# Freire in the Agora: Critical Pedagogy and Civil Discourse

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## KEYWORDS

critical pedagogy, civil discourse, Freire, public sphere

Awareness of the world, which makes awareness of myself viable, makes unviable the immutability of the world. Awareness of the world and awareness of myself make me not only a being in the world, but one with the world *and with others*. (emphasis added)

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* 15

Political debate has always been something of a perilous art. This is especially true when arguments get marred in discursive gridlock, when the available means of persuasion are insufficient for promoting compromise. Indeed, when there is no common ground on which to reconcile competing ideologies, bark and bluster usually result. Our current 113th Congress is a case in point; not only is it one of the most polarized Congresses in history, it is also the most unproductive.[1] But something is making this lack of compromise feel especially dire in the current moment. Political discourse doesn't just sound more entrenched as pundits and politicians continue to talk at cross-purposes, it also feels more dangerous. Indeed, voicing one's political viewpoint in a public forum can now result in anonymous rants on websites like 4Chan, where threats of physical violence (especially toward women) are typical responses to political disagreement.

Even national tragedies have become occasions when the threat of physical violence pierces public discourse. After the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, for instance, the debate over gun control reached a fever pitch. Only a year earlier, many national commentators decried the lack of civil discourse following Jared Lee Loughner's shooting spree in Tucson, Arizona that left six people dead and Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and several others critically injured. Ironically, the shooting happened at a "Congress on the Corner" event in which the Congresswoman was dialoguing with citizens about their various political concerns. During his Tucson memorial address, President Obama suggested that because "our discourse has become so sharply polarized . . . it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with

each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" ("Remarks"). When NRA representative Wayne LaPierre spoke for his organization in response to Sandy Hook, however, rather than call for solidarity or even a moratorium on the gun control debate, he baldly praised how firearms deter the "lethal criminal class—killers, robbers, rapists, gang members who have spread like cancer in every community across our nation" ("Remarks"). While LaPierre's demure delivery gave his speech an aura of civility (especially when contrasted against the uncivil rants of protestors who repeatedly interrupted him), the content of his remarks completely elided any notion that common ground with gun control advocates—discursive space in which to foster compromise—is a reasonable goal to work toward in the aftermath of such unspeakable violence. In fact, such discourse implicitly rejects the very notion that "public" debate is something that requires shared goals and mutual identifications.

Like most literacy educators, we are committed to promoting civic debate in our classrooms while modeling how to be open and responsive to difference. But lately we have been challenged by how best to discuss these matters with students. Unfortunately, teaching that uncivil discourse is harmful and unproductive increasingly feels like a fool's errand, especially when our own appeals in the classroom are seemingly undercut every time students turn on the television, log on to Facebook and Twitter, or read some news item about the latest national tragedy. Other literacy educators feel this frustration as well. In a recent thread on the Council of Writing Program Administrators listserv titled "WPAs and Violence in Schools," a handful of compositionists expressed concern about both the short and long term effects that school shootings have on students. Just hours after a teenager opened fire in the cafeteria at his high school in Marysville, Washington, Patricia Ericsson commented, "How can we expect the exciting collaboration that is teaching and learning to work when teachers and students and parents have to face what is happening today in my home state of Washington" (Ericsson). One responder recommended Richard Miller's *Writing at the End of the World*, a book that considers the value of the humanities in a world fraught with terrorism, war, and natural disaster.

Miller's work actually provides a useful foothold into an expanded discussion of the value of political debate in the classroom because he questions pedagogical approaches, especially those labeled critical or "liberatory," that position reading and writing as "magically transformative powers" (5). In fact, he writes, "it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories" (5). In this light, we feel compelled to identify what the concept of "civil discourse" actually means as a pedagogical goal. While we make no claim to a definitive answer, what we do ultimately argue is that civility starts when students learn how to orient themselves toward one another *with* instead of *through* discourse itself. The idea of discourse in this approach to civic literacy is not simply a mechanism for creating identifications across difference; rather discourse with others *is* an act of identification. While we will develop this idea below, our goal with this essay is to invigorate the idea that literacy classrooms should be spaces in which to cultivate civil discourse, particularly in the unceasing wake of national tragedies and the mix of civil and uncivil debate that results.

To develop this inquiry, we wish to return to the concept of civil discourse itself and the role it plays in conceptions of critical pedagogy, in particular when imagining the classroom as an *agora*, a

kind of public meeting place. Next we turn to Freire's original argument about critical consciousness and what we believe is too often ignored in his work, namely its pragmatism. Here we highlight the function of contingency and amelioration easily obscured when Freire is deployed as a metonym for abstract pedagogical objectives. Finally we consider what it might mean to reconceive the idea of "civil discourse" as a goal for contemporary literacy education. In the end, we contend it is possible to cultivate discursive environments where students learn to be responsible rhetors without necessarily positing particular models for how this should look in practice.

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE AGORA

It is perhaps not surprising that our commitment to civil discourse and the responsibility educators have for preparing students to be actively engaged in the public sphere has been influenced by Paulo Freire and the tradition of critical pedagogy. In the early years of Freire's introduction to North American audiences, educators found a philosophical voice that passionately declared why literacy education should at its root be training in "critical consciousness," which for Freire meant awareness of the power dynamics that both influence and constrain the participatory potential of oppressed classes in the socio-political marketplace. When Freire's work began circulating in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the students entering our college classrooms were obviously quite different from the Brazilian peasants for whom Freire developed his pedagogy. The problem of translating a pedagogy that was preparing oppressed classes to be literate participants in an actual revolution has always presented its difficulties for educators in the United States. Thus, dissenters to critical pedagogy were there almost from the start. Peter Elbow offered one of the earliest critiques for the field of composition in his colorfully titled essay "Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," but since that time other compositionists in addition to Miller have continued to find fault with critical pedagogy (see Durst; Hairston; Wallace and Ewald; Ritter; Ringer; Thomsan-Bunn).

What we find compelling about Miller's critique, however, is his curiosity over why literacy educators *still* invoke Freire to validate teaching the political dimensions of reading and writing. Miller understands why Freire was so appealing in the early years of his adoption by American pedagogues; he even counts himself as one who felt empowered by critical pedagogy as a graduate student. What changed for Miller was the recognition that for most compositionists today, critical pedagogy only offers "a way to see themselves as something other than the mindless functionaries of the state apparatus responsible for tidying the prose of the next generation of bureaucrats" (119). To be clear, Miller is a critic not of Freire but of Freirean pedagogy, in particular the "cherished self-representation" Freire compositionists forward to justify the work of teaching writing in terms of "liberation, uplift, and movement . . . toward a better social world" (*Writing* 121). On the surface Miller's criticism is harsh because he seemingly rejects critical pedagogy *in toto*, but what we see in his critique is a call to carefully analyze how exactly the goals of any pedagogy, not just those of the critical-liberatory variety, are actually realized in practice.

To step back, literacy educators invested in Freire's work see in his philosophy useful concepts with which to foster critical agency in the classroom, to help students become more fully aware

of their social, political, and economic contexts. This goal, teaching students to develop a critical capacity for engaging various systems of power, is essentially what Miller finds problematic within critical pedagogy. But unlike detractors of critical pedagogy who suggest that classrooms should be completely devoid of political activism (e.g., Stanley Fish in *Save the World on Your Own Time*) Miller's cynicism stems more from a place of bewilderment. Simply put, his problem is that critical pedagogues purport to teach students how to empower themselves with literacy even though critical pedagogy itself often relies on specific definitions of literacy, justice, freedom, consciousness, etc., key terms that function as predefined ends with their own value sets.

To argue that civil discourse, then, should be something compositionists teach in the writing classroom begs certain questions about what exactly civil discourse means in these contexts and who gets to decide. When such questions are considered alongside the concerns we raise in the opening of this essay about the relationship between violence, political debate, and the idea of public discourse, we find ourselves wondering if the frustration we feel stems from misidentifying civil discourse itself as a pedagogical object, as something we can actually teach. Part of this challenge is to identify what we believe constitutes the classroom as a public sphere, what Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. termed "the marketplace of ideas" and what residents of the ancient city-state of Athens—the classical birthplace of democracy—called the *agora*, or central gathering space.

Certainly the dialogue and debate that transpire in the news media point to an *agora*, as do the deliberations in city halls, state assemblies, and Congress. These are spaces where ideas get debated, where speech acts must be rhetorically attuned to the various political cultures where one aims to garner assent. While classrooms are certainly places where ideas get deliberated, it seems disingenuous to label these spaces as "publics" representative of an *agora* in an abstract, democratic sense. One reason is because not all ideas are welcomed topics of debate in the classroom. Moreover, classrooms are by definition mediated by a dictator of sorts, the teacher. This is the point Kelly Ritter stresses in her own response to critical pedagogy. Citing Ann Bertoff's reading of Freire as indicative of this phenomenon, Ritter suggests that without the teacher "there is no learning, let alone dialogue" (19). Intended to free students from their submission to dominant, oppressive ideologies, critical pedagogies demand that "students must be paradoxically *directed* to free themselves; thus the teacher-figure plays a central and perhaps inextricable role in re-shaping student consciousness" (Ritter 37). In other words, critical pedagogy requires a teacher to *authorize* students to assume the subject positions necessary for becoming "free" agents of a critical classroom. According to this logic, critical pedagogy cannot live up to its own anti-hegemonic idealism, a conclusion similar to that of Miller's.

Literacy educators, us included, nevertheless believe that classrooms are spaces where the arts of civic debate can be taught. Indeed, many compositionists stress to their students that persuasion is something earned through the hard work of rhetoric, not the doublespeak Ezra Pound had in mind when he defined rhetoric as "the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being" (200). Rather, rhetoric for most compositionists is what Karen Burke LeFevre describes as "the creation and communication of knowledge through symbolic activity" (5). The work of teaching argument is to help students make sense of this symbolic activity in ways that expand their abilities as writers and orators. Ideally, then, students who internalize this view of rhetoric

learn to equate civic debate with the qualities of sincerity, judiciousness, and eloquence. They would probably agree, for example, with the editorial published in the *Los Angeles Times* after the Tucson shooting in which the newspaper criticized "hate-inspiring political speech" and reminded readers that extreme partisanship "is bad not because it encourages political assassinations but because it debases discourse and fuels anger, incivility and stubbornness" ("Vitriol and Violence"). Public calls for civil discourse like this one are consonant with invocations of Freirean-style "dialogue" in critical pedagogy. As Amy Lee explains, "a critical writing classroom seeks to implement processes by which students might acknowledge (and hopefully revise) their concepts of self, other, and world as constructions, as one concept along a range of choices" (153). To *pace* Miller, the challenge of using ideas from thinkers like LeFevre and Lee lies in how to actualize the goals of their pedagogies in ways that transcend the abstract realm of sentiment. Invoking the language of critical pedagogy is easy, but actually articulating what pragmatic consequences such language supposedly points to is much more difficult.

It thus seems one of the first steps in rethinking the function of civil discourse in pedagogical terms is not to assume there exists a single, recognizable *agora* in which speech is universally interpretable, one in which transparent thought motivates straightforward discourse unencumbered by ideologies that would exclude anyone from the forum itself. Not surprisingly, idealized constructions of the *agora* usually begin with a tempered view of how discourse actually functions in the public sphere. This is certainly the case in critical pedagogies that assume students-as-citizens *want* to productively dialogue with one another. To echo an observation Michael Bernard-Donals develops in "Against Publics," if the *agora* is to be imagined as a public space capable of sustaining civil discourse, it must be a space that allows differences to coexist without co-opting participants by requiring them to ameliorate conflict. In order to be a place for civil discourse, in other words, the public sphere also needs to be a place where differences are not only recognized but allowed to flourish. Stephen Yarbrough notes that accounting for difference is what actually makes deliberative discourse possible. Disparity in attitude and belief, in other words, *is* the reason for discursive interaction. Discourse that leads to novelty, whether novelty is understood as new solutions to old problems or the recognition of new conditions, begins when speakers account for their disparities (Yarbrough 10). Yarbrough, like Bernard-Donals, understands that for discourse to be civic it must first be civil; it must recognize and engage other speakers.

Here is where we locate one of the first moves necessary for pragmatically enacting the values of critical pedagogy in the *agora* of the classroom: focus should be directed not on *naming* specific concepts or theories or outcomes, but on *interacting* with the specific discourses that makes something like "naming" in the critical pedagogical sense such a complicated and complex discursive act. Indeed, compositionists invested in critical pedagogy could benefit from stepping back from the concept of "critical pedagogy" itself to consider the different ways we invoke its language to describe our work. The same goes for invoking Freire. That is, we should not conflate Freire-as-historical figure with Freire-as-metaphor. As Susan Jarrett explains, metaphors as "figures of substitution" sometimes obscure the fact that "standing in for another" obviates the particulars that metaphor is intended to represent (113). In other words, while compositionists have long invoked Freire as a metaphor for

critical pedagogy, this solicitation obfuscates the differences between the rural Brazilian countryside that informed Freire's thinking and the university classrooms of North America that inform our own. More to the point, forwarding Freire's work as an impetus for our own critical pedagogies is problematic if we treat Freire as a metaphor, or, more specifically, as a metonomy for whatever practices we choose to label "critical." To echo Jarrett, this metonomy "creates a chain of associations" (113), one that binds artificial contexts to imagined significations that may run contrary to their originating conditions.

Understanding the metonymic link between Freire (as metaphor) and the critical pedagogies invented in his name suggests to us that simply pointing to his work isn't particularly useful for explaining what literacy teachers believe they enact when they channel the language of critical pedagogy. This also applies to our own questions about civil discourse and how best to introduce it as a critical concept in the classroom. With that said, we do believe it is possible to productively utilize Freire's work in a way that underscores the link between critical pedagogy and civic debate, but only by placing it in a contiguous relationship with another "critical" kind of discourse, that of North American pragmatism.

## DISCOURSE IN PROCESS

When teachers believe they can draw on critical pedagogy to accomplish in some verifiable way the goals of helping students identify, critique, or intervene in the sociopolitical systems of oppression that inform their material conditions, it is likely such pedagogy will fall short. For us the key term here is *verifiable*. Certainly there are educators who use the classroom to exercise political debate, promote social policy, and challenge dominant ideology, but rarely do such actions result in material changes over a ten or fourteen week academic term. As evidenced above, however, this is not a particularly novel observation. Elbow observes that if interpreted literally Freire goes one further than Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning:"he is insisting that the action must be more than a 'laboratory' or 'practice' kind of action. It must be sincerely designed to make a [concrete] difference in the real world" (90). Ironically, those who critique what they view as critical pedagogy's inherent naiveté make a similar mistake insofar as they try to unequivocally demonstrate the futility of "teaching to transgress," to echo the title of bell hooks's critical pedagogical manifesto. On the one hand there are those who suggest Freire's pedagogy is legitimate only to the extent it is enacted literally, while on the other there are critics who suggest that because Freire's work is so unique and specific to its original time and place, it is futile to think it could be replicated in North American contexts. The ease with which teachers and scholars will sometimes attempt to transparently enact or indifferently cast aside Freire's critical pedagogy suggests to us the need to reconsider how we approach discussions of the teacher-student relationship often highlighted in such discussions. Those who critique critical pedagogy often fail to appreciate Freire's belief in the inventive potential of human beings *in relationship* to name and rename their shared experiences. In this way, the central problem with contemporary critiques of critical pedagogy is an oversight on the part of scholars to recognize Freire's pragmatism.

As Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly point out, the first part of adapting Freire's pedagogical philosophy for the North American classroom requires that teachers grapple with Freire's insistence that "limit-situations," the material conditions that inform one's understanding of his or her place in the social order, are important to future action but not all-determining. They suggest turning to the tradition of American pragmatism, first articulated by C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, to understand this point.[2] "Rereading Freire in the context of American pragmatism . . . might give teachers hope enough to act with their own concepts of untested feasibility in mind, to work systematically in a sustained way for change, as well as to avoid seeing Freire's work from the supposed, and safe, distance of time and space" (Ronald and Roskelly 615). Pragmatism emphasizes the continual process of reflecting upon the outcomes of and reasons for one's actions, to wrestle for an awareness of the conditions that determine the present while locating possibilities for future action. According to Ronald and Roskelly, a pragmatic reading of Freire would challenge teachers to critically examine their own local contexts in order to remake a critical pedagogy that is fitting for the situation.

So while we are sympathetic to critics such as Miller who question liberatory educators who don't interrogate their positioning within the institutional hierarchies of the academy, these positions, like all matters, are mutable problems—"limit-situations"—susceptible to alteration if the teacher is willing to allow his or her self-perception to be revised through dialogue with students, administrators, and peers. These engagements, which liberatory pedagogues cite as providing the means through which our students are empowered to critically engage the social order, also help to define our roles as teachers. Donna Qualley calls this the "essayistic stance," a view of instruction that values dialogue between student and teacher, and one that is evidenced by a teacher's willingness to promote the reflexivity needed to challenge patterns of thought while locating places where "difference" results in different perspectives on the world. As an orientation toward interactions with the other, Qualley explains that this reflexive stance "complicates our understanding and efforts to know by making us self-conscious, cognizant of our role in the production of knowledge" (14). This is a "critical" view of the student-teacher relationship without necessarily taking up a particular tradition of critical pedagogy.

Or to take up a term important to pragmatism, reflexivity in the classroom serves a *mediating* function, bringing the relationships that determine social orders into view. Mediation, which Ronald and Roskelly identify as a key tenet of both pragmatism and Freire's liberation pedagogy, names the "premise that ideas can move beyond their esoteric or oppositional characteristics and into new relationships" (626). While Freire does not use the term "mediation" in his writing, his notion of "problem-posing" education is akin to this pragmatic ideal. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire describes the meditational nature of problem-posing in the following way:

> Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself . . . consciousness as consciousness of consciousness. (79)

Put less esoterically, to develop epistemic awareness ("consciousness of consciousness") requires us to reflect upon how our words and actions influence how we perceive the world.

For those of us who teach composition, we can help our students understand that our ideas develop not just as a result of the material conditions impinging upon us, but also according to our "consciousness of consciousness," how we view the relationships mediating ourselves, cognizable objects like ideas and the contexts that inform them. This is what problem-posing education actually promotes: "men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (*Oppressed* 84). Thus while some criticize those who believe the dissolution of the teacher-student binary is a feasible reality, Freire reminds us that the notion of a stable opposition between student and teacher is equally problematic because such a view erroneously imagines that such relationships exist *a priori* to our interaction with one another. For Freire, a dialogic encounter "names" the world; it creates discursive space that makes something like "civil discourse" possible. In fact, one could say that in Freire's pedagogical paradigm there is no teacher-student relationship prior to discourse; rather, the "teacher" and "student" emerge as agents who interact and apperceive the relationships mediating their engagement.

The great becoming that Freire sees as the heart of learning, the pragmatic process of forging identifications through collaboration and mediation, is precisely the same process we believe might rejuvenate our notion of the *agora*, the place where the political, social, and cultural differences of a citizenry enter into dialogue. While it is tempting to view the Sandy Hook or Tucson tragedies, or more recent ones like Fort Hood or Marysville, as reminders that both the physical and conceptual spaces that house our civic discourses cannot insure safe havens for deliberation, we must take a cue from Habermas and remember that ideal speech situations are just that, they are *ideal*. More often than not the best we can do is strive *toward* those ideals that inform the goals of our teaching, especially during those time when projecting future hope seems impossible. In this way, a pragmatist reading of Freire's work suggests that if human subjectivity is an infinite, relational process, perhaps too is our civic life. According to Maxine Greene, "His core concern for individual fulfillment was rooted in a recognition that fulfillment could only be attained in the midst of 'associated' or intersubjective life . . . [that] the public sphere came into being when the consequences of certain private transactions created a common interest among people, one that demanded deliberate and cooperative action" (435). The person Greene discusses here is not Freire, but John Dewey. Locating a critical pedagogy useful for teachers today, Greene stipulates, requires drawing on the pragmatist tradition as a methodological guidepost.

To be sure, Greene notes how Freire's philosophy was "informed by both Marxist and existential-phenomenological thought," a philosophy molded from the material history Freire lived; but still, "a critical pedagogy relevant to the United States must go beyond—calling on different memories, repossessing another history (437, 438). So what does that mean? What does that look like? For starters, teachers of writing and rhetoric might ask students to consider what sorts of situations promote the kind of atmosphere where they feel most open to new ideas. As we demonstrate in the opening of our essay, it is tempting to speak of political gridlock as the root force behind the violence present in much of today's public discourse, but "toning down" speech, which typically amounts to avoiding discussion with people with whom we disagree, does not necessarily result in the invention of new discursive spaces in which to engage civic debates. If we want an *agora* for

actual civil discourse, a civic space for deliberation and critical engagement with the ideas of others, we must invent it.

Imagining the classroom as an *agora* within which the practice of civil discourse is the established norm proves problematic when these descriptions are given *sans* discussion of the participants themselves. That is, the political ends of the critical classroom are too often assumed to be qualities of the space itself and not the consequence of discursive participation amongst students and teachers. As Elizabeth Ellsworth notes, critical pedagogy is valuable to the extent that it allows students to recognize their own voices as "partial and partisan." Only then can one's ideas and observations "be made problematic," which, if we recall, is what critical pedagogy promotes—not "banking" education but "problem-posing" education (305). As Ellsworth makes clear, problem-posing not only requires that participants engage the differences of others, but that these engagements are allowed to shape subsequent discourse.

Allowing the discursive practices of participants to inform the shaping of an *agora* is difficult, especially if participants' differences are minimized because participation requires strict adherence to decorous practices intended to abate conflict. The most problematic of these decorous practices, explains Bernard-Donals, is the elevation of rationality as an essential quality of the public space. From this perspective "difference is never altogether different" because speakers assume their interlocutors "possess at least as much discursive or cultural or human sameness" (37). Thus, authentic civil discourse, the kind that assuages conflict and leads to compromise or consensus, cannot occur in an *agora* that requires participants to be "civil." But many of us still maintain the belief that the public sphere needs to be a place where differences are placed side-by-side in rational order, because this is the only way to deliberate in a manner that leads to utilitarian consensus. Nevertheless, when educators situate conflicts within an idealized public sphere, these debates get easily confused as opportunities to rationally weigh competing claims and reasons; they aren't recognized as potentially principled clashes that stem from ideological differences unconnected to the processes of rational debate that supposedly imbue the discursive activity required for a meeting of the minds.

To assume that one teaches civil discourse by virtue of naming the conditions that make the classroom a "civil" space thus glosses over the reality that actual moments of conflict rarely lead to tempered agreement, even agreement to disagree. So what, then, are we actually suggesting to teach civil discourse? First, we suggest abstaining from prompts that would encourage students to internalize abstract dictums about the value of civil discourse itself. Students need to experience what it means *to be* civil in their political argumentation with others, and the only pragmatic method for achieving this is to allow students themselves to name what this civility looks like as they experiment with it. Second, we can help students understand that even if we can agree on what something like "civil discourse" means in practice, we can hardly predict its outcome from one context to another. That is, we might come to a collective agreement about what civil discourse means in the particular context of *this* or *that* classroom space, but this collective agreement will have to be constantly renegotiated as we move from one space to another. The *agora* in practice points to the processes of negotiating multiple discourses while accommodating interlocutors, both familiar and strange, as they enter and leave the various conversations in which we ourselves participate.

# CONCLUSION

For critical pedagogues, literacy education is at its best when the members of a classroom confront systems of oppression to identify sites for critical intervention, sites where critical consciousness might be discovered or renewed. While we admire certain aspects of critical pedagogy, we are skeptical of any pedagogy that claims artificial abstractions like "freedom," "democracy," or in our case "civil discourse," as an end point of one's teaching. In this way, we agree with Paul Lynch in *After Pedagogy* that pedagogical moments "are too complex to be accurately predicted or exploited" (xix). That is, we cannot control what students will do with the experiences they garner in the classes we teach; nor can we force upon them certain attitudes about social justice, difference, or civil discourse that will guarantee our students will "transform" the world to such ends. But what we can do is allow students to *experience* the sociality of discourse by providing them the opportunity to act justly toward one another by recognizing that differences are not the evidence of lack, but of different material conditions. This pragmatic rendering of the classroom as *agora* provides a conceptual space for tracing these differences, for creating identifications through the simple act of using discourse to share in the process of recognizing the conditions responsible for our disagreements. Consequently, once another's discursive conditions *become* conditions for us, we begin to share the world with them in new ways. This, we suggest, is the kind of literacy instruction that ultimately promotes civil discourse.

Freire encouraged educators and students to see their worlds as always in process, and he believed that when given the time to reflect on their conditions, we "will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge . . . because they [we] apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within the total context, not as a theoretical question" (*Oppressed* 81). As students investigate the world, they will begin to see the difficulties facing them with regard to the continuation of the worlds with which they are familiar. Therefore we should avoid forwarding civil discourse (or any other critical abstraction) as an outcome toward which our teaching is aimed. Otherwise we run the risk of turning these outcomes into mere sentiments.

Teachers cannot control the consequences of their instruction, let alone predict or prescribe artificial results. But we might be able to change our questions from ones that are theoretical to ones that are experiential, from "What *is* civil discourse?" to "What might civil discourse *look like* in *this* class?" In the end, we must allow our students to simply practice what it means to be civil while letting the consequences of their discursive engagements determine how we identify and engage our shared *agora*. In other words, to be in discourse with others *is* to create the material conditions needed for mutual identifications. In the end, the principles of critical pedagogy, usually dressed up in lofty, liberal rhetoric, can be understood to reflect a very simple but very important idea: we are responsible to and for one another. We are collaborators in one world, a common world, and it is through our interactions with one another that this world is continued. To be sure, the world *will* continue, and most of us hope that continuation will be defined by generative discourse, not violence. If this is to be the case in our classrooms, we must abandon static notions of what civil discourse means in the abstract and instead imagine how best to create space for students to show us themselves.

# NOTES

[1] According to Mark Murray, a political editor for NBC, as of July 2014 only 142 public bills have become law, "down from the 906 the 80th 'Do-Nothing' Congress passed in 1947-48, and the 333 that were enacted during the Newt Gingrich-led 104th Congress of 1995-96."

[2] Ronald and Roskelly compare Freire's critical pedagogy to the tenets of North American pragmatism, but they don't conflate the two. Neither do we. Following the work of Ronald and Roskelly, as well as other compositionists like Keith Gilyard (2008) and Thomas Deans (1999), we believe that Friere's philosophy and that of pragmatism usefully inform each other, especially with their shared emphasis on *praxis*. With that said, philosophers are starting to make more explicit the relationship between pragmatism and Hispanic liberation philosophies (see, for example, Gregory Fernando Pappas's *Pragmatism in the Americas*).

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