Embracing a Productive Rhetorical Pragmatism: Teaching Writing as Democratic Deliberation

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> *"Put simply, joining youth literacy in common purpose means confronting political issues through reading and writing as these issues confront our communities." -- Django Paris*

> *"[N]o pathology can be confronted if it remains in the shadows, if we don't find a way to make it visible" -- Tim Wise*

Democratic Deliberation and the Problem of De-valuing Difference

Our current points of stasis in American politics make clear: we are facing a deep crisis of imagination in public life. Our (in)ability to imagine the interests and experiences of others limits not only how we understand domestic and global citizenship but also how we enact that citizenship with others. In talk and in practice, the inability to take seriously the interests and experiences of others leads Americans – in English Language Arts classrooms and in public life – to cast those who disagree as deeply flawed in character – unpatriotic, ungodly, lazy, irresponsible, or criminal. As we've seen on the Senate floor, casting disagreement as morally wrong brings democratic deliberation to a screeching halt. More disturbing, the suicides of gay youth across the nation, (Erdely) remind us that casting disagreement as immoral is a kind of annihilation that makes difference – and anyone who embodies difference – an enemy to be squashed.

I contend that many of the logics underlying this version of public life are perpetuated – among other places – in our writing pedagogy and praxis. When our writing pedagogies prize rhetoric as a critical/ interpretive activity rather than a practical/productive activity (Gaonkar 340), we enact a skeptical[1] view of rhetoric and writing – one that is also skeptical of difference, conflict, and uncertainty. The hidden curriculum, thus, becomes one in which we aim at bracketing difference (Fraser; Flower) or villain-izing it; avoiding conflict or "bearing clubs" (Fish); preferring in-action in the face of uncertainty (Crick and Gabriel) or pretending to a certainty we cannot really predict (Flyvbjerg).

Here, my primary aim isn't to critique the current ways we've leveraged rhetoric within the humanities; rather, my goal is to instantiate a productive rhetoric – and thus, a productive writing praxis -- that doesn't relegate knowledge-building to disciplines that have enjoyed greater status, in part because of their stances toward uncertainty and difference[2]. More importantly, there is a real human need for us to teach writing "as a practical, intellectual activity aimed at clarifying problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies, and at contributing to social and political praxis" (Flyvjberg 4). After all, rhetoricians Nathan Crick and Joseph Gabriel remind us "it is within the actual lives of citizens that 'new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively'" (212). And these problems come when situational contexts change in such a way that "habitual behavior is disrupted and needs and desires are thwarted" (Crick and Gabriel 209), causing

individuals to experience doubt in beliefs and "behavioral rules" (Habermas *Knowledge* 120). These disruptions are not, however, often so immediately and irrevocably catastrophic that they preclude all action or response or hope of remediation. Rather, Crick and Gabriel comfort us with the observation that, as in the case of climate change, disruptions are often slow and cumulative, "providing time necessary for public engagement" (Crick and Gabriel 212) even while requiring us to act and respond with partial knowledge "under constraints we cannot control and outcomes we cannot predict" (Clifton). This observation is also good news for the English Language Arts (ELA) writing classroom as these disruptions to a world that is "first and foremost a world we care about" (McGuire and Tuchanska 26) of necessity put us in a space of invention where our "doubt motivates efforts to find new beliefs that will re-stabilize the disturbed behavior" (Habermas *Knowledge* 120). If our writing classrooms are to again prioritize the work of rhetoric as a practical and productive art that matters in our lives, then context and judgment – both central to understanding and taking human action – must also be central to our writing pedagogy. More specifically, embracing uncertainty, difference, and conflict as inevitable and valuable components of context and judgment must be part of our pedagogical work to foster invention for real-world writing that aims at getting something done. This is a shift equally concerned with outcomes and with justice.[3]

In part, this shift questions how we represent and teach rhetoric and writing. Rhetorician Linda Flower notes that "[t]he most fundamental question to ask about one's composition paradigm is, what is it actually teaching students to do?" (78). Most K-12 writing pedagogy[4] and training for writing teachers have primarily followed one of two paradigms: 1) an expressivist paradigm, recognizing students as writers who need "the safe houses and the tools with which to *speak up* – to discover and express themselves, their personal and cultural identities" (78) or 2) a paradigm derived from literary and cultural studies, tooling students with literate practices of deconstruction and ideological critique that "allowed them to *speak against something*" (78). Thus, much of our writing pedagogy positions us and our students to be more aware of, more attuned to, difference and to the "others" of our societies by preparing students to speak up in isolation or critique. They do not learn – and we do not teach – the ways writing might support *speaking for* something and *speaking with* others (Flower).

American pragmatists, public spheres theorists, rhetoricians, and community literacy scholars would have us fashion the writing classroom as one that thrives on difference and one that celebrates the context-dependent work of interrogating and constructing local values as well as actions that stem from those values. This piece asks, *What features of writing pedagogy would structure viable alternatives to rhetorical skepticism*? In response, I will describe practices and tools I drew on to cast writing and rhetoric as practical, productive arts first in a course, Hip Hop and the Teaching of English, and later in composition classes. Before we turn our attention to features of a productive writing pedagogy, it is important for us to consider what is at stake with skeptical views of rhetoric that disrupt public life and limit the public work of writing.

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[1]   I am drawing on Robert Danisch's understanding of "skeptical" as a cynicism toward others that erodes confidence in a positive democratic project. Sometimes skepticism can be masked as neoliberal "niceness" or as "civility," bracketing or colonizing difference and reifying doer/done-to relations. For more about this, see Long, Fye, and Jarvis "Gambian-American College Writers Flip the Script on Aid-to-Africa Discourse." See also Long, et al.'s "Charting Intercultural Inquiry: Cartography for Local Public Transformation" about how the trope of "service" perpetuates a skeptical rhetoric in the university-community partnerships.
[2]   Readers interested in disciplinary status of humanities and social sciences in the age of science wars can see Bent Flyvberg's work *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* and Dorothy Nelkin's article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "What Are the Science Wars Really About?"

[3]   As we increasingly grow to see "the interconnectedness of the human environment" through natural calamities, "it becomes less and less persuasive to advocate for policies that help one's home at the expense of one's neighbor" (Crick and Gabriel 220). A shift, then, toward seeking the common good in the face of inevitable conflict and uncertainty must develop at least out of necessity, if not out of a sense of justice (Crick and Gabriel 220).
[4]   Despite theoretical shifts including sociocultural approaches to literacies, multimodal composing, and multilingual composing, much classroom pedagogy still centers on pedagogies of the 50s, 60s, and 70s including themed writing, five-paragraph essays, current traditional arguments, and expressivist writing.

Rhetoric as a Practical, Productive Art

Deliberation[5] invites participants to see themselves as securers of their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the community as they work together to construct community action and community standards (Danisch 409). Within this context where citizens are concerned both with material outcomes and with each other's well-being, rhetorical education trains citizens 1) to make public claims, 2) to dialogue together with others who are also making (possibly conflicting) public claims, and 3) to make wise decisions under difficult circumstances with knowledge that is always limited. In these contexts, rhetoric-as-critique (speaking against) and rhetoric-as-expression[6] (speaking up) are not enough either to motivate engagement in difficult dialogues or to tool citizens in ways that enable them to invent alternative futures together (Atwill). However, "a productive rhetorical pragmatism would show a student […] both how to engage in positive political projects *and* why it is a virtue to do so" (Danisch 412). Further, productive rhetorical pragmatism aims to equip *all citizens* with rhetorical abilities to make public claims, deliberate across difference, and determine wise courses of action in difficult times (Danisch 412). This version of rhetoric is centered on discovery and change and has in view both internal and external aims for all participants. As Flower reminds us:

> Discovery starts with the articulation of difference. It leads to deliberation (unlike agonistic debate) that enjoins all its participants to act as partners in inquiry, to take on the difficult role of collaborative problem-solvers. That is, to be responsible for understanding the images of others in order to build a new negotiated meaning, workable options, and a resolution marked by justice. (40)

Our secondary ELA writing pedagogy needs to embrace uncertainty, conflict, and difference as essential and valuable resources for teaching writing as democratic deliberation concerned with discovering and enacting "workable options" and more just ways of relating.

A Skeptical View of Rhetoric

Rhetoric-as-critique and rhetoric-as-justification most often take up work that is excessively skeptical because they see deconstruction or self-interested expression as ends in themselves. Conflating the means with the ends positions rhetors in isolation and without any kind of positive political project (Danisch 412). However, these stances *can* be performed in ways that have in mind a productive rhetorical pragmatism. For example, Linda Holmes struck that stance in her article "Lance Armstrong and the Cheapening of Indignation" in which she critiques "the incredulity, the almost weaponized indignation that [Armstrong] mustered in insisting he was being falsely accused." However, her critique is not merely a deconstruction of Armstrong's indignation. Her primary concern is that by falsely and emphatically "co-opting the language of innocence" Armstrong has tainted a discursive tool we need for dialogue across difference (Holmes). She notes that in our deliberation together, "we *need* indignation. We need people to be able to say something isn't true when it isn't true, and we need *something* they are entitled to employ in their defense." Holmes implies that there is some productive work we're up to together that often engages conflict and that needs tools for engaging difference and conflict productively. Further, she implies that our work together is dependent on stranger-sociability that is, to some degree, trustworthy and reliable.

Where productive rhetorical pragmatism positions a rhetor as someone in dialogue *with others* and as someone who must venture some course of action, some positive endeavor to take up, rhetoric-as-critique positions a rhetor *as critic,* as a skeptic whose role and status and engagement is always *against* and rhetoric-as-justification positions the rhetor as someone resistant to dialogue, in part, because the rhetor is resistant to having his/her own mind changed. Both views invoke a stance for the rhetor that is aggressive or indifferent toward others and sedimented in his/her own beliefs. These skeptical views make the work of rhetoric about uncovering, deconstructing, critiquing, or shoring up but not about discovering, deliberating, deciding, listening, constructing, rivaling, inquiring, producing, or transforming. Both of these skeptical views of rhetoric are, thus, deeply dismissive of the logics, goals, training, and tools underlying a rhetorical education. The very nature of this version of "dialogue" shuts down inquiry as rhetors enacting these perspectives are seeking to justify what was previously stable or previously normative or seeking to destabilize and queer the normative but without ever venturing to re-stabilize. Neither stance moves toward invention in the midst of uncertainty, which is at the heart of rhetorical pragmatism (Flower; Long; Clifton; Flyvjberg).

By implication, these skeptical views of rhetoric, so prevalent in representations of public life, infuse our writing pedagogy and render writing-as-engagement anemic when our writing curriculum is not attuned to inquiry, justice, and deliberation. Considering the ways our ELA writing pedagogy scaffolds self-other relations and the public work of writing can help us recognize skeptical rhetoric and suggest what makes this terrain such a complex geography to navigate. We can know we're in the midst of a writing curriculum infused with skeptical rhetoric when it is…:

… bent on critique and deconstruction. The classic debate, an instructional mainstay in the English classroom, has *potential* to generate dialogue and aid participants in arriving at new understandings, but typically serves to further isolate participants from those taking an alternative stance. Literacy scholar Bob Fecho reminds us:

> […] a debate is mostly about destruction. Debaters listen to the other team, not necessarily to learn from them, but, instead, to dispute, refute, and ultimately defeat their argument. Instead of ideas comingling and transacting, a debate proclaims a winner and a loser. But, as Bakhtin suggests, vanquishing the opponent also vanquishes the dialogue. (17)

The issue debate is often part of a larger unit related to teaching argumentative writing. The underlying goal is for students to learn to create an airtight argument that is impervious to the ideas of others. Rather than teaching argumentative writing that puts perspectives *in dialogue* with one another, this pedagogical practice often underscores a skepticism toward others' ideas, seeing them as targets to be shot down.[7]

… focuses on generalizable ends[8]. Deliberation that remains hypothetical or philosophical fosters "a version of skepticism that remains distant from the goals of rhetorical pragmatism, which considers "how particular cases, not general issues, can be dealt with effectively" (Danisch 413). We deliberate not simply because we disagree but rather because some experience has disrupted our sense of stability to such a degree that we are compelled into inquiry and action (Crick and Gabriel 209). Deliberation is not about all possible scenarios but about *this* particular one that we are facing *now*, and we need the grounded details of lived

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5   Protagoras's claim that "man is the measure of all things" (Danisch 409) underpins a) a perspective on democracy: every citizen shares in respect and justice; "otherwise the state could not exist" (Protagoras 323a) and b) a perspective on deliberation: the process of deliberating over ideas and values held within a community enables a community both to determine and understand what is good or bad, right or wrong and also to develop respect and bonds between and among citizens.

6   Speaking up often takes the form of expressivism, in which we teach poetry or memoir, or it takes the form of justification in which we teach critical-rational argument and advocacy. The first version leans towards naïvete, the second towards cynicism. Both foster a kind of isolation, and neither require engagement with others.

7   Activities like the issue debate and tasks like isolated argumentative writing have profound implications for self-other norms in our classrooms and in other public spheres. Taking up Flower's question of what our compositions are actually teaching students to do, we might consider the deep consequences of our language curriculum if in ELA classes, where students are perhaps most explicitly taught our academic and democratic ways with words (Heath), we teach young people that they must choose one of only two possible sides, that those "sides" already exist and cannot be shaped (especially by those who disagree), and that they will lose if they consider or give any credence to someone else's ideas or experiences. Struggling over issues often becomes mere academic exercise for students, a discursive task to defend one perspective and undercut another. Since students are often assigned a "side" to argue, they learn that truth is so relative that it does not matter which side you take and this version of deliberation requires students to be far more committed to a discursive task than to their own ethics.

8   This is part of a larger difficulty with the colonization of social sciences by natural sciences. For more about re-claiming the social sciences, see Flyvjberg *Making Social Science Matter* and *Applied Phronesis*. For more about misunderstandings and oversimplifications about the nature of the case study, see Flyvjberg "Case Study." Here I aim only to put this practice of valuing general theoretical knowledge or tenets in conversation with rhetorical pragmatism that aims to show "how particular cases, not general issues, can be dealt with effectively" (Danisch 413).

experiences "if we are going to deliberate with the fullest range of facts available to us" (Lauritzen 24).[9] Concrete cases are valuable precisely because "it is within the actual lives of citizens that 'new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively'" (Habermas *Between* 307-308); because they "make others participate" as Primo Levi puts it, in the life-world disturbances of distant others; and because it is among the constraints and affordances of these problem situations that we navigate our lived lives.[10]

… invokes an isolated or self-referential view of self-other relations. Where our writing pedagogy engages contentious issues, we often teach a skeptical rhetoric "of self-interest advocacy (in which I don't need to listen to you)" or "of expressive argument (in which you cannot challenge me because this is "my opinion")" (Flower 35). Each of these approaches maintains what Martin Buber calls "I/It" relations between people and are skeptical of rhetoric or writing to construct "I/Thou" relations or to do any real democratic or deliberative work in the face of difference. Even where our ELA pedagogy attempts to construct an ethic of care by making space for the expression of concrete cases or life narratives, our best efforts often invoke a privileged empathy that reifies doer/done-to relations (Flower) characteristic of one-directional encounters (Long). But as Flower reminds us, "coming with goodwill and a friendly smile and a desire for personal relationship" (Flower 54) does not guarantee genuine dialogue or transformed understanding in the face of social, cultural, racial, and economic difference. And, perhaps more to the point, communicative democracy does not aim to erase painful and contested histories and roles nor to achieve "mutual identification [in which people] have transcended what differentiates and divides them and now have the same meaning or beliefs or principles" (Young 127).

… is skeptical of difference. A skeptical view of rhetoric treats difference – and by extension, conflict – as an obstacle to be overcome or avoided. Even more just efforts that enjoin others to find "common ground" or "look at it from someone else's perspective" or "walk in someone else's shoes"[11] are problematic when a one-off "rough and ready appeal" becomes systemized into a pattern of thinking about difference and conflict (Young 38). These approaches assume that the "perspectives of the self and other are reversible" (Young 38) and that we can (and should) somehow collapse differences, experiences, and the particularities of our lives. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's communicative theory of moral respect, a productive rhetoric would "distinguish between taking the perspective of other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their positions, on the other hand. Through dialogue people can sometimes understand each other across difference *without* reversing perspectives or identifying with each other" (Young 39, emphasis added).

… is skeptical of conflict. Writing pedagogies that are skeptical of conflict are often uncomfortable with tension and doubtful that conflict can achieve anything productive. In ELA classrooms, teachers sometimes speak of avoiding topics that are "inappropriate" or "too emotional" or "too controversial" and of trying to create "safe" and "nonthreatening" classroom environments. These values are often associated with upholding a more democratic ideal in the classroom. And yet, a productive rhetoric that fosters democratic deliberation

9   Ethicist Martha Nussbaum argued for greater attention to fictional narrative in public policy decisions. Paul Lauritzen observes that her point also holds with regard to "experiential narratives that foster emotional engagement with distant others" (22). It is the specific cases of experiential narratives – the details of lived experience – that have the ability to "implicate" readers and draw them out of the "narcissistic enclosure of the ego," something propositions and critical-rational arguments often fail to do (Kearny 43).

10   For more on rhetorical problem-solving as a stochastic art, see Clifton "Mastery, Failure, and Community Outreach as a Stochastic Art: Lessons Learned With the Sudanese Diaspora in Phoenix." For more on the inadequacies of focusing writing and rhetoric on generalizable ends, see Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter*, where he describes the fallacious logics of a critical-rational perspective. Flyvbjerg explains that general principles and platitudes are inadequate both for comprehending the total spectrum of human activities and for becoming expert rhetors and virtuoso social actors (Flyvjberg 22). Further, he observes that "the rationalist perspective focuses on those properties of human activity by which humans most resemble machines or Weberian bureaucrats: rule-based deliberation based on formal logic" (22). While logic and analysis are important, this model *exaggerates* the importance of rationality and analysis, "allowing them to dominate our view of human activity: so much so that other equally important modes of human understanding and behavior are made invisible" (23). To transcend the "insufficient rational perspective", we also need "context, judgment, practice, trial and error, experience, common sense, intuition, and bodily sensation" (23). These only come to us through experience with concrete cases. Generalizable rules are inadequate in the face of contingency and uncertainty, the very domains in which rhetorical pragmatism – and the events of our lives – demand we take intelligent action. Specific case knowledge is, thus, crucial "to control and order the decision-making process so that contingency, uncertainty, and probability did not prevent action" (Crick and Gabriel).

11   Readers interested in the limitations of these common tropes can turn to Iris Marion Young's work on asymmetrical reciprocity.

across difference accepts discursive conflict among ideas and is willing to engage "areas of deep, irreconcilable disagreement" (Flower 34). Paulo Freire notes that educators should never confuse the dialogue necessary for critical intercultural inquiry with one that creates "a vacuous feel-good comfort zone" (Flower 34). Rather than avoiding conflict over uncomfortable differences that might scrutinize the status quo, threaten self-denial[12] (Fecho 74), or expose patterned treatment of oppressed people (Leonardo 42), deliberative democracy puts interpretations and uncomfortable differences on the table and up for discussion. Difference and conflict are seen as valuable and productive parts of intercultural inquiry that aims for resolutions but resists unquestioned consensus and easy assent. A productive rhetoric recognizes that "genuinely diverse points 'of view are essential to understanding a problem, even though the price of difference is tension and substantive conflict" (Flower 34).

… is skeptical of uncertainty. Writing pedagogy that is skeptical of uncertainty often either leans prematurely toward a false stability or backs away from taking action altogether, or at least "until we know more." A skeptical rhetoric sees action as a last resort or considers that a course of action will be self-evident *if* any action should be taken. But a productive rhetoric re-casts action as something that *must* be done despite uncertainty over what should be done[13]. A productive rhetorical pragmatism recognizes "that in the face of shared 'imperfection marked by urgency,' something must be done" (Crick and Gabriel 202). Rhetors venture into deliberation and action knowing that final determinations are impossible because our knowledge is always partial and perspectival, our choices imperfect, and outcomes elusive[14]. Rhetorical pragmatism aims to cultivate "practical wisdom" in the face of uncertainty by teaching students how to draw on available, imperfect knowledge to venture wise action for the betterment of the community. But this is never a done deal. Rhetorical pragmatism also keeps us responsive in real time to the test of outcomes (Flower 90), a posture that thrusts us back into uncertainty and, thus, back into deliberation, theory-building, and action (Clifton 228).

… offers a limited view of what rhetoric and writing are good for in public life. A skeptical view of rhetoric is skeptical of rhetoric's capacity to change minds. In part, this is because a skepticism of rhetoric is closely linked to the other skepticisms I've outlined. "At least two dynamics thwart genuine public deliberation and seriously impede subordinated groups' attempts to argue persuasively about issues that concern them" (Higgins and Brush 694): Despite democracy's claim of widespread public participation, 1) subordinated groups are often not perceived as "expert" enough to contribute anything valuable to public dialogue[15], and 2) expert discourses often dismiss subordinated groups as incapable rhetors (694). Productive rhetorical pragmatism sees this intersection where private lives and public agendas merge as precisely where we ought to locate the work of writing and rhetorical education in the public realm (Higgins, Flower, Long).

Instantiating a Productive Writing Pedagogy: Designing Dialogue Across Difference

In the fall of 2010 when anti-immigration legislation in Arizona was making national headlines, I was teaching an upper-level special topics course I had recently designed and pitched to my department, Hip Hop and the Teaching of English[16]. Twenty-five pre-service English teachers and I sought to ground our conversations around curricula to concerns raised by local issues circulating in the news. In our talk together,

12   For more on "threat" see Fecho "Why are You Doing This" in *Is this English?* Readers might also be interested in related concepts of "wobble" and "water-pistol transactions" in his book *Teaching for the Students: Habits of Heart, Mind, and Practice in the Engaged Classroom*. Fecho argues for the importance of shifting paradigms about learning: rather than focusing on "safety from…" some pending danger, we might consider how to foster a sense of "safety to…" venture into spaces of uncertainty.

13   Uncertainty is not a trump card to preclude action or deliberation. Crick and Gabriel recount an interaction between climatologists in which one scientist observes, "To do nothing when the situation is changing very rapidly is not a conservative thing to do" (201).

14   For more on venturing wise action in spaces of uncertainty, see Linda Flower's work about working theories; Janet Atwill's work about invention; Elenore Long's work about techne; and Jennifer Clifton's work about rhetoric as a stochastic art.

15   Readers interested in thinking about versions of public dialogue might consult Linda Flower's book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* and Elenore Long's book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*.

16   Thanks to David Kirkland, whose syllabus fueled my thinking about the design of the special topics course, Hip Hop and the Teaching of English.

the limitations of our current models of writing and of deliberation – models infused with a skeptical rhetoric -- were, in many ways, sticking points that were as perplexing as the contested issues we discussed in class. However, my purpose in this piece isn't to narrate the particular ways any of us engaged in a skeptical rhetoric; rather, here I'll turn our attention to inventive practices for instantiating a productive rhetoric in secondary English classrooms (Danisch). After all, productive rhetorical pragmatism would have us understand limitations as places of invention where we re-make borders and construct action-possibilities for alternative paths with alternative futures (Atwill). Thus, here I return to the central question of this article: *What features of writing pedagogy would structure viable alternatives to rhetorical skepticism*?

The next section outlines features of a writing pedagogy grounded in productive rhetoric and describes practices and tools teachers might draw on to design writing classrooms as spaces for productive and pragmatic dialogue across difference:

1. Framing a Problem Space Around Life-World Disturbances

2. Listening for Life-World Disturbances

3. Mapping Situated Accounts: Unpacking Self-Other Relations

4. Generating and Testing Grounded Possibilities

Framing a Problem Space Around Life-World Disturbances. Because even issues gaining national headlines can remain in the shadows locally[17] and because controversies arise from "life-world disturbances," (Habermas *Between* 160), a productive rhetoric attuned to disturbances that might warrant more public attention would fashion writing as a "contex[t] of discovery[18]" (Crick and Gabriel 212) where young people might identify and dramatize new problem situations that arise in their everyday lives. However, framing a problem space as a "context of discovery" is not merely a matter of centering curriculum on conceptual themes. Instead, we need to frame a problem space that young people will find relevant, important, and compelling: our problem-posing needs teeth[19].

In the Hip Hop class, I designed our early conversations to address the deep and painful ironies that Hip Hop culture turns on. Bakari Kitwana frames it this way: "hip-hoppers are disillusioned, in part, because of persisting segregation in an America that preaches democracy and inclusion" (13). I sought to move our talk from sweeping generalities about race relations to situated accounts "of violated interests and threatened identities… first experienced as pressing problems" (Habermas *Between* 351).

In September 2010, the Drug Enforcement Agency in Atlanta put out an ad seeking "Ebonics" translators (Bluestein). Our class viewed a news segment featuring linguist H. Samy Alim who explained the ways insider language among drug dealers and gangs might or might not correspond with the grammar of Black English. Alim also talked about the racism inherent in a government that would not name Black English a language in order to educate Black youth but would name it a language in order to incarcerate them. After hearing the news segment and the interview with Alim, students – even White[20] male students – were outraged at the hypocrisy of

17   Despite Arizona's anti-immigration legislation garnering national attention and heated criticism and despite the National Council of Teachers of English pulling out of its contract to hold its annual convention in the city of Phoenix, white pre-service teachers in my Hip Hop course claimed, "That [discrimination, racism] doesn't happen anymore. Maybe in the South but not here."

18   For more about public listening for life-world disturbances, see Clifton, Long, and Roen "Accessing Private Knowledge for Public Conversations: Attending to Shared, Yet-to-be-Public Concerns in the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing DALN Interviews." *Stories That Speak to Us: Exhibits from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives.* Ed. H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, & Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2012. Web.

19   A productive rhetorical pragmatism calls us as writing teachers to create some context in which student-writers might begin to do the real work of constructing a positive democratic project – one in which they are *speaking for* something and *speaking with* others. In part, our work as writing teachers becomes about bringing young people into conversation with issues that confront our local communities. But that is not as easy or simple as it might sound. We can, however, build some terrain to explore.

20   Throughout this piece I capitalize "White" to make visible an identity construct that is often rendered invisible. Here, I draw attention to

the DEA officials, finding points of empathy with African Americans and also claiming moral high-ground over government officials they presumed to be much older. Next, we read a blog post co-authored by Alim and Imani Perry in which they were more explicit and direct about the racist ideas underneath the DEA's recent decision, and we talked more about the Oakland "Ebonics" controversy.

Drawing on bell hooks' argument that hip hop can construct "empathy-ties" and "shared sensibilities" (28) that cross boundaries of race, class, and gender, I asked students to connect concerns over Black English in public life to Arizona's legislation regarding local languages and cultures. I projected the following paragraph on the screen:

> In April 2010, the Arizona Legislature passed SB1070, which makes it a state crime to be undocumented and requires police to check for documents if they have "reasonable suspicion" a person is in Arizona without such documents. Weeks later, HB2281 was signed into law, banning ethnic studies in K-12 schools. A law is currently being written that would deny U.S. citizenship to children born in Arizona of undocumented parents. In addition, the State Department of Education has introduced the English Fluency Initiative, banning teachers with "heavily accented" English from working with English Language Learners. English Only classes have been mandated for English as a Second Language learners. (excerpt from Django Paris' AERA 2011 proposal)

Another White young woman said, "Okay, maybe that happens here [in Arizona] but not at ASU." An African American young woman responded with her own experience at ASU:

> Everywhere here is segregated. You can see it in the cafeteria. All the Black people sit together; there's nowhere else for us to sit. Even the professors here know it. Before school starts in the fall, the African American faculty pull all the Black students together and warn us that we're more visible here. We stick out and teachers will notice us more. [They tell us to] sit in the front of the classroom, be on time, dress conservatively, speak up in class. Other [White] students can get by without doing those things 'cause they blend in. Not us.

The same White young woman replied definitively as if to end the conversation, "No, there's no segregation." And the class grew quiet. Her response worked in that moment to silence the local knowledge and experience of the African American young woman who had just spoken. I asked other students what that they thought about what had just been said by these two young women. No one spoke. I turned on the moment and asked students, "So, what do we do in spaces where one person's local knowledge is laid side-by-side with someone else's?" Then I asked students to write down their responses and reactions.

In dialogue around life-world disturbances, where divergent experiences come into contact with each other, we often enact familiar but unproductive stances. Certainly performing dominance that silences others is one unproductive stance, but so are stances where we "agree to disagree," invoke "common ground" (Young), or focus on "personalistic concerns over how [we] are perceived as individuals" (Leonardo 40)[21]. Rather than closing down these conflicted moments or competing narratives of life-world disturbances, a productive writing pedagogy would have us instead open up these controversies as spaces of intercultural inquiry.

Listening for Life-World Disturbances. To scaffold deliberation capable of more just self-other relations as well as material outcomes, in the Hip Hop class I began to call on and design tools and practices that could help us engage with each other across difference without dismissing experiences and perspectives that rival our

the construct as a way of calling its normalizing effect into question and as a way of putting Whiteness-as-difference into conversation with other markers and performances of difference.

21   For more about unproductive stances, see Clifton's work on *dismissive moves* – rhetorical performances that dismiss others' situated expertise and shut down dialogue.

own. One practice I introduced was listening for the *critical incident* (Flanagan)*.*[22] Higgins, Long, and Flower describe the critical incident as a resource for subsequent joint inquiry among people who otherwise have few occasions to listen and to learn from one another.[23]

In listening for narratives of life-world disturbances, we attempted to hear where the private, localized knowledge of an individual or group might be reflective of or indicative of a more public issue of shared concern. Part of the test of a critical incident is its ability to elicit resonance with a listener, to evoke meaningful response, stir a relevant memory, or connect to another's prior knowledge, experience, or understanding in some way. Thus, when we listened for critical incidents, we listened for the places where someone else's story gained traction or raised tensions with our own or with someone else's story we've heard. In the Hip Hop class, I began by modeling ways of listening for and then using writing to construct critical incidents[24] within and across texts.

For example, we read "Gonna Work It Out: Peace and Rebellion in Los Angeles" a chapter in the iconic Hip Hop text *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* in which Jeff Chang offers a journalistic account of the days leading up to and including the Rodney King trial and subsequent L.A. riots of 1992. From Chang's text, I pieced together an excerpt:

"Daude Sherrills added a Unified Black Community Code, a code of conduct for gang members. It began, 'I accept the duty to honor, uphold and defend the spirit of the red, blue and purple, to teach the black family its legacy and protracted struggle for freedom and justice.' It warned against alcohol and drug abuse and use of the 'N-word and B-word,' and even laid down rules of etiquette for flagging and sign-throwing. It called for literacy, school attendance, voter registration programs for community investment…

"Against all odds, they had built an infrastructure of communication for peace. But for peace to last, it would take more than talk. There would need to be jobs, services, and support. So on April 28, as the party went down at Nickerson Gardens, the peacemakers marched with 250 Crips and Bloods from seven different neighborhoods to City Hall to announce the truce at a Los Angeles City Council meeting.

"'We made a presentation to the City Council, telling them that we was coming together to bring an end to all the violence in the 'hood,' says Aqeela. 'We told them we would like to have access to funding.'

"But Council members didn't exactly jump out of their chairs. One suggested applying for a $500 grant, Aqeela recalls, 'And they were like, 'Thank you very much,' and ushered us out of there as quickly as they possibly could.'" (Chang 366-68)

Students and I later wrote critical incidents based on our own experiences, and we drew on these as case studies for in-class deliberation where we could together unpack self-other relations and consider alternative options and outcomes for a given situation.

Mapping Situated Accounts: Unpacking Self-Other Relations. To scaffold in-class deliberation capable of moving beyond our scripted ways of relating and thinking, I asked students to do a kind of discursive mapping of critical incidents so they could come to see the ways different people were positioning themselves and others. I asked students to name the different stakeholders involved, to name what each might be protecting, to consider what each might be gaining or losing in a given situation, to critique the stance each took, to imagine alternative ways of being in a given moment, and to rival possible alternative options and outcomes. For example, after reading "Gangs and Their Walls" from Ralph Cintron's *Angel's Town*, we looked more carefully at interactions (involving Christians, Mothers Against Gangs, a local resident whose screen door was destroyed, the editor of the local newspaper, the police, and the mayor) related to a gang's funeral ceremony making headlines and prompting readers to write letters to the editor. In groups, students discussed and created text around the following prompts:

Prompt #1
Discuss the newspaper's coverage of the gang's funeral ceremony and the letters that followed in response. Then create a visual that represents the different perspectives represented and what you imagine their story-behind-the-story to be….

Cintron 187: What are your thoughts about the gang funeral ceremony being featured in the newspaper and the ways different groups responded? What is at stake in each of these responses – what are people protecting? What are they trying to gain or afraid of losing (or have already lost)? Where is the emotion in their language coming from? For Christians? For Mothers Against Gangs? For writer whose screen door was destroyed? For the newspaper? For gang members? For the police? For the mayor?

Prompt #2
What are some possible critiques of the conventional views in the letters in the newspapers (Cintron)? *Create a list of possible critiques of* **and** *alternative responses to the letters by Mothers Against Gangs, Christians, the writer whose screen door was destroyed, the police, the newspaper.*

Generating and Testing Grounded Possibilities. With more robust understandings of a complex situation, we could then deliberate to consider action-able options. For example, later we returned to the critical incident involving L.A. gangs and city council members. I asked students to work in groups to imagine alternative responses for both groups:

How might Council members have experienced this scene? How might gang members have experienced this? What alternative options for the Council members can you imagine? What alternative options for the gang members can you imagine? **Create several** *What if… then…* **statements for Council members' possible responses and several for gang members' possible responses.**

Despite explicit directions to consider alternative options for council members and to generate a list of options and outcomes in the form of *If… Then…*[25] statements, groups only named alternative options and *If… Then* statements for gang members. They laid all the responsibility on the gangs: "They shouldn't have worn colors. They shouldn't have marched down there. They shouldn't have come in such numbers. They scared the Council." The groups seemed unaware that they had put all the responsibility on the gangs until I pointed out that they had not assigned any responsibility to the Council. The conversation stalled. I asked, "The Council has

22   For more on listening for three kinds of critical incidents, see Clifton, Long, and Roen "Accessing Private Knowledge for Public Conversations: Attending to Shared, Yet-to-be-Public Concerns in the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing DALN Interviews." *Stories That Speak to Us: Exhibits from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives.* Ed. H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, & Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2012. Web.

23   Narratives that elaborate on stakeholders' reasoning, social positioning, and life contexts generate new information and propel discussion that can move people beyond personal expression to public problem solving. When narrative is elaborated in this way and focused around the causes of and responses to problems, it can be used for case analysis. […] In the context of community-based deliberative inquiry, critical incidents elicit carefully contextualized accounts of how people actually experience problems involving, for instance, landlord-tenant relations, gang violence, school suspension policies, or welfare reform. (Higgins, Long, and Flower 21)

24   For other examples, readers can email me at cliftonj@missouri.edu

no responsibility in this? Apply for a grant? That was their only and best course of action in this moment?"[26] I asked students to keep working in their groups. Students could then do the work of imagining alternatives but still largely voiced that the responsibility lay with the gang members. I offer these as examples of the kind of work that was typical of how we spent part of each class learning to have critical deliberative conversations and to imagine alternatives to scripted ways of being.

Threaded throughout these four practices is a perspective that values difference and sees uncertainty and conflict as necessary and potentially generative. A productive writing pedagogy would have us see limitations – in our ways of relating, in the practices and policies of our institutions, in our understandings of complex issues – as fulcrums on which to launch inquiry and invention. Rather than avoiding spaces of difficulty in the name of "safety," a writing pedagogy grounded in productive rhetoric would have us construct intersections that allow us – through deliberation – to step into the limitations we experience in, out, and among institutions. For example, we might consider readings and tensions related to capitalism, creativity, and the commons; or authority, futures, and care; or movement, capitalism, and kinship. In these intersections, where we experience violated interests and hope deferred, we can leverage writing to do significant work in the life of local publics where we perform "actually existing democracy" (Fraser). In the face of shared felt difficulties, a productive writing pedagogy in ELA classrooms would use writing in the service of productive pragmatism to…

... *re-see a situation or a rhetor*

... *make the personal, shared*

... *construct shared concerns*

... *construct more complex understandings of localized issues*

... *engage others' ideas and experiences*

... *network arguments*[27] *in, out, and among institutions*

... *create public forums*

... *listen across difference*

... *analyze, evaluate, imagine/invent alternatives*

... *generate public dialogue*

... *construct intercultural inquiry*

... *engage in productive problem-solving*

... *construct wise action in uncertain circumstances*

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27   For more on networking arguments, readers might consult Rebecca Dingo's *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing*; Adele Clarke's *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn*, especially her work on discursive mapping; and Elenore Long's current work in data visualization at Arizona State University.

For example, in a subsequent class more directly focused on teaching writing at the intersection of capitalism, creativity, and the commons, one student used his writing to *construct wise action in uncertain circumstances* by articulating and testing a personal business ethic with a high-level outreach coordinator for an international outdoor clothing company. Another student drew on writing to *construct intercultural inquiry* in her workplace that would open up job-site conversations about workplace policies related to social media and employees' private lives. Another student called on writing to *listen across difference* and to *construct more complex understandings of localized issues* related to unjust treatment of low-wage workers at job sites that frequently hire students and immigrants. The productive writing projects students pursued emerged from our in-class deliberation and often lead students to invite people they knew in their lives outside of class into inquiry and dialogue concerned with more just relations and material outcomes.

A Productive Writing Pedagogy: "*So, What Do We Do?*"

Productive rhetorical pragmatism would have us engage in democratic deliberation when we feel the weight of the problems we pose – when we feel real angst over the way things are and recognize that our simple answers and scripted sound bites don't do justice to the complexity of the issue and don't offer viable options for moving forward. If our writing pedagogy is to call students into dialogue across difference, calling attention to situations where we experience doubt must be part of the work and discourse of the classroom. Engaging life-world disturbances requires listening for, documenting, and putting up for dialogue "situational conditions [where] habitual behavior is disrupted and needs and desires are thwarted" (Crick and Gabriel 209). We can know we're on to a rich problem space when young people are beating us to the punch and asking, "*So, what do we do?!*" Such urgency signals a problem space rich enough and compelling enough to invite collaborative, intercultural, interdisciplinary inquiry around public or yet-to-be-public issues of shared concern where our responses (our actions or in-actions) have consequence.

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Jennifer Clifton, a professor at the University of Missouri and director of the Missouri Writing Project, works with youth in school and community contexts to develop and leverage their multiple literacies to support intercultural inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and transformative action in public life. Her work theorized public rhetorica and conditions under which policy decision-makers and those most affected by those policies can be productive public dialogue.

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