluded that many students do actively engage with the concerns of critical pedagogy when the classroom ethos strongly supports their agency—their ownership of their developing ideas and texts.³ Justin's teaching shows that critical pedagogy doesn't automatically provoke students' resistance.⁴ Instead, his teaching strategies imply the efficacy of approaches advocated by Trainor and by Wallace and Ewald. My analysis of Justin's teaching supports this focus on mutuality in constructing knowledge. But it suggests that replacing traditional forms of classroom speech with new ones is only part of a much more complicated picture. I show how Justin deftly used a wide repertoire of rhetorical strategies to channel students' incipient resistance into thoughtful engagement with course concerns. His approach fostered respect for students' ownership of their developing ideas and texts.

Rather than stressing the number of times students spoke or introduced topics, my analysis suggests that mutuality emerges from a complex mix of such factors with more traditional forms of classroom speech: IREs, modeling key practices for working with texts and ideas, scaffolding students' work with those practices, and teacher commentary and guidance. Perhaps most significantly, Justin used rhetorical moves that consistently encouraged students to thoughtfully evaluate their own and others' views. Through such rhetorical moves, he conveyed respect for students' decisions about where, how, and how extensively to engage, as well as their choices about what they chose to reveal in class discussions and in writing. In making such choices, students manage their personal and intellectual boundaries, and Justin's rhetorical moves supported those boundaries. I argue that his approach helped students digest others' ideas rather than swallowing them whole or rejecting them outright, risks of both traditional and critical pedagogies. I contend that by supporting students' boundaries while also using other key rhetorical strategies, Justin fostered their ownership of their ideas and their developing arguments.

II. "Actively Construct[ing] Knowledge": Why We Need a Holistic View of Classroom Discourse

Wallace and Ewald argue that mutuality arises when teachers and students act as both learners and educators and so "establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom" (3). In each of the book's three central chapters, they explore one approach to sharing authority. In Chapter 2, which considers alternative forms of classroom speech, they argue that shifting

out of traditional forms that privilege teacher control is essential to changing typical classroom power relations so students are positioned to co-construct knowledge. Replacing traditional forms of classroom speech demands that teachers (and students) master new forms. Wallace and Ewald argue that these forms can't be specified in advance because they arise from the interactions of particular people in particular classrooms and concede that they "might even include limited roles for lecture and IRE discussions" (33). Yet to distinguish their alternative pedagogy from traditional pedagogy, they measure the ratio between how often teachers used traditional forms of classroom speech, such as lecture and IRE, and how often students spoke or introduced topics.

To examine these ratios, they studied two classes, one taught by each author. Their evaluation of one of Ewald's fourth-week class sessions reveals that "Helen was not dominating class discussion" because her "students took over 90 percent of the conversation turns, had all twenty-three of the long turns, and spoke directly to each other in cross-talk 75 percent of the time" (39). Similarly, in Wallace's class meetings throughout the semester, students took "nearly two-thirds of the conversation turns and [spoke] to each other in cross-talk about one-fourth of the time" (40).

Thus Wallace and Ewald's method of analysis presumes that traditional forms of classroom speech can play at most a minimal role if teachers and students are to share authority. They acknowledge that simply encouraging students to speak doesn't guarantee the intellectual exchange key to mutual knowledge construction. But their emphasis on calculating the ratio between student talk and teacher talk nonetheless measures mutuality by precisely that yardstick. Similarly, they emphasize tabulating the ratio between student-initiated topics and teacher-initiated topics, as well as how often teachers use various forms of classroom speech. Thus despite their caveat, Wallace and Ewald's research methods presume that particular forms of classroom speech automatically function in a given way, regardless of the larger rhetorical context or the responses they evoke from students in specific situations.

I agree with Wallace and Ewald that teachers and students must create mutuality for a classroom to promote real change and that alternative forms of classroom speech help invite students "to actively construct knowledge" with teachers (36). But my study findings suggest that the effects of particular rhetorical strategies, even traditional forms of classroom speech such as IRE and lecture, do not automatically produce predictable effects. Rather, we must examine specific cases if we hope to understand what effects result from using a particular form of speech in a given context. We need to ask, "How do these

particular uses of lecture (or IRE or open questions, etc.) operate in relation to the other rhetorical strategies used? How do students respond to the combination?" In Section III, rather than calculating how often students and teacher spoke, introduced topics, or used particular forms of speech, I analyze the interplay among different forms of speech in several key classroom exchanges in Justin's course. I show that to understand how teachers' rhetorical moves can produce mutuality, we must examine particular interactions and their effects.

To do so, I draw on key concepts from two sources: systems theory, which studies how patterns of communication structure relationships, and Gestalt psychological theory, which holds that humans perceive objects, events, and interactions in wholes or patterns, rather than in fragmented units. For systems theorists, relationships form from the series of messages that constitute them. The patterns of these messages define the nature of the relationship by inviting some kinds of responses and not others. However, these communication patterns are only partly conscious. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson holds that consciousness focuses primarily on information relevant to our purposes, often blinding us to how these purposes affect the systems we inhabit. Sometimes our focus on purposes—for instance, increasing students' critical consciousness—can throw such systems destructively out of balance. Bateson's work shows that to understand what's happening in a classroom, we must consider parts in relation to wholes, rather than attempting to understand parts (such as forms of classroom speech or paper comments) in isolation from the whole of a classroom's interactions. It reminds us to subordinate goals such as critical consciousness to promoting effectively functioning classroom systems.

Such classrooms must, of course, support learning. Gestalt theory understands learning as a form of cognitive and emotional chewing on an object to assimilate it. This position challenges Freud's belief that ideas, principles, and values are swallowed whole rather than integrated into one's prior understanding (Nevis 27). The learner chooses which new material to integrate and which to discard, as well as which parts of her prior beliefs and values to revise. To take apart new concepts or skills to understand them, the learner needs clear boundaries between self and the unfamiliar. Thus, learning requires adequate boundaries, or clear but permeable lines between self and other (Zinker 182). Rather than trying to overcome resistance to learning, Gestalt practitioners emphasize recognizing how any resistance supports the resistor's integrity (187). They do so because they believe an existing state must be experienced and accepted before a person or system can change. Awareness of, and respect for, that state—including resistances—is part of the change process⁵ (289). In

the next section, I show how Justin powerfully modeled work with boundaries, different perspectives, and integration.

III. “Often We’re Not Aware of That”: Transforming Resistance into Agency

In the winter 2004 semester, Justin taught an intermediate writing course in which students read materials on literacy, including excerpts from texts by Lisa Delpit, Geneva Smitherman, Mike Rose, and David Schaafsma, as well as various cultures’ versions of “Cinderella.”⁶ They also watched significant portions of Steven Sondheim’s *Into the Woods*, a musical that merges and rewrites several well-known fairy tales. They did so to prepare for the work they would do in the second half of the semester: mentoring sixth- and seventh-graders who had enrolled in an after-school course taught at their inner-city Detroit middle school by Justin and his co-teacher (and former student), Mike. The university students’ writing assignments in the early part of the course also helped prepare them for their mentoring experience. They wrote a formal essay, a fairy-tale revision, and several one- to three-page response papers that commented on assigned texts. Some response papers and the formal essay dealt with the competing ideas about literacy students were reading and considering in relation to their upcoming mentoring. Other response papers and the fairy-tale revision prompted students to examine the cultural purposes of traditional fairy tales and revised versions. Because their middle school mentees would write fairy tales as well, the response papers and fairy-tale revisions prepared the intermediate writing students to coach mentees in that project. Writing assignments in the second half of the term drew on students’ work as mentors and included response papers, field notes, and a final research paper.

Justin generously allowed me to attend the class and collect ethnographic data on the course. I was interested in whether and how the service-learning context encouraged students’ critical awareness and whether and how Justin’s teaching strategies explicitly promoted such awareness. I chose his course from three service-learning sections taught at the middle school that semester because he was teaching his fourth such course, had shown a passion for service learning, and had so successfully engaged students in the mentoring experience. Six of his former students had continued working at the middle school after taking one of Justin’s courses, and each semester, word of mouth brought a number of new students who had enrolled in his class based on friends’ recommendations. I wanted to learn what made Justin’s teaching so successful. Further, knowing his commitment to progressive political change

and having read scholarship on students' resistance to critical pedagogy, I wanted to learn whether and how Justin pursued that agenda in a classroom that so clearly engaged students rather than prompting their resistance. To explore these questions, I sat in on twenty-five of twenty-seven two-hour class sessions and two sessions when the class met voluntarily during finals week; collected students' writing; interviewed students individually and in groups at a few points during the semester; and audiotaped many class meetings.

Clearly, the course's service-learning focus fundamentally shaped its design and students' experiences in it. Despite the importance of the service-learning context, my analysis of Justin's rhetorical strategies explores dynamics that emerge in all writing courses. Thus I believe it provides insights potentially relevant for composition teachers generally, as well as for service-learning instructors particularly.⁷ Further, all of the exchanges I consider here occurred in the first half of the semester, before students had begun mentoring or visited the middle school, so the class meetings were structured like those of a traditional composition course. The series of rhetorical moves I examine are strategies readily available to writing teachers generally, regardless of whether they're teaching service-learning courses. I analyzed these strategies through what Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw describe as a classic approach to working with qualitative data: I allowed patterns to emerge inductively from the data and, in the process of coding, examined those patterns through the lenses of relevant theoretical models.

One type of move Justin made repeatedly early in the course involved not only setting course expectations, as most teachers do, but also demonstrating respect for students' boundaries. On the second day of class, after extended introductions in which he'd asked students to "give us something interesting," responded to each student with several follow-up questions, and then played a name memorizing game, Justin asked students to write answers to some questions. Explaining that he was asking the questions not to evaluate students' writing but because he was interested, he said quietly but pointedly that students didn't have to answer the questions just because he was asking, that what they revealed was up to them. He went on to request contact information, the title of a book they'd really liked or recently read, their favorite news source, and their experiences in past English courses. Elaborating on that question, he asked, "What would you like me to know? What worked for you? What did you like? Not like?" and suggested students could add their "hopes, dreams, expectations" of his course. After they'd written for several minutes, he com-

mented that their writing should be “strictly what you want to communicate to me. I’m not asking you to tell me any [freshman writing] secrets.”

In Bateson’s terms, Justin’s statements act as the opening move in a pattern, so they implicitly invite a set of likely responses, just as aggression invites submission or counter-aggression. Thus to understand these moves, I consider what pattern Justin’s messages make, what sets of response they invite. First, these specific moves must be understood in the context of the extended introductions and follow-up questions that preceded them. Those questions—which asked for more background on students’ work, sports scholarships, and cultural interests—invited personal disclosure and connection rather than a more narrowly academic relationship between students and teacher. That context could well have encouraged students to use their written responses to disclose more personal information, as the audience for the writing was smaller, as Justin had already set a tone that prompted students to trust his interest in them, and as students had perceptibly relaxed throughout the introductions and the name game. In that context, Justin’s comments urging students to consider what they *wanted* to reveal and reminding them that what they chose to reveal was up to them promoted students’ awareness of their own boundaries and provided teacher support for honoring those boundaries. One key response Justin’s messages invited was conscious, thoughtful choice.⁸ Because choosing what to take in and put out is key to the process of integration, or real learning, Justin’s respect for students’ boundaries encouraged their agency in such learning.

Those comments in the second meeting only suggested a context for agency in learning; they didn’t determine a pattern for all classroom interactions. For instance, they set norms for student-teacher interaction without explicitly implying any norm for students’ interactions with each other, with texts, with ideas, etc. But by establishing this pattern for student-teacher interactions, they set the tone for Justin’s subsequent comparable moves in relation to intellectual boundaries. According to systems and Gestalt theory, participants experience classrooms holistically, so the pattern set for personal student-teacher interactions shapes the context for exchanges typically seen as academic or intellectual.

Justin built on his early moves in the third class period, when he asked students to consider issues of language and dialect that often arise when people use education to pursue upward social mobility. During that discussion, students readily matched dialects and accents to different levels of education, class, and social position and noted that when returning home from college, people from

non-white, non-middle-class backgrounds avoided language they'd use in the classroom so they wouldn't seem "above" friends and family. Students referenced Carlton, a teenaged African American character in the situation comedy *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, whom they described as a "dork," a "sissy" who "speaks properly." Contrasting Carlton with Will, the show's protagonist, students called Will "ghetto," someone who didn't care about being smart like Carlton.

Linda said, "Will has street smarts; Carlton has books smarts." When Justin asked how Carlton had gotten his academic abilities, Maura said he was "brought up in a higher class family." Students noted the musicians Carlton liked, Neil Diamond and Tom Jones. Justin asked why it was funny that Carlton liked these singers, and Gene, a white student, replied, "Because they're white." Justin prompted, "Funny because he acts white, likes white things. Why is it funny?" "Because he's black," Gene replied.

Asking students to imagine a scenario where a person from any one of several ethnic backgrounds attended college "to get your degree and get a job," Justin said, "And there they teach you to act like Carlton, and what happens [when you go home]?" Deirdra answered, "You get beat up," and other students laughed, agreeing. Justin asked, "What's that do to a person?" He continued, "[When] the way you speak doesn't get you power? The language that gets you power" doesn't equate with "your authentic self?" Students remained quiet, and he pressed, "What do you think?"

Melinda, a white student, answered that Justin's scenario didn't apply in every case. "My parents are both teachers, and I talk to them like I would with professors." Affirming her point, Justin described the local suburb where he'd grown up, noting that most residents are managers in the auto industry and their families. Explaining that for him the leap between home and school language was much smaller than for some people, he said that the language he was writing and speaking before college was similar to the language he uses at the university. "My parents both have master's degrees," he concluded. "I speak a lot like this at home. What else comes into your head?"

Commenting on the tensions academic achievement can produce for students in some communities, Linda, who is white, said, "I just don't understand why it [such achievement] comes to be looked down on." As if to support her point, Deirdra, who is African American, referenced Carlton. Despite students' earlier claims that the show's jokes are based on Carlton's preference for academics and other aspects of culture sometimes seen as "white," Deirdra argued that Carlton is the butt of the sitcom's humor primarily because he likes cultural products that are "too old for him." Students had just described the

tensions first-generation college students often face when returning to their home communities after time away at school. But when Justin asked them to consider the costs of changing one's language as a result of education, Linda and Deirdra resisted, revising the class's earlier assessment of Carlton.

"I don't know," said Justin. "Carlton is funny because he's doing something he's not supposed to be doing." He noted that the sitcom's drama arises because Will comes from south Philadelphia and is trying to be himself in the show's Bel-Air setting. Then he highlighted the contrast between the two African American youths. "Why do we look down on people who change language, clothing to get by in society?" he asked. After a discussion with Maura about stereotypes, Linda commented, "If you want to be successful, you have to conform to what people in power positions [want you to do]."

"Often we're not aware of that," Justin replied, implicitly affirming her point. "And of the things we know [about how to conform to such expectations]." He began linking respect for students' personal boundaries with respect for their perspectives and intellectual boundaries. Justin's affirmation of Linda's point about needing to conform to the expectations of people in power enacted a pattern. Earlier in the discussion, Justin used a fairly open IRE pattern of questions and answers in which students' responses explicitly established the race and class tensions that make Carlton's character funny and contrast him with Will. Similarly, students acknowledged the serious social costs for such individuals with Deirdra's comment that people who use education for class mobility "get beat up" when they return to their communities and her peers' acknowledging laughter. But when Justin asked about the psychic costs of education for people in that situation, Melinda's response that the scenario didn't apply for all students avoided the question by shifting the focus to other groups. Joseph Zinker, like other Gestalt theorists, describes such moves as a form of resistance, namely deflection. Linda and Deirdra's later efforts to question the reasons the class had already established for why Carlton is the butt of *The Fresh Prince's* jokes similarly deflected the discussion's focus away from the psychic costs of using education to gain class mobility.

In both cases, Justin's responses shifted the conversation's dynamic from resistance to affirming students' boundaries. In reply to Melinda's comment that she speaks to her parents as she does to professors, he affirmed her point not only by offering his own example to support it but also by offering the same *kind* of example, one from his personal experience. After presenting the example, he reopened discussion by phrasing a broad request for students' thoughts ("What else comes into your head?"). His question's breadth sidestepped the implicit

conflict between Melinda's response and the topic of psychic costs by inviting students to respond with any comment related to the broader discussion. It simultaneously validated Melinda's contribution despite her move's resistant aspects and enacted respect. In response to Linda's claim that success requires conformity, Justin affirmed her point and suggested its value by noting that it often goes unrecognized. He built on that validation by asking students to consider the case of a boyfriend from a different social class visiting his girlfriend's upper-middle-class household and not knowing the rules for which fork to use.

In Gestalt terms, both Melinda's and Linda's moves show an unreadiness to engage with the topic Justin had raised. Had he attempted to push students into engaging with that topic, Justin would've risked generating further immediate resistance because his move, in Bateson's terms, would've invited that kind of response. Given how quickly classroom dynamics can take root, how early in the semester this conversation occurred, and students' frequent expectation that teachers will impose their views to one degree or another, such an exchange easily could have initiated a habitual pattern of interactions calculated to produce the systemic resistance Gestalt theorists—and many composition scholars—describe. Justin avoided this risk by sidestepping one response invited by Melinda's and Linda's deflections, namely restating his question (and the position inherent in it) more forcefully and so inviting escalated resistance. From Bateson's perspective, because he offered neither of the responses implied in the students' comments (either taking the bait of the deflection or pushing harder to get his question addressed), he shifted the context for response they'd set to a more productive one. Gestalt work on resistance helps explain this shift and the new context it produced.

First, by recognizing and working with, rather than against, students' unreadiness to engage with the topic he'd raised, Justin enacted respect for their boundaries. Because, as Zinker argues, integration, or real learning, requires adequate boundaries, this move sacrificed immediate pursuit of the question to create conditions for students' real engagement with it later, once readiness was in place. Further, it enacted the approach to resistance advocated by Gestalt theorists and clinicians. The relationship between students' positions and the topic of the psychic costs of education shows the significance of two Gestalt emphases: first, Edwin Nevis's point that resistance is a creative force that helps people avoid potential damage to their integrity (143) and, second, Zinker's related contention that it helps people avoid painful interactions (117). For first-generation college students (a substantial percentage of our university's student body), the topic raised potentially painful, even threatening, awareness

of the costs of their pursuit of higher education. For middle-class students whose parents had attended college, it raised potentially guilt-inducing awareness of their privilege. Either way, the topic posed a possible threat to students' sense of their integrity. By sidestepping students' deflections, Justin's moves enacted respect for this integrity.

Both of his responses to those deflections served to heighten students' awareness of their existing positions by first affirming their points and then using that affirmation to prompt students to consider their own relevant experiences. By responding to Melinda's comment about her parents with a reciprocal story of his experience and how it matched hers, Justin worked to increase students' awareness of the effects of middle-class privilege, but he did so while affirming Melinda's point. Similarly, by responding to Linda's contention about the need to conform to the expectations of people in power with the statement that her point often goes unrecognized, he again directed students' attention to middle-class privilege through an affirmation. Nevis holds that people can move into a new way of seeing only after their present state is "fully experienced and accepted" (150). Thus Justin's responses potentially played a key role in initiating such movement. By supporting students' boundaries while simultaneously encouraging awareness of their experiences, his responses set the stage for that process. They did so by following strategies Zinker and Nevis recommend: by affirming students' competence and creativity, a necessary step in promoting their readiness to consider weaknesses or problems in their positions. This approach encourages the mental chewing required for integration and intellectual agency. At the same time, through these responses, Justin modeled for students rhetorical moves that respected others' differences and boundaries yet expressed his position non-confrontationally. Through them, he avoided privileging a single variable (students' immediate engagement with the topic) and instead supported a holistic approach that optimized the class's function and prompted students to integrate new ideas rather than to swallow or reject them wholesale.

In succeeding weeks, Justin built on this foundation of rhetorical moves for respecting students' boundaries by extending that approach more explicitly into their work with texts and with each other in peer groups. In the third, fourth, and fifth weeks of the term, the class discussed contrasting approaches to literacy education (e.g., Delpit, Rose, Schaafsma, and Smitherman) and different critical approaches to interpreting fairy tales. Throughout that work, Justin consistently integrated rhetorical moves that supported students' boundaries with a range of other rhetorical strategies. These frequently in-

cluded both IREs and forms of speech Wallace and Ewald recommend, such as open-ended questions requesting students' evaluations and experiences. They also included extensive modeling, in which Justin demonstrated a range of composing practices: how to analyze and compare arguments by pursuing a series of questions about the text, presenting related points, and suggesting possible interpretations; how to develop one's own response to a text; and how to help peers generate ideas and evidence.

I argue that through these moves Justin helped students clarify and develop their own ideas. He did this by combining traditional classroom rhetorical strategies like those Wallace and Ewald critique with another set that highlighted and supported students' intellectual boundaries. In one set of rhetorical moves, he encouraged students to draw on their experience in responding to texts, an approach Wallace and Ewald advocate. Later in the fifth class day's discussion of Delpit's ideas, he asked students what kinds of evidence she used. Mark responded that Delpit was presenting evidence from "her school," meaning her grade school writing classroom. Justin agreed, noting that Delpit used her teaching experience as evidence. Melayne pointed out that Rose also used his experience as evidence. Justin affirmed her point, then said that students could use their experience as evidence in their papers, just as Delpit and Rose did. He thus structured the conversation so that it began with the authority invested in the assigned texts, which he'd introduced to students near the beginning of the semester as holding more weight because they were examples of published scholarship written by and for scholars, rather than textbooks written for students. By using an IRE pattern to lead students to name the kinds of evidence used in two such texts, Justin demonstrated that some academic texts ground their arguments substantially in personal experience. This demonstration offered students concrete evidence for the viability of Justin's subsequent suggestion that students could use their own experience as evidence in their papers.

Despite Wallace and Ewald's claims about the effects of IRE patterns, his use of the pattern illustrates student-teacher relations with a significantly non-traditional dimension. Rather than assuming that the teacher has the authority to make claims that students must accept on presumption of their instructor's superior knowledge, this use assumes that the teacher must sometimes persuade students by offering evidence. Thus it enacts a fundamental respect for students' judgments and right to evaluate ideas and information presented by an instructor. Similarly, after considering Delpit's representation of debates over whether to focus literacy instruction on developing fluency or developing

skills, Justin referenced students' upcoming mentoring experiences. "We'll have to see," he said, implying that this experience would enable students to evaluate the merits of the arguments for themselves. These interactions enacted respect.

Justin's approach bore fruit, as evidenced not only in students' continued willingness to state positions that differed from those he'd asked them to consider but also in their writing. The first formal essay for the course asked students to consider the literacy scholarship they'd read (Delpit, Rose, Schaafsma, and Smitherman) as representing "different voices in a debate about language, power, and education." Noting that students didn't need to adopt any of these views wholesale in their upcoming mentoring, the assignment instead explained that it would be useful for students to determine their own ideas about language and literacy. Specifically, it asked them to produce "a statement of your own on the relationship between language and power or on how you believe language should be taught." It suggested students could agree or disagree with the scholars they'd read but could also make other arguments. Further, it urged students to draw on both their own relevant educational experiences and the assigned texts to explain and defend an argument that represented "some careful thought about language, power, education, and writing."

I have nine (of sixteen) students' first formal essays for the course, in which they considered competing models of literacy instruction.⁹ Of those nine papers, four could be read as arguing, broadly speaking, for the kind of progressive ideas sanctioned by critical pedagogy; two as arguing against such ideas; and three as arguing for a synthesis. Among the essays arguing for progressive ideas, Mark's contends that dialect expresses one's culture and uniqueness and that we should value all dialects because diversity is an American strength. Similarly, Jim claims that environment shapes language, which expresses cultural identity, and argues accordingly that teachers should take students' environment into account in designing literacy instruction. Safiyeh holds that interaction with others and their ideas is more important for literacy learning than is skills instruction, citing her experiences as a nonnative speaker of English. Likewise, Erica, a white student, argues for teaching skills as a corollary to teaching fluency, although she also insists white educational administrators must take seriously the concerns of black educators who, like Delpit, emphasize the importance of skills instruction. While these papers argue for ideas associated with critical pedagogy's values, the differences in students' positions and their reasons for taking those positions suggests some sense of intellectual ownership, as in Safiyeh's link to her own learning experiences and Erica's emphasis on dialogue between educators of different races.

Evidence of students' agency as writers emerges more clearly in the two essays that argue against progressive social and educational ideals. Dave contends that skills instruction must precede efforts to promote fluency because, he says, fluency comes naturally and emerges in contexts outside school, while for many children, school is the only opportunity to learn literacy skills. He holds that expanding educational and career opportunities for less privileged students requires skills instruction, and he deftly cites Smitherman's argument, which he generally opposes, to provide support for his own. Likewise, Linda argues that education must help students cope with existing racial and other stereotypes by teaching them to speak and write Standard English. Only by doing so, she contends, can it effectively prepare children to overcome those stereotypes and thus gain entrance into college and desirable jobs. Like Dave, she cites not only Delpit, with whom she generally agrees, but also Smitherman, with whom she doesn't, to make her case that liberal teachers who emphasize fluency over skills ultimately harm their less-privileged students. Linda and Dave take agency in these papers by disputing a point Justin worked hard to foreground early in the semester, namely the psychological damage done to groups whose language is marginalized. I believe Justin's rhetorical moves promoting such agency for students during class discussions provided a context that offered enough support that these students felt able to argue for positions that challenged ideas their instructor had encouraged them to seriously consider.¹⁰

This agency also appears in the three essays that synthesize progressive approaches with more conservative approaches. Notably, of the nine essays I consider here, these three were written by the only students, other than Safi-yeh and Amad, of non-European ancestry. (Louna is Lebanese, while Akena and Deirdra are African American.) I see it as especially significant that these students wrote essays demonstrating substantial agency. For instance, Louna holds that dialects have no place in the classroom because students need to learn Standard English so they can overcome stereotypes when seeking higher education and employment. She espouses Delpit's argument for teaching skills in context of critical thinking. To argue for that position, Louna follows Justin's suggestion that students could draw on their own experiences as evidence. She describes her earlier writing courses to explain why she concurs with Delpit's argument for teaching skills in context of critical thinking. Citing Delpit's critique of skills instruction without such a context, Louna says, "I encountered this way of teaching hands on[,] and I blame that [for] the fact that my writing skills with fluency are not as good as I would like them to be. I know that teaching only skill[s] to the children will cause them to memorize those skills and

not really learn and understand . . . at least in my case this is what happened” (2–3). Yet despite her agreement with Delpit’s larger point, Louna nonetheless critiques Delpit’s account of how her open classroom failed. The problem, Louna claims, wasn’t Delpit’s use of progressive pedagogy. Instead, Louna argues that Delpit “gave her students too much power in the classroom and this [is] why she felt that she failed in what she was trying to accomplish” (3).

Further, although the class concluded that Rose’s teaching fit into the category of progressive pedagogy, Louna reads Rose’s work as compatible with skills instruction because rather than marking the errors in his K–12 students’ papers, he rewrote the papers so they could “see how their writing can sound better, when the right skills are applied” (5). Noting that Smitherman would disapprove of this approach, Louna argues that it is calculated to push children to better their writing skills without discouraging them. Thus she illustrates her ability to compare complex arguments that overlap at some points but take conflicting perspectives at others. Perhaps even more significantly, Louna’s work with these arguments shows her ability to use their specifics to construct her own position, one that revises her sources’ arguments in significant ways.

Finally, Louna’s paper also effectively evaluates and uses her peers’ arguments, and those of source texts. Louna readily disagreed with her peers’ views during class discussions. Yet she also considered their perspectives and revised her own when that seemed appropriate to her. In her first formal paper, Louna describes how a class discussion prompted her to shift her position on another text. She summarizes Schaafsma’s account of a conflict in which African American teachers in a summer writing program for inner-city middle school students expressed extreme discomfort after white instructors permitted the middle school students (nearly all of whom were African American) to eat publicly on the street during a program field trip. Louna explains that her first reading of Schaafsma’s text led her to conclude that “accepting the African American teachers[’] advice will put a racist feel to the Summer Program” (4).

Yet she goes on to describe the class’s discussion of this text and how her assessment of the issues shifted as a result of that conversation. She concludes that after the discussion, she understood the African American teachers’ position because classmates had pointed out that eating on the street wasn’t a concern for most class members, or the white teachers Schaafsma describes, because they hadn’t grown up in environments where such behavior could result in negative consequences. “But if I came from an environment where most people that ate on the street are considered homeless,” Louna explains, referencing the class’s discussion, “then I wouldn’t want to be seen as that type

of person by others, especially since I was making the effort not to be like those people and get[ting] an education” (4). Her thoughtful use of her peers’ ideas to assess and revise her initial reading of Schaafsma’s text suggests that Justin’s efforts to support students’ boundaries encouraged them to consider such ideas carefully, neither rejecting different perspectives outright nor swallowing them wholesale. Rather Louna’s response to class members’ ideas about Schaafsma’s account shows her success in evaluating others’ ideas and integrating those she found persuasive and useful.

Deirdra and Akena similarly critique the writers whose work they use to make their own arguments. Like Louna, both argue that literacy instruction should focus on Standard English rather than bringing students’ dialects into the classroom because they believe such education is essential to helping students overcome stereotypes. Akena’s paper also critiques Delpit for failing to exert enough control, arguing that the open classroom approach Delpit used has value if integrated more effectively with traditional skills instruction. Further, Akena agrees with Rose’s contention that open classrooms increase minority students’ desire to engage in discussions and writing because they provide a less intimidating atmosphere, and she cites her own prior experiences as a student in both traditional and open classrooms to make her case. She depicts a middle school English course that used the open classroom approach and asserts that there she learned “to correct my own grammatical errors in both my speech and in my writing” (3).

While endorsing key aspects of progressive pedagogies, Akena still critiques what she views as teaching failures in the progressive classrooms Schaafsma and Delpit depict. After explaining what she sees as each instructor’s mistakes, Akena concludes, “students should not be allowed complete control over the learning process. Some restrictions must be placed on them” (4). Thus, like Louna, Akena draws on her prior educational experience to construct her argument, and she incorporates points and concepts from conflicting academic camps. In short, she sorts through positions and evaluates them in light of her prior experience, deciding which new ideas to integrate into her own views and which to refute. Her capacity to do so suggests that Justin’s rhetorical moves helped students work to integrate new material into their existing values and beliefs.

Deirdra similarly critiques Smitherman’s emphasis on diversity as ignoring the realities minorities face in seeking work. She acknowledges Smitherman’s point that African American students often come to college with “their own way of speaking” (2). Then she describes her own experience working in a mixed-race

suburb and how she uses (and needs) code-switching to do her job effectively. “Using myself as an example, I might say when greeting a friend, ‘what up doe?’ but in a working environment it’s totally different. I greet my customers by saying ‘Hi/hello how are you?’ Due to the fact that I am in a predominantly white, middle to upper class city[,] I greet them the way I would expect them to greet me” (2). She presents a hypothetical case in which an African American youth doesn’t get a job, for which he’s otherwise more qualified, because he speaks only dialect and hasn’t mastered Standard English. Like Louna, Akena, and other students, Deirdra draws persuasively on her own experience to respond to the texts she considers and, out of those responses, constructs a position. Like other students, she argues against positions Justin had asked students to consider during class discussions. Thus her paper illustrates strong ownership of her ideas and her process of engaging intellectually with the texts and positions she encountered in class.

In these three papers particularly, students engage substantively with a range of positions on literacy instruction and on appropriate roles for dialects and Standard English in the classroom and workplace. They consider these ideas in some depth, agreeing with and building on the parts they find persuasive while critiquing sections they find problematic and using the critiques to construct their positions on these issues. Their work with their source texts shows strong agency. The positions they construct for themselves on the issues at stake demonstrate ownership of their developing ideas. Notably, some of these positions draw substantively on ideas the writers themselves or their classmates initially articulated during class discussions.

The work in these papers suggests that Justin’s combination of rhetorical moves created a classroom context that encouraged students to integrate the ideas they were encountering rather than to swallow or resist them. The range of positions students take and their nuanced readings and arguments show the individualized work involved in such integration, where people weave new ideas into prior experiences, perceptions, and values. The individualized nature of this process suggests how delicate and complex it is for students and teachers to co-construct knowledge as Wallace and Ewald advocate. Yet the thoughtful work many of Justin’s students do in their essays highlights the value of fostering such mutuality through a pedagogy committed to progressive values.

IV. Conclusion

Like much recent scholarship, my study suggests we should neither pursue critical pedagogy at the expense of promoting effective classrooms nor abandon

it in favor of students' pragmatic goals. Certainly it is essential to incorporate students' goals and interests into our courses. But to sharply prioritize either those pragmatic goals or our values of critical consciousness is to privilege a single variable at the expense of creating classrooms that promote real learning. Through our teaching, we participate in the larger social, political, cultural, and economic systems we inhabit. Privileging a single purpose, even one as pressing as social justice, risks throwing such systems into the kinds of destructive escalation of a nuclear arms race or global warming. Given the delicate equilibrium of the systems in which we live and the internal motivation required for change, I suggest that our professional responsibility is to enhance the greater good of those systems and their potential readiness for change, rather than to pursue isolated goals, whether our own or students'. In taking this approach, we forego critical pedagogy's emphasis on revolution, which is inevitably linear and focused on a single goal, in favor of the kind of change that ripples throughout systems while keeping them in the balance needed to support life and growth.

Notes

1. My sincere thanks to the following people, who provided helpful comments and advice on drafts of this essay: the anonymous CCC reviewers, Pamela Batzel, Deborah Holdstein, David Seitz, and Justin Vidovic.
2. In this type of classroom speech, teachers (I)nitiate a discussion topic, eliciting (R)esponses from students, which teachers then (E)valuate or to which they provide feedback. As Wallace and Ewald explain, researchers see the genre as promoting strong teacher control of classroom discourse (10).
3. Justin and the students described later in this article agreed to participate in a research study approved by our university's Human Investigation Committee. All student names are pseudonyms. Justin chose to use his name in publications based on the study.
4. To some extent, Justin's teaching parallels Durst's reflexive instrumentalism because both incorporate process approaches more substantively than does typical critical pedagogy. But while reflexive instrumentalism focuses courses on students' pragmatic professionalizing goals, Justin does not. For my response to Durst's argument before I observed Justin's class, see my "Redefining Resistance."
5. Seitz's compelling exploration of the teaching students find internally persuasive also shows that real change must be internally motivated.
6. At our university, intermediate writing fulfills students' second general education writing requirement.

7. Following Robert E. Stake's argument regarding case studies, I'm not suggesting that my findings are generalizable, because I believe qualitative research is inherently rooted in a specific local context. Rather, as I argue in *The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change*, qualitative studies provide readers with a heuristic for evaluating comparable situations.

8. In conversation, Justin explained that he wasn't concerned about what students might reveal about their freshman writing instructors but instead wanted to indicate that they didn't need to disclose any information they felt might compromise them in his eyes, for instance, that they'd failed freshman writing the first time they took it, that they'd put little effort or energy into the course and gotten a poor grade, or the like.

9. I was unable to collect the remaining seven papers from students. Although all students had agreed to allow me to photocopy their drafts once they'd finished using them to develop final paper ideas, some students forgot to bring the drafts, despite reminders.

10. In conversation, Justin pointed out an equally important factor in students' agency. While he encouraged them to engage with these progressive ideas, he was himself convinced of the importance of all the arguments under consideration (those for progressive pedagogy advocates and those for instruction in basic skills and Standard Written English). I believe he is right that this stance supported students to develop their own positions and argue against ideas Justin had encouraged them to consider seriously.

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