Attending to Small Talk in the Classroom: An Issue of Answerability/ Responsibility

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Abstract

Education, as a field, is inherently political, ideological, and contextual (Freire, 1970). As a result, there are no easy answers to address the myriad of highly contestable educational issues that arise as part of the daily classroom discourse. Educators can find themselves at a los for words when it comes to providing clear cut answers given the number of highly polarizing stances, comments, and opinions that elicit strong student and teacher responses. Yet, in the context of the classroom space, the teacher holds a lot of power, which must be coupled with an ethical responsiveness to student engagement, participation, and development of "small talk" in an education course as an approach to co-constructing a dialogic classroom community in which everyone has a responsibility to answerability.

Keywords

Reflexivity, teacher vulnerability, dialogic practice

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Education, as a field, is inherently political, ideological, and contextual (Freire, 1970). As a result, there are no easy answers to address the myriad of highly contestable educational issues that arise as part of the daily classroom discourse. Educators can find themselves at a loss for words when it comes to providing clear cut answers given the number of highly polarizing stances, comments, and opinions that elicit strong student and teacher responses. Yet, in the context of the classroom space, the teacher holds a lot of power, which must be coupled with an ethical responsiveness to student engagement, participation, and development of human agency. In this essay, the author illustrates the development of "small talk" in an education course as an approach to co-constructing a dialogic classroom community in which everyone has a responsibility to *answerability*.

Key words: Reflexivity, teacher vulnerability, dialogic practice.

I.

Introduction

There are no easy answers in the field of education. When engaging students in educational debates and controversies, students need to be provided with ample opportunities to expand their thinking beyond foundational theories. This is premised on the fact that the persistent problems in educational settings are not just about teaching and learning, but also about a society's ideology (Nieto, 2010). Nonetheless, foundations and theories are important. However, equal emphasis must be placed on how such have the potential to impose, exclude, and crumble; they should never just be considered as stable and fixed. Thus educators need to help students ponder - how can theories be applied with a critical eye toward their production, an awareness of their function, and an understanding that they may need adjustment in situated educational contexts? (Bleiker, 2003).

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In the context of the college classroom, engaging in what I call "small talk" allows me to theorize about my students' knowledge production, assumptions, and standpoints. Essentially, small talk entails discussion of current events, news-worthy stories, or thoughts from the previous class session – as such relate to the course content. I refer to some of my comments as "food for thought." I find that this type of small talk interaction at the start of class is a good way of generating interest, making connections, or simply getting students to loosen up, settle down, and engage the discussion.

In what follows, I reflect on how I attempted to cultivate a dialogic space in a particular course from the onset of the semester. I then reflect and comment on a vulnerable moment that standouts in my mind as an example of the complexities involved in attending to small talk in the classroom. Finally, I make a connection to the issue of answerability and responsibility as posited by Bakhtin (1990) and highlight how such has the potential to expand the dialogic space to a type of engagement that goes beyond the classroom walls.

Positionality & Vulnerability

As the only faculty of color in an Education Studies Program, I am mostly responsible for the teaching the courses that focus on diversity issues, culturally responsive pedagogies, and urban contexts. To me, teaching is more than personal; it is always relational and social. However, I also acknowledge that the act of teaching has an individualistic component in the sense that as the instructor, I am responsible for planning and implementing a curriculum aligned with accreditation standards (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2004). This is precisely why I openly discuss the inherent power embedded in the act of teaching and try to position myself as someone who believes in sharing that power. After all, I tell my students that I am learning, too.

Over the years, this pedagogical approach has worked well for me given my positionality as a women of color in the classroom and the content of the courses I teach. In every course I emphasize the notion of moving towards a community of scholars, and highlight that functioning as such necessitates that we collectively carve out spaces where everyone stands to both teach and learn. This stance requires everyone attend to the discursive practices of the classroom community- what is said, how is it said, when, and for what purpose. However, I acknowledge that co-constructing a dialogic space is easier said than done especially in instances of vulnerability.

According to Hargreaves (1998), "emotions are at the heart of teaching" (p. 835). For me this translates into preparing for my classes, reflecting on my practice, collaborating with colleagues, and continuously finding ways to attend to my students educational, social, and yes even emotional needs. Teaching, after all, is a human profession, and it is in human relationships that I find the affective rewards for this work (Shapiro, 2010). Yet, despite real rewards, sometimes emotions are raw given environmental factors that impact on both a personal and a practical level. This is because:

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neither cognition nor feelings can be separated from the social and cultural forces which help to form them and which are in turn shaped by them. The emotional reactions of individual teachers to their work are intimately connected to the view that they have of themselves and others … the unique sense of self which every teacher has is socially grounded (Nias, 1996, p. 294).

In the fall of 2012, I felt particularly vulnerable, and it took awhile before I understood how my emotions, cognition, view of self/teaching profession, and context were all intertwined in a complicated web that impacted my positionality in my classroom, my practice, and my answerability/responsibility to my students (Kelchtermans, 2005).

Cultivating a Dialogic Space

This particular semester I taught an Urban Schooling course. In the very first class I asked students to consider how the terms "urban" and "urban schools" are operationalized in society and educational discourse (Milner, 2012). In every society the production of discourse is controlled, selected, organized, and diffused by certain procedures, which have the potential to create systems of elevation and subjugation (Bleiker, 2003). What do we mean when we use terms like "urban"? Is it just a geographic construct or is it used to encode for race, class, and ethnicity when used in educational discourse? (Noguera, 2003).

I showed students visual representations retrieved from Google Images that included the following captions: location, housing, community, school failure, underfunded schools, socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity. I then asked them to research the terms and to bring their own visual representations to the following class. When we met again, I posted the representations around the room and asked them to review and to write various comments on post-its. This opening exercise was an attempt to make meaning of the terms "urban" and "urban schools," and to identify if their usage of the terms encoded or masked identity markers that students are often unwilling to acknowledge, let alone discuss such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The post-its constituted anonymous representations of the students' sense making of the images. This exercise yielded some of the material I needed to prompt subsequent small talk discussions. Throughout the semester, I strategically used one or two of the comments on the post-its as a "food for thought" comment to engage in a particular discussion at the start of class. Depending on the topic, previous class discussion, and over all in-class facilitation, small talk in the classrooms lasted anywhere from five to twenty minutes.

The key to effective small talk facilitation is the explicit connection to points previously raised, attentiveness to the learning needs of the students, and the intentionality to connect it to content yet uncovered. Not everything is discourse, but

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everything is in discourse. Discourse renders social practices intelligible and rational – and by doing so masks the ways in which they have been constituted and framed (Bleiker, 2003). Therefore, everyday talk, including small talk, is characterized by heteroglossia or multivocality of all social languages. All utterances are dialogic, speaking to and against what has been said and written by others in the past. Therefore, small talk provides textual and documentary traces of schematic and discourse connections students and teachers make, consciously and otherwise, with other texts, life histories, and semiotic universes (Bakhtin, 1981).

By the third week, this type of exchange usually becomes a matter of routine. What I find is that recognizing and attending to small talk not only leads to open dialogue, but it elicits evaluative and thoughtful responses from students (Burbules, 1993). Attending to small talk does not always mean answering; it does mean acknowledging, pushing against, and paraphrasing and expanding for others in the classroom community to take up. This approach not only signals to students that their comments have been heard, but sends a message that in a community of scholars, the collective has a responsibility of making sense, making connections, and responding in ways that lead to democratic dialogue (Grant, 2012).

The notion of democratic dialogue attends specifically to issues of reflection, ethics, and ideological work culminating in social action on behalf of all students. These components work well together in pursuing a value-centered and transformative pedagogical approach for future educators (Grant, 2012). Thus, students often times come to class with their own contribution to small talk exchanges. This exchanges consists of social events of verbal interactions that inevitably shape the direction of the discussion, but occasionally lead to sites of struggle where social languages and ideological belief systems collide (Robertson, 1993).

Personal Vulnerability: Reflection of Attending to Small Talk

Toward the end of the semester, I commented on something having to do with teaching and teacher education programs. I do not recall exactly what it was, but I have no doubt it had something to do with the continual call for changes in teacher education programs. The argument that due to profound demographic, economic, technological, and global changes, the needs and expectations of schools have changed; thus, there is a need to examine where and how teacher education programs are still relevant (Levine, 2010). Lately, this prevailing argument has been more than just a sore topic and has led to a great deal of introspection given the shifting environment at my institution.

The teaching of this course coincided with programmatic and organizational changes in my department. During this time, the Education Studies Program was moved into the Sociology Department. The administrative change generated a lot of buzz on campus, particularly amongst our students pursuing an education minor. A lot of students questioned the decision to eliminate the licensure program as well. Therefore, in my roles as teacher and as Program Director, I spent a great deal of time during the semester

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fielding questions about the program, program offerings, and the future of teacher education in general.

Understandingly, a host of students felt uneasy about their chosen profession. I heard everything from "what does it mean for an institution not to have an Education Department?" to "will this impact my degree and how I market myself?" At times, it almost felt like I was gearing-up for an eventual end, trying to keep everything together for the sake of everyone, but not necessarily feeling like I was standing on solid ground. I certainly tried my hardest not to demonstrate any kind of disappointment or negativity. Instead, the focus shifted to exploring ways to renew excitement and chart a new direction.

This was not always easy to maintain, and I frequently doubted myself. Perhaps due to my heightened state of vulnerability and sensitivity, I often sensed that students could pick up on my uneasiness. It was almost as though I was living what I was attempting to convey to students about teaching: that teaching is full of uncertainty, that it is ethical and political work, and that it requires one to break from personal feelings of entitlement and marginality in order to engage students in being critical readers of the world (Robertson, 1993). The reality is that for a host of reasons the move to the Sociology Department was the best possible outcome. As an administrator, I realized this. However, as a teacher, it has taken me a long time to grieve the demise of an Education Department. As such, the continual environmental calls for changes in teacher education programs and the negativity surrounding teachers hit very close to home in the fall of 2012.

One particular night, having just barely finished my small talk comment, Katerina sheepishly raised her hand and remarked, *"you know, that's what they say about you. Well, not you personally, but the education program."* My facial expression must have exposed what I was feeling because I sensed a bit of trepidation in her voice. At the same time, she courageously continued, *"as an economic major, I hear it all the time, 'why are you taking education courses? Those are just a bunch of feel good classes.'"* Before I could respond, Jennifer enters the conversation and in a matter of fact demeanor stated, *"yeah, I was telling my friend about some of the things we are learning in this class and my mom who happened to be nearby asked, 'is that what they are teaching you in school?'"*

For a few seconds, I was confused and felt smaller than my five foot frame – completely exposed, just twisted inside. *"Teaching you in school,"* I remember asking myself. I immediately wanted to defend the emphasis placed on critical pedagogy, the notion of praxis, and the power embedded in teaching. What's the matter with these topics I wanted to exclaim! How would I respond without coming across as being personally wounded? I felt the need to disengage and to comment objectively as to give credence to the teaching profession – it is not just about touchy feely things after all! I felt the need to defend and justify everything we had discussed in the course. However, coming across as defensive was not an option. This open and sometime raw dialogue is

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precisely what I hoped for as a teacher and what I worked so hard to encourage and support.

At that moment, though, I stood alone, exposed, and secretly hoping the community would come to my rescue, but no one did. Everyone just sat in silence waiting for a response from me. To make matters worse, as customary, I had already loaded my power point slides and as the clock slowly crept closer to 4:35, just as the sun was starting to set, the light of the projector never shone brighter on my face. Certainly, there is no alibi from being. Each utterance entails a response and in this case, the entire class waited for mine (Maguire, 2006).

In what seemed like a lifetime, with the exception that I could honestly feel rapid synapses at work, I pondered how I could continue the dialogue without revealing the vulnerability I was feeling. Could I separate those feeling from my response? Oh, no, not the "f" word – feelings! Who are the "they" Katerina referenced? Why it is that she hears these comments "all the time?" Does it have something to do with her major? What exactly did Jennifer's mom mean by asking, *"is that what they are teaching you in school?"* What about my teaching was not consistent with a college education? Am I reading too much into all of this? Whose interest am I serving by pondering these questions and whose interest would I serve by the way I attend to them? (Vadeboncoeur & Luke, 2004).

Creativity in teaching often emerges in the unexpected, the unanticipated, and the unscripted raw comments students make (Cruddas, 2007). I could not have planned this any better. Here it was, almost the end of the semester and I had an opportunity to make connections to content, to process, and to practice. More importantly, I had an opportunity to attend to what it means to teach in real time, in a situated social spaces where environmental influences impact how knowledge is constructed, how individuals come to know what they know, and where feelings do matter and affect our practice.

I responded by asking my students to think back to our previous class discussions, particularly, *"do you recall that very early in the semester we discussed issues of ideology and theories?"* A few of them nodded their heads. I proceeded, *"why do you think I focused on those issues in this course"* Still no response. *"What do you recall from that and subsequent discussions and do you think any of that applies to dominant narratives about teaching and even perhaps teacher education programs?"* I asked these question with the hope that they would recall that we had discussed how the term "ideology" was first used just after the French Revolution by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in *Eléments d'idéologie* between 1801 and 1815 to propose a new science of ideas, an idea-ology, and that he argued that all the ideas in our heads come from evidence about the world we have gathered through our physical senses (Gee, 2012). This prodding was meant for them to ponder where the prevailing ideologies about teaching were emanating from, but more importantly, for them to think of possible responses to such discourse as a result of what we had discussed in previous classes.

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As a critical scholar of color, with post-modern tendencies, I had deliberately framed the Urban Schooling course this way because inevitably such comments about teaching and practice elicit strong reactions and responses from students. I had emphasized that what one thinks and how one acts is due largely to one's upbringing, experiences, and environment. As such, we had discussed theory(ies) as a set of generalizations that help ground beliefs and claims. They tell us how and where to look for evidence and what counts as evidence. Therefore, all knowledge claims and beliefs are theoretical, grounded in a theory of some sort that tell us what words ought to mean and how things ought to be described and explained, and therefore all knowledge claims and beliefs are ideological. I had asked them to consider whether all theories are then based on a genuine attempt to understand the world and make it a better, more equitable place or just on a desire for power, control, and status? (Gee, 2012). *As it relates to teaching,* I asked, *what ideological claims are being made when teaching is reduced to a feel good discipline?*

We also had discussed the power of words and of meaning and how as critical scholars, we need to be mindful of our discursive rationales and reasoning, especially when discussing education and other people's children (Delpit, 1995). Meaning, I shared, is not a thing that sits fixed in the mind. It is not something that sits in dictionaries. Nor does it reside in the minds of experts and well-educated people to the exclusion of others. Rather, meaning is primarily the result of social interactions, negotiations, contestations, and agreements among people (Gee, 2012).

The questions asking students to think back to past conversations about discourses, ideology, and meaning inevitably lead to a fruitful discussion where additional voice(s) erupted. Soon I had forgotten about my open wounds. Students must be allowed to become the audience for each other's comments, dialogic interlocutors with and for each other (Vadeboncoeur & Luke, 2004). This approach led to dialogue that helped to reposition us not only to respond to what has been said about teachers and teacher education programs, but also to imagine new discourses and elicit possible responses. Ultimately, my goal was to have what counts as knowledge emerge from them and how they had taken up the material and course discussions so far.

It would have been very easy for me to respond from my standpoint. I have very openly done this in the past. However, whose interest would this have served? I tell my students that I can only provide information, highlight practices and effective tools, and attempt to critically facilitate dynamic discussions where we can collectively problematize, expand, and contest. At the end of the day, they need to decide what battles to engage in and take on. In my practice I attempt to do this by asking them to look at how educational issues are discursively framed and then ask themselves, whose interest does it serve? (Grant, 2012).

Following Bakhtin's (1990) concept of answerability, all utterances share a common prospect that takes on the dimensions of an ethical responsivity, the individual's anticipation of another person's answer. Answerability foregrounds the discursive responsibility that, in a classroom, teachers and students share as interlocutors, as well as

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the ways in which those exchanges mark their ethical stances toward other people and events in local, institutional, and societal contexts (Bakhtin 1981). Thus, to teach requires a will toward the ethics of answerability, and the willingness to enact through small talk interaction, ways of explicating, expanding, and when needed – shaping students' comments into more articulate, elaborated analyses (Cruddas, 2007).

In an era where the purpose of teacher education is hotly debated, teacher educators need to help students problematize questions and consider, are students being taught in ways that are consistent with cultivating flourishing lives? Are students being trampled over by workforce preparation and consumerism, which are based on a narrow, top-down, technocratic model of teaching and learning where experts determine what is to be learned? I believe that teacher educators ought to be able to help create spaces that provide more than 21st century skills for 21st century jobs (Grant, 2012). This includes dialogic spaces where small talk is attended to with the goal that it will lead to dynamic understanding that is collectively constructed, but informs individual practice which will hopefully lead to action for the common good.

II.

Conclusion

After the semester ended, I received an e-mail from one of the students in this class: *"Professor …., I had to shoot you this e-mail as I sit in a forum in DC with Grover Norquist. He just went on about a 10 minute animated rant about how we have failed our urban children in regards to education all over this country. He spoke of so many things that we talked about in class and I couldn't resist letting you know! The hope is still alive in Washington! Someday, I hope to help!* (John, January 2013).

I hope that my practice leads my students to a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue that takes into account the dialogical relationship of utterances and thus recognize that these require a commitment to both answerability and responsibility (Bakhtin, 1990). Despite their power to frame the world, discourses are not invincible. They are not monolithic forces that subsume everything in sight, crush everything in reach (Bleiker, 2003). Promoting and engaging in dialogic classroom practice is needed to model and to foster open dialogue outside the walls of academia where the stakes are higher, where it means engaging with the voices of those who for a myriad of reasons may not be heard (Grant, 2012). The reality is that John was listening, but listening with the goal of engaging, *"the hope is still alive …,"* *"I hope to help."* Indeed the hope is still alive!

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