

STREET SMARTS, SCHOOL SMARTS AND THE FAILURE OF
EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE INNER CITY:
A MULTILECTICAL APPROACH TO PEDAGOGY
AND THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE ARTS

By

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Abstract

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Over the past five years, I have mentored language arts teachers, and their students, in one of the poorest cities in the United States. Though official transcripts stigmatize most of these students as failures, their written and spoken words, and the ways they interact, show them to be intelligent, thoughtful, witty, and inquisitive. How could policymakers and school officials be so inept at assessing the students they are authorized to serve?

In this dissertation, I explore why educational leaders ignore, suppress, and are oblivious to the incredible vibrancy and brilliance of the students I've worked with. I examine the disastrous consequences that result from official policies, mediated by the inadequacy of the theoretical lenses and the methodologies they employ. I suggest alternate lenses and pedagogical methods that welcome students in their multi-dimensionality, focusing particularly on practice in language arts classrooms. These facilitate the creation of an environment in which learning is an adventure rather than a chore, and writing a tool to explore students' ideas rather than an exercise in drudgery.

Central to the inability of the educational establishment to evaluate my students is its fixation on measuring knowledge and enforcing standards that reflect dominant ways of perceiving and quantifying worth. I propose alternate “multilectical” lenses that are able to see students in their rich complexity. Multilectics makes visible the immeasurables on which student knowledge rides. These include curiosity, exuberance, thoughtfulness, and collaborative engagement. Because these qualities can’t be measured in any static way, they are excluded as conveyers of knowledge by educational policymakers. Moreover, since these attributes are manifested through language in its fullest sense (speech, gesture voice), and student language is often suppressed because it threatens dominant discourse practices, the very tools students have to communicate are shut down. When schools prohibit the tools of expression that students have available to them, they censure the very essences of who these students are. Schools then become terrains of hostile encounters in which the values of academia clash relentlessly with the values of home and street.

In the language arts classroom, the mania to enforce dominant standards and to quantify achievement at every level facilitates formulaic teaching and the prioritization of spelling and grammar over ideas and passions. Even though ten years of such enforced practices have not raised academic achievement, schools continue to dull down the curricula, taking the art out of language arts and turning it into a series of task-intensive exercises.

In the final section of the dissertation I view a group discussion of a 7th grader’s poem through a micro analytic lens. Perceiving students close up and in slow motion offers a new way to reveal their strengths and some pedagogies that serve them.

Dedication

To Mr. C. and his 7th grade language arts students, 2010-2011.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Kenneth Tobin's Logic of Inquiry course guided me through my doctoral education. It illuminated ways of thinking that had previously only lurked at the outer edges of my theoretical world and gave me access to new ways of perceiving social life. It was of central importance to my educational trajectory, and left no doubt in my mind that I wanted Ken as the chair of my dissertation committee; fortunately, he agreed to accept me as one of his dissertation students. Ken urged me to look with new eyes at phenomena and explore new methods of analysis. He was always available for consultation, provided me with constructive and rigorous feedback, trusted my instincts, allowed me to find my own way, and treated me more as a less experienced colleague than as a student. He eased my way over administrative hurdles and had my back when others found my research threatening. I am grateful for his mentorship and his friendship.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vii
Foreword – Framing the study.....	1
The art of research	1
Methodologies and methods	4
Multilectics: Three dimensionality and multilevel analysis	7
Multilevel analysis	8
Familiarity and the syntax of perception	10
The five parts of this text	12
References.....	15
PART 1	
Street life, school life and the categories we use to judge each other.....	16
Chapter 1 – “Will you tell your people about me?”	17
Alienation.....	20
Positivism and the culture of testing.....	23
Perceiving the world	24
Structures of perception	28
Value and worth.....	30
Chapter 2 – The landscape of student life	32
The world of my students	32
The sea of normality	34
Poverty	35
Race.....	36
The way we communicate	39
Misalignment of dispositions.....	41
Physicality.....	42
Fighting.....	47
The differences within	51
Fractals.....	53
The individual and the collective.....	55
Chapter 3 – The landscape of control.....	58
Enforcing discipline and internalizing obedience.....	58
Towing the line, subverting the rules.....	60
Control of teachers.....	63
When la perruque is not enough	66
Control over subjects taught	69
Systemic forms of control.....	70

When confrontation is the method of order	72
The ingredients of order	73
Chapter 4 – The clown is the scholar	75
The perfect student.....	77
Sharp mind, sharp tongue	82
Laughter	85
Collaborating clowns, collaborating scholars	90
Achilles heel.....	91
Burning for literacy.....	94
References, Part 4	98
PART 2 – Multilectically perceiving the world	101
Chapter 5 – Mailer, Marx, Marcuse and the representation of social life	102
Researching experience	105
Dialectical thinking.....	106
Negative thinking.....	108
Structure and agency.....	112
Marcuse, Mailer and how we view the world.....	114
Towards a broader dialectic	117
Methodology	119
The space of the classroom	122
References, Part 2	127
PART 3 – Life is not a paragraph: Perceiving the writers within	129
Chapter 6 – The functional and the holistic	130
Learning templates.....	132
Persuasive essays	135
Chapter 7 – The art of language	142
Metaphor.....	142
The hint of a poet	145
Ana’s poem comes to light	150
References Part 3	153
PART 4 – Multilevel analysis and Ana’s poem.....	154
Chapter 8 – Scales of analysis.....	155
Chapter 9 – Key to reading the data	162
Praat notation	163
Transcription notation.....	165
Chapter 10 – The discussion begins	166

Chapter 11 – Thick and thin	168
The transcript	168
The cartoon	170
Guide to Chapter 11: Thick and thin	189
Chapter 12 – Love is what you want it to be	200
The transcript	200
The cartoon	202
Guide to Chapter 12: Love is what you want it to be	239
Chapter 13 – When love breaks	262
The transcript	262
The cartoon	263
Guide to Chapter 13: When love breaks	285
Chapter 14 – Reflecting on my methods of analysis	296
The transcripts	297
What do the transcripts not tell us?	299
The cartoons	299
What do the cartoons not tell us?	307
Sound files	308
What the sound files do not do	309
The guides	309
How my methods illuminated solidarity and contradictions in collective practice	309
Multilevel analysis	313
Chapter 15 – Ana’s second poem: A new beginning	315
References Part 4	317
PART 5 – Reflecting on the text	319
Chapter 16 – Pulling the strands together	320
Revisiting multilectics	323
The multilectical teacher	324
How microanalysis illuminates	328
Methods	330
Assessments and multilectical thought	331
Revisiting the artist’s way	332
Seeing newly	335
References Part 5	340
References	341

Foreword: Framing the study

The Art of research

To change the way you see things is already to change the things themselves.
JR, quoted in "Massive Attack" by Garry Wood (2011)

My research is about how we see in the broad sense of what vision implies, how we make sense of phenomena, and the implications for educational practice of how we interpret and make coherent our experiences. It is simultaneously about the work I have done over the past five years as a mentor to middle school language arts teachers in some of the most underperforming schools, in one of the poorest cities, in the United States. I have applied my thoughts about perception to the teaching of language arts in the hope that they will stimulate a movement to put the arts back into language arts while simultaneously fostering new ways of seeing, understanding and serving student potential. Though I write about perception, and about theories that channel how we see the world, I make no claims to perceive objectively. What we decide to look at and how we interpret data are choices imbued with subjectivity.

I consider myself an advocate for the students I work with. I want to make visible to others, through careful looking, listening, engagement, reflection and documentation, what I already perceive from being in the classroom: that my students are vibrant, intelligent, funny, reflexive, perceptive and curious despite the fact that by every officially documented measure of achievement most of them are abject failures. How could these young men and women shine so magnificently for me yet appear so dull and without luster to those compiling the public record? It is my purpose to examine why the contradictions exist between how I understand my students, how they see themselves, and the way they are represented by those in power. I also want to

analyze the implications of that incongruence for our system of education and, especially, for the teaching of language arts.

I suspect that the lenses through which those in power look at my students, and the values they bring to bear on their observations, which indeed affect the lenses they choose to employ, make it impossible for them to see the students they evaluate in their fullness, complexity, and brilliance. They look narrowly, distantly, and with foreign eyes across a huge expanse of difference, refusing, unable, or oblivious of the need to rethink the categories through which they judge the worth of those they are empowered to assess. Having fixed notions of how intelligence is expressed, policymakers and enforcers fail to perceive the competences acquired outside the school domain. Instead they conflate community and street cultures, and the ways they manifest themselves, with ignorance, apathy, dimness, indolence and delinquency.

Educational functionaries, because of their allegiance, conscious or unconscious, to the dominant norms and to the standard tools of measurement that verify their claims, cannot see past the limits these impose. In accordance with methods taken for granted, they prioritize exactitude and efficiency in their attempt to justify the status quo and thus seek to weigh, define, compare and rank student intelligence, accepting without question the very idea that intelligence is quantifiable. As a result, they cannot see the immeasurable qualities that go to the heart of creative learning and critical thought. These qualities are the very ones in which my students excel—curiosity, passion, engagement, resiliency and thoughtfulness. It is therefore not surprising that the solutions policymakers devise for the problems they identify are inadequate and indeed often harmful to those they are authorized to serve.

I hope that through thick description of my practices, and those of my colleagues and my students, I can offer alternative lenses that will serve as vital tools for educators. Through careful

exploration, multileveled observation and data collection enriched by theories of perception that emphasize the complex ingredients of social life, I seek to present my students in all their ingenuity and vivacity, suggest conditions under which they could thrive, and flush out some of the reasons why their talents are currently ignored, dismissed, or suppressed. Dubious of the idea that intelligence is measurable, I focus on the very immeasurables that official policy ignores, qualities that go to the heart of any creative endeavor and that are, I suspect, at the core of student possibility and potential. I see research, teaching and learning as artistic enterprises dedicated to reformulating stale ideas, shaking up old ways of thinking and conceiving, and moving beyond the rigid rules and regulations that have clearly not improved the futures of the students that I work with.

Unlike traditional researchers then, I did not begin my study by constructing a hypothesis, designing research questions, and deciding what evidence I needed to determine the validity of my hypothesis. Rather, I had faith in the journey of research itself. Thus, much of the investigation I engaged in proceeded intuitively and improvisationally as I rolled with the punches, altering my practice in response to the activities of my students as they, in turn, responded to me. I began with the ontological stance that classroom space is not a neutral and empty container to be filled by hierarchical power structures, imposed lessons that are drummed into the heads of passive students, and predefined and inflexible criteria that measure accomplishment. Rather, I conceived classroom space as co-constructed by students and teachers, a terrain defined by what we did together as we produced it, a creation made lively and productive by what all members contributed to it, a place in which the tools students had available to them would be welcomed as the building blocks of further knowledge. I did not know what the outcomes of my research would be, but trusted the process would be valuable to

all participants and that we would all learn as we worked together. I did not use questionnaires, Likert scales or control groups as part of my exploration process. Indeed, nothing I did within the classroom was done for the purpose of research, but I researched everything I did and observed, following—moment to moment—the emerging shape of events. I understood that just as I was influencing the course of activities and the actions of others, the course of activities and the performance of others would influence me. The French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) wrote that it is the painter's job to “make visible how the world touches us” (1993, p. 70), and I sought to show the reader how my students and I changed each others' worlds by being receptive to each other despite our differences. I wanted my engagement with students and teachers to feel more like an experience for all participants rather than a chore forced upon them.

Methodologies and Methods

Mauve takes offence at my having said, “I am an artist”—which I do not take back, because that word of course included the meaning: always seeking without absolutely finding. It is just the converse of saying, “I know it, I have found it.”
Vincent van Gogh (1982, p. 148)

In order to represent my students in their fullness, I sought theoretical lenses that would illuminate complexity and three-dimensionality, as well as methods, tools and approaches to research that served those theoretical stances. Every theory, like every tool used in an endeavor, clarifies and obscures, focusing attention in ways that affect the path taken. The choice, then, of which theoretical lenses to appropriate was a crucial one for me. They needed to reflect my understanding of reality—a question of ontology, and be consistent with my ethical approach to living in the world with others—a question of axiological integrity. My lenses also had to make visible my philosophical stance on what counts as knowledge, an epistemological standpoint that affects the data perceived to be important. Obviously, epistemology, axiology, and ontology are

interdependent concepts or structures, merging together such that the distinctions between them are blurred. Calling them structures has the metaphoric advantage of visually imprinting them as constraints that funnel vision, shining light on data but only within the confines of their borders. If, however, one imagines those borders to be porous, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) did in his later work, one gets a sense of the fluidity of all structures and their amorphous shapes. If, to push the boundaries even further, one approaches the chosen structures with what Bourdieu called “radical doubt,” i.e., the possibility that the appropriated structures might be the wrong ones for the task at hand and lead to misinterpretation, distortion, and injustice, then uncertainty and humility begin to coat all analyses.

My choice of lenses was also influenced, inevitably, by my past activities, the social contexts in which I had participated, the experiences I had had. My years as a political activist drew me to Hegelian and Marxist theories of dialectical thinking, the idea that motion and change are constant underpinnings of social life. At the root of this fluid process of transformation lie the injustices of the world, what Marx called contradictions, most markedly those of enormous power and wealth existing simultaneously with servitude and devastating poverty. Dialectical thinking proposes that what exists is false, a momentary reality subject always to the challenge of what could and ought to be. I was attracted to dialectics both as a method with which to interpret societal dynamics and as an ontological representation of how society develops and functions. Perceiving a radical imbalance in how the goods of society were distributed, I was also drawn to Marxist thought because it was axiologically infused with the hatred of oppression and the aspiration for universal justice.

But yet there were aspects of the Marxist dialectical lens which troubled me. I was uncomfortable with its dualistic conception of reality, the perception that we live in a world of

neat, rigid opposites that lack nuance (good and bad, rich and poor, proletarian and bourgeois). I was perturbed by its broad strokes that, while they sought to liberate humanity, mostly failed to account for its poetic aspects—for laughter, joy, friendship, beauty and the emotional cloth in which every human act is wound. Marx, because he was interested in the macro view of human interaction, made little room for what makes each member of humanity an individual. He ironically ignored the dialectical interactions of the individual with the collective emphasizing only the collective class character of men and women. Finally, I rejected the teleological prediction that the dialectical dynamic followed a predetermined path, and that one day it would grind to a halt and all men and women would be free.

As the dogmatic certainty that accompanied my years of radical resistance began to dissolve, I looked towards artistic activity as a different way of observing the world and my place within it. Indeed my life as an artist, which provided refuge from some of my most politically rage-full days, rebelled at the notion of dualism and absolute truth of any sort, seeing transformation as an endless process involving multiple interconnected and overlapping forces that could emerge in multiple configurations. I rejected neat solutions to complicated problems and embraced the juggling of multiple perspectives and conditions that would help me to reach moments of understanding and clarity but never leave me in a comfort zone of absolute certainty. Both the artist's approaches and the tools used to flush out meaning militate against the idea of finality. The relationships between objects formed and made visible on the canvas, and the interdependency between the shape of space and things represented, are so fluidly rich, so flexibly mobile, and so interpretively bound to the viewer's physical and emotional state and location, that self-satisfaction at resolution is at best a temporary victory. And the artist may be especially sensitive to the relationship between tools and representation. After all, the same scene

portrayed in pencil or in ink, in charcoal or in paint, impressionistically, “abstractly,” or “realistically” all reveal different insights.

Seeing the world complexly was an adventure I relished, and so later, when I joined the Academy, it also mediated my understanding of my students and how they made sense of their worlds. Their ways of being were affected by their surroundings, and they moved, spoke and interacted differently depending on where and with whom they were. The edges that demarcated their ways of being sometimes seemed hard and unbridgeable, and my students often defended these frontiers with anger and force, especially when they felt stereotyped, patronized, or ill at ease. When so enraged, students pulled the classroom space towards them, gravitationally bending it around their aura, pulling others into their field of anger. But other times, these same divisions seemed like water, seamlessly flowing together as my students swayed easily between their different worlds, adjusting the codes at hand to give them access and mobility. When comfortable, my students’ intelligences and humor radiated in all directions, transforming the very atmosphere of the classroom, creating a space that was shared, collaborative and flexible. I needed methodologies and tools that would readily convey the rich and dynamic nature of what I feelingly perceived and absorbed.

Multilectics: Three dimensionality and multilevel analysis

What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself...
Franz Kafka (1976, p. 252)

Marx, viewing social life as motored by dualistic contradictions, championed dialectical thinking. Since I see the world more complexly interactive, and want to expose the multiplicity rather than the duality of how social life evolves, I propose what I call multilectical thinking. Rather than seeing contradictions as the collision and then resolution of two opposing forces, I

imagine social life as the interplay of countless interacting dynamics. Multilectics reflects the Bourdieusian notion of many borderless fields of social life constantly in play with each other. It allows me to see a contextually mediated world in which space, as in art, shapes and is shaped by the collaborative efforts of the elements of which it is comprised. Multilectics makes it possible for me to represent the street life and school life of my students not as distinct oppositional forces but as fields that interact unpredictably, constantly intertwining with one another no matter where my students are physically rooted. It makes the concept of resolution more complex than Marx imagined because the multiplicity of fields constantly pushing and pulling against each other demands a recognition of contingency in the roads that emerge and that may be chosen from within any social process. Each field brings together the many voices and meanings of its members, but multilectics also embraces the idea that every person contains within him/herself a multiplicity of identities conditioned by the fields in which he/she enacts knowledge. We are, indeed, many voices even by ourselves. Multilectics embraces all these complexities.

Multilevel analysis

...according to Mme Cezanne, he [Cezanne] would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, "germinating" with the countryside. The task before him was, first, to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second, through these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism. To do this, all the partial views one catches sight of must be welded together." (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 67)

Acknowledgement that every individual can perform differently depending on his social and emotional context is only one aspect of multilectical thought. The distance between the observer and the observed also alters what is perceived. Since I believe in a multi-dimensional and complex world, the research methods I use to examine my subjects must, like the artist's methods, embrace a range of perspectives, angles, and distances. In multilevel analysis, we talk

about macro, meso and micro levels of observation. Macro is looking from a distance, from far away. Looking carefully from this range, we see large shapes of things, broad themes that shape our understanding of the world and that could not be identified at close range. When looking at society through a macro lens, at wide swaths of social life, the issues of race and class, of wealth and poverty catch our attention. These large categories that broadly group individuals together, and thus divide them from each other, are so deeply entrenched in the way we conceive of social life, so buttressed through the resources of the mighty and the force of habit, and so enmeshed in everything we do that their defining walls often seem impregnable. Yet, if our theoretical lens tells us that these are the only important aspects of the way we are in the world with each other, than we never look further. Educational policy is often framed from macro data alone. Thus we often talk about poor black students and poor Hispanic students as if they were lumps of sameness, sharing the identical problems and in need of the identical solutions.

The artist who seriously cares about understanding what he is looking at knows that such broad stroked interpretations, by themselves, only give a crude symbol of reality; they don't capture the complex nature of who we are. Though we are all incredibly alike, we are each unique as well. That is why Bill Fasolino, a professor of art at Pratt Institute of Technology in Brooklyn, always used to talk about the "great events" of drawing, the way a nostril turns, the way a fingernail meets a finger. These differences between us, that can only be seen close up, on the meso and micro levels of observation, often mark the integrity of a work of art. The great masters, though they studied anatomy, knew that the key to creating a masterpiece was to look newly every time, with wonder and fascination, never taking anything for granted despite their knowledge of the human form. They gazed at their subjects with what the revolutionary Russian poet Vladimir Myakovsky called "the eyes of big children" (Widgery, 1972, para. 10), and thus

their paintings and drawings vibrated with the exhilaration of seeing the familiar as if it had never been seen before. In research, as in art, multiple vantage points are necessary in order to approach the whole.

Macro deficit lenses, that predict the ignorance of our students and their inability to advance, anchor educational policy even though they represent shuttered patterns of thought and vision. Unheeded of the great events within the classroom, their promoters design formulaic, one-size-fits-all solutions for our most underserved students as they squeeze them into preconceived categories of deficiencies. My research represents a different approach. I suggest that we replace mono macroscopic vision with multilectic and multi-scalar vision, one that joins class and race analysis to the great events made visible through meso- and microscopic vision. In this text, I have tried to show what this might look like, “welding together,” as Cezanne tried to do, “all the partial views one catches sight of” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 67). We need teachers, administrators and policymakers that seek fluency with the cultures of the students they teach. For those not born into the cultures of their students, that fluency can only be acquired by those receptive to multi-leveled experience.

Familiarity and the syntax of perception

Our vision is not only enhanced and obscured by the multiplicity of lenses through which we observe and the distance of our vantage point. Familiarity with what we know and believe also hems us in, which is to say that we are so accustomed to our place within the fabric of social life that it is difficult for us to stray even when we understand the need for it. Indeed, a central dilemma we confront in our daily lives is well expressed by the title of Dugmore Boetie’s autobiography, *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* (1969). What we know gives us security and comfort; it is our kingdom. We thrive in a recognized world, filled with the experiences we

have had and those that have been passed down to us. We, in turn, transmit these codes of survival to others by merely walking as we have learned to walk and perceiving the way we have learned to perceive. In this manner, society reproduces itself, moment-to-moment and century-to-century, only occasionally undergoing radical shifts that define epochs, or what the historian William Sewell, Jr. calls “events” (2005). That is why we value the culture we’ve created so deeply, the layers and layers of experience that form us, that soak through our language and our movements and our ways of seeing and feeling the world. Familiarity gives us confidence, allows us to reproduce in our own image and execute our roles as agents of continuance albeit with variation. It is part of what Anthony Giddens calls “ontological security” (Sewell Jr., 2005, p. 272). We could not squeeze familiarity out of our lives if we wanted to.

And yet, even as familiarity cushions and sustains us, it narrows our vision and constrains our possibilities. In the world of familiarity, truth is equated with what we have experienced, and it cements existing inequalities as inevitabilities. It tempts us to never look beyond the rules and structures that confine us, the paths we have mapped, the customs and patterns we have absorbed. Familiarity facilitates our imprisonment within self-constructed confines. We walk, if not blindly, at least unperceptively, alienated from our own potential to understand and make better the world in which we live. “Freedom,” writes Merleau Ponty, “can only come about ... by our going beyond our original situation...” (1993, p. 72). We are unknowingly lost to ourselves because we rarely venture “beyond.” We succumb to habit and the matter-of-fact, relishing the richness of what we already intimately know and can identify.

The lives of the students in the schools that are the subject of the following pages are different from the lives of those who design school policy. The categories they use to make sense of their worlds, the syntax by which they move and speak, the accent and rhythm of their words

and gestures, rich as they are, differ in important ways from the dominant patterns of academic life. Logically then, the dissonance between the culture of the street and home, and that imposed within the school, the tools needed to survive within each field of activity, grate against each other. Students, familiar with the language of home and street, instinctively resist the demeaning of their culture that is woven into the fabric of school life, especially when the benefits of acquiring school learning seem nebulous. Most school officials, familiar with and supportive of academic values and practices, do not have the theoretical tools, the freedom from official restraints, or the inclination—itsself a tool—to bridge the gap between school and street, between hegemonic values and the values of those they are entrusted to serve. Often, they do not even have the fluency to understand who they are teaching. It is my hope that this text will explore these issues in ways that will benefit students, teachers, administrators and policymakers.

The five parts of this text

In Part 1 of this text, I have described as thickly as I can the contradictions between the lives of the students and those in charge of educating them in school. The voices of my students, in all their vibrancy, are given freedom to breathe, and I hope that their intelligences sparkle through their written and spoken production. I contrast the dynamism of student voices with the methods used by schools to suppress them, and I analyze how the contrast between official modes of perception, students' ways of seeing, and my own perspectives clash. In the last chapter of this section, I focus on 12-year-old Justin, a brilliant but failing student who struggles to integrate his academic world with his street life. The chapter also focuses on Mr. C., his language arts teacher, who, unlike most teachers, is able to help Justin because of his fluency with Justin's world. Multilectical and multisclalar ways of perception are woven through each chapter, as theories of perception are described and their contribution to pedagogy explored.

In Part 2 of this text, I investigate ways of representing and understanding social life, and the importance to that depiction of the theories that inform lenses of perception. I contrast Norman Mailer's description of social life in his novel *The Executioner's Song* (1979) with Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* (1970), a theoretical work on dialectical thinking. I address the need for theoretical lenses that highlight the multidimensionality of individuals; access macro, meso and micro levels of analysis; welcome doubt and contingency and the messiness of social life in social analysis; embrace the possible as an aspiration and as a critique of what exists; and are accessible to readers who are not devotees of theoretical manuscripts. I end Part 2 by showing how multilectical thinking informed my interaction with Ashley, a furious, failing student in one of the schools in which I worked.

Part 3 focuses on teaching language arts and highlights, specifically, writing that students have done and what that writing reveals. I examine the way language arts is taught and shine a light on the *art* of teaching language arts as an alternate approach. I demonstrate what teaching language through love of language might look like. In this part, as in Part 4, I suggest pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning that help create spaces in which students excel.

Part 4 illuminates what we can learn from microanalysis of classroom activity, and brings to light the immeasurable qualities of students that go to the heart of their potential and possibility including curiosity, reflexivity, enthusiasm and collaborative engagement. This section analyzes, moment by moment, seven minutes of a fifty-minute session devoted to a group discussion of a love poem written by Ana, a seventh grader. By reviewing classroom events in slow motion, the play of words, gestures, and voice as they form language that is all at once visual and aural, individual and collective, takes center stage. They reveal ways of recognizing, documenting and assessing student literacy progress that official records ignore. Part 4 also proposes alternate co-

constructed structures of student-teacher activity that could create trajectories of success for my students

Part 5 reviews some of the major ideas of this text, includes some final thoughts and suggestions, and examines once more how artistic and multilectical lenses offer insights for pedagogy and educational research.

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PART 1:
Street life, school life
and the categories we use to judge each other

Chapter 1:

“Will you tell your people about me?”



Tania, an eighth grade African-American student, is a brilliant writer who is failing school. Last year, when she was twelve, she wrote about the death of her grandmother with whom she always went to buy ice cream, “[The ice cream seller had] teeth the color of sunshine and breath like dirty socks.” When Tania asked him, “Why do you look that way?” he answered, “Stress, I’ve been stressing.” At her grandmother’s funeral, “Everyone was wearing black. My grandmother hated black. She said it was the color of hate.” Meanwhile, “I had the blues, like my grandmother’s favorite shirt, the one I bought for her” and, beginning to circle back to her story’s start, “I began to melt like her favorite ice cream.” The end of the story meets the beginning when the ice cream seller appears at the funeral to offer condolences and free ice cream “anytime,” and Tania is told by her father that her grandmother died because of “stress, she was stressing.”

I used Tania’s story as a model memoir in a language arts class whose teacher I am working with this year. When I searched for Tania to let her know her writing was inspiring other young writers, I could not find her. Her current teacher told me “She’s flunking. She never comes to school. She only has herself to blame.” Another teacher added, “Tania has too much attitude.” Tania does have attitude: she’s angry, outspoken, and talks back. She also has a captivating

laugh, a twinkle in her eye, and a poetic feel for life and language. She could become one of this country's most important writers, but at the moment it looks like she may never get out of middle school.

Tania is not alone in having her uniqueness unrecognized because she doesn't fit the favored mold. The list of students facing similar obstacles is long. In most of the classes I work in, the overwhelming majority of students do not even score proficient, that is to say a score of 50%, on the state language arts tests. The others barely make it.

Standardized tests, which evaluate students on the basis of easily measurable criteria, are designed to rank students according to scores in the pre-determined skills most valued by policymakers. But they don't measure my students' intelligence, creativity, or passion. They can't quantify Tania's metaphors and they can't perceive the complexity of students' thinking. The tests can't speak their language, engage their desire or curiosity, observe them working together, incite their passions, or evaluate their senses of humor. They are oblivious to the richness of the students they assess. And the tests are boring. Ana, who questioned in her memoir if God and the Bible "is by my side," told me, "I can't stay focused on them. I look at the tests and just hear music."

Yet Ana is not always bored by text and not always frustrated by analyzing what she reads. When she studies the Bible with her mother's good friend "in my kitchen, with its dimmed lights' where all you can see is "the black and white stove, the off-white fridge, the dusty old glass table set and what was left of the wooden cabinets" she is able to concentrate on the text. When that concentration is interrupted by her father entering the kitchen and turning on the TV to a high volume, "I could not take it anymore. There was always two different kinds of noises. The noise in church was full of joy and inspiration. At home was just ruckus. So I pictured myself being at church, where it is always loud and music is playing. The sound of me picturing myself in church, full of joy, calms me down." Ana, when with someone who really cares about her and shares her interests, will sit and study texts, even under less than optimal conditions, and make connections between the text and her life that

Edited conversation with Antasia and some of her classmates

GF: Why when you're at home, in your kitchen, with your sister, you can study text, and you're reading the Bible and you're asking questions and your sister is helping you figure out what it means, but when you're in class, you often just don't care about what you write. And that's probably true of the rest of you too. And when you take the state tests I think you don't even bother. Is that true?

A: (and other students): Yeah

GF So why?

M: For example, they got an actual question on it, like "In paragraph 5, look for the word 'beautiful,'" like, for example, they got "what does the word complexion mean?"

A: like I don't want to know this. Give me some real stuff. This is all fake.

GF: But ,but don't, but how about the idea that even though it's fake, and even though you don't care about it, it makes a difference to what high school you're going to get into and stuff like that.

A: It makes, it makes a real difference, a lot of difference. (...) But like, I'd rather do, I'd rather learn stuff from my house because—it's like more interesting. All we do here is sit. Listen to that, do this, do that. I wanna learn something that's interesting. Like I'm very interested in like animals and stuff. I want to learn about that. And science, science fiction history and all that—we don't do that stuff here.

GF: So S, what happens to you on those standardized tests. You just tune out sometimes?

A: He got kicked out of class. He ain't supposed to be here in this conversation. I still got to read this (holding up her poem)

S: When I get to the last ones, [questions] sometimes I get ...

GF: Sometimes you get what?

S: Tired.

A: (loudly) Yeah, you be like there for two whole hours. What I look like staying here reading for like two whole hours. That's like boring. ... They say if you don't know it, just put a "c." Most of my answers are C.

M: They say if you wanna guess, they say if you can't guess nothing

A: [Just put C

M [just put C. C is like

D: the most common

S: That's the stupidest thing I ever heard

GF: does that mean you don't care what the grade is when you get it back?

S: I know I'm going get over 200

GF: But you know 200 is 50%....

A: No, but like that test is boring. I don't even understand why we got to take it. Like it's so boring, like I'm not going to set there and read that whole text

S: is like two pages long and they be boring

A: I don't even get the story. Like what is you talking about?

literacy teachers struggle constantly to get their students to make. Like Tania, Ana is a talented writer and serious thinker who tunes out when confronted with the standardized tests. These exams seem like tools of an alien world. Just like the ruckus from her father's TV, they are not worthy of her attention.

There is nothing novel in the insight that many students find no value in the work they have to do for school. Lev Vygotsky, the twentieth century Russian psychologist who emphasized the importance of culture and social interaction in learning, commented, in the 1930s, on the subjects students are forced to write about: "These topics remained foreign to the children, they did not touch their imagination or emotions...It was a rare case that this work was linked with a goal that was understandable, interesting, and within the capacity of the children" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 45). Too often, the writing students are forced to do has nothing to do with their lives and their concerns, and they cannot locate their own ideas in the products that get graded. Rather, they feel that what they have written doesn't emerge from within them, that it is not meaningful to their lives but is imposed on them by forces that can't understand where they are coming from and aren't interested in their futures. It is why Ana, after I showed her what I had written about her and asked her why she couldn't focus on her tests the way she focused on the Bible, declared emphatically, "It's not real!" and "I don't even get the story [on the exams]. Like what is you talking about? ... Like I don't want to know this. Give me some real stuff. This is all fake."

Alienation

Marx's theory of alienation, rarely spoken about anymore, deserves to be considered again in this context, with the student in the school replacing the worker in the factory and the writing they do replacing the "product" being produced:

Whatever the product of labor is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.” (Marx, 1964, p. 108)

It is, of course, not only alienation from texts and tasks that render so many of my students invisible to those who decide their academic worth. The students, in fact, lack many of the grade-level skills associated with the prevalent view of the purpose of schooling and the necessities of the economy they will enter into when they leave school. Few of my seventh-graders read at seventh grade level and many read at third- or fourth-grade levels. Most of their writing lacks consistent parallel construction because their oral language does not adhere to academic standards for English. Their spelling and grammar need work. Their vocabulary is not only limited but often punctuated by words that are part of their vernacular but found unacceptable in formal academic writing. Though students are able to improve in all these areas if writing is taught well and they feel safe exploring their thoughts, their lack of “grade-level” academic reading skills makes it even more difficult for them to engage with the material that is put before them. The reading comprehension tests and the writing prompts, that are based on passages of text, are often daunting tasks for many of my students. The content seems irrelevant to their lives, the vocabulary is foreign, and the grammatical forms employed do not parallel the way they speak at home or in the street. For all these reasons, the tests can’t measure their intelligence, if indeed intelligence is measurable at all.

It is not clear, then, what test data actually tell us. Not even New York's Educational Commissioner David Steiner knows what they actually measure or mean. Speaking on February 24, 2010, he said that standardized tests reduced complicated processes to simple outcomes that were easily quantified but that failed to reflect what, if anything, students were learning that was valuable. He questioned if these tests told us very much about student thinking or their "level of skills." Additionally, Steiner said, the tests did not reflect anything about student excitement with the process of learning.

This is not to say that reading at grade level or writing coherently is unimportant; indeed both are critical. It is only to recognize that the tests only serve to confirm and maintain students' already established positions in social life and that they substitute flat numbers for dimensional human beings.

The twentieth century French philosopher and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (2003) writes:

An educational system that puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action requiring familiarity with the dominant culture...offers information and training which can be received and acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the condition for the success of the transmission and of the inculcation of the culture. ...The educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture" (p. 108).

As Bourdieu explains, the tests reflect the degree to which dominant culture has been acquired; for the disenfranchised, they merely serve to perpetuate their "otherness."

But despite the inadequacy of tests, they are used to evaluate students. They are also used to judge the quality of teachers and administrators. The principal of one “failing” K-8 school, who has been threatened with dismissal because of the persistent failure of his students to score proficiently on the statewide exams, calls me into his office with the challenge, “So what will you do to improve test scores during your visits here?” I answer truthfully, “I’m not sure. If I can help make reading and writing enjoyable and meaningful for the students and their teachers, then, eventually, I believe test scores will improve. But there’s no quick fix.” This is not an acceptable answer and he replies dismissively, “We’d all like to see them enjoy school. That’s not good enough. We need to see some improvement on the tests. Tests don’t lie.” But he didn’t tell me what truths the tests were telling him.

Positivism and the culture of testing

Tests are tools that emerge from a dominant theoretical stance (Comtian positivism) (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009) that assumes that everything worthwhile can be quantified, categorized, and replicated and that research methodologies based on isolating variables are the only ones with validity. They reflect none of what Bourdieu called “radical doubt” (Bourdieu, 1992), the possibility that the categories we construct, and through which we see, severely restrict our range of perception. They also dismiss what are thought of as the “secondary qualities” of knowledge and meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1993), those associated with emotions, empathy, curiosity, collaborative energy, because these can’t be measured easily if at all. These secondary qualities are excised from the very concept of cognition, as if learning were a function unrelated to emotion and body-sense rather than deeply intertwined with them, and as if collaborative knowledge, the collective spirit that enhances learning, were inconsequential.

But emotions are deeply intertwined, indeed inseparable, from cognition. As Vygotsky (1962) pointed out, “Everyone knows that we see everything with completely different eyes depending on whether we are experiencing at the same time grief or joy” (p. 18). He wrote, further, that the separation of cognition from emotion “segregates” thoughts “from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 10). Because emotional qualities are not seen as important, because they are not quantifiable, because official evaluative tools are blind to the interrelationships and situational contexts that mediate learning, and because the worlds of African-American and Latino students in poor neighborhoods are often so distinct from the world that test designers recognize as worthwhile, the tests end up merely perpetuating the status quo, confirming the academic under-performance of African American and Latino students. The tests can only rate what they were designed to judge; the rest doesn’t count and is worthless. And so the Tanias of this world are cast out of school to navigate their complex and difficult worlds somewhere else.

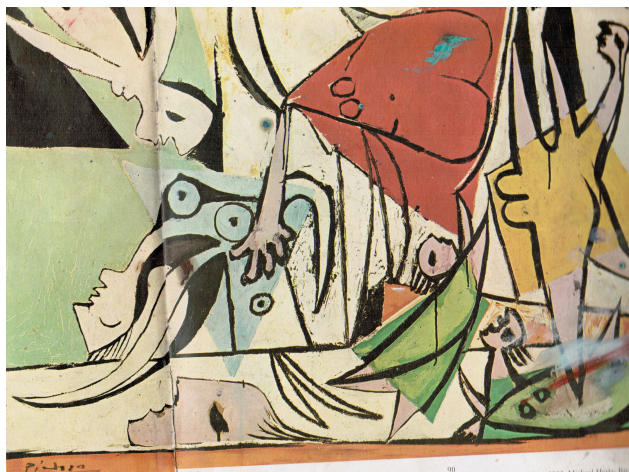
There are, obviously, issues of axiology at stake here, that is to say questions of ethics and values. What do we choose to qualify as an indicator of knowledge? What are schools supposed to contribute to the society of which they are a part? What mixture is to form the glue of beliefs and practices – of culture – that keep our society together? These questions and stances are tightly interrelated with structures of perception. How do those in control and those not in control perceive the world and how those views are acquired, absorbed, rejected, tolerated or endured by the many who are affected by dominant culture?

Perceiving the world

I was already thirty years old when I decided to become an artist. I knew who Picasso was, and Rembrandt, but I barely knew of Cezanne and I was ignorant of Matisse, Schiele, Grosz, Rivera,

Guston, DeKooning, Bearden or any of the contemporary artists. Then, within a period of weeks, as my social world grew to embrace a range of fellow painters and sculptors, many of these names became part of my daily conversations, part of my vernacular, co-constructors of my world. Intoxicated by the wonder of the Great Masters and their disciples, my new way of looking developed a glow informed by their art. Now, on my periodic drives from New York to Pittsburgh to see my parents, I would look at the landscape of Eastern Pennsylvania and marvel at how much it looked like a Van Gogh painting; indeed I could not see the landscape without thinking of Van Gogh; they had become inextricably joined in my mind.

Meanwhile, my own paintings, the colors I used and the forms I created leaned on the artists who had spoken to me. Painting the brutal beating of my



mother's childhood neighbor, Hugo Deller, by the Gestapo in 1938, I looked to Goya for inspiration. When



I wanted to depict my mother, as a 12-year-old child, throwing herself at her father who had just been released from Dachau, I recalled a beach painting by Picasso in which a girl strained upwards towards her mother as others swam about them. I retrieved it in order to create my own version of a child embracing a parent, and so the child of my pastel radiated a “family resemblance” to the one in Picasso’s 1932 *Women and children at seashore* though the two were,

simultaneously, very different from each other. My paintings were not copies of Goya or Picasso, but anyone intimate with their work would have recognized the path-dependent nature of my own creation and its place in the historic landscape of art and social life; they would grasp that I had built upon what existed in the language of art to create something that, though different, was informed by what had come before. Those unfamiliar with the artistic record would make their own connections to my art based on the experiences that had honed their own lenses. For me, however, the connection with my artistic ancestors was unshakable in my mind and I could not see my work without seeing theirs as well.

But other structures also interfered and intermingled to guide and construct my knowledge of the world. When I looked at the image I had created of my mother reaching out to her father, it brought back to me a horrible historic moment, a temporal structure, but I also thought of Picasso's frolicking children and mothers on the beach – his joyful characters now “linked,” as the twentieth century Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin would say, to my mother's anguish, an anguish that echoed deeply through structures of family, religion, history and geography. Additionally, within my own pastel, a version of the disbelieving joy my mother experienced at that precise moment of welcoming her father, some 73 years ago, rose up in me and conflated time; past and present were not measured by the chronological tick of the clock but rather enveloped me all-at-once and together. Looking at the pastel today, I still feel an internal interplay of tragedy and exhilaration that words cannot capture, joined with the satisfaction of having produced the artifact itself. All these emotions, remembrances and references well up within me simultaneously in all their contradictory polyphonic and polysemic essences; their joining within my body-sense is fully coherent as they shape my world and outline the limits of my perceptions at the constantly shifting frontier of my senses. They are a testament to the great

unquantifiable capacities that human beings carry around with them, a testament to the wondrous logic that comprehends contradictions as an integral part of reason. To be fully human is to entertain a host of conflicting understandings within oneself.

While we all share certain structures of perception, they unfold and overlap differently in each of us at different moments. We also are not identical in our ways of seeing or in the structures that sharpen our views. And so I would be chatting with friends who knew me from my more activist days, or with my fellow typesetters on the graveyard shift at a type house in midtown Manhattan, and I would comment on a landscape by Van Gogh or a drawing by Matisse, and they would look at me as if I were a foreigner from some other world. Van Gogh, like Matisse and Picasso, had become so second-nature to me, so ensconced in and validated by the social relationships that contributed to a new phase in my life, that I forgot that he was not part and parcel of the knowledge I shared with friends met in different realms of activities, in what the American anthropologist Dorothy Holland would call different “figured worlds” (1998) or Bourdieu might call “fields” of social life. The structures I had acquired and that now helped to shape my vision were not the same ones my friends had at hand. And so they regarded me quizzically, skeptically, while I found myself momentarily awed by their ignorance. I forgot that, hardly six months earlier, I, too, knew nothing of Van Gogh’s landscapes, and that the view of Pennsylvania from a car driving down Route 78, on a fall day rich in greens and oranges and luscious rolling hills beneath a pale blue filled with cumulous froth that Van Gogh had no role in constructing was beautiful on its own account though, in my mind, I couldn’t disassociate him from it. Structures of perception both join us together and separate us.

Structures of perception

Visual experiences form only one type of structure that both enhances and limits the way we perceive our worlds. Spoken language also limits our verbal discourse to what words are able to express while at the same time providing us with the wonder of talk; the lens of dualities – the seemingly unshakable concept that we live in a world of opposites – good or bad, female or male, ugly or beautiful, true or false, proletariat or bourgeoisie, poor or rich likewise frame our perceptions. The idea that one can be good and bad, ugly and beautiful, multi-classed and multi-gendered in different proportions at different times seems beyond the pale. Indeed our “internalized censors of thought...make a whole collection of things unthinkable... [They are] categories of thought which determine that there is only black and white, and that grey areas do not exist” (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 13). Unlike the visual structures I mentioned above that focused my way of seeing and that I sought for consciously to enrich my world, these latter categories of thought, a world organized by dualities and by the limits and breadth of language, are internalized effortlessly as tools of perception. These taken-for-granted categories of thought and feeling are part of what Bourdieu called “habitus.” We acquire them without thinking as we are nurtured within our culture; though constructed by us, they also mold us. They are so inscribed upon our beings and shared so widely within our cultural groups that we don’t even give them a second thought. Indeed it is these structures that provide the glue that holds a society together. The historian William Sewell writes, a shared culture “recognizes” the same set of oppositions and therefore its users are “capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action” (166). Bourdieu (1992) notes:

...these oppositions – hot/cold, east/west, dry/wet...organize every thought and all practice. These oppositions are applied to everything, in order to consider the

opposition between the sun and the moon, the toad and the frog, and even, but already more difficult, between wheat and barley. ... They function as the most absolute system of censure since they are... the things which structure what is thought, and therefore they are themselves extremely difficult to think” (p. 39-40).

Positivism, which equates value only with qualities that can be measured, has become part of our “ready-made thought” [p. 40) that constrains our possibilities of perception and comprehension. The world seen through the positivist lens is clear and certain, not some dynamic interplay of constant motion and change filled with inexpressibles in which truth and causality are elusive. Statistical measurement based on positivist lenses has come to define what we value; they convert polysemic and contradictory understandings into a statistical measure, they discard what can't be counted, the passions, curiosities, and ignored or disrespected knowledges that go the core of our humanity. When tests equate our multi-logical understandings to a point on a graph, or measure and flatten them into a number or a letter, the fullness of our capacities is lost and data replaces quality and worth in its deepest essence.

That Tamir, a seventh-grader, is a magnificent dancer and singer who can get everyone laughing and spinning together is of no account because he has difficulty writing an opening paragraph to a persuasive essay. And because 12-year-old Justin reads at a third grade level, it is of no official importance that he is an incisive logician and reflective thinker with a remarkable vocabulary imbued with the street, a class leader with a wicked sense of humor who seeks the success of his classmates, an expert on street survival and dirt bikes, a fountain of outward joy though his father was killed in a police chase last summer, a student who comes to school every day though he doesn't take his report card home because “nobody will read it,” a self-motivator who, as his teacher told me “is raising himself. There's no one who tells him it's time to go to

bed, no one to tell him it's time to take a bath." No matter any of these qualities or how he toils to become interested in reading, he stays on the lowest rank on the official scales of worth and value as judged by official tools of evaluation.

Value and worth

Marx writes about three types of value, two of which, "use value" and "exchange value," are immediately pertinent to how educational systems conceive of student value. Marx writes in *Capital* (1990) that "He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour ... creates use values" (p. 131), whereas commodities, being things that are exchanged for other things, are "themselves external to man, and therefore alienable" (p. 182). Exchange value is what one thing is worth in terms of another thing. Marx thought on the macro economic scale, and in order to exchange commodities a common denominating unit of exchange, money, had to be invented. "Exchange value," wrote Marx, "appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use values of another kind" and that "every useful thing... may be looked at from the two points of view of quality and quantity" (p. 125). Sewell (2005), building on Marx, adds, "the core procedure of capitalism – the conversion of use value into exchange value or the commodification of things – is exceptionally transposable. It knows no limits; it can be applied not only to cloth, tobacco, or cooking pans, but to land, housework, bread, sex, advertising, emotions, or knowledge, each of which can be converted into any other by means of money" (p. 91). As a result, "all kinds of qualitative relations" are "transformed... into quantitative relations of economic value" (p. 348) in which "every qualitative difference ... is extinguished" (Marx, 1990, p. 229).

In schools, grades that rank serve a similar purpose to money, extinguishing every qualitative difference between human beings, transforming each student into a mark that can be measured

against another mark. This perception that all things- whatever they are- can be translated into numeric equivalences “has perverse and ultimately crippling effects. ...and it hides the fact that our fascination with quantification itself arises out of the generalized commodification of our social life” (Sewell Jr., 2005, p. 349). Lefebvre (1974) adds:

...use re-emerges sharply at odds with exchange in space.... The more space is functionalized – the more completely it falls under the sway of those ‘agents that have manipulated it so as to render it unifunctional.... Why? Because in this way it is removed from the sphere of *lived* time, from the time of its “users’, which is a diverse and complex time. (p. 356)

The inertia of categories of quantification to measure human value, their “tendency to remain in place” and become what David Harvey calls “permanences” (1996), is one of the challenges that face socially-constructed structures of thought that are enforced by “the chain of our own ideas” (Foucault, 1995, p. 102). They cry out for “radical doubt,” for a new way of seeing and conceiving, a “transformation of systems of knowledge” (Haraway, 1988, p. 585) to shake up the categories of thought that constrain perception on every level of social life and, most insidiously, in the way we gauge our own and each other’s worth.

Chapter 2

The landscape of student life

The worlds of my students

There are things my students know that I cannot. Like the soldiers in Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*, (1990), my students carry with them the burdens, necessities, dreams, and pleasures that infuse their lives – family traumas and historic traumas, poverty, the dangers of the walk to and from school, adolescent love and heartbreak, the banter and laughter of camaraderie, and the mysterious and often explosive mix of violence, play, and experiment. Like the many characters in O'Brien's novel who trudge through Vietnamese jungles and American cities, my students have more to haul than just their backpacks. The weight of their load is visible in the steps they take through the hallways, the rhythm, pitch, and decibel level of their talk, and the words they use in their interchanges with each other. These are all in-the-moment actuations of the knowledge they carry with them as they strive, like all of us, to make sense of their surroundings.

Amber carries with her the imprisonment of her 14-year-old big brother for hitting an alleged assailant with a “blue and white” bat. The cops who arrested him, “came faster than bread getting toasted” and took him away. The sadness, loneliness and anger she feels are hers alone, and yet they belong similarly to her family and they resonate with many in her community whose young men are behind bars or in juvenile facilities. She rarely speaks in class, sits at her desk with her eyes downcast, and only occasionally participates in the ribaldry of her tablemates. She always smiles at me when she enters and leaves the classroom, often she gives me a small wave of the hand and a “hello, Mr. Fellner,” but when I or the teacher approach her and ask her questions, she mostly answers with but a word or two. Yet she is articulate when she pleads in her essay,

“Someone should be able to see my brother’s innocence... Someone should be able to comprehend why he did what he did.”

Her classmate, Earl, has seen the hands on a Desert Eagle Automatic “go back and forth” after the gun’s been fired and seen at least one man stabbed and bloody, “That’s the first time I seen a person shot,” he writes.

Meanwhile, Akil explains that his uncle is “ruining peoples’ lives by selling weed and crack.... He sells this stuff to pregnant women, kids, fathers and mothers just to make a buck.”

Just as I am unable to really know my mother’s anguish at the murder of her parents even as I feelingly comprehend it on a plane once removed, I cannot perceive how my students live except from a distance and through the lenses I have available and that they help me to acquire.

Knowledge is experience, and it is continually being constructed for each of us as we live our lives, second upon second. We can walk next to each other, alongside each other, but we cannot share the identical sequence of steps or make the identical footprints. Most of the experiences of these twelve-year-olds, and most of the education they receive, seen in the context of knowledge in its expansive and truest sense, happen outside of school, and outside of the spaces I share with them during a school day.

It is then never a question of *if* students are learning. They are, always. It is, instead, a question of if they are learning the right stuff, and on who decides what the right stuff is. Is it what students want to learn or what teachers want to teach? To what degree do these goals overlap and interact? Is the right stuff that which will help my students survive in the world others hope they will live in despite the dreary statistical evidence of stagnation and reversal in many communities of color? Is the right stuff that which my students need to survive in the streets of the rough impoverished cities that they inhabit and form? What do these students need

to learn in order to prosper? What can we do within the schools to support those parents who struggle so that their children will flourish in a world of less immediate danger and hardship? What can educators do to replace the often self-destructive glamour of the streets with a more seductive academic glow, a curiosity for exploring that different path of learning that formal education, at its best, promises? How can we provide students with an education that will help them survive on their streets, our streets, while simultaneously building within them the knowledge to triumph in that other world, really a different place within the same world, as successful and fulfilled human beings? Is there a way, through formal education, to incite the transformation of the one world with its multiple worlds into places that are more generous, joyful and just?

The sea of normality

We are watching an episode from a You-Tube documentary series called *Girlhood*. It is about two adolescent girls, about the same age as my students, who are in a juvenile facility. One, Regan, is locked up for assault. The other, Shanae, is in for stabbing a “friend” to death. Out of the class of twenty-two students, all but a few raise their hands to assert that Shanae did the right thing by killing the girl who “hit me from behind.” None of them question Shanae’s account of the story, none of them seem to even give a thought to the young girl whom she killed and none think it unusual that Shanae was carrying a knife with her on her way to school. One student says, I carry a knife when I’m not here. You need protection.” When informed that 75 people were killed in his city last year, he was unfazed, “That’s not a lot. For a year, that’s good.” While many students share an outrage about drugs, murders, and burglaries, others are much more flexible in their condemnations. In their world, drugs and violence are always threatening, and if they aren’t personally involved in either, they have close relatives who are; they see the self-

destructive aspect of the violence and the drugs but they also find it familiar and, sometimes, romantic.

Such familiarity mediates a different attitude toward crime than the outside world is likely to have. One articulate student was expelled from a previous school for stealing a few hundred dollars from a teacher's purse. One day she told me the story of the theft and admitted, "Yeah, I did it" only to say later, with a small laugh, "no, I didn't." She couldn't seem to decide if her act was something of which to be ashamed or proud. When students were discussing O'Henry's short story "A Retrieved Reformation" about the burglar Jimmy Valentine, one student commented, "Robbing one bank is ok. But if someone does it again, then maybe they should go to jail." Another student told me, "You wouldn't mug someone for a million bucks; I'd do it for ten."

Poverty

Mr. C., the class teacher who comes from the same neighborhood as his students, relates to me a conversation he had with them. He tells me, "they don't realize they're poor." When he asked his class, "If being rich means you can buy happiness, does being poor mean you are unhappy?" One student replied, "well I'm not poor, so how should I know?" When Mr. C. then pointed out to them that they are getting free lunches and that their parents are all getting financial support from the government, it is the first time they seemed to realize that this is not what all families get. When he asked them what they thought a good salary was, one of the girls guessed \$10,000/year. One of the boys interjected, "It's got to be around \$25,000." When Mr. C. detailed his own expenses and told them his salary, the class was impressed. The discussion ended when another girl, the one who stole the money, summarized, "well then, we're all poor in this school."

Issues of poverty and race have startlingly never been directly addressed in the writing that my students have done and in the conversations I've engaged in or overheard, but they can quickly bubble to the surface. They may not see themselves as poor, yet they understand relative poverty and sometimes shame each other by exposing economic conditions, "You don't even have a sink in your bathroom," and "What you talkin' about, you don't got heat in your house." When we are discussing school uniforms, one student whispers to me the names of two students in the class who have their uniforms subsidized because, "They poor. They can't afford them." Students understand the ranges of poverty among them, but seem only marginally conscious of how poor they are in relationship to others in the world outside, notwithstanding their adulation of various famous performers and athletes. The vast majority of my students have never wandered far from their neighborhoods, and so they have little with which to contrast their own lives. It is thus not surprising that the tools my students have to negotiate their survival and their prosperity are not adequate for maneuvering through the minefield of the society represented by test makers. Their dispositions, their habitus, may be durable and transposable within the world they know but, for most of my students, they are not easily adaptable to the dominant discourse.

Race

Like poverty, the issues of race and racism also flow in paths that are characterized by ambiguities and contradictions that are not always easy to interpret. These are complicated by thought processes that may seem absurd from the outside though they are perfectly logical from within.

In one 6th grade class, students are reading *The Watsons go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995), a book of historical fiction about the 1963 church bombing in which four young black girls were killed. They are making collages of the Watsons, a black family making a trip from Detroit to

Birmingham. One black female student cuts out a picture of a white woman from a magazine to represent Mrs. Watson. A black male student upbraids her, “What’s the matter with you. Mrs. Watson was black!” The girl replies, “It don’t matter, don’t be racist.”

In another class, students are reading *Number the Stars*, a fictionalized story about the Holocaust. The literacy coach begins to discuss with them what it means to be a minority and asks them how they feel being minorities. From the perspective of these students, the question doesn’t make any sense because they don’t see themselves as minorities. To them, minorities are Mexicans, and the term Mexican is often used as a slur, associated with being poor, illegal and ignorant. On further inquiry, it turns out that, at least in this class, the Puerto Ricans think they are the majority population and the blacks think that blacks outnumber all others. From their perspectives, and within their community, they are right. Only one black kid says he feels like a minority, and that is because, though black, he is Haitian and Portuguese. When I point out the chart with the pictures of the Presidents on the wall, all but one of whom is white, the students just shrug. What does that have to do with them?

Meanwhile, the only school in which my whiteness was ever a subject of overt suspicion was in an all black school, and that dissipated, at least on the surface, as I began to build trusting relationships with students and staff. In one school however, as I sat at a table with five students discussing a written assignment, one African-American male began pinching the skin on my hand and saying, “Look how it changes color. Why does it do that?” The other students looked on with fascination. Overall, however, my Jewishness was a subject of much greater curiosity than my whiteness.

Student 1: He was Jewish

GF: (taking off my cap) Well, he was, you know, there are a lot of, there, like, like I’m not blonde, and I’m Jewish

Student 2: No you’re not

Student 3: You’re Jewish?

Student 4: You’re blonde?

GF: No, I’m bald.

Laughter

Most of my students have never, knowingly, spoken to a Jew before. When I read the first few paragraphs from Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1995) to the students and asked them about why the narrator had attacked the tall blue-eyed blond man in the street, one of the students declared, "He was Jewish!" Because of the spike in pitch and intensity of her voice, I interpreted the tone of her words as hostile. Later in the year, however, when the same student said, "I want to see your story" and I showed her some of my pastels about my mother's flight from Nazi Germany, she said, in the same tone of voice, "You're mother's got a history. She needs to write a book!"

The prosody and intensity with which students speak, their "orality" as Boykin et al. (2005) would say, can easily be misinterpreted as disruptive or even hostile by those ignorant or intolerant of the prosodic speech features of many inner-city students. In this case, "strangeness" inspired dialogue and

GF: He wrote, "I got into a fight with this Dominican guy."

Student: OOOOH,

GF: That's what he wrote

Student: He's Puerto Rican

GF: He was a Puerto Rican guy

Student: Oh Yeah! Oh Yeah

learning. Months later in the same class, a student asked me, "are you really Jewish?" When I said yes, she asked, with a short laugh, "Then why don't you wear that little round hat on your head?" Another girl said, "Jews have beautiful green eyes." When I told her that my twin sister, "has dark brown eyes just like yours" the student responded incredulously, "She does? Is she Jewish too?"

Where racism between students has seemed most explosive it has been between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. One student, writing about a fight he had in school, wrote, "I got into a fight with this Dominican guy." He used no descriptor except "Dominican" to describe his antagonist. When I quoted his line to the class in which the above conversation about Jewishness took place, one student laughed and said, "Yeah, that writer must be Puerto Rican." When I said, "that's right," he laughed knowingly, "Yeah," drawing out both the word and his laughter.

Later the student told me that he himself, as a Puerto Rican, doesn't really have anything against Dominicans except that they "Don't know how to behave. They live above us. They play their music loud at night. I mean, they're ok. But they don't act right."

At the same time as race and poverty seem not to impinge as *conscious* daily forces on the lives of most of my students, they are aware – especially my students who are black – that racism and discrimination are forces against which they must contend. Discussing the Bill of Rights during a language arts class, Justin told us about the time the car he was in was pulled over just because the driver was black. He also explained to us the intricacies of the bail system and how it varied from place to place. He may not be able to answer, or may not choose to answer, a test-prep question like one recently given on what you would do if you were surrounded by a swarm of butterflies, but he is a young expert on how the legal system confronts black people in his community and of the perils of being black in the world in which he lives.

The way we communicate

Akil is a tall black 7th grader with a big smile and a sharp mind. He wants to be a football player when he gets out of school but he has a flair for dramatic writing, a possible future as a sports journalist or a crime reporter though when I mention either he scoffs and tells me, "What ya talking about? I'm gonna be on the field. People be writing about me." When I first began participating in Akil's class, he would look at me askance, wondering what I was doing there. Later, when he would leave the classroom at the end of the period, he would dramatically lumber towards me, his chin and chest thrust out, a look of determination on his face, and bump me. "You think you can take me, huh?" he would say as the hulk of his body cast a shadow over me. I would look him squarely in the eyes and respond, "yeah, no problem." A wide friendly smile would suddenly appear, his eyes would twinkle and then he would laugh, only to suddenly

revert, in jest, to a dark scowl and then break out laughing once again. This way of saying goodbye has become almost routine by now, a friendly ritual between us, a sign that we're "ok" with each other. Sometimes it is interrupted by Tamir who approaches, stands in front of me with his arms folded like a bodyguard might, and says, "Don't worry, Mr. Fellner, I got your back." Though he is joking in class, Tamir once seriously inquired if I had been in any fights and assured me with bravado, "You don't ever have to feel unsafe here. I'll protect you with my life, I don't care." I thanked him but told him I hoped that wouldn't be necessary. As I left the building he said, "drive safe."

Students who spend time on the streets bring to school bodies attuned to the physical dangers of their communities. With those dangers comes the physical-verbal banter that helps them survive in their neighborhoods; they have mastered the language required to size up an opponent as well as to forge a friendship. As in the streets, such measuring up hovers on the threshold between play and violence, jest and threat, friendship and wary appraisal. Earl, who has seen his uncle shoot a man on the street outside his building, approaches me and says, "You better take me with you to read today, or I'm going to get you." He is using the forms of persuasion that he has sharpened on the street. Unfamiliarity can easily lead to misinterpreting as a threat what is really a joke or a plea.

Elijah Anderson, in his book *Code of the Street* (1999) explains, "At play, small children hone their physical skills, standing down adversaries, punching each other lightly, playfully sizing each other up. This sort of ritual play-fighting, playing the code, is commonplace" (p. 25). He analyzes the precariousness of this jousting, "At the heart of the code is the issue of respect. ...But what one deserves in the way of respect becomes ever more problematic and uncertain. [It is open to] intense interpersonal negotiation, at times resulting in altercations" (p. 33). Ann

Ferguson (2001) notes that the survival strategies need by young males in poor communities of color – ritual play-fighting, serious fighting, cursing, acting and being tough and defiant are the very strategies which lead to detention and suspension in the schools.

Misalignment of dispositions

Boykin et. al (2005) describe a number of qualities, or knowledges inscribed as habitus, that are essential for communication among many black and Latino students though they are undervalued by policymakers and educators as knowledge to build upon because they are “contextually inappropriate” (p. 525) and are habitually punished when openly manifested in schools. These include *movement*, “the interwoven mosaic of movement expressiveness, dance, percussiveness, rhythm, and syncopated music” that are “engaging of life itself and are vital to one’s psychological health” and is inclusive of gesture and speech; ... *affect* which “emphasizes not withholding emotions;” *orality* which “implies a special receptiveness to the spoken word and a reliance on oral expression to carry meaning and feeling;” *communalism* “refers to the fundamental interdependence of people” and the importance of “social bonds” and “cooperation” (531-2). Though I am not as inclined to paint my analysis of these qualities with the broad strokes that Boykin does, he has researched these qualities in depth and writes incisively about them. Partly because of my familiarity with his work, I have been able to observe the behaviors he mentions in many of my students. These ways of interacting create what Sewell calls a “semiotic community,” whose members “will recognize the same set of oppositions and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action” (2005, p. 166) with each other (whether friendly or antagonistic). Boykin writes:

At the root of these efforts is the conviction that the challenges in achievement African American students face are, at least, partially informed by a cultural

divergence between the instructional practices in public schools and the learning preferences of this population, which are cultivated through their home socialization experiences. (2005, p. 522)

Boykin's analysis can easily lead to assuming, falsely, that all members within a categorical group (whether racially or economically defined) share all the same cultural descriptors, an error in perception that is typical of policymakers and those who only view social life through macro lenses. And yet his observation is compelling and takes us back to Bourdieu's analysis of the power of dispositions to persevere and the difficulties confronted by individuals and groups whose dispositions don't align with those of the dominant culture within which they must function.

In classrooms in which my black and Latino students are free to speak with gusto, make non-threatening physical contact with each other and sometimes with the teacher; express their opinions loudly and vociferously using the language at hand and, occasionally, dance, academic learning takes place within an environment that is emotionally nurturing, often joyful and filled with laughter. Spaces in which student language predispositions are not punished but given space to breathe can stimulate the critical thinking that schools say they value (a subject I will return to). Though such communicative exchange is often considered inappropriate by teachers and administrators, it is often what grounds students in a zone of comfort that permits them to think freely, act with confidence and competence, and allows them to be who they are.

Physicality

I am aware of how physically interactive my students are with each other. They are always touching one another- affectionately, playfully, roughly, aggressively. They are always dancing, interspersing their conversations with little spins (if they are standing) or with tapping their

fingers on the desk or their feet on the floor. Their physicality embraces Boykin's *movement* and also the *communalism* that he describes. Often it is combined with his definition of *orality*, words saturated with passion and emotion, with "verve." Roland Barthes writes that "without rhythm, no language is possible" (1985, p. 249), and that "the voice is located at the articulation of body and discourse" (p. 255). Rhythm animates both gesture and voice, and both join in every expression we make. In many of my students, the articulation that Barthes writes about is overt.

Nelson is a Puerto-Rican seventh grader, bordering on the obese, who has the skill and intelligence to make the honor roll but does not score proficient on his language arts tests and rarely does classroom work. When he chooses to participate in discussions, his comments can be astute, but mostly he just makes jokes with his tablemates or spaces out. His relationship with his fellow male classmates, his bond with them, is cemented by a daily ritual greeting every morning. As he comes into the classroom, he walks around the room and rubs the top of the head of his friends (who are both black and Latino). I have heard him say, "how's my nigger," to black students as he rubs their heads- as if they were some good-luck charm, without anyone taking obvious offense. Some students laugh, some give him a slap on his belly, most just go with the flow.

Ana, tall, articulate and outgoing, spends many long minutes during class stroking the head of the boy who sits beside her. The boy is short, quiet, shy and scores significantly below proficient on the Language Arts standardized test. They sit next to each other in their assigned seats, her hand on his hand, he quietly looking forward, both appearing perfectly at ease and in harmony.

Ngozi, who has a tendency to loud, angry and nasty outbursts, can also be warm and affectionate. When reading with Justin, she often has an arm on his arm, her chin on his head.

Her physical demonstration of friendship is coupled by communalism as she helps Justin pronounce words from the book they are reading together. Indeed



such mutual, uncompetitive learning together is common in the classrooms I've been in, and it is often accompanied by touching or by physical synchrony- bodies leaning forward together, mouths open in unison though only one person is speaking. When such physicality is prohibited, the emotional climate that links intimacy, friendship, and pleasure with learning is lost. Because there is a tenuous line between speaking with gusto and behaving obstreperously; between being physically affectionate and being physically violent; and between laughing and dancing to further synchrony/solidarity as opposed to a type of clowning that negatively disrupts, teachers tend to clamp down harshly at even a hint of these acts. Even affectionate physicality often takes the form of roughhousing and *orality*, in the form of cursing, can sometimes get out of hand. Time provides nuance here: roughhousing that lasts five seconds is very different from roughhousing that lasts ten or fifteen seconds, and roughhousing that dissipates quickly on its own is different from that which needs to be interrupted by an authority. In the outtake below, three male friends (only two are visible) are roughhousing together. As one student swipes the head of the other, the one being struck yells out, "Oh you mother!" The entire

exchange last 2.48 seconds, the teacher doesn't respond to it. A few students laugh for a fraction of a second but basically the event takes place without comment and without causing



any severe disruption. The protagonists settle down almost immediately. This is the type of disruption which, in some classrooms, might result in the three getting detention or even suspended, but in this case it passes almost unnoticed.

In fact, such interchanges are common. They echo the way in which many students interact on the street – slapping and cursing both to test and to demonstrate comradely feelings. How teachers and administrators react to them affects the emotional climate of the classroom and the learning that takes place there.

I was in a sixth grade classroom conversing with two students, a boy and a girl, about a writing prompt. At one point the boy grinned and said to me, “she don’t know how to write.” The girl, laughing, slapped him on the back, “yes I do,” the noise of her hand on his jacket reverberating through the classroom though it did not divert the flow of our conversation. But the school social worker, who happened to be close by (though not privy to our discussion), strode quickly up to us and interrupted our conversation by screaming at the top of her lungs, “How dare you hit him! How would you feel if he hit you back?” The girl just glared at the social worker and said nothing as the whole class stopped working to focus on her. “Apologize to him,” screamed the social worker. The girl said nothing, just kept her stony silence and held fixed the look of her inquisitor. The social worker then turned to face me and screamed, “Mr. Fellner, is this acceptable behavior?” It was my turn to be silent. I was a visiting consultant to the school, and already had made myself unwelcome by questioning the language arts curriculum. As an

occasional visitor, I didn't want to confront her before the entire class, but I was also unwilling to back her up. Not receiving any support from me, she turned again to the girl and shouted, "If you don't apologize you're getting detention." The girl said quietly, never taking her hardened gaze off the social worker, "I'm sorry." The social worker walked away. I said to the boy, "So, would you have hit her back?" "You kidding?" he laughed, "she's a girl."

In a similar vein, there are teachers who give detention for cursing in class, making off-topic comments, or for the occasional, short-duration roughhousing which punctuates other classes without reprimand. In a sign of the contradictions involved in interactions within social life, teachers who are harsh disciplinarians and strict maintainers of cultural norms sometimes have the respect of students, especially when their words are laced with the sarcasm and verbal quickness that are highly prized on the streets. One teacher told a student, "What are you? Stupid? Don't you have anything in that cobweb-infested skull of yours you call a brain?" Later, he said to me, "Yeah, I scream at them, I'll call them stupid and make fun of them, but they come to my classroom after school to work on the computers, not to Mrs. Smith's or Mr. Wattam's. They love me." And in fact, though some students were humiliated others told me, "I think he's funny" and another 7th grade teacher said to me, "Yeah, they all loved him last year." Ferguson (2001) and Anderson (1999) both point out that harsh disciplinary male figures are respected in many segments of minority communities and exchanging insults is customary within friendships as well as within antagonistic relationships. What I consider unacceptable teacher behavior, symbolic violence leading to humiliation, is casually accepted in some schools and may positively motivate some students. As far as the schools are concerned, as long as the students are kept in line, the method used is largely unimportant.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin discusses how physical interactions, cursing and sexual joking, and amiable insult are often signs of intimacy, social bonding and solidarity building. That intimacy and learning facilitate each other should be obvious to anyone who learned to love books as a young child during bedtime reading rituals. When intimacy and joy are sucked out of the learning process, learning becomes a “torment,” an activity “hateful for its meanness” that “transforms life-time into working time” (Marx, 1990, p. 799). It also complicates the schools’ attempts to compete with the allure of the streets.

Fighting

The most severe contradiction lies in the fact that street dispositions that can signify intimacy and friendship can also signify antagonism and enmity. For inner-city school administrators nervous about violence exploding at any time, the need for control outweighs all other needs including pedagogical ones. Allowing students to enact their dispositions, even if doing so is shown to often have a positive affect on academic learning, is just too risky, with schools legally liable if students get hurt. This means that harsh measures are often taken against fighting when other measures might be more conducive to promoting an emotional climate that nurtures students and advances academic goals.

Early one morning, in the hallways of one school I was in, two seventh-grade girls, fighting over a boy, fell upon one another on the floor and were slugging away at each other. A teacher who knew them pulled them apart, dragged one of them into his classroom and hovered over her in a corner, speaking to her quietly as she panted, refusing to let her escape from the blockade of his body until she had calmed down. He then told her to sit in the back of the room and “cool down.” After about fifteen minutes, when she said she was “ok” and promised not to get into any more trouble, he told her to go to her class. By lunch time, the two girls had somewhat

reconciled; at least they were talking. Later in the day, however, the police came and pulled them out of school, criminalizing a confrontation that could probably have been better resolved through dialog.

In a different school, a seventh grade girl who was the glue of my language arts was suspended for punching another girl in the face. She had worked tirelessly on her memoir about the death of her grandmother entitled, “The second worst thing that ever happened to me.” The girl now lived with her older sister, who was her legal guardian. I told the principal what a fantastic student she was, how hard she had worked on her writing, and how magnificently she had spoken about her memoir at a professional development workshop I had led. I said to him, “surely there must be a better way to deal with her than to suspend her.” He replied sympathetically but firmly and undefensively, “We have a zero tolerance policy against violence here. There is no option other than suspension.”

Though I believe school officials erred in their judgments in the examples of school violence above, there are numerous cases where the fury of the moment is seriously dangerous – when violence does not end in dialog, hostilities do not peter out on their own, and where students are seriously hurt or humiliated. In one class a girl in rage almost stabs a boy in the eye with a pencil; in another class two students slug it out because of some unexplained fury that was probably brought in from the outside; in yet another case, a student is in fear of another student who has threatened her and comes by her home after school. Though dialogue should always be part of efforts to reflect|learn, the conditions that lead to an escalation of anger are often difficult for some schools to cope with. These include a lack of resources – specifically an absence of counselors, social workers and therapists to deal with the numbers of students involved in both aggressive and self-destructive acts, and few teachers skilled in conflict management. The

inability to cope with students about to explode also stems from a stance that decrees suspension for every act of physical aggression rather than trying to deal with underlying causes; categorical constructs which view student conduct as good or bad without nuance; and official mandates that make teaching strategies, state curricula, and standardized exams obligatory regardless of the needs and dispositions of the students being taught. Of course, the issues of poverty, racism, and parental absence only aggravate these issues and are, indeed, largely beyond the control of school officials.

Meanwhile students are verbally bullied for a range of reasons including, prominently, suspicion of being gay. I have had students who sympathize with relatives who have robbed and killed but state without hesitation that they would kill a relative if he were gay. The use of the word “gay” as an epithet is so widespread, among both students and teachers, that eliminating it from daily discourse seems almost impossible. Once when I thought a student was mercilessly deriding another for being “gay,” I intervened and told the bully that her words and behavior were unacceptable. She looked at me and shouted, “I ain’t making fun of him. I’m just saying the truth. He’s gay.” When I discussed the event with the classroom teacher, he gently chided me, “I’m not sure intervening in that way is helpful. Besides, I don’t think he (the guy being bullied) is gay and everyone knows she (the bully) goes off on people like that. I think you’re making too much of it.” Though it was not, in my mind, a question of whether the “victim” was gay or not, the teacher might have been right. Other times, however, my intervention was more successful. When a seventh grade student who was involved in group work stated, “I hate gays. I don’t want them around,” I asked him why he felt so threatened by homosexuality. When he answered, “I just hate them. I don’t need a reason,” some of the young women in the group admonished him, “That’s not right. There’s nothing wrong with being gay.” During one class discussion, a student

widely respected by his peers admitted that “My cousin is gay, and I like him.” I expected the class to jeer but nobody raised any objection. Once I confronted a teacher who made fun of a student by telling him, “you’re really acting gay. Next thing you’ll be wearing a skirt and acting like a girl.” The teacher admitted, “You’re right, I shouldn’t be doing that. I wasn’t thinking. But it’s no problem, none of my students are gay.” When I asked, “How do you know?” and added, “and even if they’re not gay, they may have friends and classmates who are. You’re not setting a good example,” he said he would be more careful in the future. The fact that friends call each other “gay” during casual banter makes intervention even more problematic. Discussing it later with Mr. C., he remarked, “You know, sometimes I’m on the phone with my best buddy and I call him “gay.” It’s just part of the way we speak.”

It is not easy to know how to deal with physical violence in school and verbal bullying. Ferguson writes, “Teachers must weigh immediate practical considerations about classroom management as well as more abstract imperatives of imparting social values and standards of interaction as they define the actions of a child as rule breaking” (p. 88). She cites teacher beliefs that “rules teach children values” (by which they mean “normative” values that may not be shared by the communities from which the students come) and that they are seen as “effective ways of imposing order and affirming teacher authority” (p. 88). These rules and values, however enforced, cannot easily trump the street values of those students who need them to get by. Bourdieu writes about, “durable and transposable dispositions”(Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 13) that help privileged classes excel in school because they are aligned with the dispositions that schools value. My students also have durable dispositions that have been constructed and internalized over generations, mostly under conditions of want and systemic inequality. The way they see the world and the dispositions they have acquired, though, are not

in synchrony with those of the school authorities and they are not left outside on the curb when the students enter the school building. When the culture of the street differs markedly from that of the school, as is often true in many poor communities of color, classrooms can appear to be hostile territory. They “are not culturally neutral terrain” (Boykin et al., 2005, p. 524).

The differences within

Scores on standardized tests paint a broad picture of undifferentiated failing youth. When you zoom in close, however, the veneer of sameness splinters, and many differences reveal themselves among students lumped together within one category.

Though all my African-American students get free lunches, not all of them demonstrate movement, verve and orality to the same degree; some barely show it at all in the way Boykin describes. And they do not all demonstrate the same interests, intelligences, senses of humor, or modes of interacting with each other. One female twelve-year-old is reading a book from the Twilight series, another – with almost the same score on the language arts test – a raunchy novel which begins with a graphically explicit masturbation scene. One Latina female student who scored 186 (fourteen points below proficient) on the state language arts test almost trembles when she comes across the word “bitch,” and won’t say the word, while the language of another who scored 182 is saturated with curse words. Differences in test scores don’t reflect anything about the variety of skills, knowledges, aspirations and perceptions of my students.

I showed the Kerry James Marshall's 1994 painting, *Better homes, better gardens*, to a group



of sixth graders, all Black and Latino, and asked them to write a narrative describing what they saw. One boy wrote simply, "I see a boy and girl walking together holding hands." A girl wrote, "Devell and Devella was walking through the park holding hands because they were boyfriend and girlfriend. While they were walking they saw beautiful flowers and beautiful birds flying in the sky. They said it was a nice day." Another student wrote, "'Get out of here'" the owner of the building yelled at the sister and brother because they were poor and looking for food. They did not have parents. They were lonely in the streets." A fourth wrote, "Hi, my name is Kerry James Marshall. I painted a picture of me and the girl I always wanted to be with. But one day, everyone throw food at me. I felt bad." A fifth student had a more frightening reaction, "This picture is about a boy walking home, holding hands out of a hotel. But then the boy got shot in the heart." Finally, a sixth student interpreted the painting very differently, "Welcome to Wentworth Gardens," a lady welcomed the couple. As the couple looked around, people greeted

them everywhere. The couple loved the place and decided to stay there.” Even students from the same neighborhood and economic bracket can perceive the world differently.

Fractals

What we see depends not only on who we are and where we stand but also on the lenses that direct our perceptions. What you see looking through a microscope is different than what you see with your naked eye. Each gradient on the scale of perception, from macro to micro, when superimposed one upon the other, helps clarify the truth of the whole though we can never quite reach it. We are, always, only approaching an understanding of what we are looking at. Benoit Mandelbrot, the famous mathematician who coined the term “fractals,” wrote, “On a map an island may appear smooth, but zooming in will reveal jagged edges that add up to a longer coast. Zooming in further will reveal even more coastline.” He added, “Here is a question, a staple of grade-school geometry that, if you think about it, is impossible... The length of the coastline in a sense, is infinite” (Hoffman, 2010).

When you look at human beings from a distance without magnification tools they appear identical; even zooming in, if you don’t get very close, they can seem almost so. Educational policy statistics, that mostly examine from up high and far away, serve to lump individuals together on the basis of perceived similarities and bounded categories, discarding what can’t be easily understood and settling for large measurable trends. But when you telescope in, it becomes obvious that no two people, however much they share, are identical and that how we see ourselves and each other changes moment by moment, and depends on where we are, with whom we are, and on the emotional “things” we carry with us in any instant. Like Mandelbrot’s coastline, we are each of us formed of jagged edges that are difficult if not impossible to measure and make sense of. It is why studies that isolate one seemingly obvious and easily perceived

variable – race, sex, gender, class, level of skill, class size – and then apply findings from that study to groups of students that apparently belong to the same category, invariably leave so many students unrecognized and so many conditions unaccounted for. “Categorical” thinking can reveal some trends from some vantage point, but they are not sufficient to understand the members that they gather together.

Because educational policymakers can’t often be bothered with the unmeasurables, because the work of zooming in is so complicated and uneven, and because, from their positivistic lens, policymakers tend to seek one statistically proven solution to problems that have multiple interrelated causes that are never identical for any two times or locations, the solutions they derive from their large studies do not fix the problems they seek to solve. Conceding that no two samples are ever the same, that any given problem has multiple inter-related causes, and that the categories devised by researchers may not address the aspirations, goals, or knowledges of those who are in their line of sight, would necessitate a total re-thinking of policy and approach.

Even the great thinkers I have cited tend to observe phenomena from a distance and thus forgo the jaggedness of who we are. This is because they mostly analyze macro forces, and when doing so there is a tendency to ignore idiosyncrasy and contradiction in order to reveal large patterns of behavior and major social trends and trajectories. Marx, Foucault, and Bourdieu focused primarily on these macro structures, on their resistance to change, their persistent strength and stability in social life as they are internalized, as “common sense,” by human beings. They painted with thick brushes, making grand, incisive and detailed observations. Still, though Marx did not theorize contingency, Bourdieu, who was deeply influenced by Marx, gave chance and accident the possibility of modifying structures in his elaboration of different borderless fields of social life as “sites of struggle.” Sewell and Harvey did so to an even greater

extent, and they also incorporated into their theoretical framework the role of emotions, language and rupture in seemingly inflexible historical patterns. And it is this sense of contingency mediated by emotions and the constant interconnectivity between improvising humans that opens a space in which a break in the permanences that exist can be forged. Sewell and Harvey both theorize the agency|structure dialectic as constantly dynamic, theorizing the possibility that men and women can transform the structures that recursively mediate who they are. Since the structures are socially constructed, they are surely vulnerable to be socially transformed. Still, in their theoretical works, the power of individuals acting together to create new structures from the old pales beside the formidability of the structures that exist because of the degree to which individuals have internalized things “as they are.”

The individual and the collective

The theoretical unity of the individual and the collective render minimal the possibilities for altering the macro structures that mediate who we are. Even as Marx aroused the masses to unite together to overthrow the oppressive structures that eviscerated their humanity, he understood the idea of humanity in categorical terms, in terms of classes not of differentiated individuals. Marx writes that “society does not consist of individuals; it expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves” (Marx, n.d.). This is so, most essentially, because we are social animals, and because any individuality we have is imbued with the social world. When I enclose myself in the privacy of my study, I am not alone. The way I think, study and play are all mediated by my family history and my experiences in social life. With me are my thoughts about my friends and my colleagues, my community and my world. Walt Whitman, however, understood the individual|collective dialectic better than Marx. He agreed that our individuality is saturated by the collective, “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to

you (1959, p. 25), but he knew, also, that the collective is made up of each and every one of us uniquely

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,

The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,

The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his

wife;

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,

And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,

And of these one and all I weave the song of myself (p. 36)

Though we are all imbued with society, we each have our own song, our own self. It is not visible from the statistical distance, but only at close range; and it is unique. Just as Mandelbrot saw closely jagged edges when he examined the British coastline through a microscope, so do we each have jagged edges that differentiate us from each other when we peer at ourselves closely even as we are mediated by many of the same structures and, within our common social groups, share habitus. From the outside a particular category of people may seem culturally united, “thickly coherent” as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz would say. But from close up cracks will become visible, and what differentiates one person from another will become salient. In such difference lies the potential to transform the structures in our lives that appear to be permanent.

Though many studies make sweeping statements about black students and Latino students, girls and boys and different economic classes, as we look more closely, relatively more micro and, importantly, more multi-logically and dimensionally, we find that the smooth generalizations that we attach to outward characteristics are, on closer inspection, uneven and

often inapplicable. Patterns that seem consistent on one scale can be inconsistent on another. Research findings may be viable to multiple situations that bear a family resemblance to the one studied, but the fit will not be perfect. And so as we read the works of Boykin, Ferguson and Anderson, of Marx, Foucault and Bourdieu, it is always important to remember that individuals swerve from categorical generalizations. Structures used to highlight similarities among groups simplify policy decisions while obscuring contradictions that make those decisions problematic.

It is under the umbrella of the categorical lens of sameness, truth and simplicity that school district administrators like to talk about “differentiation,” about meeting the needs of each of their students. In one classroom, differentiation means dividing the students into three groups, Princeton, Harvard and Yale, but these groups are defined purely by the category of reading test scores and thus hide from sight other ways of perceiving the knowledges that students carry with them. One student, quite aware of the way students were being evaluated, told me, “I’m in the Harvard group, that’s the dumb group.” The large demographic and statistical analyses of reading scores reflect mostly macro-mediated inequalities and injustices, but they say little about who our students are, what they know, and what they need. To explore these questions is an enormous undertaking that requires determination, resources, and a willingness to question the status quo. That these are lacking represents an ethical failure on the part of those in power. Fearful of dispositions that threaten the glue holding our society together, determined to maintain their privileged positions, the policymakers and those they represent seek to suppress the differences in habitus that rumble between us. Instead they opt for suppression. In the public schools in which I work, and in most of the classrooms, control is the name of the game.

Chapter 3: The landscape of control

“All we do here is sit. Listen to that, do this, do that.” – A seventh grade student

“If they find out you’re not doing what you’re *supposed* to do, you’re in trouble.”

– An eighth grade teacher

Enforcing discipline, internalizing obedience

The vice principal is in the cafeteria with a bullhorn, his voice echoing down the corridor. He bellows at the students to be silent; in this school, students are not permitted to converse when they eat lunch because “all of the fights begin in the cafeteria.” Outside the cafeteria, about six eight-year-olds are standing at attention, their backs against the wall; they’ve been pulled out of the lunchroom for talking. The literacy coach comments, “already so many kids out here?” and the young security guard answers proudly, “I pulled them out of the cafeteria. Rules are there for a reason!” A few seconds later, the principal, who is both brilliant and charming in other contexts, is towering over them, screaming about proper lunchroom behavior.

It is not that principals and their enforcers seek to be nasty or unreasonable. Though some are mere hacks, many are sincerely committed to the educational advancements of their students, whatever they define that to be. But in those middle schools in which space is fiercely controlled and power aggressively asserted, administrators believe that a hierarchical command structure in which students and teachers are afraid of authority achieves both good educational results and safe schools. They are just carrying out their duties, playing out their role, serving the demands

of a system that leaves no room for radical doubt. Marx (1990) writes that the “immanent laws” of the system, “confront the individual” functionary as a “coercive” and “external” force (p. 381) and Lefebvre that “Produced space harbors ideology” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 157) and this ideology-imbued space “demands obedience” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 143). It is a space in which the goals and methods of the pedagogical structure are not to be questioned. In fact, the demands of the system have so infiltrated the core of its functionaries that reflexive examination is largely absent and perceptions that might emerge from vantage points outside the school enclosure are not accessible. It is a sign of such hegemony that many teachers serve as unthinking transmitters of school policy, as what Foucault would call “docile bodies,” (1995, p. 38), even as they are oppressed themselves. Foucault writes that the “mechanics of power...have a hold over others’ bodies not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines” (p. 138). By “docile,” then, Foucault does not mean unenergetic or passionless, but rather unquestioning and unconsciously; the teachers become functionaries in the core sense of what that word means, fulfilling a function much as a gear does within a machine.

And yet no system is absolute. There are variations between administrators, between teachers, and between schools. There are also different levels of acquiescence to authority, signs of cracks in the hegemonic system, efforts to circumvent the most rigorous and rigid disciplinary measures. Because of the different teacher dispositions, different levels of trust between classroom participants, and conflicting ideas of what “classroom management” actually means, individual teachers and administrators assert their agency in different ways. These differences make moderate dents in the disciplinary school structure. And so, while all schools employ strategies to control students, not all schools demand silence while eating and not all

administrations enforce discipline with equal zeal. At one extreme, students in one middle school must line up twice a day to go to the bathroom, one by one; using the bathrooms at any other times is forbidden. In most schools, however, students can request hall passes when the need arises. And even as there are differences in how control is exerted from the top, obedience, from below, takes many forms and variations.

Towing the line, subverting the rules

Hall passes, for example, are, most obviously, a tool used by schools to monitor the movements of their students. But students' requests for them, and teachers' permission to use them, represent only one of the many ploys appropriated by students to escape from the classroom, one of the tactics used to breach disciplinary control even as its purpose is to maintain it. The requests illustrate what the French philosopher Michel De Certeau calls "la perruque," or "the wig," an oppositional tactic that doesn't seriously threaten the dominant structures. La perruque subverts the rules "not by rejecting or altering them but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice to accept" (xiii). Indeed, every request to go to the bathroom is an experiment in trust – does the teacher believe the student needs to go? Does she think the request is a ruse, an attempt to flee instruction? Does she even care if the request is "legitimate" or not? One teacher tells a student, "a minute ago you were happily talking with Sam and now you suddenly need to go? I don't think so;" another says, "You don't look like you need to go the bathroom. You're not fidgeting enough." Often teachers simply give their assent, not wanting to deny a student who may really be in need or, at other times, just wanting that particular student out of the class because of her disruptive behavior. Ironically, in this way, the use of the passes to subvert the system of control helps to maintain it, providing an escape valve for students whose emotions, at the moment, are upsetting class routine. La perruque – which, as

De Certeau explains, relies on clever use of time, of seizing opportunities as they arise to subvert official control of space – is a prevalent tactic to overcome the strategies used to enforce discipline within the space produced in the school. Hall passes can be adapted by students to give them a margin of liberty for, at least, a short period of time. They thus represent both strategies of control and tactics of freedom. Teachers, often in sympathy with their students, give them slack.

In the district in which I work, the uniform policy is another effort to control students. It is mandated that students wear them. The students say they hate the policy, but the schools give many reasons for enforcing it. They say the wearing of uniforms prevents students from flaunting their relative wealth, keeps students focused on work rather than on fashion, prevents gang colors from being displayed, and demonstrates that students are proudly representing their school –evidently a requirement. Everyday an enforcer goes from classroom to classroom to check that students are properly attired. If they are not, they are subject to detention. Repeated flouting of the uniform policy can lead to suspension. In one class I was in, the man who was checking for uniforms even threatened students with arrest and trial to which one student guffawed, “you can’t arrest me for that!” and then looked at me and asked, “can they?” One girl told me that there are fights despite the uniform policy and adds, in an illustration of *la perruque* (as she points to her knees), “you see boys in uniforms with their pants down to here.” Another remarks in a similar vein, “People come to school with their regular clothes under their uniform.” A third comments,

GF: "And what about representing the school. Do you think students should represent the school at all?"

Two students at once: No.

Student: "Teachers should do that."

Student 2: Yeah, teachers should do that. They're the ones that working in the school.

Student 3: Yeah that's messed up. The kids need to suffer through a uniform, [pulling at her shirt and laughing] ...it's too hot.

Student 4: The teachers don't gotta wear the same ugly colors every day.

Student 3: Give us back our freedom"...if it were up to me, I wouldn't even come to school for wearing uniforms.

“they’re trying to express themselves WITH their uniforms but they can’t.” Another adds, “Uniforms are tasteless,” and “Who wants to wear the same clothes every day?” When a girl asks what “tasteless” means, she is told, “they’re just not chill.” As for representing the school, the students don’t seem to care much about it (see side transcript) despite the vice principal who exhorts students to “Be proud of your uniform. Be proud of representing your school.”

The classroom space is generally thought of as being controlled by the teachers, and the hall passes are ways of extending that control into the school corridors during class time. But when students are switching classes, corridors are often seen as places into which school policies cannot reach, places where student culture is freely enacted despite uniforms and other tools of control. In the middle schools of my experience, however, this is not the case. Indeed, none of the corridors of the middle schools I have been in reflect the “contested space” or “alternate space” to the degree that Dicker (2008) describes in her book *Corridor Cultures*, spaces in which “school-oriented identities” and “street-oriented identities” interact. Dicker writes that the “exclave” in the halls of the high school in which she is teaching, “does not mirror the streets and is not simply an inversion of the classroom. It pushes the limits of school policies but is not merely what the classroom is not. It is an alternative produced by students for themselves” (p. 10). In the middle schools I have worked in, the teachers police the corridors and enforce “proper” conduct. In fact, teachers are often yelling at their students to quietly walk in single or double file as they move from one subject to another. One teacher I pass tells her noisy sixth graders, “You better be quiet. Remember you’re always being watched.” She is referring to the cameras that peer into every staircase and hallway; their purpose is not only to keep students safe by their ubiquitous digital gaze, but also to keep students “well-behaved,” “disciplined,” and “docile.” The very fact that teachers are yelling at students to behave is a sign that the cameras

are not successfully fulfilling their function (unless they are thought of as solely tools of documentation in case violence erupts). In the hallways during change of classes, it is the teachers that are in charge of maintaining discipline. This does not mean that laughter never reverberates through the hallways, that the shouts of “yo nigger, what’s going on” are never heard, or that violence between students never takes place. But the cameras probably serve more as tools of observation than prevention. In my experience, disobedience, flaunting of rules, and manifestations of opposition or inability to subdue passions- whether of joy or of fury – are as likely to invade classroom spaces as they are the spaces of the corridors.

While students may not be restrained by the optic eye, teachers are another story.

Control of teachers

It is not only students who are caught in the disciplinary web. Teachers and principals, all worried about losing control and losing their jobs, are caught in it as well. Teacher fear is often palpable. In one school I was in, the principal told the teachers in the early months of the fall that two of them would be fired during the year but he hadn’t decided which ones yet. One teacher said to me, “We are all afraid to speak our minds. We don’t even speak with each other.” Such blatant display of manipulative power is not as rare as one might hope, but other ways of demonstrating power are more common. In all the middle schools I’ve worked in, teams of administrators enter classes without warning in what are called “walk throughs.” These take all of a few minutes. Clipboards in hand, they walk into the classroom, check off whether the vocabulary wall is in order, the currently fashionable writing formulas are prominently exhibited, the day’s objective is properly written on the blackboard, the teacher’s desk is neat, and student work is sufficiently displayed. Then they leave abruptly, never having said a word to teachers or students. One teacher had written on the blackboard that the students were to “show mastery of

explanatory writing by revising their first draft.” She told me later, “They wanted me to replace the word ‘show’ with the word ‘demonstrate’ and the word ‘revise’ with the word ‘refine.’ They always find something wrong with what I do.” Sometimes, in what they call “observations,” administrators will sit in the back of the room silently scowling and taking notes. One teacher told me, “he found nothing wrong, so he told me that my desk was unacceptably messy.” In some schools administrators do tell teachers in advance that they will be “observing” their class, and they sometimes participate in it as well, but in either case the teachers are worried and they usually are not privy to the observations made or able to challenge them without incurring the wrath of supervisors.

Meanwhile the cameras that serve legitimate security functions monitor teachers as well as students in true panoptical form. In one middle school, a principal who was very committed to his students and his community berated a teacher for failing to ensure that her students “were properly lined up and behaving” as they got ready to move from one class to another. He told me with a laugh, “I want her to know we keep track of these things. I mean, what are they thinking? They know we have these cameras and can see what they are doing.” A teacher told me furiously, “I’ve been teaching 25 years, I know what I am doing. But they are always telling us to do something that’s a waste of time. If they find out you’re not doing what you’re *supposed* to do, you’re in trouble.”

Teachers, in fact, are not trusted to be on top of their game in the schools I’ve been in. They are not trusted to know pedagogy, not trusted to know content, and not trusted to maintain control. Unfortunately in poor urban schools, such mistrust is often warranted, but the many teachers who are competent, talented and creative are given no room to exercise their abilities. The lack of trust that administrators show them engenders resentment and despair.

The micro-management of the school day and the curriculum by administrators and

100 Minute Literacy Block Instructional Schedule

Time	Activity
Readers' Workshop	
5 minutes	Warm-Up/ Do Now
5 minutes	Read Aloud
10 minutes	Word Study Block
15 minutes	Mini-Lesson/Model Lesson
10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice • Shared Reading
15 minutes	Small Group Instruction/Independent Reading
Writer's Workshop	
10 minutes	Mini-Lesson/ Model Lesson
15 minutes	Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Guided Teacher / Student Conference
5 minutes	Closing

Changing Hearts and Minds to Value Education

policymakers (with no input from those doing the teaching) is one important way in which lack of trust is manifested. The language arts periods, for example, are partitioned minute by minute by district or school administration; some teachers use timers to make sure they stick to the imposed schedule. These strategies are employed to maintain power, uniformity, and control within given spaces. Foucault (1995)

details the use of timetables that “Establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition” (Foucault, 1995, p. 149). These methods were characterized by a “fundamental reference not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility” (p. 169). Under the rules, there is no time for a discussion about literature to travel tangentially, no time for questions that are complex to be aired and debated. One teacher told me, “The reason everything seems so rushed and the reason I don’t give the kids time to answer questions is because we’ve been told to cram all these activities within one block every day.”

But some teachers, like their students, practice the tactic of *la perruque*. Like students, they subvert official policy when they can. There are innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game," re-appropriating a "space instituted by others," "escaping but not leaving" it, manipulating – for their own goals – conditions that "were not of their own making" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 18). One teacher, when I question the directive to spend only five minutes reading out loud to the students tells me, "Yeah, how crazy is that? If they catch me reading aloud, during their walk arounds, and I'm not doing what I've been scheduled to do, I'll hear about it." Another teacher told me, "I had to stick to the ten-minute time slot because I was being observed. It was ok. He didn't say anything bad to me. But when I'm not being observed, I sometimes close the door though technically that is forbidden."

Though *la perruque* is practiced most pervasively by students, sometimes teachers and principals also practice it, often in collusion with each other, in an effort to mitigate the worst consequences of official control over the space of the school and the regulation of time.

When la perruque is not enough

The tactic of "*la perruque*" is not designed to overturn oppressive structures but to let out steam. For some teachers, however, this is not sufficient to make conditions tolerable. Being monitored constantly, by cameras, by walk-throughs, by observations and by interminable paperwork, is considered so intolerable by many teachers that tactics of temporal resistance are not enough to make employment bearable. It may not be surprising then that the 2003 National Commission on Teaching and America's Future in its paper *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children* (Hunt & Darling-Hammond, 2003) reports:

The real school-staffing problem is teacher retention. Our inability to support high quality teaching in many of our schools is driven not by too few teachers entering

the profession, but by too many leaving it for other jobs. The ability to create and maintain a quality teaching and learning environment in a school is limited not by teacher supply, but by high turnover among the teachers who are already there.

(p. 8)

Furthermore:

Not surprisingly, turnover is highest in low-income urban schools. The turnover rate for teachers in high poverty schools is almost a third higher than the rate for all teachers in all schools. ...And attrition, the leak in the bucket, has been getting worse. In the 1987-88 school year, teacher entrants exceeded leavers by 3 percent, but during the 1990s the trend changed; by 1999-2000 teacher leavers exceeded entrants by 23 percent.... (p. 12)

Ingersoll, in a study of almost 7,000 teachers, found that job dissatisfaction outweighed, by far, any other factor or variable – including salary concerns, personal reasons, race or gender – for leaving teaching jobs in high poverty urban schools (2001). A subsequent study by Ingersoll found that high-poverty public schools, especially those in urban communities, lost, on average, over one fifth of their faculty each year. In such cases, ostensibly, an entire staff could change within a school in only a short number of years. Ingersoll attributed most of this turnover to “inadequate support from the school administration, too many intrusions on classroom teaching time, student discipline problems and limited faculty input into school decision-making” (2004, p. 2). Teachers left because of dissatisfaction with school conditions, including lack of administrative support, little control over curriculum or style of teaching, not enough prep time and lack of collegiality. In a related study, K. H. Quartz (Quartz et al., 2008) studied the quarter million teachers who either moved each year from full-time teaching positions to other roles

within the educational system or migrated from one school to another. In the latter case, the move was almost entirely from poorer schools to wealthier ones. His longitudinal study (2000-2005) of 6,733 elementary and secondary teachers found a high correlation between turnover rate in schools and teacher dissatisfaction with conditions within urban schools. He reported that race and gender issues were less prominent as factors for attrition and migration than issues of job dissatisfaction.

One would think that such statistical data, because it employs methods similar to those used to aggregate test scores so reified by policymakers and administrators, would lead officials to examine the relationship between pedagogical methodologies, emotional climate and student achievement (especially in light of the failure of test scores to improve since the passing of NCLB). There is, however, no evidence that policymakers even consider these in their calculations about student academic advancement. It doesn't seem to occur to them that students, just like teachers, seek recognition of their talents by those in power, nor that they would feel more committed to the school, and "perform" at a higher academic quality, if their voices were heard and taken seriously. It would seem a no brainer that a working environment in which there is no respect, no trust and no support, or as the Quartz study reported, no "collegiality," would sap the excitement from the process of teaching and learning with predictable results. Yes, it is true that school administrators often speak of "school spirit," but they don't mean a spirit of students, teachers, and administrators listening to each other and working together to become a learning community. What they generally mean is that students should wear uniforms and behave according to the regulations decreed from above; school spirit is not seen as something collectively created but something that is imposed from above and adhered to from below. Indeed the relationship between school climate and learning, between the

emotional ambiance within the school and “success” or “failure” finds no place in the conceptual world of most policymakers. It can’t be measured after all, it’s too fuzzy to be included in serious pedagogical inquiries. Luckily, many teachers, demeaned and treated like robotic functionaries, can migrate to jobs elsewhere as Quartz’s data indicate they do. Students, generally, do not have the same option. If they cannot find some way to coexist with the demands of power in their neighborhood school, their only alternative is to drop out.

Control over subjects taught

Because language arts and math are the only subjects tested by the state, other subjects are discarded. In many schools, for example, social studies is barely taught, because it “doesn’t count.” In another, a bad teacher was moved from a language arts classroom to a science classroom. When I asked, “but what does she know about science?” I was told, “It doesn’t matter; students don’t get tested in science.” The implications for critical thinking, that the district says it values so highly, are obvious as is the disdain for inner city students who won’t get exposed to the “disciplines” that students in wealthy districts take for granted. Such “narrowing of the curriculum,” further underserves an already underserved population and helps to maintain class divisions that the schools are supposedly there to help overcome. For students who might excel in one of the non-tested subjects, the implications can be tragic. Meanwhile the arts are given little emphasis in the urban schools and so students like Tamir, and there are many like him, have no place to trumpet their talents, to sharpen them, and to shine. Rigid categories of importance, rigid pedagogy, rigid control of what is being taught and how it is being taught, and rigid discipline join to produce a space that suppresses student and teacher joy and excitement with learning and teaching. Such control can only be established within a fixed space even as it

cannot be enforced absolutely. Still, under these conditions, the possibilities are dismal for the construction of an emotional climate that permits passion and pedagogy to interact.

Systematic forms of control

In *Capital*, Marx, though he discusses schooling, is primarily focused on how the system of production simultaneously enslaves factory workers and sets in motion the path toward her/his freedom. It is never clear when liberation will come, but the road towards it is cruel, violent, and dehumanizing. It robs men and women of the joys of being together, sunders family bonds, distorts their real needs for pleasure in family and community, contaminates love, and turns all human production into commodities even as new structures are formed that stimulate cooperation and solidarity and that will eventually transform the oppressive structures into liberatory ones. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), builds on Marx, but whereas Marx saw the structures of power as being in constant transformation due to the unfolding of material economic conditions, the structures Foucault describes, structures that explicitly include educational institutions, often seem impervious to change. Though Foucault insists elsewhere that, except under regimes where torture and execution are the tools of enforcement, “resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groups are always possible and institutions are “quite capable of being turned around” (1984, p. 245), the institutions he describes seem so formidable that their transformations, occurrences that Sewell (2005) calls “historical events,” seem unlikely. Structures are especially resistant to change because their power, as Lefebvre writes, “has extended its domain right into the interior of each individual, to the roots of consciousness” (Soja, 1996, p. 32). In schools that serve minority cultures, especially those that have not prospered over many generations, the reach of hegemony is not as absolute as elsewhere; hence subversion takes place, in the form of *la perruque*. When *la perruque* is not sufficient, both

teachers and students drop out, teachers by leaving the profession or migrating to schools in wealthier districts, and students, especially black and Latino males, by turning their backs on high school and college. In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner writes that when schools do not “equip kids with self esteem,” they will gravitate to “other parts of society that can do this, but with deplorable consequences for the society.” He adds, “America manages to alienate enough black ghetto boys to land nearly a third of them in jail before they reach the age of thirty” (1996, p. 38). In the fifteen years since Bruner wrote those lines, that scenario has not changed.

Though this chapter has discussed many levels of control in order to provide a landscape of the school system in a poor urban district of color, it is important to focus on why control is enforced so blatantly in these schools whereas in wealthier schools it seems more innocuous, less visible. Bourdieu’s insight about misaligned dispositions goes to the heart of the issue. When dispositions between students and school authorities are aligned because they share similar cultures, similar ways of being in the world and similar perceptions of reality, there is no need to overtly exert power; the needs of power have been internalized, incorporated. Where the rules of society are effectively hegemonic, force is not necessary. Teachers, then, do not need to perform as disciplinarians to the same degree as they would in schools where the experiences of those being served have resulted in different norms, expectations, goals, and ways of being in the world.

It is of course integral to the mission of schools to inculcate cultural norms. Educational historians including Tyack (1974), Kliebard (2004), Ravitch (1974) and Brumberg (1986) have all documented the role educational institutions have played in “civilizing” foreigners in order to eradicate threats to the wealth and property of the rich and to “prevent revolution” (Tyack, 1974, p. 87). Brumberg writes, “an active dynamic society...could not be expected to passively accept

either the imported culture of the immigrant or the perceived rudderless life style of the immigrant's children" (p. 79). Schools, then, have been entrusted by those in power to promote allegiance to dominant norms and, when viewed from a distance, their success in achieving that allegiance may seem clear. But as Sewell (2005) points out, thick coherence on the surface may well camouflage a thin coherence that is bubbling beneath, one that does not significantly surface except in "eventful" times. And in the United States, even during uneventful times, it is clear that in certain groups, most markedly African-Americans but in recent times Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Mexicans as well, cultural misalignment with the dominant culture exists. Macro policies, economic above all (though affected by race as well) exacerbate this discord. When hegemonic power is insufficient, force takes over. Foucault draws a clear connection between military force and the disciplinary regimen in schools. Military discipline came first, he writes, and then the schools were modeled after it. What began as a method of disciplining soldiers became "the blueprint of a general method. They were at work in secondary education at a very early date, later in the primary schools..." (p. 138).

When confrontation is the method of order

Justin is playing basketball in the gym. He bends down to retrieve a lost ball and, as he gets up, he somehow slams his head against a girl whom he didn't see approaching. It was an accident. The gym teacher sees the collision and tells Justin he can't play anymore, that he must sit on the bench. Justin tells him it was an accident. The gym teacher doesn't believe him or doesn't care. Justin figures if he's not going to be able to play, he might as well change his clothes and leave. Accustomed to being his own master in the streets, he simply refuses to be ordered about and so he walks out of the gym. Mr. C. sees him in the hallway and asks him what he is doing there when he should be in gym. Justin begins to tell him the story. The girl he bumped into happens

to walk by them. She is coming from the nurse's office where she went to have the nurse examine the bruise she received from her impact with Justin's head. She confirms Justin's version of events and is not angry or upset. As the period ends, the gym teacher comes out into the hall. He is angry with Justin for disobeying orders by leaving the gym rather than sitting on the bench. He approaches, sticks his hand in Justin's face and shouts, "You are benched for five days. No gym for five days." Justin curses him out and then tells the homeroom teacher, "he shouldn't have stuck his hand in my face." The Vice Principal gets involved and tells the homeroom teacher to call Justin's mother and have her come into school.

These are the types of confrontations that do not need to happen. In this case, it was facilitated by a combination of one teacher's difficulty at anger management, the dissonance between the normative values of student and teacher, and a systemic disrespect for students. Ken Tobin notes that conflict is accelerated by the escalation in "pitch levels, speech intensities, and speech rates" (2010, p. 1), as clearly happened in the altercation between Justin and the gym teacher. Coupled with an aggressive physical movement and a punishment whose only purpose was to demonstrate authority led to heightened antagonisms.

It is the dangerous mix of these conditions that turn schools into hostile terrain.

The ingredients of order

Every teacher I've met agrees that good "classroom management" is a prerequisite for learning. There is also agreement that students, whatever their native dispositions, need to acquire the skills to function within dominant society, the ability to write academically correct essays and speak according to the norms of academic discourse, despite the "symbolic violence," that teaching these skills holds for students from minority cultures. There is also, of course, the understanding that violence and bullying of any sort should not find sanctuary in an educational

institution, even when both may be necessary for surviving on the streets of some of our communities.

The question, however, is not whether classroom management is important, but how that management is maintained; not whether “norms” are important but how those norms are arrived at: not whether academic skills are vital but how those skills are to be taught given the knowledges that students carry; and not whether violence be permitted but that it not be conflated with friendly jousting. Symbolic violence cannot be entirely avoided but it can be mitigated by demonstrating respect for student identities.

In the schools I’ve worked in, battle lines are drawn where discourse, negotiation, and compromise should suffice. As Lefebvre, writes, “homogeneity is imposed” by “a politics of space, a form of rigorous [i.e. deliberate] planning that suppresses symbols, information, and play” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 20). Under these conditions, hostility, resistance, and alienation will emerge with grave consequences. What is needed, instead of rule by punishment and force, is flexibility, recognition, conversation, compromise and humor. What is needed is radical listening (Tobin, 2011) to what students have to say, respect for who they are and the knowledges they bring with them, a desire to understand the world from the vantage points of the “other,” and a willingness to carve out a space of trust and dialogue in which shared commitment goals can emerge. We are each informed by what the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha called, “complex Intersections of multiple places, historical temporalities, and subject positions” (1995), and thus there is room to maneuver, to search for common ground, to produce new spaces in which imposition is replaced by negotiation. When order is imposed and adherence to cultural norms is demanded, respect is sacrificed. However respect, Elijah Anderson (1999) tells us, is perhaps the most important requirement for co-existence on the street.

Chapter 4: The clown is the scholar

First impressions are notoriously unreliable, and yet, despite the folly of prediction, after a week in a classroom I have already formed some tentative impressions about the futures of my students. In every class there are a few who I think will be “ok,” whose general demeanor conforms to the stereotype of a good student: they come every day, they sit obediently in their assigned spot, they pay attention when the teacher talks, do their homework, and are also generally content, sociable, and polite. These students are, as Bourdieu would say, predisposed to do well in school. In my experience, most of them come from two-parent families or at least have a mother or grandmother who is actively committed to their academic progress. In this regard, these students fit the statistical mold; on the information that can be gleaned from depersonalized data they have a greater chance of successfully completing high school than most of their peers. Now, to say that these students will probably be “ok” does not mean that they are performing well academically or that their potential will be seriously exercised during their time in the schools. Yet, in comparison to some of their colleagues, they seem better equipped to maneuver through the school system without being derailed by crime, gangs, drugs, pregnancy, disillusionment and despair.

Most of the students I have met, however, are more like Justin, which is to say that they are in danger despite their intelligences and their vibrant personalities. The precariousness of their lives infiltrates their every movement. Caught between the worlds they know and the worlds the schools try to impose, they twist themselves this way and that in order to find some way to fit into both. The familiar and the strange each have their allure, but the tools these students have at hand, that they have acquired at home and in their communities, are woefully inadequate to the world being imposed in school even as many of them suspect they need that world to get ahead

and to prosper. Meanwhile, the sheer boredom of the educational routine grates on them as does the disciplinary mechanism that forces them to sit still at their desks, hour after hour, and learn the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of a world that their personal experiences knows nothing about and that is, indeed, useless in their day-to-day life. Many turn away quickly, seeing the constraints of school life as pointless and the hierarchy of order and discipline as a bitter herb they are forced to swallow five days a week without any glimmer of eventual gratification. Working with these students, I was constantly reminded of Langston's Hughes 1951 poem, "Harlem," that questioned, "what happens to a dream deferred?" It can "dry up," "fester," "stink," "crust over," "sag" – "like a heavy load" – and "explode?" In my students, the frustrations of school life as it collides with that of the street is manifested in all these ways, with too many of them sagging under the load of what they carry, and too many exploding.

And yet, Justin, because deep inside he is hungry for knowledge and even wisdom, and because he recognizes the fragility of his life and the dangers that surround him, struggles to find some way to ease the passage between school and street. He learns to code switch, to master the language of school just as he has mastered that of the street. He enters the classroom in his uniform, keeping his du-rag in his pocket. Later, when he leaves school, he will remove it from its resting place, unfold it and wrap it carefully around his head. Justin knows it is inappropriate to wear his du-rag in school, where he tries to be polite, to do the work, to speak "properly," yet it is part of his ticket into the street. Knowing of the dissonance between his worlds, he strives to become part of each context as he inhabits it. Though anger is never far away, though rage is always threatening to seep outside his body-border, Justin also possesses a boisterous, witty and mischievous sense of humor that serves as some protection. Laughing at himself and at others, he creates a less hostile space in which and through which to move.

The perfect student

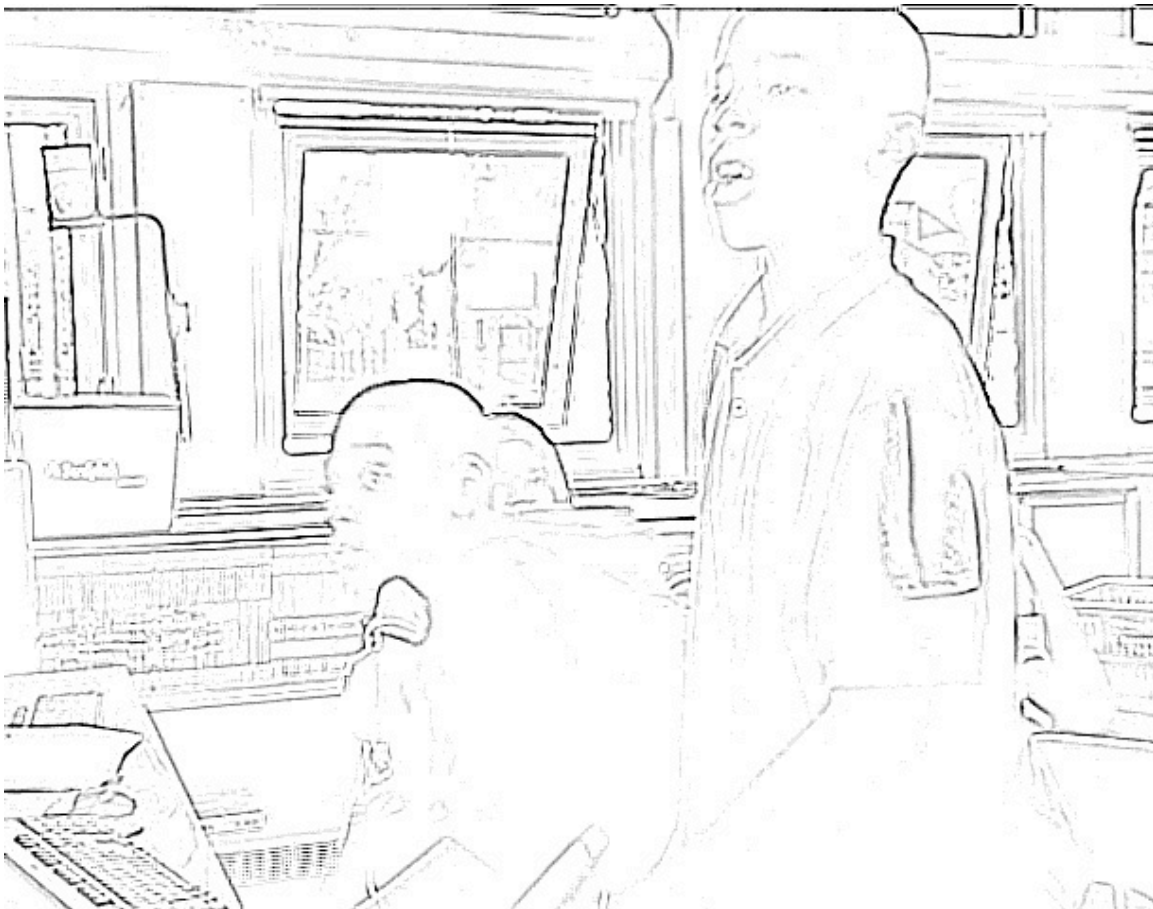
Justin, in fact, is the perfect student. He listens and observes what is going on in class, he asks and answers questions, and he listens carefully- defining words based on their context better than most of his more adapted peers. Maybe, most importantly, he struggles mightily to overcome his reading deficiencies and to push aside the frustrations that confront him every step of the way.

At the beginning of the school year, when I was just getting to know him, I watched him read the third draft of his memoir to three of his peers who, like him, read way below grade level. They were all looking at the typed version of it which was projected on the wall and, as Justin read it, they followed him intently, one of them frequently moving his lips to read along. Just watching these students collaboratively reading together moved me; though they read poorly, they were invested in becoming better scholars, and any statistic which ranked them among the world's losers was doing them, and the rest of us, a disservice of vast proportions.



I watched Justin plod through the text he had written. As he spoke, he beat the rhythms of the words with his left hand as if he were chopping them into the syllables he needed to pronounce.

Sometimes, when he made a mistake, he would shake that hand as if he were sweeping away the text itself. “I messed up,” he said at one point, and then he started all over again, only to ask Kuran, the student on his left, to take over control of the projector so that he could concentrate more fully on the words he sought to decipher.



As they switched places, both students maintained their focus on the projected memoir. They were working hard to translate written text, their own, into spoken words.

I had been watching Justin’s memoir develop from his first brainstorming, a few weeks earlier, to its current version. His first draft of twenty-three handwritten lines (132 words) contained eighteen mistakes, ten grammatical mistakes (mostly tense-related) and eight misspelled words. These could be easily counted, circled and scored. But what was exciting about Justin’s effort was that it included many elements of a good story that we had talked about

in class: dialog, description, background information and detail. Justin had written about dirt bikes, a subject on which he was an expert. His was a “black, white, and red 50 cc dirt bike.” It smelled “fresh,” as if “someone was on the grill cooking hot dogs,” and it went “Yaaaang, Yaaaang” when he “pushed down on the gas.” This version ends, “we was riding like there was no tomorrow.” Though the “was” in the last line is clearly incorrect according to the rules of academic grammar, it is accepted speech in the communities in which these students live and did nothing to confuse the meaning of the story. Meanwhile, many of his spelling mistakes came from his efforts to translate the speech he heard in his mind into written text. And so when Justin’s uncle showed him the bike and said, “guess what, it’s yours,” Justin wrote, “Will gest what it’s yours.” Indeed, what his uncle said might have been more similar to what Justin wrote than to its corrected version.

By the time Justin had finished his third draft, his memoir, though it was still filled with spelling and grammatical errors (27 errors in 24 lines), had become a much more polished product. Within it, Justin’s street voice was vibrant and jubilant, giving the piece an integrity and a presence that mark the sign of a good writer. At the same time, he had found compromise with academic requirements; he had managed to have his own words glide on the edge of “the boundary between its own context and another alien context” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 284), and many of his previous grammatical errors had been corrected. He began his essay with pure street, “Wow, this dirt bike look mad good,” but the first paragraph ends quite academically, “My brother and my cousin were so excited.” In this sentence he had successfully code switched by changing the vernacular “was” into the academically correct “were.”

His second paragraph began, “We put gas in it and turned it on. Yaaaang, yaaaang, the dirt bike went as I pulled the throttle.” Notice, he had no problem spelling the specialized word

“throttle,” or knowing what a throttle was, a sign of vocabulary being informed by use and experience and not by some abstract concept of difficulty. Justin also added background information to fill out his story, “I first started riding them [dirt bikes] when I was 8. My uncle had brought one for his self and let me ride it.” And then he added some incredibly rich description, “It was going so fast, it looked like I was light [later changed to lightning] striking across the sky....I felt like nothing can stop me.” Then Justin plopped the reader down right in his community, and brought his other world into school:

I rode around the complex’s and all the kids followed me....And the little kids ran to the back like if they were getting a royal rumble. They all asked at the same time, can’t you ride me....When I got the hang of it, I took all the kids around for a spin. They said it was fun. It was 10:00 at night when my mom came outside and said ok that’s enough riding that thing. I told her ok one more time around.

She let me go. I took my sweet time riding around.

The dialog, the expressions (“royal rumble”, “mad good”) are all street, but Justin had packaged them well within an academic framework. Still, because he had worked so hard to improve his essay by including elements of good writing we had talked about, he also increased the number of language errors, some of which just mimicked the way he spoke on the streets and at home. So he wrote “his self” rather than “himself,” “I was doing it perfect” instead of “I was doing it perfectly,” and “can’t you ride me” rather than “can’t you give me a ride.” It is true that his essay also had many spelling mistakes, “hoped” instead of “hopped,” for example, “in teal tomorrow” rather than “until tomorrow,” and, a bit unusually, “shier” instead of “shower,” but many of the other errors Justin made cannot be considered errors of language; rather they reflected the differences between the language he speaks and academic English.

It is, of course, important to make Justin aware of the differences and requirements of the two languages given our system of education, the power of dominant discourse, and the skills needed to prosper, but it is a huge mistake to see such writing as a reflection of ignorance, indifference, or laziness. Justin's memoir, in fact, tells a story that transports the reader into his world through a voice so exuberant and honest that to focus only on the easily marked language errors would be an act of terrible blindness. Instead the reader should take their "sweet time" to read and relish Justin's story. This is something the test makers and graders and even teachers usually don't do, and thus they deprive students who write error-saturated but richly rewarding essays of the

feedback they need to become better writers and to care more about becoming writers who are formally skilled.



In our class, however, Mr. C and I got all the students together to read the final versions of their memoirs and to celebrate them along with the dean of the education department of a state university who agreed to give outside feedback. Justin was the first volunteer to read, and when he finished and the class applauded he responded by smiling and bowing (see photo to the left), a job well done from a student who is failing all subjects and is in severe danger of falling through the cracks. When the visiting dean asked

Justin why he had written about dirt bikes, Justin responded, "I wrote about this, because this is what I like to do when I'm home, in the summertime; it's the only thing I like to do. Me and my

brothers go on the field across the street and ride through the dirt and stuff.” When asked how long it took him to write it he said, “It didn’t really take me long to write it; I wrote it all in one day but I had mistakes and I had to add in a little bit but it only took me three days to add in a little more stuff and Mr. Fellner went over with us – fixed the grammar and stuff, and then I was finished.” The dean told him, “You are well on your way to becoming a serious writer.” That is if he continues to get the support that he needs in school and if the streets don’t lead him elsewhere.

Sharp mind, sharp tongue

Justin was not only a lively writer when he put his mind to it, he could also be the instigator of discussion and the class logician. For example, during a presentation of arguments based on First Amendment and Fourth Amendment rights, Justin sat at the head of the class and pronounced his opinions. When one student read an opening statement saying that there had been a violation of the Fourth Amendment rights of Robert Tanger, a fictional character in a case Mr. C and I had invented, Justin pointed out that the student hadn’t connected an anecdote used in the argument to the Tanger case: “I gave you a two out of five. You had a clear introduction, but when you got to the end, it didn’t make no sense. What you said with the cop car and then you just put the girl right in it, that didn’t make no sense. You just said, ‘that’s Robert Tanger’” He then told the student, “read the last sentence,” and the student, without objection, complied. Justin’s critique made sense to all of us, but an outsider, just reading his words or listening to his speech, would more likely peg Justin as a student from a poor neighborhood who hadn’t learned proper grammar rather than as an insightful thinker and a class leader.

During a different class, when a student read a paper he had written on Jimmy Valentine, the protagonist of *A Retrieved Reformation*, a short story by O’Henry, Justin got up from his chair walked to the center of the room close to where the reader sat and asked, “you’re saying some people said Jimmy Valentine should go to jail? And they said it’s because he STOPPED robbing? Why would they say he should go to jail when he stopped?”



Repeatedly, Justin offered perceptive criticisms of the texts written by his fellow students, and they listened to him respectfully because, despite his low grades, all the students recognized his keen intelligence, his good nature, his wit, his street “cred.” When discussing a video of two girls in a juvenile correctional facility, and a student remarked that it didn’t seem so bad because they are seen partying and dancing, Justin said, emphatically, “But you got to think about this, they still kids. They’re not adults. They ain’t supposed to get treated like adults when they do certain stuff. They still kids.” When Mr. C pushed back and asked, “Like when they kill somebody?” Justin responded, “Like when they kill somebody, say if you kill somebody and get out and then go kill more people, that’s when they ought to go to prison.” He continued, “like maybe the first murder, they be protecting themselves.” From where he is positioned, from his experiences, his comment made perfect sense even though those who create school policy, given their own stances, might consider his remarks to be perverse. When discussing the prison system,

Justin was able to show off what he knew, and bring the worlds he inhabited closer together. He would lecture his peers on the intricacies of the bail system and on the differences between the county system and that of the state.

Adept at offering constructive criticism to others, he also wanted to hear about what others thought of his arguments. After he read his closing argument about a case leaning on the First Amendment, he asked to be excused to go to the bathroom. As soon as he returned, however, he interrupted Mr. C to ask, “Can I hear what you all said about my speech?” When Mr. C answered, “We didn’t get to you yet, we’re coming.” Justin, said loudly, under his breath, “Yes.” When someone in the class, however, criticized his presentation, specifically the way he had stumbled over some words he reacted angrily, “That was my first time reading this shit.” When a high-performing classmate, an independent reader with a rich vocabulary, criticized Justin’s “diction” and explained that “diction” meant “speaking properly and clearly,” Justin, again, became angry, “I ain’t about to speak like no nerd, I’m gonna speak the way I speak.” When Mr. C replied, “I don’t think it has to be speaking like a nerd, I think it has to be speaking correctly in some ways, so that people understand.” But Justin was not going to back down, “I speak the way I speak.” When Mr. C replied, “Justin, if you don’t want to hear what people have to give you for advice then just tell me and we won’t share our advice with you,” Justin restated his position, “I said I’m gonna speak the way I speak. That’s what I said. I’m not changing my speech for nobody.” “OK,” said Mr. C., “but it seems like you’re getting defensive for no reason.” Justin shot back, “I wasn’t talking to you” and C returns, “I’m talking to you.” “All right,” Justin replied. Mr. C. continued, “If you’re going to get angry, ...” but Justin interrupted him, waving his hand back in forth in front of his face while sounding out the letter “a” (as in Hay) over and over again, trying to block out what Mr. C was saying as well as erasing him from

his sight. Here academic English and street English were face to face, two cultures clashing, and Justin, feeling cornered, did everything he could to obliterate the threat of the language he was being pushed to master and that threatened his identity. Defensive, feeling attacked for who he was not what he was saying, Justin lashed out – but he did so without cursing anyone out or physically threatening them, a sign of respect and maybe reflecting his knowledge that, deep down, he knew he had to improve in these areas. Significantly, Mr. C did not berate Justin for swearing or rudeness, but just calmly and softly pushed Justin to reconsider his position.

Laughter

Intellectual engagement and outspokenness were two ways Justin had of interacting with the culture of school and gaining respect, but almost always when anger didn't take over, these emerged accompanied by laughter and foolery. Justin dealt with the seriousness and the foreignness of the school system by poking fun at everybody including himself. Indeed, he had a remarkable ability to make his classmates and his teachers laugh, and thus to transform the environment of the classroom. It is true he could not do this alone because transforming a space is a collaborative undertaking requiring at least acquiescence on the part of others. And in many classrooms, where respect and acquiescence were absent, Justin, the clown, would run into trouble as would the teacher intent on disciplining him. But in our class, Mr. C, allowed the clown in Justin to have some freedom, knowing that without the clown the scholar would have no room to breathe.

Writing about carnivalesque laughter in the age of Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984) writes, “Seriousness had an official tone and was treated like all that is official. It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy” (p. 94). However, when carnivalesque laughter took over:

...this temporary suspension...of hierarchical rank....led to the creation of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. (p. 10)

Quoting the radical 19th century Russian thinker A.I. Herzen, Bakhtin writes, “laughter contains something revolutionary....Only equals may laugh” (1981, p. 223).

It is sobering that the fear and hypocrisy that characterized power in sixteenth century France can be applied to the climate within many of today’s schools, but just as in the 1500s laughter could be used to turn that world topsy-turvy, so in today’s schools students use laughter to infuse the territory of the school with the language of the street that Justin speaks fluently, to make the world of the school familiar. Bakhtin adds that laughter is also “ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding” (pp. 11-12), and thus though it serves to bring two dissonant worlds together, it doesn’t lose it’s edge of confrontation and challenge.

Maryann Dickar (2008), in her discussion of class clowns, elaborates on Bakhtin’s insights. She writes that during laughter of the carnival variety, in which the clown makes fun of everyone including himself, the “public transcript,” that represents official, hierarchical discourse, interacts with the “hidden transcript,” the “bottom-up discourse spoken off stage out of the hearing of the powerful” (p. 168).

The pervasiveness of class clowns in most schools suggests that clowning is an invasion of the public transcript with the hidden one to create a carnivalesque disruption of the order. Though clowning can be very disruptive, it straddles the line between infrapolitical and open resistance. It is infrapolitical insofar as class clowns play “the harmless fool” who wittily or good naturedly interrupts the

teacher (a trespass eased by the comedy in it) and puts the teacher on the defensive. Daring the teacher to clamp down on an amusing disruption, class clowns compel teachers to behave in an authoritarian manner or to surrender some control to the clowns which puts the teacher between a rock and a hard place. Class clowns test the limits of the public transcript and teacher authority by cloaking their intentions in playfulness. Humor is a vehicle through which power relationships can be made visible by subordinates because such performances are not intended to be taken seriously. (p. 179)

Justin, though a serious scholar, perfected the art of the clown. Hobbled by his poor reading skills; restless in an environment that demanded obedience and attention; disrespected by adults who could not or would not understand where he was coming from; insulted by teachers and administrators who denied him his independence and ignored his self-sufficiency; and alienated by the gap between the knowledge he had and the knowledge required, he consistently and mostly successfully acted the clown in order to transform the classroom into a place he could navigate and relax within. Sometimes, his performance seemed designed mostly for himself, a way to remind himself of who he was and of what gave him pleasure. Other times, he seemed more outwardly directed, seeking to generate laughter, garner respect, and force the teacher to either accommodate or repress him. Many teachers chose repression. They were threatened by Justin's physical and verbal outbursts. They could not find the humor in the laughter Justin provoked, and didn't respect the manchild that Justin was protecting. When confronted with such teachers, Justin got into trouble by skipping class or by disrupting it. Mr. C, however, was different.

From the hood himself, Mr. C. understood the code of the street, and he knew that the skills students had to survive on the outside often doomed them to failure within the schools. Mr. C. was fluent in both street and academic culture, and spoke English and Spanish. He had overcome obstacles similar to those of many he taught; could roll with the punches – giving as much as he received, and he knew how to laugh at himself and others. This ability to act street in the classroom garnered him the respect of the Justins and of most other students as well. Deeply committed to his own community and the students he taught, Mr. C. publicly recognized and welcomed the street into the classroom thus giving Justin a chance to be himself, a scholar and a clown, within a space that they mutually negotiated together. And so, in Mr. C, Justin met his match.

In the middle of group work, for example, Justin would get up and begin to dance for a few minutes. Sometimes his fellow classmates would ignore him, sometimes they would laugh, but it was a rare case that Mr. C told him to sit down and get to work. Usually, after a minute or so, Justin would sit down on his own. Other times, he would grab my camera that was recording in the back of the room and begin shooting his own movie and providing commentary as he did so. He focused on the top of my skull once and went on a riff, “look at that head, look at that head, look at baldy there, look at that baldy. Look at his little ears.” Then he turned the lens on Mr. C’s head and continued, “Here’s another one with a bald head, let me show you, let me show you. See that baldy? Look how shiny it is.” And then he began focusing on different students, mocking each one in turn: this one was a “stick figure,” that one a “fat boy.” He would shout out their names and as they would turn he would insult them, “Oh my god, what is that creature, I don’t know. It’s black, and it’s ugly.” Or he would shout out the name of one of his closest friends and then comment, “She don’t know who called her. She’s a witch,” and then “Look at

Tyson, his eyeball's bigger than the World Trade Center....” His victims would turn to him and laugh until, after two and half minutes he signed off, “That’s enough with all these ugly people” and go back to work. Here Justin was bringing into the classroom the skill at dissing that he had sharpened in the street and transformed it into comedic commentary. He was letting himself go, providing some relief, to him and his classmates, from the formality of the class day. Some teachers might have been bent out of shape by his breach of academic behavior, some might have felt threatened or become angry, but Mr. C just gave him room thus allowing a student’s frustration that might have exploded to spread laughter and camaraderie.

Sometimes, in the middle of serious whole classroom discussion, Justin would also inject humor into the mix. At times his remarks, though generating laughter, would also go to the heart of the issue being bandied about. When we got into a discussion about random searches of drivers by police, Justin burst out that what you really had to be careful about was DWB. When Mr. C asked what DWB was, Justin replied, to general hilarity, “driving while black.” When we were discussing the Bill of Rights and Mr. C told Justin to sit down and stop talking, Justin held up the transcript of the First Amendment and followed after him waving it in his face, “what the hell, you cannot do that according to the fucking law.” Another student then held out his copy of the First Amendment and, with a gleaming smile on his face, shouted in solidarity with Justin, “Freedom, First Amendment. I can say whatever I want.” None of the students in the class had every heard of the Bill of Rights or knew anything about the First Amendment. Now they all knew. This was something they needed and could use. ”Shit,” said Justin later, “I’m going to carry this paper around with me wherever I go.”

Whether Justin joked around on topic or was just fooling around, he managed to dissolve the strict teacher-student hierarchy that characterized most classrooms and to alleviate the heaviness

that the weight of school behavioral standards placed upon him (and his peers). Employing his wit and his good nature, he could shine in a way that strict adherence to school codes would not permit him to do. At the same time, by mocking teachers and students alike, he was able to insert some equality into relationships that were patently not so.

Collaborating clowns, collaborating scholars

When Mr. C. was talking about a court case that determined that students could be paddled in school, Justin got up as if to take him on for such an outrageous ruling. As Justin leapt out of his chair and toward Mr. C in a mock demonstration of outrage, Mr. C, grabbed him



by the shirt saying, “You gonna get paddled too, get outta here.” Everyone, including Justin, laughed as Justin sat down, delighted to having been made fun of. During another class, as Mr. C was criticizing the lack of evidence provided by the students in an essay, Justin jumped up as if he were going to attack someone in the street and went towards him. Another teacher might have considered Justin’s leap out of his seat threatening, but Mr. C played along, by pushing back on Justin, staring down at him and making him the target of his remarks, “I don’t want to say their names, but their reasons seem to be pretty much all the same reasons.” As everyone laughs, Justin, who Mr. C has pushed back down into his seat, gets back up into Mr. C’s face and retorts, “I’m looking at someone whose hair look like they didn’t shave right this morning.” Mr. C laughs along with the class, going along with the laughter rather than suppressing it, allowing the moment to lighten the mood; he did not take Justin’s outburst as the threat to his authority as other teachers might have done. In another class, when Mr. C asks for a show of hands, Justin

walks right up to him and raises his hand right beside Mr. C's face. Mr. C responds, "I know you want to kiss me on the cheek, Justin" as the class, and Justin, roar with laughter. Mr. C, familiar and comfortable with the culture of banter and confrontational jesting is in his comfort zone too, and is able to give as much as he gets thus maintaining authority while still allowing the students to be themselves. In this environment, one in which allowing play and the flavor of the street to



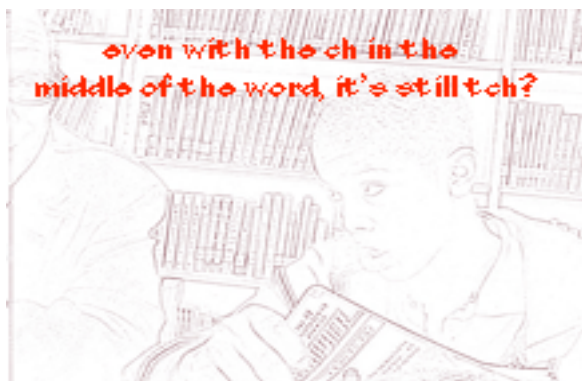
serve as the facilitators for study and learning, the classroom becomes a more welcoming place for students, one that has at least a whiff of the familiar.

Achilles heel

And yet, even with all the tools Justin has forged to make school life more palatable, the streets, Justin's streets, are always beckoning while school life, even as it offers a degree of refuge from the dangers he knows so well, never truly accepts him or provides safety. This is partly because no matter how hard he tries, no matter how deeply he strives to be the perfect student, success within the school system is elusive. Though Justin is prepared to bargain with the authorities, to give school a chance if a chance will be given to him in return, he knows that because he can't read well, the school will not live up to its side of the bargain. Indeed it is an unfair bargain, one that seems almost beyond repair.

Because Mr. C and I recognized that the odds for success were stacked against Justin, and because we both recognized his intelligence and potential, we thought we would try to boost his most obvious weakness, his reading skills. After consulting with a literacy specialist, we determined that Justin had no neurological problem that prevented him from reading well; his issue was simply lack of exposure to reading material. My first thought was to get a reading

specialist in to work with him. Justin, however, said it would be too embarrassing to have someone come in from the outside to help him learn how to read at grade level, especially someone he didn't know and couldn't trust. Everybody, he said, would be asking questions about why he needed special help. And so we decided that I would work with him instead. The following week, I brought Justin a bunch of books and illustrated pamphlets about dirt bikes that I thought we could read together. Smiling broadly and disbelievingly, he grabbed the books with both his hands and clutched them against his chest. Soon we began to read them together. But it was hard going, Even the ones that contained mostly pictures were exercises in frustration. Still, Justin



trudged on.

He and I began by reading an adventure novel about a dirt biker. Almost immediately, Justin struggled to pronounce the word “aches” and he asked me, “even with the ch in the middle of the word, it’s still tch?” I laughed, “sometimes

it is and sometimes it isn’t” to which he responded by looking upwards, grinning and rolling his eyes.. “It’s not fair, I know,” I said as I

answered his eyeroll, “but in this case it isn’t a ‘tch’ sound.” Justin then tries to read the line again, “He was atching, he was itching?” I’m not sure why he chose to add an “ing” to the word but I wrote down the word “itch” on a piece of paper and said, “so ‘itch’ is spelled



like this, and is pronounced like a “tch’ but in this case...Justin interrupts, “it’s ‘atch.’” I

continue, “it’s pronounced as a ‘k,’ ...so it would be like” and then Justin interrupts again, but this time he pronounces the word “aching” correctly and when I say, “yeah but it’s not...” and Justin corrects himself and says, “aches,” correctly. When I respond, “right!” he delivers a wide smile of satisfaction. He continues to read, but almost immediately stumbles on the word “pains.” He turns his attention to what I am writing as I begin to list some words that include the “ai” sound. I ask him,



“So you know what an ‘ai’ is like?” and “do you know some words that have ‘ai’ in them?”

He responds, quite logically, “ain’t?” a word that he uses all the time. I answer, “ain’t is like that, and paint, and rain are like that” and Justin nods his head. I list a few more words and then Justin says, “pain,” making sense of the word he was

trying to unpuzzle. I nod, “right, that’s it.”

Though it was choppy going, Justin’s comprehension of what he was reading was excellent, but it took so long to get through a page of text that we had to abandon the books on dirt bikes. Even with us reading together, these were written on his frustration level, not on the “instructional” level, the level that he could read comfortably with assistance. And, over the weeks, he got bored and restless though he was also amazingly persistent. Often when I would say, “I think we’ve done enough, you seem pretty tired,” he would answer, “no, I’m good” and continue to struggle. One day he was almost falling asleep in his chair as we sat in the library reading so I asked him, “you getting tired?” He raised himself up and answered, “I ain’t tired. I’m just trying to see what this is.” He then mouthed a few words to himself and then said

exasperatedly, “that ‘ly’ [pronouncing each letter separately] is in everything!” It made me think back to the line in his memoir, “I was doing it perfect.”

We tried other books, such as the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007), which was written on a much more basic level, but after a while Justin got bored with them, maybe in part because the lives of its characters had so little resemblance to those of people he knew. For a few weeks, a close friend and classmate of Justin’s, who was a much more facile reader, joined us as we read together, and she and he would work together to make sense of different texts, but this too lost its luster, and Justin stopped asking me if we could read together and I stopped urging him to do so with me. We were both frustrated, and I felt like I was failing him – though now, looking over the videos, I think we actually made progress. Still, I was just not able to locate the right books that were written at the right level to both maintain his interest and serve his reading needs. My own knowledge of books that would serve him was woefully inadequate and the school librarian could offer me nothing at all to read with him. And though Justin treasured the books I had given him on some abstract level, and would work with me to decipher them once a week, he adamantly refused to read anything on his own time or indeed do any homework of any sort, “I spend half my day in school. I ain’t gonna do no school work when I leave here.”

Burning for literacy

From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.... Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. ... What he [the master] most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged,

against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. (Douglass, 1968, p. 49)

Chapter after chapter, I have been writing about students who are failing school not because of lack of intelligence, or lack of knowledge, but because the intelligence they have is not aroused by the school curricula and because the knowledge they have is not sought, valued, or accessed by those who make policy and administer it. Indeed, according to the statistics that policymakers have devised to measure the skills they prioritize, these students are failing in every category. Scrutinize as closely as you can the piles of official data that the schools have amassed to tell us who we are teaching, you will search in vain for any sign of what my students excel at. Among the accumulated numbers, there will be no indication of Justin's incisive logic, quick wit, or incredible resilience. You will find no data that show how he laughs and learns together with his classmates, rages at them when his street culture is demeaned, eggs his peers on to find the words that express what they feel and what they think, and holds up the First Amendment that he knew nothing about last year because he grasps its relevance to the life he leads and the world he hopes to survive in. Where in the data can you spot Justin's exhilaration when he clutches three books that he can't read against his chest? Where are the data that tells us about curiosity, desire, and effort, his yearning to find a spot of comfort between his dissonant worlds? Where, in official records, can we even get a glimmer of the thrill that ripples through his body when he masters a skill? The data turn multi-dimensional and vibrant students into flat cardboard caricatures that fit perfectly into the stereotypes that macro designed categories predict. And, overlaying it all, is the burning friction, the constant scraping that accompanies the world of the street as it collides with the world of the school. The sad reality is that, for the students I work with, neither one holds promise for a better future or even serves as a refuge in the present.

Maybe it's because these students know the cards are stacked against them that they barely bother to notice the tests put in front of them. They know that even if they do pay it some mind, their difficulty reading and their lack of the dispositions that those who are systemically favored take for granted, makes failure a foregone conclusion despite whatever smarts they have. Why play the game? After all, as Ana told me, "It's all fake."

And she's right. It is fake. The tests aren't there to assess students and they are certainly not there to help them. Rather, they serve to legitimize the status quo. The tests tell us nothing about intelligence or potential. They are merely there to confirm what we already know, what statistics vacant of any particular boy or girl can tell us, what the macro lens shows us. The tests confirm that the rich and the favored have already learned, before they even walked through the school doors, the culture of academia and the requisite skills to master it. If you are black or Latino, your chances to make it in that world are bleak. So why even bother walking through the school doors?

But of course, under certain conditions, there is a reason to open those doors and enter, because macro structures, despite their force and their permanence, don't determine who we are and what we do. They are flexible and porous. Together, we can push back. No movement only works in one direction. That's what dialectical thinking teaches us. We create the spaces we make together, each one of us contributing to what makes that space alive and filled with possibility.

James D. Anderson's book, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988), documents that even under conditions of severe oppression, Blacks taught themselves how to read and mastered academically challenging curricula. They did so because, for them, literacy and liberation were bound together. Statistics ground out by books and journals will tell you that

if a student isn't reading on grade level by the third grade, he will have little chance of ever being a proficient reader. What the literature doesn't tell you is the degree to which these results are mediated by frustration, apathy, disillusionment, and resistance. The history of African-American education indicates, however, that when students are propelled by a monumental and fierce internal passion and drive, when they believe that freedom and formal education are inextricably joined, statistics can be turned on their head. Anderson writes, "Hence emancipation extruded an ex-slave class with a fundamentally different consciousness of literacy, a class that viewed reading and writing as a contradiction of oppression" (1988, p. 17). After the war, we find a proliferation of schools throughout the entire South with one quarter of the children of ex-slaves attending schools. John Alvord, superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau, commenting on the proliferation of Black schools wrote, "They have within themselves... a vitality and hope, coupled with patience and willingness to struggle, which foreshadows with certainty their higher education as a people in the coming time" (p. 15). This contrasted to the "general apathy" for schooling held by "lower-class whites" (p. 25) who were wedded to the status quo and who did not associate literacy with a betterment of their lives.

Obviously, students who have not learned to read when they are young confront steep obstacles in mastering academic written and oral language. But if history is a guide, the emotional climate in which students are taught to read, the emotional associations they connect to the reading process – love, freedom, independence, wealth – are central to mastering literacy skills. In schools where the emotional climate is hostile to student culture and identity and where learning how to read seems to offer only false promises, the challenges are confounded.

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PART 2:
Multilectically perceiving the world

Everything was shades of brown. One poverty after another. Even the icebox was brown. It was the shade of gloom which would not lift. The color of clay. Nothing could grow.

Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, (1979) p 487.

Knowledge begins when philosophy destroys the experience of daily life.

Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, (1960) p 103.

Chapter 5

Mailer, Marx, Marcuse and the representation of social life

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, a book about Gary Gilmore, executed in January of 1977 after a long national hiatus on legal executions in the United States, highlights the complex and intertwining relationships that comprise social life. At times Gilmore, who brutally slaughtered two strangers in Utah, is the book's most sympathetic character. As I read about him and his crime, I was baffled by my own empathy for him. It was one I shared with many of Gilmore's contemporaries whom Mailer paints so well, even as they are horrified by what he has done. In Mailer's text, these men and women are all multi-dimensional human beings whose inner voices often battle one another as they try to navigate the worlds they live in and make sense of them. Mailer reveals their dialogs with themselves and their dialogs with others, and these help us become privy to the different ways in which the world opens itself up to them depending on the vantage point from which they see and interpret the world. During this process of revelation, Mailer peers into their family histories, their relationships, and their lives made spectacle on the national and international scales. All of these layers, saturated with emotion, are connected together by the constraining but elastic glue of collective life; they intermingle, overlay, and, unpredictably, transform one another.

Socratic thought teaches that "the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it" (Arendt, 2004, p. 433), but in his tireless campaign to engage others in reflexive dialog, Socrates implied not only that the world opened up differently to every individual, but that it opened up differently to each of the multiple identities that every individual simultaneously encompassed. Indeed it is these multiple identities that allow us to talk to ourselves, to engage in the very type of reflexive dialog that Socrates became famous for. Arendt

argued that when Socrates talked to himself, and when he tirelessly urged others to discover the conflict between their various selves that didn't see eye to eye, it was in order to dissolve internal disunity and to forge one undivided self that embodied truth and reason. It was Socrates' belief that there was only one truth regardless of where one was positioned, and that the passions in which earthy inter-personal relationships were immersed were distractions from the path towards wisdom even though he, himself, relished sexual banter and the beauty of the (male) body.

Holland et al. (1998) also tackle the dialogic nature of men and women. They write, "Humans are both blessed and cursed by their dialogic nature—their tendency to encompass a number of views in virtual simultaneity and tension, regardless of their logical compatibility" (p. 15). According to their theoretical framework, that has much in common with Bourdieu's concept of "fields" as sites of struggle and the Hegelian notion of an "infinite of relations" (Marcuse, 1970, p. 68) in which we are all immersed, we do not have the option to become one unified self as Socrates would have it; the different hats we wear simultaneously and at different times prohibit that possibility. We are, in other words, each internally conflicted not because of illogical thinking as Socrates believed.

Rather, we are each many selves because the different social positions that we fill each demand different logics, stimulate different perceptions, and mediate a different opening up of the world. Emotions, that Socrates entertained so lustily in his life but gave little importance to in his logic, saturate the multi-logical perceptions that these different positions mediate precisely because each of us is "a bundle of emotions, desires, concerns and fears all of which play out through social activities and actions" (Harvey, 2000, p. 234). From this perspective, it is foolhardy to separate emotions from intellect, the lives of students within classrooms from their lives on the outside, inner dialog from public speech, academic achievement from the many other

achievements that build upon each other throughout a day, and the individual life from the different social settings that serve as context for cultural enaction.

Mailer doesn't analyze the conditions that affect how and why we talk to ourselves or the many stances from which our many selves interact and enact with the selves of others, but his characters, all self-reflective and thoughtful in their own ways, and all animated by contradictory emotions, illustrate and embody, in their daily lives, the concepts about which Arendt, Bourdieu, Holland and Harvey theorize. And so Gilmore's lover, though mostly steadfast in her passion for Gilmore, is simultaneously fickle in her sexual appetites and thus conflicted in her sense of loyalty. Gilmore's relatives, loving him, are anguished by their betrayal of him while simultaneously aghast at his slaughter of two innocent men. They are bound to him by family ties but they are also bound to their community by engrained values. These two positions- that of relative and that of citizen—conflict; they can't reconcile their love for Gilmore with their sense of justice. Friends and acquaintances who witness Gilmore's aberrant ways are torn between their religious sense of charity, of giving every individual a chance to redeem him/herself, with their gut sense that their generosity will be used to reap horror; they are caught between two moral compasses. As for the journalists and lawyers who swarm about Gilmore in search of the scoop and the attending prestige, they discover that their professional ethics and the moral codes they profess often conflict with their ambitions and vibrate uneasily across boundaries that they can't easily delineate.

Meanwhile, the families of Gilmore's victims cannot make sense of the time, money, and devotion showered on the murderer while they themselves are left devastated and isolated by what Gilmore has wrought. For them, a world which is supposed to be coherent, to make sense, has suddenly turned their lives topsy-turvy. They suffer a catastrophe of scale: the national

crusade for or against the death penalty with its ethical pronouncements cannot address their personal loss, their own need for a moral response to their grief and a national recognition of their pain. They feel abandoned by their own community, sundered from the very fabric that bore them. They, like the others in Mailer's book, find themselves tangled between the many roles they play and the many perspectives they juggle, and they do not have the tools to make the world right. Only Gilmore is able to make sense out of the non-sense of his world. Though he dialogs with himself, his selves seem to be the most unified of all of Mailer's cast. It is certainly not, however, the same unity of self that Socrates sought when he spoke about truth, wisdom and justice, for the ending of *The Executioner's Song* is messy and ambiguous, leaving behind no clear consensus on right or wrong, good or bad, justice or injustice. Indeed these dichotomies don't begin to define the experience of living, an experience that hovers more often in the nuanced in-betweens than at any port of clarity.

Researching experience

That Mailer can bring us such a full and complex picture of the human condition is a testament to his artistic creativity, his ear for language, his eye for detail and his skill as a listener and researcher. It is also a reflection of his unstated ontological stance in which truth is multiple, constantly in flux and saturated with emotion. Reading the text, we hear the thoughts and words of Gilmore and those he interacts with recursively spinning as we observe their gestural and facial language, hear the caliber of their voices, and understand—however fleetingly and uncertainly—what it might be like to be in their shoes and to comprehend how the world opens itself up to them.

But just as each of Mailer's "characters" views the world through the multiple lenses of his/her own experiences, Mailer—like any researcher and author—can't avoid the prism of his

own perspective. Like any scholar, he chooses the data he provides to us and organizes them as he wishes. Moreover, Mailer's masterpiece of writing and research melds official documents, court transcripts, and actual interviews conducted with the individuals mentioned in the book with imaginary scenarios, thus creating a smooth, invisible mesh of "reality" and "fantasy." The reader, searching for the seam that neatly knits one to the other, cannot locate the frontier between them. Vygotsky wrote, "There is a double, mutual dependence between imagination and experience. If, in the first case, imagination is based on experience, in the second case experience is based on imagination" (2004, p. 17) and every telling of an experience is not only already mixed with fantasy but also selectively reported in order to emphasize and to exclude.

Robespierre said simply, in his letter of December 21, 1792, "*L'histoire est un roman,*" or "History is fiction" (*Robespierre, 1792*), but maybe it is more accurate to say that every account of human action is a slice of fact and fiction woven together, and a semblance of how life may really be can only be constructed by a vast number of slices jaggedly and yet seamlessly joined—as close as we can get to seeing our world in its fullness, messiness and transmutability. And yet that world does hold together, and Mailer's stunning, metaphoric prose is the vehicle that shapes the story into a coherent whole. He guides us through the complexity of a historical moment (or accumulation of moments) and helps us to illuminate the dialectical nature of our lives.

Dialectical thinking

It just so happens that at the same time as I was immersed in *The Executioner's Song*, I was reading Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* (1970). I had not read it since my undergraduate days, but it was the book that introduced me to Marxist dialectics and laid the groundwork that made *Capital* and the earlier writings of the young Marx accessible to me. It

paved my way towards the construction of the theoretical lens through which I would see the world over at least the following decade. Admittedly, my early understanding of Marx was naïve and colored by the excitement and the fury of the early '70s and the devastation caused by US forces around the world, but I have never since felt as empowered by theory as I did back then, as fully permeated by the knowledge-sense that history was purposefully surging in the direction of the liberation of humankind and that a new world was indeed possible, one in which we would be more at one with ourselves and others, a world in which inner and outer conflict would be radically diminished.

Looking back at that time now, the idea that Marxism could lead us towards utopia, that I could even desire such a world, seems incomprehensible; clearly the collective euphoria that I contributed to and that contributed to me overwhelmed the other senses that I brought to analytical thought. Still, I felt enormously lucky to be among those pushing the world forward on its inevitable, revolutionary and triumphant path. Theory was serving what I then saw as its preeminent purpose. It provided a framework, part crystal ball and part rigorous analysis, through which I could understand my world while at the same time following a political route that had to some extent already been mapped. I felt that as I engaged in political activity, I was literally embodying the theory|practice dialectic, the two, inseparably together, guiding me on my way.

Though my adherence to many aspects of Marxist thought has dissipated over the last few decades, dialectical thinking still remains my primary lens through which to understand the world and to change it. It is the kernel of my ontological stance: We exist for and through one another; the world is always in flux and, in that respect, it is false; and contradictions saturate all aspects of social life and are the engine of the continuous transformative forces that characterize

existence. Marxist dialectical thinking also anchors my axiological (ethical) stance that is bound with my ontological one: The purpose of theory is to liberate humankind from want and oppression both of which contradict reason; the world as it could be and as it ought to be (what we can conceive) should always drive transformation of the world as it is.

Negative thinking

Marcuse explains that the key to Marxist dialectics, its foundation, lies in the process of “negative thinking” that was introduced by Hegel. In English at least, the term “negative thinking” has unfortunate connotations. It brings to mind fatalism and nay saying; to be negative is to be a downer, a bore and a depressive. It appears to be the categorical opposite of “positive thinking,” which brings to mind optimism, hope, and a can-do attitude. Ironically, in philosophical terms, the reverse is true, a reflection of the flexibility of language and of how the power of words is subject to contextual and conceptual conditions. Philosophically, the power of negative thinking is found in the “confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude” (Marcuse, 1970, p. x). A negative thinker “begins with the recognition that the facts do not correspond to the concepts imposed by common sense and scientific reason—in short with the refusal to accept them” (1970, p. vi). From a Marxist perspective, the facts are unacceptable, unreasonable and thus negated by reason because they condemn the masses of human beings to intolerable conditions. Therefore, negative thought is dangerous, a threat to the powerful and to all those content with the status quo. It is also infused with imaginative exuberance, hope, and vision.

Marx explains the dialectical dynamic of negative thinking in his preface to the second edition of *Capital* (1990):

...it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary. (103)

The process through which dialectics negates existing conditions is a dynamic “fluid” process of continually becoming, in which the interactions between things define their essence and their evolution. With every second that passes and transforms the second that preceded it, with every turn of the head, with every re-consideration, the reality we perceive and the possibilities before us are transformed. For Marx, opposites confront and mediate each other as thesis and antithesis, creating a synthesis that again separates and confronts anew. When writing about the seemingly opposed relationship between exchange and acquisition, Marx writes in *Capital* (1990),

To say that these mutually independent and antithetical processes form an internal unity is to say also that their internal unity moves forward through external antitheses. These two processes lack internal independence because they complement each other. ...There is an antithesis immanent ...between private labor which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labour...between the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things... (p. 209)

A positivist, in contrast to a negative thinker, accepts the world “as is” to be true and fixed. In the spirit of Comte, he believes that “imagination,” is “subordinated” to observation (Marcuse, 1970, p. 341) and that what is observed is governed by immutable laws. To be “positive” in

attitude towards what exists is to support existing inequalities and obfuscate potentialities.

Though positivists claim the mantle of practicality and truth, to be a positivist is to be blind to the constant dialectical interplay of contradictions. Positivists see the world as variable-driven, logical, and controllable.

A dialectical view of reality conflicts not only with the positivist ontology associated with Comte but also with the commonly held Cartesian view that understands the world as dualistic and mechanistic (Jardine, 2006). Descartes wrote, “A substance is that which requires nothing except itself in order to exist” (p. 274). He thought that the only way to understand something was to isolate it from its context, the reverse of what a dialectician believes. When the world is seen through a Cartesian lens, what is being examined becomes “the problem,” shorn from interaction with the multiplicity of conditions that mediate its identity. Educational methodologies still tend to be based on scientific ontologies influenced by the positivism of Comte and the scientific methods of Descartes. Merleau-Ponty (1964) writes:

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. It makes its own limited model of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. Science is and always has been that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use. (1964, p. 159)

Such a view disputes the ontological position essential to dialectical thinking: that we are formed by relationships and, most emphatically, by our relationships with each other.

Marx was a dialectic *materialist*, not merely a thinker with his head in the clouds concerned with ideas as metaphysical concepts that floated in the breeze. He did not spin his theories from thin air, but derived them from the daily grind of working people as they struggled to exist. He hoped that the dialectic process he outlined and bolstered with historical analysis would mediate the actual daily lives of men and women, to empower them with understanding and guide them to revolutionary activity. Theory and practice were continually and dialectically interacting; they presupposed each other, tested each other, and transformed, continually, the shape and direction of their evolution.

Integral to the materialism that suffuses Marx's dialectic is the ontological stance that you can't transform what doesn't exist. This important concept separates Marx from those who think that the past can be made irrelevant in one fell swoop and that change can be spun out of nothing. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louise Bonaparte* (N.d.), Marx writes, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (para 2). And when writing about the Paris Commune "They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant" (1977b, p. 76).

Reading Marcuse's explanation of dialectical thinking again now, after having been involved with a myriad of radical organizations and after having teetered for years on the border of self-preservation and revolutionary zealotry, I was struck by how, with all its insight, intellectual thrill and revolutionary force, *Reason and Revolution* made no room for the messiness of social life that reverberates with emotional energy and that is so meticulously painted by Mailer. Even though Marcuse's investigation of Hegelian and Marxist dialectical thought is one of the clearest

and most incisive examinations of dialectic thinking that I have read, I was struck by the absence of real human beings in the text, human beings consumed by passions and acting in ways not always predictable or class-determined. The emotions of social actors, that Vygotsky postulates as being inseparable from cognition (2004) is absent in the theoretical framework that Marcuse (explicating Hegel and Marx) presents, thus facilitating a confident (and mostly dry) teleological view of history unimpeded by emotion-mediated acts and goals that might derail it. I was likewise aware that the *Logic*, so concisely argued, made no notice of the contingent nature of so much that takes place in social life because a recognition of contingency would sabotage the certainty of revolutionary success.

Structure and agency

It would be wrong to blame Marcuse for this lack of flesh and blood in his analysis since there is an aspect of Marxist thought that is powerfully deterministic, one in which men and women are merely tools of the macro structures in which they act, one in which their “feelings” are inconsequential. Similar mechanistic theories in which human agency is seen as a weak force in contrast to the strong predictive forces of class and culture also seep through much of the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. This is not surprising since the purpose, after all, of the concept of structures, as Sewell (2005) points out, is to be reproductive. Indeed Holland and Sewell also acknowledge the formidable nature of structures even as they recognize the power of humans to transform them under optimal conditions. It is why Harvey calls these structures “permanences” (1996). Sewell writes, however, that “Structures are at risk, at least to some extent, in all of the social encounters they shape—because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably” (1992, p. 19). “What tends to get lost in the language of structure,” he emphasizes, “is the efficacy of

human action” (p. 2). What is dismissed by Marx, and by many Marxist philosophers who believe in dialectical thinking and revolutionary goals, is the polysemicity of social life, the multi-dimensionality of social actors, and the many interlocking worlds that we all take part in. It is precisely this aspect of what it means to be human that Mailer captures and that Marcuse, in his role as an explainer in *Reason and Revolution*, logically omits. It is a contributing aspect to what makes *Reason and Revolution* inaccessible to readers who are not dedicated to theoretical reading.

Though the members of Marx’s working classes may be flat and predictable, and though Marx understood structural transformation as mechanical, largely unidirectional and inevitable, he nevertheless acknowledged, by the very act of writing if not in the actual text of his work, the importance of emotions in human activity and their potential to destroy economic and class structures. As formidable as Marx saw these structures, he also understood that theory and agitation could move the masses to transform them. The purpose, after all, of the Communist Manifesto was to catalyze and direct human passion in order to bring about revolutionary change. Marx also knew the power of expressive writing, and though he was not a novelist, he could spin words as well as Mailer. He understood that theory tied to and reflecting the lives of working men and women, written incisively and with passion, could inspire. His documentation in *Capital* of how the masses lived and died reads as fiction, as an account of irrationality gone wild as in a novel by Dickens or Zola. Volume 1 includes an almost 80-page chapter entitled “The Working Day” that documents the travails of working men, women and children. Gleaned from government reports and newspaper documents that he meticulously copied by hand as he sat in the British Museum, it makes transparent the brutality under which workers labored. Abstract concepts are not left floating around in the clouds but are mirrored in the concrete

existences of those who eked out a minimum survival when they were lucky. Marx explains how the daily grind of the working day infiltrated with its brutality family life and affected the common sense attitudes of the oppressed creating turmoil in the relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents. Though Marx doesn't examine the emotions that influence history and human action, and though his working classes are without nuance, his most passionate writing rumbles with the consciousness of human misery: "For 'protection' against the serpent of their agonies," Marx writes at the conclusion of the chapter:

...the workers have to put their heads together and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier by which they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital. In the place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day, which at last makes clear 'when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins. (1990, p. 416)

Marcuse, Mailer and how we view the world

If Marcuse presents us with a cogent analysis of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics based on negative thinking, Mailer makes real for us the human beings that together, even if not consciously, engage in the dialectical practices that create social life. His historical novel breathes with the passions that animate the "common" person, and it illustrates how those passions interact with thought and deed. Mailer's characters also complicate the category of class as it intertwines with religion, professional allegiance, geography, history and contingency, each layer vibrating with the others, sometimes in synchrony and other times in contradiction so that no end is predetermined and every end is just a marker on a road still under construction.

Of course, Marcuse's goal in *Reason and Revolution* is to explain the Hegelian dialectic and its subsequent life through Marxist thought not to delve into what the Marxist dialectic omitted that was theoretically vital to its revolutionary mission of transforming economic and social systems. And it is not Marcuse's fault that theoretical works don't easily capture the myriad of passions, ideas, and unforeseen events that animate any given slice of time or their chronological and non-chronological joining. Meanwhile, Mailer's *Executioner's Song* makes no attempt to transform the world, and he is not bound by the ideal types and categorical rigidities that make revolutionary theory so convincingly captivating, empowering, and certain. Mailer, author of a historical novel without a revolutionary agenda, is able to allow human character to overflow stereotypical boundaries as they do in real life. And indeed I think that it is Mailer's focus on human beings in their "irrationalism," and his rejection, here, of political analysis, that makes *The Executioner's Song* so much more accessible than Marcuse's philosophical *Reason and Revolution* and so more wrenching to the reader's state of equilibrium. The language Mailer uses is sophisticated but not specialized, and the passions he gives voice to can reverberate through a common reader's sensibilities in a way that intellectual explications rarely do. Hence, though Marx remains the backbone of revolutionary theory today, few actually read his major works because of the dense content of most of his texts and the difficulty of locating within them human beings similar to the multi-dimensional ones with whom we are familiar. Marcuse's text on dialectics, much like stereotypical theoretical writing, is dense and difficult and lacks the humanity of Mailer's novel even as it inspires those for whom theory provides the security for action and the possibility for liberation. For these reasons, Marcuse's text is heavy going, whereas I read Mailer's work rapidly and voraciously though, at over one thousand pages, it is twice as long as that of Marcuse's.

But if I seem to be favoring Mailer over Marcuse, I should immediately add that my intent is not to favor one over the other, but to value them both as offering different and necessary clues on how to disseminate theory that mediates action, how to develop an understanding of what makes the world tick, and on how to design research methodologies that will help us move the world in the direction of justice and reason. As enthralling as Mailer's writing is, the *Executioner's Song* normalizes unreason and leaves the reader to ponder an enduring and unalterable permanence of irrationality and suffering. Though richly creative, the book makes no claim to the revolutionary aspirations of constructing a world without want or injustice. Gilmore, his girlfriend and his relatives and acquaintances are not Marx's class-conscious factory workers; they are wage workers or small-time owners without much ideological direction who are just trying to get by; intellectuals in a quandary over the callings of justice; or hacks of all varieties just trying to serve themselves. Even for the few who seek justice, their quests fall short of radical change. That transformative goal is still central to those who take seriously the Marxist call to not merely interpret the world, but to change it (Marx, 2002c). While Marcuse may be less accessible than Mailer, in *Reason and Revolution* he helps us decipher a path towards becoming via the dialectic process whereas Mailer leaves us in a Beckettian world, hopeful and intent on persevering and moving on while mired for eternity in the same un-reasonable and un-revolutionary place.

What is needed then is a dialectic that is broader and more flexible than the one Marx elucidated, one that recognizes the multiple and nuanced worlds in which we live and rejects dichotomies in favor of multiple interacting conditions of social life that, even though they complicate negative thinking, allow for the fullness of who we are in all our contradictory polysemicity. We also need theorists who can elaborate the power, hope, and perceptive acuity

that thinking dialectically can harness in language that is riveting without being dogmatic or simplistic.

Towards a broader dialectic

In volume two of his *Science of Logic*, Hegel writes, “Consequently the Real Possibility of a case is the existing multiplicity of circumstances which are related to it” (1929, p. 189), and it is precisely the neglect of these “multiplicity of circumstances,” that leads policymakers to identify single solutions to complicated problems. Bourdieu’s theorizing of borderless fields as sites of struggle and Holland’s “figured worlds” build upon the concept of multiple interactive conditions. They bring us a *multilectics* rather than a *dialectics*, an amplified vision of negative thinking that moves beyond the rigid class borders that are associated with Marx, or the dichotomous thinking that characterizes dominant thinking. Such a multilectics recognizes that no single categorization encompasses the complexity of human identity within collective life. Sewell (2005) writes:

The multiplicity of structures means that the knowledgeable social actors whose practices constitute a society are far more versatile than Bourdieu’s account of a universally homologous habitus would imply: social actors are capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible schemas and have access to heterogeneous arrays of resources. (p. 140)

And Sewell, like Lefebvre (1974), recognizes that one’s role within the system of production does not by itself define who we are and how we act, but that “laughter,” “play,” and the awareness of death” or “residence” (p. 165) might have as much to do with who we are as our position on the economic wheel. Sewell’s *Logic of History* (2005) not only theorizes about dialectical change, but guides us through perceiving specific historical moments in a dialectical

way to make vivid the human role in constructing history and creating social space. He recognizes the importance of emotions in social transformation, and the need to intertwine theoretical writing with critical and accessible analysis.

If Bourdieu, Sewell and Holland have abandoned the notion of rigid categories and ideal types and, by so doing, have given us tools to perceive the dynamics of a more complex world, it has not been without the loss of the exhilarating notion that justice, freedom, and pleasure are ours if we only persevere. Instead we see a world in a blur of movement, always changing but not necessarily in the direction we desire despite our efforts. Hard and carefully as we look, sophisticated as our tools and theoretical lenses may be, it is not apparent if we are moving toward the vision that negative thinking inspires. This loss of clarity is only exacerbated by the grim accounts of the revolutionary movements that claimed Marxism as their guiding light. Nevertheless, the failure of Marxism thus far does not diminish the fundamental power of dialectics to help us understand the world and develop methodologies that promote the practice of transformative thinking in social interactions. Nor does it alter the fundamental role of liberatory philosophy to facilitate paths of perception that point us in the direction of freedom. Thayer-Bacon (2006) writes that philosophical arguments:

...don't try to make the case for what is (that's science); they try to make the case for *what should be ideally*. Philosophical arguments try to make the case for what is the best, the right, the good, the beautiful, the fair and just, the true. These are arguments that are warranted by reasons, using logic to make their case. (p. 143)

Dialectical thinking, senseless without the rejection of that which is and without the imaginative leap of perception that declares a better world possible, remains at the core of transformative methodologies; it is the life flow of philosophy.

Methodology

But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage
 can seldom see through his bars of rage
 his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.

Maya Angelou, from *I know why a caged bird sings*

I do not know when the sixth-grade classroom in this all-black middle school erupted into chaos, but as I entered students were screaming, spitballs were flying through the air and the laughter was loud and continuous. The teacher explained to me that she had smelled smoke and was certain one of the students had lit a match, “I’m going to pull them out in the hall one by one until I find the one who did it,” she told me as she left the room with a suspect tagging behind her, “You can do anything you want with them.” I stood in the center of the class and stared out at the chaos, not knowing what to do. One student, Ashley, began running wildly in circles around the room. She was howling as she passed in front of me and then laughed raucously, her teeth glimmering, her eyes staring fully into mine. A classmate said something I couldn’t hear to her and she stopped in her path to slap him on top of his head. I walked up to her and quietly said, “You can’t be hitting people on the head.” She looked down at me for a second, and then she lightly slapped me on the top of my cranium. In the long pause that followed, we both stared at each other and said nothing. I’m not sure which of us was more surprised by what had taken place. I walked away as the chaos continued around me. But as the minutes passed by, I pondered on what had occurred; I was troubled less by her slap than by my walking away and my puzzlement about what to do. I guessed by her startled expression at the instant of contact between her hand and my head, by the aghast drop of her jaw and by the lightness of the slap that she was as confused as I, that she had reacted impulsively, that she had not intended any harm and that she knew she had crossed some line of admissible conduct but that there had not been enough time or sufficient distance between us to retract her hand in mid flight and alter the

conversation's direction. All this, though unspoken, was clear in the sizzling silence that hovered over us in the seconds that followed, in the momentary silence between slap and walk as we stared at each other in disbelief, locked together by the intensity of recognition, waiting for what would happen next. As Roland Barthes reminds us, "Silence speaks" (Barthes, 1985, p. 259), and now, as the seconds passed, I felt that if I didn't somehow revisit the event with Ashley, respond to the intimacy of that silence, that I would never be able to gain her respect, respect myself, or continue the dialog that had begun so clumsily but yet had ended with some type of mutual recognition.

Revisiting that moment now, I don't think I said to myself that it was time to put on my philosophical glasses and analyze, according to post-Marxist dialects, what was going on. Still, I was conscious of the many layers of interactions that were taking place and the many vantage points from which analysis was possible. Most apparent from the outside was the macro layer of race that had so much to do with her sitting in this underperforming school and living in a dangerous and impoverished community while I came from the outside, from the university, as an "expert" in literacy pedagogy. I was one white face in a sea of black faces with the connotations of power and privilege that whiteness in the United States represents. But yet here in the classroom, I was a minority and a stranger who was clearly not empowered—even with all the official resources at my disposal, and it was not certain by any means who was in control. Though race was a systemically and culturally imposed divisive category that both Ashley and I were born into, I felt the color divide rumble throughout my entire body, in my intertwined movements and thoughts; I understood it sensefully- corporally; in my body-space it generated anxiety and discomfort. I also felt it conceptually—in those moments of reflection I was consciously burdened and puzzled by the weight of family, cultural and community codes that

could not separate whiteness from power, the act of slapping with disrespect for my position and walking away with surrender. The final silence that wound around the encounter, that seemed to suffocate a trapped living thing, signaled to me an inadmissible lack of resolution. Yet I also felt something else going on, a contradictory dynamic that dialectic thinking proposes. Ashley and I had experienced what Chalmers (1995) called “a state of experience,” an emotionally packed stream-of-consciousness that, “like the sound of a clarinet or the smell of mothballs” (para. 8) could not be measured or positivistically made sense of because it had no static position but was fluid, because it was not detached in a Newtonian space but was subjectively and socially imbued. That final silence could be theorized as a temporary and porous stage in a process that was still fluid rather than as a fixed static moment that was over and done with. Seen multilectically, open to embracing thought, language, emotion and positionality as part of the puzzle, I was able to seek meaning in the voiceless but eloquent expression in Ashley’s eyes that reverberated in the silence following her assault, a silence that though brief was at least twice as long as the flick of her hand on my head. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) says that the “intensity of an experience is more important for intimacy with space than the extensity of the experience” (pp. 184-5), and now I chose to interpret the intensity of that momentary silence as part of our dialog, as a reflective spark, a reconsideration of sorts that transcended the color of our faces and the imbalance that age, gender, class, officialdom and our very different spots in the web of social life that defined the space we shared. It reached deeply inside to some core that bound us together, however momentarily. My instant microanalysis of her gaze and her body language complicated the mandated punishment that is the automatic response when a student strikes a teacher. I did not know what Ashley carried with her to school that day, what “bundle of emotions, desires, concerns and fears” played out in her “social activities and actions” (Harvey,

2000, p. 234) and caused her to strike me. I hoped, however, that if I could continue our encounter, we could break through into new possibilities, produce a space in which we could both creatively and fruitfully encounter one another using dialog as the dialectical method at hand. Such dialog would include “radical” listening, defined by Ken Tobin as “trying to give the same meaning to the words that the speaker does and to understand where that speaker is situated” (Ali Khan, 2009). Doreen Massey (1993), building on Marx’s definition of space as defined by interrelationships writes, “It is not that the interrelations between objects occur *in* space and time; it is these relationships themselves which *create/define* space and time” (p. 154). Using multilectical methodologies, Ashley and I had the possibility of redefining the space we jointly created.

The space of the classroom

In her book on the Paris Commune, Kristin Ross (2008) writes:

Our tendency is to think of space as an abstract, metaphysical context, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we help create. The difficulty is also one of vocabulary, for while words like “historical” and “political” convey a dynamic of intentionality, vitality and human motivation, “spatial,” on the other hand, connotes stasis, neutrality, and passivity. But the analysis of social space, far from being reactionary or technocratic, is rather a symptom of a strategic thought and of what Rista Tzara, speaking of Rimbaud, called an “ethics of combat,” one that poses space as the terrain of political practice. (p. 8)

It may seem obvious but yet it needs to be emphasized that what produces social space is the interactions between human beings. Because spaces are socially produced, they can also be socially transformed. Human beings can alter the nature of the spaces they share despite the fact

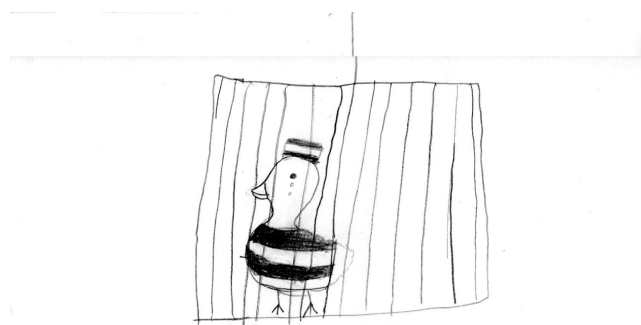
that they are always imbued by ideology (Lefebvre, 1974), because “contexts, while they are productive of interpretation, are also the products of interpretation” (Fish, 1982, p. 708). It was up to Ashley, and especially up to me as a teacher in the Vygotskian and/or Freireian sense, to turn the space of the classroom that we shared and produced together into one that served us both. Vygotsky offers the metaphor of teacher as a guide who accompanies students through stages of reflection and re-evaluation by constantly building on existing knowledge. Freire (and in some ways Socrates) proposes reflexive dialog as the method of reaching self-understanding. Understood this way, the space in which Ashley and I were in together would be defined by what we did and did not do together. We had to negotiate the “fresh actions” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 73) that our past activities had made possible. We had to become agentic, to “exert some degree of control over the social relations” in which we were “enmeshed, (Sewell, 1992, p. 20). The methodology I appropriated to help us to do so reflected the dialectic potentialities of the dialogic method and embraced the full gamut of the languages we use to communicate with one another. It also embraced the axiological Marxist demand that theory serve the liberation of the underserved and develop self-consciousness rather than be the fount of punitive remedies that more macro structures tended to impose.

A few minutes passed. The class was still chaotic. I walked slowly up to Ashley who was standing by her desk now and said in a voice barely above a whisper, “we have to talk.” She looked at me directly, sat down in her seat and said without argument, “ok.” With that brief exchange, the silence of before became a mere stepping-stone to understanding, respect and trust rather than a dismal finality. Though it was the slap that brought us to the table, I don’t think we ever talked about it. I remember that Ashley surprised me by telling me how much she loved the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and that she loved poetry. “I come from a good family,” she said, “not

like a lot of these kids” and her arm swept across the room. “I hate being here,” she added, “it’s a waste of time.” I asked her if she wanted to come with me, the following period, to an eighth grade language arts class that I was teaching. She nodded. I went and asked the school literacy coach if that was doable. The literacy coach replied, “Well, she has science then. I’ll ask the science teacher if it’s ok.” She came back and told me, “He told me you should take her every week, that she’s a troublemaker. He can’t imagine why anybody would want her in their class.” Ashley and I walked upstairs and down the hall and into the senior language arts class. I introduced her to the students and to the teacher and asked them to make Ashley welcome. Ashley sat at the back of the room. She listened attentively, asked good questions, contributed to the conversations. When the class was over she queried, “can we do this again next week?”

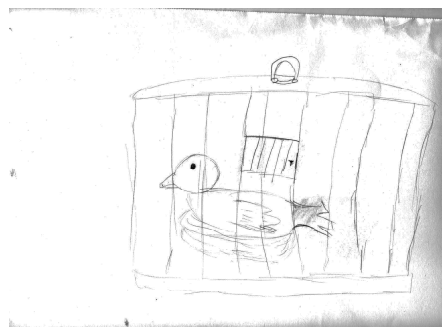
“Yes,” I assured her, “yes.”

The following week I brought with me one volume of short stories by Poe. copies of poetry by Langston Hughes and a copy of Maya Angelou’s “I know why a caged birds sings,” which I had introduced to eighth grade students in another school who had drawn illustrations to accompany the poem (see



I am a caged bird and I
 dream of freedom my Taylor isn't
 cruel but isn't sweet either
 I dream of freedom and freedom
 is all I want.

drawings this page). I asked the school literacy coach if I could read some of these texts in her office with Ashley during what would normally be Ashley’s language arts class. The literacy coach said she would request permission from her sixth grade teacher to do so. She came back and told me, “Ms. Braddock says you must have



the wrong girl; nobody would want to talk with Ashley.” I assured the literacy coach that Ashley was the student I wanted and, within minutes, she and I were reading Angelou’s poem and talking and writing together. Again, I took her with me to the eighth grade class, and gave her the book of Poe stories to take home with her.

The following week when I went to look for Ashley she was gone. The literacy coach told me she had been transferred to another school without explanation. I made some inquiries, discovered the school she was now in (though not why she had been transferred), and wrote her a letter that I gave to a regional coordinator from the Board of Education who, after reading the letter, assured me that Ashley would get it. I never heard from Ashley again, and my colleagues advised me not to pursue the issue because people would think I was a “pervert” chasing after an 11-year-old girl.

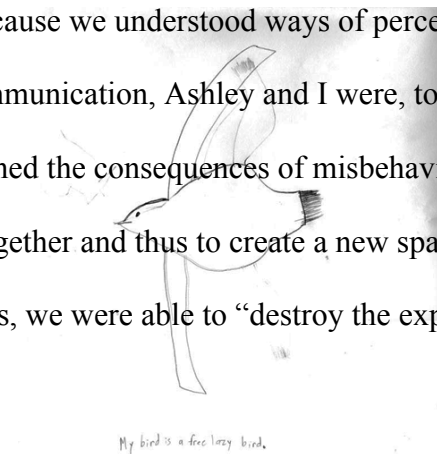
The story of Ashley is a story about the power of negative thinking—the refusal to accept the normative “is” and to seek the “ought-to-be”s and the “could be”s. It is a story about dialogic relationships, one in which Ashley and I were able to transform our relationship in a way that facilitated teaching and learning in shared spaces that are often so damaged that no escape seems possible. It is a story of transformative methods emerging from dialectical thinking—the search for contradictions and the effort to resolve them. It is a recognition that words and actions can be easily misinterpreted and that if we look at what is usually ignored, and listen to the silences as well as to the spoken, we will have more data on which to proceed.

Ashley’s story is also one about methodologies that emerge from the recognition of multiple and interconnected layers of experience saturated with emotions, in this case Ashley’s and my own, that could not be easily defined, isolated or measured. We had to negotiate to create a space enabling the emergence of new possibilities--what Pierre Bourdieu might call a “field of

possibility,” what the geographer Edward Soja might call a “thirdspace,” or Homi Bhabha a space of “hybridity.” It is a story of “radical listening,” and it is a story of trust, both Ashley and I trusting our mutually good intentions and mediating a world that would open itself up differently to us than it did before.

Finally, Ashley’s story is one that is imbued with irrationality, with un-reason: an eleven-year-old girl filled with rage; a school with inadequately educated teachers and few supplies; a disempowered and disenfranchised parental community; an impoverished neighborhood a few miles away from one of the nation’s richest metropolises; a city government, state government and federal government that focus on finding scapegoats to fault for the bleak possibilities these students face rather than tackling the issues of poverty, racism, and joblessness that haunt poor localities of color.

Like Gary Gilmore and Mailer’s cast of characters, the individuals that populate Ashley’s story can be viewed as part of a perpetual loop of dysfunction that will never change, “one poverty after another,” as Mailer wrote, “A shade of gloom that would not lift. ... Nothing could grow.” Yet because of luck, desire and will, and because we understood ways of perception that forefronted the interrelational quality of human communication, Ashley and I were, together, able to alter the structures that normally predetermined the consequences of misbehavior in public schools. We were able to think negatively together and thus to create a new space of possibility. For a moment at least, as Marcuse writes, we were able to “destroy the experience of daily life.”



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PART 3:
Life's not a paragraph:
Perceiving the writers within

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;
wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
- the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says
we are for each other; then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph
And death i think is no parenthesis

e. e. cummings

Chapter 6: The functional and the holistic

For any theory and set of practices is dogmatic which is not based upon critical examination of its own underlying principles.

John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (1938) p. 38

The joy of language is not commonly emphasized in the public schools. Doing so requires that the love of words and ideas be prioritized, which it is not. It also demands time and attention, but both of these are severely apportioned to the achievement of testable goals. Furthermore, a delight in the fullness of language is not a requisite for teaching language arts in the schools and so its transference, through the sheer infectiousness of enthusiasm, rarely happens. The heartbeats of language, the rolling current of sounds, words and rhythms that makes language an art as well as a tool are not prioritized because the relationship between joy and skill, joy and learning, joy and high academic scores cannot be measured. I have met many language arts teachers who read but a book a year and who, except for emails and filling out forms, never write at all. For them, writing is a practical tool to get things done. Period. To be sure, this reason to write should not be sneered at because we need writing to keep track of what we have and what we don't have, to let us know if we are in the red or in the black.

Some have postulated that writing evolved to serve an economic need, as a tool to keep track of income and debts and to serve the needs of those in power. But whatever its origins, it must have immediately escaped from that limited purview to serve our emotional-intellectual needs as well, to spread knowledge and ideas, to incite passions and to inspire. We think of the functional as relegated to the quantifiable, to the activities that make for efficiency at work, but the

functional should be seen in its broad context as also making it possible for us to love and play and share the exquisite pleasure that texts can offer us.

In a world perceived dichotomously rather than multilectically, the functional is opposed to the pleasurable and the creative rather than intertwined with it and dependent upon it. Shunning multilectical thinking, schools pit these purposes against each other, positing them as antagonists in the struggle to assure student success. It accounts for what has been called “narrowing the curriculum” (King & Zucker, 2008, p. 7), the evisceration of the arts from school curricula, indeed the subordination of any discipline not subject to state exams. Within language arts itself, pleasure with language must be subordinated to the mastery of specific skills including proper grammar and spelling and the five paragraph essay, as if the one had no relationship with the other. Not in written policy, you understand. In fact, the irony of this dualism within language arts teaching in the schools is that current pedagogical theory, given lip service to by many Boards of Education, actually embraces dialog, reflexivity, collaboration, the goal of self-knowledge through writing and reading, reader’s theater, poetry, journal writing, process writing (discussed later), Vygotskian principles of teacher as guide and Deweyan wholistic theories that differentiate the needs of individual students. These are methods that infuse the learning of reading and writing with art and improvisation. They all invite the students to build on the knowledge they bring with them to school, the languages and experiences that have made them who they are.

School structures, however, militate against use of these teaching methods. In classroom practice, teaching methods remain largely mechanical, divorced from the lives students live outside of school and from the critical thinking skills that can further transformative thinking and possibility. The policies that enforce mechanical teaching of language skills come from the top

although they are advanced by teachers who, even when they know the basic grammatical rules of language, are unlikely to appreciate or recognize figurative language or to analyze the relationship between speech, thought, motivation, and the things students carry with them to school and that contribute to the emotional climate within the classroom. This entire dysfunctional pedagogical fabric that isolates theory from practice, that considers theory merely a statement of principles rather than an integral and recursive part of practice, is comprehended through a deficit mode of thinking that is in turn exacerbated by the panic engendered by poor grades. Despite years of failing scores under No Child Left Behind, policymakers continue to eviscerate the creative and necessarily improvisational-welcoming ingredients from the methods used to teach language arts without considering how creativity mediates enthusiasm, motivation and success. What is left is formulaic and vapid.

Learning templates

The language arts teacher said to me, “You’ll hate what we’re doing today.” She was right; I did hate it. The city-mandated day’s assignment was to write a letter to the mayor telling him how to reduce shootings in their city. The students were given a template that included ninety percent of their opening and closing paragraphs, which they were to copy word for word. The teacher commented, “the school wanted me to give them a template for every paragraph, but I refused.” Such writing exercises are common. Walking through the schools corridors, I read fifty seventh grade persuasive essays, each one of them containing these three identical lines: “But after careful consideration I have come to the objective conclusion that . . .,” and “Please continue to read my essay as it will serve to explain my reasoning,” and “After reading my letter, I know you’ll do the right thing.” The teacher explained to the students that they had to copy the

template but assured them, “Once I know you understand what belongs where, I’ll let you use your own sentences.”

When I told the school’s literacy coach that I was distressed to see all the formulaic writing, she told me that she had written the template herself and that, though she understood how I felt, she was actually happy to know that the students were following the template because “it’s a vast improvement over last year when students answered questions with only one incoherent paragraph.” She contended, as did the class teacher, that the template resulted in higher scores on the standardized tests (though I saw no evidence that this was true). I also observed that the students had no idea what the words “objective” or “pertinent” meant, though they were part of the imposed template. In addition, I criticized the totally fictitious studies attributed to Yale University or the Board of Education that were cited in over half of the essays to satisfy the

[Writing Template- Students are told that everything not in bold is to be copied word for word]

Dear _____ , OR Title

(Grab the readers' attention by starting with a hook). This (**word, question, quote, image**) comes to my mind when I think about the following issue. It has been brought to my attention that (**state the issue**). After careful consideration of this pertinent issue, I have come to an objective conclusion and I strongly (**give position**). Please continue to read my (**letter/essay**) as it will serve to explain my reasoning.

First, I'd like to start by mentioning that (**state first reason**). Recent studies conducted by (**newspaper, school, organization, person**) found that (**give research to support the reason. Don't repeat the reason**). This shows that. _____ could relate to this because (**make a connection by giving an example**). After this experience, I learned that (**explain how the experience relates to the first reason.**)

Second, (**state second reason**). For example, (**name a famous or important person**) once said, "(**provide quote or opinion about the second reason. It can be more than one sentence**). This shows that (**explain how quote/opinion relates to the second reason**). Imagine (**have the audience imagine something powerful that has to do with your reason. Put THEM in the situation. DETAILS!**)

All in all, the above-mentioned reasons have clearly indicated why (**repeat your position**). Keep in mind that (**repeat 1st and 2nd reason**). I understand that this may be difficult, but I think the right decision will be made for the betterment of (**school, students, safety - whatever the issue is**). After reading my (letter/essay), I hope you do the right thing. Don't disappoint us!

second paragraph in the above template. The teachers had told the students to invent studies to support their positions (I suspect the teachers invented the studies). A number of students, for example, wrote that the local newspaper had done a study indicating that “75% [some said 80%] of students who get allowances do better in their classes.” The classroom teacher claimed that the “exercise” demonstrated to the students the need to support their opinions with statistical evidence.

I voiced my belief that even if such “teaching” methods resulted in better test scores, it did nothing to foster better writing or critical thinking but merely encouraged writing by rote, plagiarism, and dishonesty. Her position, and that of many others who taught and administered, was that so many students read and wrote below grade-level that they would have no chance of graduating without being given some scaffold on which to lean. In her mind, if the school could train students to be functional, to memorize written codes that could be inserted in the blanks of cover letters or resumes, she was doing the students a great service. She did not dispute that this was far from ideal, she was genuinely troubled by the questions I presented her with and recognized their merit, and she wanted to do what was best for her students. I, for my part, believed her sincerity and her good intentions. But, in her eyes, the final measure of her success was student test scores and she believed the template would improve them. Here again Marx’s theory about the “immanent laws” of the system forcing the hands of its functionaries, shows its mettle as teachers and administrators become hard-working and committed “docile bodies,” working hard and conscientiously to carry out misguided policies. I, in contrast, was unable to convince her, or myself, that having fun with language in the classroom and reflexive discussion about writing and reading correlates to higher test scores even though I could point to some great

writing that many of my students did and to the enthusiasm with which they often discussed ideas.

Persuasive essays

Vacuous assignments often comprise the core of literacy teaching. For example, every year students are told to write persuasive essays, but the concept that students should actually write in order to persuade each other, or to change their school, their community or their world, is a joke. I made the mistake of thinking that we- Mr. C., the students, and I, could reverse that failure.

It began by chance, in a seventh grade classroom, when I read Shelly's memoir and thought to myself that she was not really writing about an important event in her life but rather about how much she hated school. One line in particular caught my attention, "I was by myself in my own world where kids didn't have to go to school or wear uniforms- the navy blue, maroon, white and kaki uniform. They were free to do whatever they want." I told her that her essay seemed to be more about the school uniform policy than about anything else and that maybe she should transform her memoir into a persuasive essay on that subject. Mr. C., upon hearing this, remarked that there was a school newspaper and nobody could remember the last time a student had written an article for it; in fact, none of the students even knew such a paper existed. Wouldn't it be fantastic, he said, if Shelly's essay were to be published in that paper and read by those designing and implementing school policy. It might encourage other students to write for the paper, knowing that their work would be actually read by others and their opinions considered.

Mr. C. and I were excited by the prospect but Shelly and her classmates were less enthusiastic. One student said, "They don't care what we think." Another, "we'll just get into trouble." Shelly simply told me, "They won't put it in." "Sure they will," I naively replied. "Why

don't you keep working on it and we'll discuss it together." Shelly replied, "ok, but I'm going to tell my parents now just in case I get into trouble for writing it- so if I get suspended they'll know why."

Shelly and I met a number of times over the following weeks, once discussing her essay with a group of her friends. In my field notes, for the first of January, I've written: "Shelly is very excited about having her piece in a school newspaper. We went over the anecdote briefly and then talked about where to go from there—what the counter-arguments would be (gang colors, uniforms to represent the school, uniforms to keep the students focused on work not on each other.) Shelly said there could be some restrictions, some "laws," but that the present regulations were too much. One student said, "there are fights even though we're wearing uniforms," and another, "even when they're wearing uniforms they still wear things to express themselves." Shelly said, "they think uniforms change your personality, but they just make you angry."

The final version, completed after a few revisions, was well-written, metaphoric, thought-provoking and much more moderate than I expected. Shelly only requested that, once a week, students be free to choose what to wear to school. When I asked her why she hadn't asked for the uniform policy to be scrapped in its entirety, she replied, wisely, "They'll only accept baby steps." She concluded her essay by writing:

People might also say we should wear uniforms because they represent the school. But I believe that wearing uniforms is just like us students being in jail. It is because, in prison, cellmates have to wear a special uniform that goes with the jail they are in. Students have to wear uniforms to match their school. Do you see the similarities?

We do not go to school to feel like we are in prison. We go to show our true colors and express who we are!

I am not saying that we should stop wearing uniforms. What I am saying is we should have at least one day of the week to bring out who we are as human beings.

“It’s about time,” said the teacher in charge of producing the paper, “that we had students writing for the paper,” and we’ll print copies for as many of the students as we can.” But Mr. C. told me, “Before we print it, we have to run it by Mr. Lopez, the school principal.” Then he added, with a bit of disappointment, “I’m sure there won’t be any problem. She hasn’t said anything radical.” It had not occurred to me to even consult the principal of the school about our plans since I knew him to be committed to students and he had been very supportive of my work in the school. Indeed, I thought he would be thrilled that a student had been so motivated by a writing project to spend time at home on it—a fantastic example for her peers.

It turned out, however, that Shelly understood the power structure of the school better than we. The principal said it couldn’t be printed, “unless she writes a balanced article giving equal weight to both positions.” I said to him, “she wants to advocate for her position, not advocate for both positions.” He replied that we should then get another student to advocate for school uniforms. When that proved futile, I suggested that he, or someone who believed in the school uniform policy (a viable stance), write an opposing article. The principal rejected that idea but said he would meet with Shelly to urge her to write “a more balanced piece.” When I objected that she might feel pressured, he shrugged his shoulders and said, almost apologetically, “it’s city policy, it’s not within my hands.” When I replied that it wasn’t a question of uniform policy but of encouraging student writing, critical thinking, and giving students the sense that what they

think matters, he smiled but didn't say anything. One outraged teacher said to me, "What ever happened to free speech? It sure doesn't exist here." Indeed it seemed that the school administration was making a point of ensuring the alienation that Marx spoke about. Here it was contorting a creative work that was woven from thoughts and passions that resonated deeply with Shelly and squeezing it into a generic mold, making certain that the more Shelly did to satisfy school requirements, the less she would see herself in what she wrote. If she acceded to school requirements, her essay would develop an "external existence;" it would become "something alien" and "hostile."

When I told Shelly that the principal wanted to meet with her, she said, "That's fine." I told her I would go with her if she wanted me to but she answered, "I want to go by myself, I'm not scared of him." But the meeting never took place. Every week for months Shelly asked me when she could meet with the principal and every week for months I asked the principal when he would meet with Shelly, but the meeting was always cancelled or postponed. Finally, five months later, Shelly told me she didn't want to meet with the principal anymore, "It doesn't matter. It won't be printed."

Shelly's story highlights the hypocrisy of a system that claims to value critical thinking but stifles debate, one that mandates the teaching of persuasive writing while providing no chance to persuade. It is overseen by policymakers who declare the importance of making writing exciting and relevant (text-to-self, text-to-world connections) but shiver when a student is excited about using written language to challenge authority, an act that is integral to the very idea of critical and independent thought. It is also about self-censorship, about good people making bad decisions out of fear for their positions, and thus serves as a warning about the corrosive effects of internalized structures of authority on integrity and free thought.

But maybe most importantly, Shelly's story is about the absence of multilectical thinking in the way that those in positions of school authority view the world (ontology); conceive of pedagogy and knowledge (epistemology); and value, as an ethical mandate, the foundational role of relationships based on respect (axiology) in the process of teaching and learning.

Ontologically, the authorities generally see skill as divorced from passion and purpose. In the language arts classroom, this stance is reflected in the position that the teaching of writing can be isolated both from the love of writing and from the belief that writing should advance the goals of the writer. Thus Shelly was encouraged by the school administration to develop persuasive essays about things she cared nothing about and discouraged from pursuing a subject that was important to her.

The ontological position of school authorities is joined to an epistemological one that regards feelings as distinct from knowledge rather than intrinsic to it. Rather than building on Shelly's passionate response to the uniform policy, school administrators sought to dampen her enthusiasm thus risking an opportunity to make writing exciting, pertinent and a tool to develop critical thinking. Through their "scientific" lens, Shelly's passion was viewed as an extra, the cherry on the sundae, not an essential part of what makes knowledge so delicious and exciting. Indeed, love of learning for the very sake of learning often finds no nook of refuge in the school building.

These ontological and epistemological perspectives are clothed in a garb of indifference, generalization and patronization in which the voices of students are only heard when they follow a script they have had no part in writing. That Shelly should have been frightened of official retribution for writing an essay about a school policy is a shocking indictment of the way writing is perceived by those in charge of teaching; it betrays a severe ethical breach (axiology). It is also

an indictment about the lack of commitment to the values that are so proudly taught. That our class discussion about the first amendment should have overlapped with our failed entreaties to have her article published served as a perfect lesson about the hypocrisy of a system that claims the mantle of free speech and the democracy that depends on it while suppressing both. Here free speech was squelched because a student's opinion didn't match that of those in authority and democracy was mocked as both students and teachers were disempowered, disrespected, and ignored.

But Shelly's story is not only about failure. In true multilectical spirit, it is also about success and about the unexpected. It is impossible to know for certain what within the process outlined above inspired Shelly, kept her going, and forged within her a sense of accomplishment rather than defeat. And yet, I can say with a feeling of certainty that it was not one thing but rather many things that came together and helped mediate these results. To begin with, Shelly had a vibrant sense of justice and an inner courage, both evolving from multiple conditions of social life. She also had two teachers who noticed the important kernels in her memoir and, being flexible, encouraged her to transform a memoir which she was indifferent to into a persuasive essay she was passionate about. They urged her to persevere in the publication of her article despite her cynicism about getting it published. The teachers had faith in her, listened to her, thought what she had to say was important, gave her individualized attention, recognized her strengths, and facilitated conversations with her peers about what she had written thus helping to build collective support. Their on-going conversations with Shelly about her article, which continued for a period of five months, helped to overlay a relationship based on power (teacher-student) with one based on trust, allies working together in support of their common goal of making student writing matter. (I also wanted to encourage my students to advocate for

themselves, a lesson in democracy.) Shelly, additionally, had the support of many classmates (one of whom drew a picture to accompany the article) and also of her parents, who were willing to oppose punitive consequences were they to be invoked.

Seeing the world multilectically allows for complexity. It entails the understanding that the result of every encounter is but a link in an ongoing conversation affected by a host of fields, interactions and conditions that are dynamic, fluid and contingent though always, as Marx taught, built upon what has come before. In an award-winning essay that the school, ironically, praised, Shelly wrote:

I am working in school to be a lawyer. Even though I'm not near my goal of being one, I would work on little things that would help me reach that goal, such as fighting for some rights in school. I wrote an article for the school newspaper expressing my opinion about uniforms. This obstacle will help me get closer to my goal.

Chapter 7: The art of language

Metaphor

I was sitting at the table telling my friend about the metaphors that my students unknowingly used and that teachers, for the most part, didn't recognize as metaphors. For example, there was Pablo, a failing seventh grader, who wrote about his grandmother in Mexico who was coming to visit. "I tried to think deeper into my mind," he read from his memoir, "to see if I could bring back any memories about her, but I could not find her." As he finished the sentence, he began to cry, trying to make sense of missing his grandmother so badly yet not even being able to recall what she looked like, the loneliness of missing deeply but unseeingly. What struck me, in addition to the poignancy of the moment, was that neither he nor his teacher were even aware that he had, metaphorically, equated his mind with a cave or a tunnel through which he was searching for a vision of his grandmother. It was this metaphor that made his sentence so visually powerful. He had made two very different things identical; that's what metaphors do! Their power resides not in the words but in the concepts that are juxtaposed (Scaruffi, 2006). When successful, the greater the difference, the more powerful the metaphor. And yet, without reflection, without recognition of the contradiction, the metaphor is lifeless, a useful way of organizing ideas but one that is expressively dead. Indeed, Pablo was, unknowingly, leaning on the cultural metaphorical concept of the mind as a container (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). He was accessing an organizational concept that had been passed down through generations in order to standardize perceptions of the world and provide frameworks within which to talk about that world. Taken for granted in this way, the language retained only a light dusting of poetry. And

yet the way Pablo spoke, the way his voice cracked and his shoulders fell, transmitted the depth of a wound that the metaphor, unexamined, could not do justice to. When scrutinized, however, the metaphor could give profundity to his yearning, make vivid the darkness through which he felt his way, and help him to understand his own words in their powerful, lyrical, sad, ironic and mysterious fullness. We need metaphors to comprehend and share the traumas of our lives. Indeed, we need metaphors to understand almost anything, or at least to approach understanding. Though we are blessed with the wonder of language, words are often a poor conveyor of how we feelingly think. Schutz (1967) writes that it is virtually impossible to totally grasp another's subjective experience. Still, the power that words do have to convey to us another's experience in all its complexity and poignancy, resides, most eloquently, in the metaphors we use.

I asked Pablo to reread his story, and then I repeated his metaphor and encouraged the class to actually imagine the mind as a cave through which one could rummage, a place that could be both dangerous and exciting, gloomy and illuminating, a place of hidden pockets with secrets and clues. It is in this type of exploration that language becomes art, a key that unlocks thoughts, unleashes words, and facilitates the world opening itself up differently and newly and to every person uniquely, even as collective knowledge makes it meaningful and allows us to convey meaning to others. Peter Elbow (1986) points out that the "most important fact about metaphor" is that "there must be a *contradiction*, 'a piece of non-sense, before you can have a metaphor. The word or phrase must be sufficiently *wrong* to produce at least a momentary blockage of sense" (p. 250). In this sense, they are tools of dialectical thinking. A metaphor, when not already taken for granted, "forces us to...live with the contradiction and try to let it reverberate as a way of doing justice to the complexity of its subject" (p. 250). Metaphors have the power to merge words, image, and awe, they are subversive because they are a version of negative

thinking, imagining something as something that it isn't and then making it so. This type of adventure, the examination of the ideas that words can only hint at, is not often embarked on in language arts classes.

My friend was interested and amused by the story, and so I then told her about another failing and sometimes disruptive student who had written a magnificent sentence about a school counselor, one that highlighted the unquantifiable nature of emotions and relationships, "her office was so small for all the big things she did for me." What he was not quite consciously expressing was the inability to contain a "state of experience," to quantify what happens when knowledge grasps a truth which is not a thing. Experience is the knowledge that walks with you, the "things you carry." Ingredients of wisdom, they color all you are and do.

This same student had written that his mother's kitchen looked like a Jackson Pollock painting," a sentence that threw me for a loop because of my own deficit lens: I could not imagine how Jackson Pollock had entered his life. Yet here, I said, was a metaphor that he had invented to relay his own confrontation with Pollock's art and, of course, with the kitchen he was most familiar with. My friend suddenly gave me a derisive look, "but that's not a metaphor, that's a simile." I crumpled right there in my seat. Did she miss, I wondered, the essence of what I was talking about? Here I was so excited by my student's insights yet I was being faulted for grammatical inexactitude. I could have responded that similes were types of metaphors. And yet answering the specific objection would thrust me on a different and treacherous road, into a discussion of terms rather than essences, and it would force me to entertain teacher failure at definitions at the very moment that I was delighting in student brilliance. My friend's comment represented exactly what was wrong with the teaching of language arts. There is more emphasis on recognizing the technical difference between similes and metaphors, that a multiple choice

test is good for spotlighting, than in analyzing and relishing the power of words to enhance self-knowledge, critical thinking and rich imagery--the art of language and one in which my students often shine.

The hint of a poet

If Shelly's memoir hinted of a hidden advocate that a language arts class was able to guide and nurture, Ana's memoir, developed through process writing, revealed the spirit of a poet that our language arts class helped to recognize and release. Unlike some of her classmates, Ana took to heart the initial teacher prompts to search through her mind-body for the colors, shapes, sounds and textures that surrounded the experience she wished to write about, an experience that she ranked as one of the most important of the last three years. And so, even in her first draft, entitled *god in the bible*, she introduced the reader to the "dimmed lights" of her kitchen that only barely exposed the "black and white stove." We see the colors of the furniture and appliances and the "dust" on the table. And we visualize her mother's friend suddenly "sit up straight" when Tanya asked the burning question which rumbles through the story and which also makes the poet visible, "Is God and the bible on my side?" Ana continued, "I started asking more and more questions that was hard that I did not understand."

Process writing, in its beginning stages, focuses on ideas rather than grammar and syntax for multiple interrelated reasons. The first goes to the heart of the difference between art and task, between the joy of unraveling the recursive play of thought and language and the satisfaction of completing a chore successfully. If grammar and spelling mistakes become the main focus from the start, then students concentrate on fixing errors, (even though these corrections, in my experience, don't carry through to other writing) at the expense of thinking deeply about what it is they want to say and finding the words that will convey it. Mostly this results in essays that

have fewer spelling errors but are banal and generic. Learning to love writing or, even absent of love, feeling compelled to use words well, comes more from the desire to express deeply and accurately than from the demand for correctness. And so concentrating on rules before digging deeply into the essence of the thought-text interplay diverts the adventure of critical thinking and self-reflection into an exercise of distinguishing “proper” from “improper” spelling and grammar. This does not mean, as some strict adherers of the “process writing” strategy think,

that one should never talk about spelling or grammar in the early stages of process writing. Once a school literacy coach became angry with me when I acceded to a student request to help him spell the word “dangerous” during the first

Heaven

Interesting title - especially since you never mention it in your memoir.

One night in my kitchen with its dimmed lights all you could see was the black and white stove. The off white fridge the dusty old glass table set and what was left of the wooden cabinets. At the table sat tiffany, mi-mi, and I were sitting down talking about God. I asked tiffany when she was going back to church?" this Sunday "she said. I asked tiffany would she bring me a Bible I asked a lot of questions about the Bible and God. Want the Bible that I could understand more. Tiffany and mi-mi were going back and fourth about God and what they believed in I interrupted them when I asked.

"Is God and the Bible by my side"

Tiffany sat up straight with her white and black sweat shirt on and told me "God will always be by your side if you just believe". After hearing that it got to me, I wanted to learn more about God and started going to church. I stared asking more and more question that was hard that I did not understand ~~any~~, but she did. When my dad turned up the turned really loud and I could not hear tiffany talking, the phone was ringing. Tiffany and I could not take it anymore so I pictured myself being at church where it's always loud and music is playing.

But in a blink of an eye I came back to real life and I asked my dad to turn down the TV. Turn off the ringer. Finally I could hear tiffany when she read the Bible! She went word by word so that I could understand what it trying to say. This was important to me because leaning about God and the Bible keeps me calm.

I + was like I can be able to ask all of those question and feel alive while ask them. Frustrate d

There was always so different kind of noises the noise in church was all jay and inspiration. At home was just ruckus. My dad did not know that me and Tiffany was talking. so he turned on the tv and turned it up loud. ~~the~~ Tiffany and I was hardly upset that my dad did

Gene Fellner 11/4/10 2:19 PM
Comment: Beautiful First line. Your descriptions in this memoir are very powerful and you use dialog very well.

Gene Fellner 11/7/10 2:31 PM
Comment: You have the makings of a philosopher- some one who seeks wisdom. I have a difficult question for you. If you believe in God, what makes you think God might not be "by your side?"

Gene Fellner 11/5/10 1:08 PM
Comment: Is the black and white sweat shirt the same pattern as the stove? I love the way they are both black and white and I wonder how they compare or contrast?

Gene Fellner 11/5/10 11:11 PM
Comment: Tiffany seems very sure of her belief. Does she speak with certainty? Is she speaking softly or loudly? Is she looking directly into your eyes? Is she comforting you or inspiring you?

Gene Fellner 11/4/10 2:22 PM
Comment: This sentence is confusing. Could you clarify it?

Gene Fellner 11/4/10 2:23 PM
Comment: This sentence is also a bit confusing. Can you clarify it?

NPS 11/7/10 3:02 PM
Comment: Do the paragraph more clearly I Why does the loud noise at home bother you but the loud music in the church doesn't bother you?

Gene Fellner 11/5/10 11:12 PM
Comment: Great!

or second draft of his essay. My intervention took less than a minute and involved all the students sitting at his table, parsing the word as a group. In my view it was a “teachable moment,” an opportunity to build on student curiosity. To the coach, it was a sully of the official protocol. But with process writing as with any strategy, a teacher must know when to be flexible in its implementation. Sadly, however, most teachers are frightened to stray from official doctrine.

Teaching academic grammar in a way that has a lasting effect to students who speak a different grammar at home is incredibly difficult. It takes enormous amounts of energy and attention and it cannot be disassociated from the love of writing. For the moment, however, I, want to illuminate the importance of recognizing the nascent writer-thinkers within my students as maybe the most important aspect of teaching writing. Process writing is built on multilectical thinking; it is designed to place task in the context of meaning. It postpones, until the final stages, comprehensive grammatical review though never abandons the search for words that will grasp the feelings within.

And so I encouraged Ana to plough the depth of her ideas and to explore the meaning of her words. I wrote her letters about her text, a strategy supported by many current books on writing that seeks to create a bond between student and teacher based on respect for student writing. In one letter I wrote, “Asking a lot of questions is ...a very important part of life. It is also ...part of becoming a good writer.” I then wrote, “what made you ask if God was on your side?” and “can you describe how you felt when you asked the question?” Over a period of six weeks we went back and forth with each other. Sometimes I wrote her notes, sometimes we met to discuss one-on-one and in groups. In my field notes I’ve written, “Next I spoke with Ana, who reads [according to standardized tests] on a third grade level. ...We had a pretty profound discussion. I

asked her why she thought God might not be on her side. She looked thoughtful when I asked, but didn't answer me in words. We also talked about why the noise of the TV at home upset her peace while the "noise" in church calmed her down. She told me that the blaring noise of the TV in her house made her transport herself to the church where 'it's always loud and the music is playing beautifully.' She contrasted two 'types of noises,' the 'ruckus' in her house to the inspirational sounds of the church that 'calms me down.'" Careful listening to what a novice writer is saying joined with perceptive questioning and time to ponder can lead to writing that is reflective and poignant. The importance of giving students a chance to mull over their own ideas and the questions asked, to let them tumble around together over a period of weeks, is a vital part of the writing process but one that is rarely attended to. Ana and her classmates worked on their memoirs over a period of six weeks and most of them maintained a commitment and an interest in their essays during that time.

Careful listening to student questions and answers can also give insight about teaching methodologies. Halfway through the writing process, Ana changed the title of her memoir from "God and the bible" to "Heaven" though she never mentioned the word "heaven" in her memoir. When I asked her why the change she replied that when she talked with her mother's friend in her kitchen, "It feels like heaven because I can ask any question of her that I want to and it's ok." Her story might have been overtly about the bible and God, but on another and equally significant level it was about creating a learning environment that encourages curiosity and reflexivity, a heaven here on earth like the one that was created in her kitchen. Needless to say, her essay was a blistering critique of the school system where it's not "ok" to ask too many questions.

What is often absent from the discussions about process writing is its importance in establishing affectively positive relationships between and among students and between students and teachers. Guiding a young writer who is often suspicious of the power of writing has as much to do with establishing relationships of confidence than it has to do with teaching particular skills. It is through relationships and trust, through the social, that the danger of alienation that Marx so eloquently wrote about can be overcome. It is through careful dialogic guidance that passion and purpose can be nurtured. When that feeling of trust is absent and is not alighted, when the emotional ingredient of learning is neglected, every pedagogical method—however worthy, is in danger of failing. I was not able to establish a sense of trust with every student, but together with Mr. C., we were able to reach, I believe, virtually every student in the two classes we worked with. Ana was one of the students who came to trust me over the course of the school year.

In a Cartesian world, the positively tinted relationship that Ana and I constructed together might be attributed to the attention I paid to her memoir, a relationship of cause and effect. In a multilectical world, however, in which the complexities of social life interrelate always, there are numerous fluid conditions that arrive together at every stepping stone. When Bourdieu wrote that fields are characterized by “extreme permeability” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 43) such that no one field of activity can be identified as *the* cause of a particular thought or deed since every field is continually in dialectical interactivity with every other field, he recognized that any analysis of social activity had to account for this fluidity and the complexity it implied.

Certainly, my personalized interest in Ana’s writing was pivotal to the relationship of trust that we established. But maybe even more crucial was that the classroom teacher, Mr. C., welcomed me easily into the classroom at the beginning of the school year and enthusiastically

co-constructed a partnership with me. He came from the same community as Ana, he knew her and her parents, and he had an already established “street credit” with many students in the classroom. He spoke their language (literally and gesturally) in a way that I would never be able to master. I came in on his coattails and benefitted from the trust his students had in him. Also, as in any relationship, every person brings something to the table. Ana brought with her “more and more questions” and a probing mind that school records did not reflect and school administrators showed no interest in. The class teacher and I invited these questions to the table, and allowed the classroom and the street to openly encounter each other.

Ana’s poem comes to light

Ana wrote a poem about love. Her text sprung out of her need to unravel her own thoughts as she sat at home thinking about her life. She used writing to do what every passionate teacher of writing wishes students would do; she searched for words that would help her make sense of her world.

I would never have been aware of Ana’s poem had I not asked her to read a few paragraphs about her memoir that I included in my doctoral dissertation. Like so much of the writing and the reading that students do outside of school, her poem would have passed under the radar of teacher awareness, part of her private world. “Ok,” she answered, “I’ll read what you wrote, but then you have to read a poem that I wrote.” “Deal!” I said, “How about during lunch?” She pondered this for about a second and asked, “how about next period instead?” Next period was World Language, a subject that most of the students felt was a waste of time. Though I was hesitant about granting her permission to skip a class, Ana’s homeroom teacher, Mr. C., told me that the students were pretty much wasting their time in World Language, “If they’re excited about talking about their writing with you, and your dissertation, that’s a plus.” Ana then asked,

with an expert's skill in *la perruque*, "can I bring Maleeka with me?" Ok, I retorted, selfishly thinking that it was a rare opportunity for us to discuss writing in an informal and voluntary setting, a "third space" within the damaged space of school. In return, I asked her, "Can Shelly join us too? I need to speak with her about her uniform essay." "Sure," Ana responded, "me and Shelly are cool."

Ana's "demand" to exchange texts leveled the field between us. That she was able to set terms for the discussion and bring to the table something she had written for herself rather than something written in response to a class assignment also affected the discourse environment, an indication of the importance of beginning with what exists within the student as a stepping stone to work done in school—a school-to-self connection. Likewise, the spontaneous nature of the get-together infused the ambiance with a bit of the street, a bit of casualness, laughter and camaraderie despite the school setting though it also allowed for the release of banter that bordered on the hostile. That Ana was willing to expose her private writing to me was certainly facilitated by the relationship Ana and I had already initiated during the memoir project, but it cannot be reduced only to knowable conditions. Indeed as I sat there with the three young women, two of their male classmates, who were thrown out of the World Language class for misbehaving, sat down uninvited, and joined us. I was not certain if I should have told them to sit somewhere else or not, and was uncertain if they would negatively affect the mix, but no one in the group objected in any way and so I took my cue from them and acquiesced. Only in the course of the period did I learn that one of the two young men had been romantically involved with Ana, and that it had ended badly. Indeed, overt tensions briefly flared up between them, but they also collaborated with each other and participated in a verbal dance that included mutual support, disagreement, and laughter. Our fifty-minute conversation remained participatory of all

members and often intimate as it swerved between topics. Multilevel analysis of that conversation, the subject of Part 4 which follows, reveals much about teaching and learning.

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**PART 4:
MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS AND ANA'S POEM**

Sociologist John Lofland has suggested that there are four people-oriented mandates in collecting qualitative data. First, the qualitative methodologist must get close enough to the people and situation being studied to personally understand in depth the details of what goes on. Second, the qualitative methodologist must aim at capturing what actually takes place and what people actually say: the perceived facts. Third, qualitative data must include a great deal of pure description of people, activities, interactions, and settings. Fourth qualitative data must include direct quotations from people, both what they speak and what they write down.

Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, (2002) p. 28

Chapter 8: Scales of analysis

For researchers who believe in a multilevel world, the importance of scales of observation is crucial, for every slice of social life can be viewed through macro, meso and micro lenses and only by combining all these perspectives can we begin to grasp a sense of what reality might look like. Though we can never get outside of ourselves, outside the sense-structures that limit our ranges of perception regardless of where we stand, what we learn from each vantage point helps us to cobble together an understanding of the world we live in. We need to look from close as well as from afar, focusing in on minute details of human activity but also extending our senses outward in every direction. Additionally, we need to be conscious of the historical paths that have helped us arrive at where we are, a spacetime that itself is continually in flux. From a Cartesian perspective, a situation, a subject, can be isolated from its historic and present surroundings, but from a multilevel point of view, these are all constantly interacting with one another.

Categorical macro constructs, such as race, class, and economic structures, are most easily visible from a distance and infuse all the other layers, seeping through the meso and micro layers, influencing how we think, feel and act and what we take for granted. Their “permanence” in social life makes it virtually impossible to escape their power over how we see others and ourselves. It is this bird’s eye view that allows many observers, and most significantly, perhaps, those with political power, to see my students as impoverished ghetto-dwellers who lack worthwhile knowledge. From their distant perspective, informed by their particular experiences, test scores accurately reflect ability. Through their macro lens of observation, the subjects in their line of sight are untainted by nuances and differences—for these cannot be seen through the

tools they have available to them. Seen from outside and far away, my students are lumped together in clumps of sameness; the vitality that bubbles beneath the surface view is overlooked. The richness of daily life flows through the cracks and vanishes.

Meanwhile, from within the meso level of social life, my young students, mostly oblivious of the telescopic view, see themselves as members of a majority population living in communities where street smarts are prioritized, free lunches are part and parcel of going to school rather than a demonstration of government “generosity,” and body and voice are tuned to the necessities of their particular survival needs. From the inside and face-to-face, the intimate drama of the street rushes through and over everything and becomes their reality of immediate consequence. Whatever knowledge schools seek to impart may pale in importance beside the knowledge these students acquire day-to-day outside the classroom.

In our daily lives, we tend to perceive and engage on the meso level, though without the continual touch of the macro and micro, the meso ceases to have meaning. The meso is the level of civil society, of work and of play, of home and of school; it is community life rich in social interactions. The meso world view is abundantly replete with passion and laughter, with sexual tension and exuberance, with heartbreak, with advanced degrees and prison sentences, with ambitions, hopes and dreams, dismays and disillusionments, with curiosity and indifference. It is inseparable from the realm of emotions, the rage that can bring about destruction and the love that can forge community, both carried around by each one of us, sometimes uneasily, in a continually changing, mutually informing and interconnected balancing act. When these forces are most inspired, macro structures—unable to contain them--can crumble and be transformed.

Macro analysis can trace the grand scheme of things but the meso follows the beat of daily life and is reflected in the rhythm of our words and movements. Though our ways of being in the

world with each other are so ingrained that we barely pay them notice unless there is some disruption of routine, the physicality of the way we are is visible—apparent in the lean of our bodies, the look in our eyes, the way we walk and the way we touch, and the pitch, power, and articulation with which we speak. We can distinguish the difference in meanings between the wink of a friend and that of a stranger in the fraction of the moment it takes to produce it. In a sliver of a second we can distinguish a laugh meant to wound and one meant to nurture. We are as adept at reading unspoken language as we are at walking. And we are also facile improvisers at speaking with each other. We raise and lower our voices instinctively, without thinking in order to make ourselves heard over other voices, to emphasize the importance with which we regard our commentary, or to express anger or affection. Sometimes we lower our voices for the same reasons. Every word we utter is an experiment waiting for a response, a “feeler,” to the world outside of our body-border, a mediator between our inner world and what is outside it. Unconsciously, we modify our responses to account for the responses of others, and others do the same, part of the improvisational character of our communicational practice. All these acts of social life become part of the knowledge we carry around with us. Sometimes, of course, we misread, thus rerouting a chain of events. And sometimes we seek combat rather than understanding. These moments of misinterpretation or purposeful antagonistic responses are called contradictions.

From the distance, from the macro level, these signals of daily social interaction are invisible. When noticed, a blip on the radar, they are often discarded as irrelevant data. Marx, quite consciously, looked away from the importance these interactive details—from the role of laughter, voice, or gesture and even from the themes around which daily conversations circulated; his focus was elsewhere, more on the way that the macro structures confine us and

determine us than on the way we, in our daily goings-on, determine them. On the meso level, we rarely consciously think about these signals. From within, because of our familiarity with the codes by which we live, we move through life largely unaware of the significance of the signs of our immersion within the multi-scaled world. Instinctively, viscerally, we absorb without effort the import of the tones released and the motions traversed by ourselves and others; they are part of the sea within which we swim and the air we breathe though some observers of social life, Bakhtin, Barthes or Schutz, for example, honed into these more corporal aspects of human existence as revelatory of our relationships with the macro structures that confine us. Schutz (1967) saw them as “tools at hand” that help us make our way, Bakhtin (1984) highlighted the use of these very tools as sly subverters of controlling powers. Barthes (1985), Schutz and Bakhtin all saw in the “taken for granted” the keys to the relationships we establish.

For the educational researcher who peers reflectively in this direction, these taken-for granted phenomena are evidence of knowledge we carry with us, knowledge that tests don't measure because they are deemed unimportant or because they are not quantifiable in any traditional sense if at all. Where once keen observers noted down on paper the minute intricacies of social interactions, today, with new software programs and electronic equipment, we can record the sound and motion of social interactions from multiple perspectives with a precision formerly inaccessible, down to events that take place within a hundredth of a second. This is called micro-analysis; like Mandelbrot's fractals, micro analysis examines phenomena from as close-up as we can approach them. This data can be examined and reexamined and, cumulatively, layer over layer, they can help us understand, within limits, how meaning emerges on a micro scale and how knowledge is made one with body and mind, how it emerges along with movement and talk. Not only can we see on the meso level of activity the eruption of laughter with its infectious or

stultifying effects, we can analyze the sound of laughter, witness the interactive engagement of participants, the trajectory of themes as they are discussed, the synchrony or contradictions between words and gestures, the banter that radiates community and undergirds discord.

Microanalysis can hone in on our unconscious movements and involuntary tonal nuances. It can measure the loudness, speed, and inflections of voices; the time-lapse of glances, smirks, and eye rolls that are often not visible by the observer without electronic assistance; the emergence of the unanticipated; and the lengths of the silences between utterances, which Roland Barthes reminds are as important as the audible. These “measurements” can tell us about how we interact, and, as tools, they can help us to construct pedagogical methodologies that advance teaching, learning and understanding. For example, Tobin (1987), in his study of “wait time,” discovered that teachers often fail to provide students with the three seconds of teacher-initiated silence after asking a question even though providing this “wait time” correlated to better student performance because it gave them “additional time to think” (p. 69). Though three seconds, in certain situations, can fly by in an unnoticed flash, within a silent classroom it can be experienced as almost interminable- thus driving teachers to interrupt the pause with another question or comment. Tobin and Llena (2010b) have also documented the deleterious effect of teachers raising their voices in classroom environments where passions are hot and voices are already loud. These studies have served notice that an important way to reduce the tension in a classroom is to lower one’s voice in a situation of conflict rather than to raise it. In another study, Roth and Tobin (2010a), in their micro-analysis of a science classroom, noted how the prosody of student speech, the rising and lowering of voices and gestural synchrony or lack thereof were signs of the degree of solidarity and positive emotional climate within a classroom. These types

of observations are not possible when phenomena are observed only from the macro or meso levels.

Like all levels of analysis, microanalysis, when severed from other levels, both highlights and amputates. It can be employed to improve teaching methodologies and to understand human interactions, but it can also be used carelessly and malevolently to manipulate and control. It is therefore important to contextualize all findings within other scales of analysis, recognize differences that affect findings from place to place, and be always conscious of the affect that recording equipment may have on the phenomena recorded. It is also crucial to bear in mind Schutz's (1967) caution that you can only interpret someone else's experience through your own.

Maybe, most critically, we must understand that any measurement of any phenomena is not the same as the phenomena itself, and that experiences, like "the smell of mothballs" (Chalmers, 1995), like shame, sadness or happiness, cannot be quantified.

Even with all these caveats, microanalysis can be rich and rewarding for those with the disposition to do it (it is meticulous and time-consuming work). It has provided researchers with valuable data about social life and teaching methodologies.

In the context of my interests here, I am curious to know if observation on the micro level (when combined with meso and micro scales of perception) can provide data that can serve as additional resources for student assessment. Can they help us to recognize such vital signs of student potential—such as curiosity, excitement, engagement with ideas, and critical thinking that standardized tests are unable to recognize? Can they help us to see the knowledge that students have acquired as they engage with each other in reflexive practice within the classroom?

To probe these questions, I have engaged in a very limited version of microanalysis. I have applied it to a seven-minute excerpt, from a fifty-minute vignette, that included a group

discussion about Ana's poem. It is important to bear in mind that my own lived experiences are in many ways different from those of the students with whom I was working. The significance of some of their language and movements, the knowledge that suffuses them, could easily have passed me by. It also bears remembering that these students and I were aware that we were being videotaped. Additionally, the act of revisiting the recording of our discussion in order to observe and reflect upon it was necessarily affected by new conditions that were absent at the time the event first took place. Because of my reluctance to assign numbers to phenomena, I have experimented with a different approach to microanalysis that translates numerical and sensual data into visual data. Neither, of course, can replace the sound of a person's voice, the look in her eyes, or the feeling-thoughts inside.

Chapter 9: Key to reading the data

The following class conversation about Ana's poem includes an introduction, three chapters-- *Thick and thin*, *Love is what you want it to be*, and *When love breaks*—and a discussion. The key to understanding the notation for the three chapters follows.

Decibel level of speech

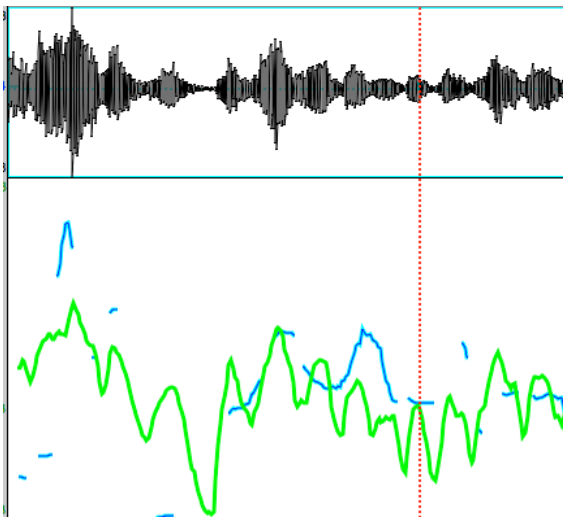
I use 14 pt type to designate the conversational loudness of participants, which for these participants ranges in the low to mid-60s decibel level. As they get louder, the point size of the words they speak gets bigger. As they get softer, the point size decreases.

Decibel	Type Size	Decibel	Type Size
Under 57	10 pt	69 – 72	18 pt
57 - 62	12 pt.	73 - 75	22 pt
63 - 65	14 pt	76 - 81	26 pt
66 – 68	16 pt	Over 81	28 pt

Warning: Decibel levels can be misleading. Those sitting closest to the camera, and facing it, are the ones most clearly understood and recorded at the higher decibel levels. Those seated far away from the camera, or turned away from it, are hard to decipher, and, thus, not given equal treatment in the analysis.

Praat notation

Praat is a software program designed to analyze sound waves. Within it, a blue line of crests and troughs indicate the pitch of the speaker(s); a green line of crests and troughs indicates decibel level. A black compressed pack of lines represents the entire sound wave. I have taken liberty with Praat protocol by changing the color of these notations when I thought doing so would give a better sense of what was taking place in the video. Within the boundaries of every frame, I have maintained scale proportions.



Filters

Red Filter over image indicates loud and passionate

Yellow Filter indicates mean-spirited speech

Pale pink over image indicates exposing vulnerability, uncertainty

Warning: All of these interpretations are based on my perceptions, which are in turn based on my experiences.

Silence:

Silence < .5 seconds: 1 frame without words

Silence = .5-.9 seconds: 2 frames without words

Silence = 1 – 1.4 seconds: 3 frames without words

A word about silence. Roth (2006) writes that a completed sentence is generally followed by a “standard maximum silence of one second (p. 249). That second, regardless how quickly it appears to pass in daily life, can under certain circumstances be experienced as a very long time. Once, when the steering axle of my 1965 Dodge Dart rusted through, and the car went up a small hill on the side of the road and began to turn over, I experienced time as thick and lethargic. It moved so slowly that I was able to think a zillion things in the few measurable seconds it took for me to find myself banged up and upside down. A second may seem like nothing, but it is more than enough time for a wink, a shrug, or an eye-roll. Two and a half seconds is enough time for someone to say, slowly, as they do in one of the vignettes, “I love my mother, but sometimes I be hating her.” Roth adds that “pauses are opportunities...for anyone to take the conversational floor” (p. 243), and a half -second pause generally invites a change in speakers (Tobin, 2005). And so, when no one takes the floor, it is because of a “collaborative” effort (Roth, 2006, p. 243) to maintain the pause. The above code is an effort to make palpable the role of silence.

Transcription notation (Roth, 2006, pp. 264-5)

Overlapping speech

Brackets, in combination with backward slash and “greater than” symbol indicate the extent to which speech overlaps.

A: [It will never be/
D:<So thick]

No audible gap between two utterances

Equal sign indicates no audible gap.

A: Oh my God=
G: =you're going to explain what she means?

Duration of pauses (in seconds)

Time to the hundredth of a second between parenthesis

(.56)

Vowel Lengthening

Sound of vowel longer than normal; each colon indicates approximately .1 second of lengthening

A: They always say, um:::::

Uncertain speech

A question mark following items enclosed in single parentheses denotes an uncertain hearing

D: My (mom?) just broke up with my dad

Transcriber comments

Double parentheses enclose transcriber comments

((very softly spoken))

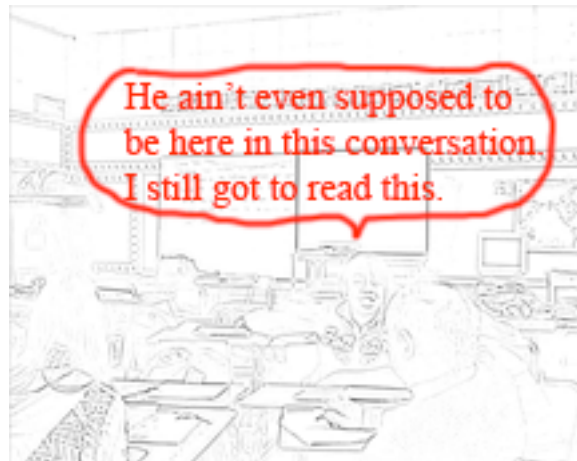
Chapter 10: The discussion begins



I asked Ana if I could read her poem. She shook her head from side to side, “Uh, uh. You have to show me what you wrote about me first. Then I’ll show you my poem.” And so I read what I had written. None of the students seemed particularly interested, though Ana commented in a very soft voice, “You really know me cause I do hear music in my

head when I’m taking a test. Me and my older brother.” But what she really wanted to talk about was her poem. Indeed twice when, as part of our discussion about testing that followed my reading, I shifted attention away from

Ana to ask a question of one of the male students about a book he remembered hearing about, Ana looked at me good-naturedly and said, simply, “hey” and, eighty seconds later, holding up her poem again, “Hold up. He got kicked out of



class. He ain’t even supposed to be here in this conversation. I still got to read this.” When I finally said to her, “So Ana, do you want to read your poem?” she smiled up at me.

Simultaneously, Shelly encouraged her, “Yeah Ana, read your poem.”

And so Ana read her poem.

Love is what you feels for someone,
But can love be hate or madness?
Love is what you want it to be.
Love is just like roses falling from above
It can be wonderful or painful
When love breaks it feels like death.
Falling in love, then breaking it, changes life
Love will always take a path
Love will be thick and thin.
You will suffer but always make it through
Love, why is it such (unclear)

“Do you know what love is?” Kelvin asks Ana immediately after she has finished reading her poem. Neither Ana nor anyone else present takes up his invitation to talk about love. In fact there is no measurable pause between his question and Maleeka holding up a drawing and saying, “Did you see our picture? Look.” Darryl laughs. Ana smiles, “Oh Yeah.” Kelvin says, “That looks like you got beat up,” leading everyone to laugh and Ana to say, “That’s what it’s supposed to be.” He then says, “it looks like sesame seeds” and everybody laughs again. Then Ana turns towards me, still laughing, and says, “I used the words “you, you, because I was writing fast” but her turn towards me and her directing her words towards me invites me to say something. I take up her offer quickly and ask her, “What do you mean ‘thick and thin’?”

Chapter 11: Thick and thin

The Transcript:

G: What do you mean “thick and thin”? Love will always be thick a:nd
(0.67’)
G: thin.
A: like
(.57)
M; Shelly, what you want?=
D: =You always like somebody like
(.37)
D: like=
A: =OH MY God=
G: =YOU’RE gonna explain what SHE means?
D: Yeah::
(0.3)
D: Yeah, Cause I know, I think I know what she means but I don’t know
A: Cause, cause PEOPLE ALWAYS say, like,
(0.4)
A: when someone gets married, they always say um::: “thick and thin,” [like/
G: <yeah]
K: Long <as they be together, between them]
A: [it was, it was ALways be/ rough times and it’ll always be
A: [GREAT it’ll/
D: <hard times]
A: Yeah
A: it’ll always be great times and always be hard times but [It will never be/
K: <SO THICK]
(.36)
A: [RIGHT/
K: <MEANS] HARD
(.85)
A: [But it wlll never be/ perfect
K: <thin]
(0.2)
A: [It’ll always gonna be/ thick
K: <Yes it will]
(0.2)
A; and thin.

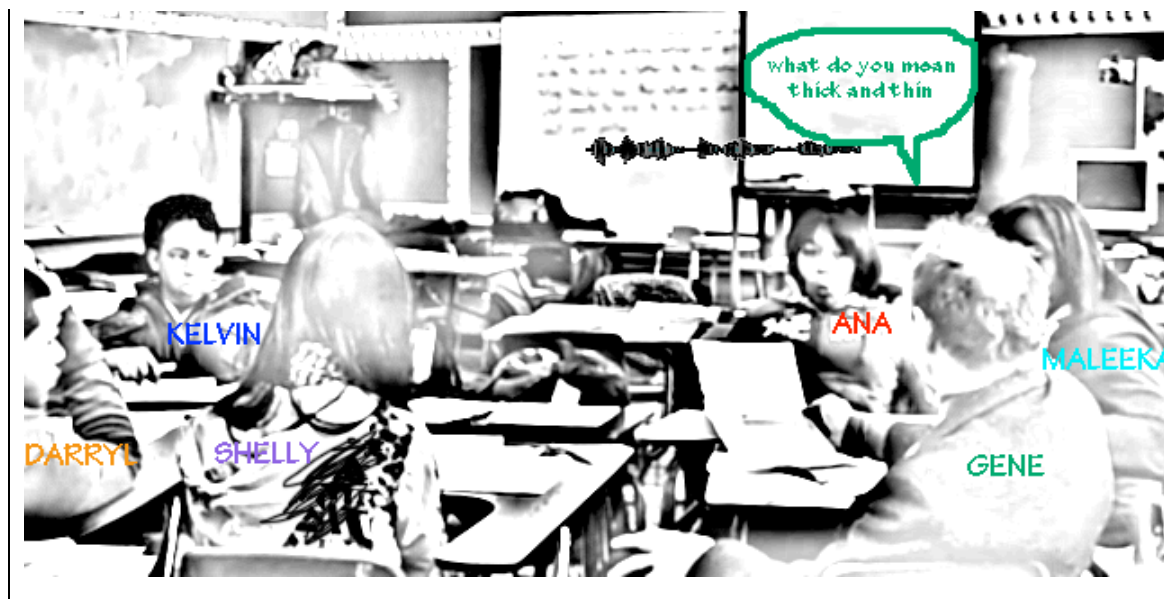
The cartoon

When looking at the vignettes that follow, try, as best you can, not only to follow the dialog, but to notice the changes in voice (to the degree that printed matter can translate them) and to observe the gestural language of the participants. Notice the difference between reading the transcript and following the comics.

Each of the following chapters is divided into two parts. The first part includes only the cartoons. The second part is frame by frame description of what the cartoons depict. At the conclusion of the section, there will be an overall analysis of the vignettes.

Love will be thick and thin
Excerpt from Ana's poem

1

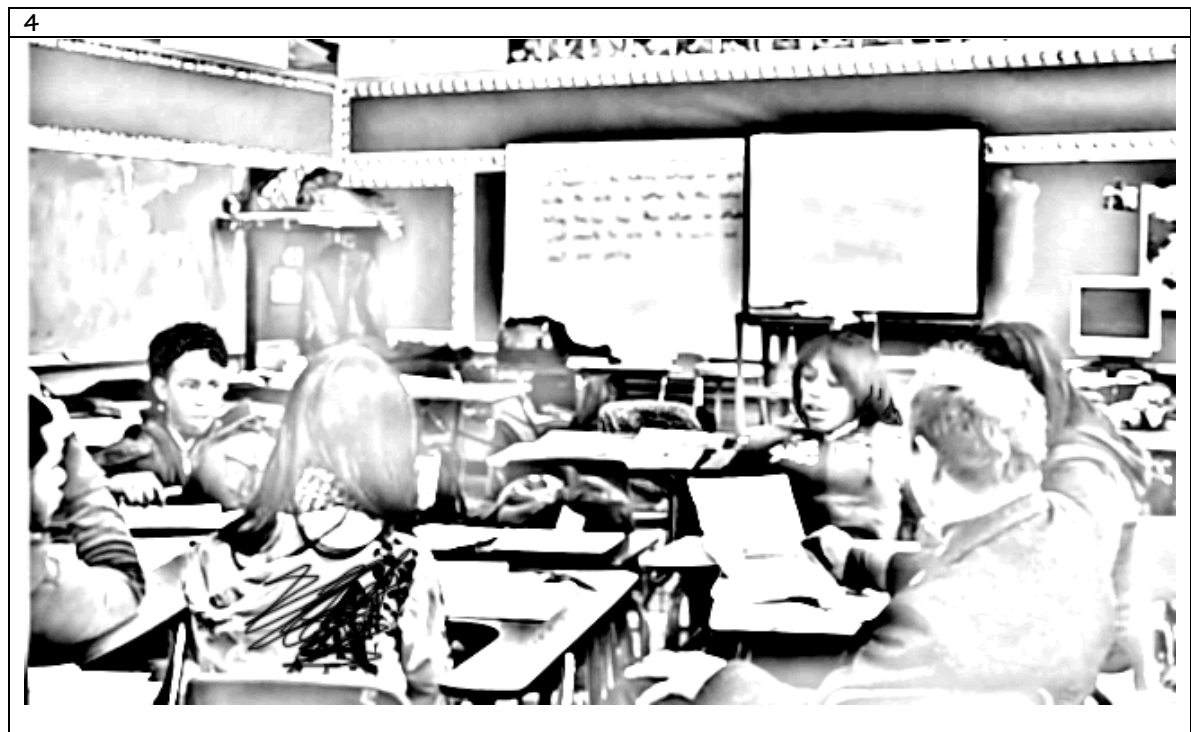
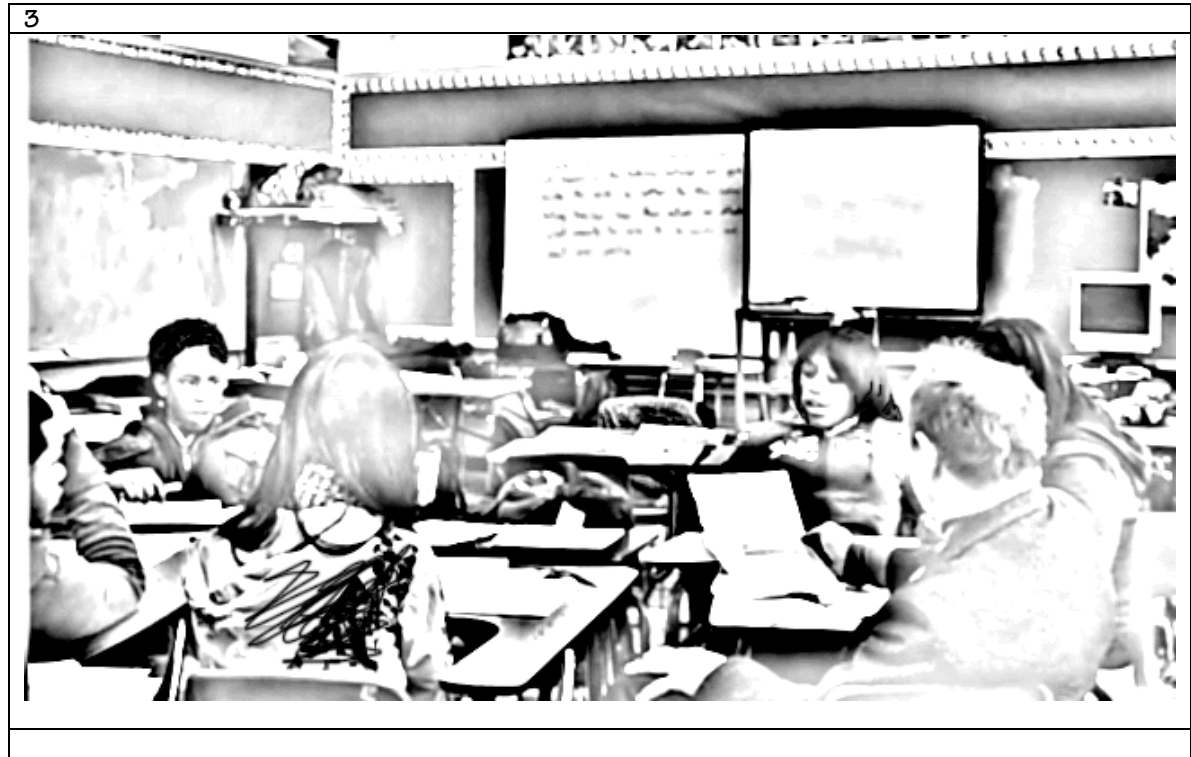


G: What do you mean "thick and thin"?

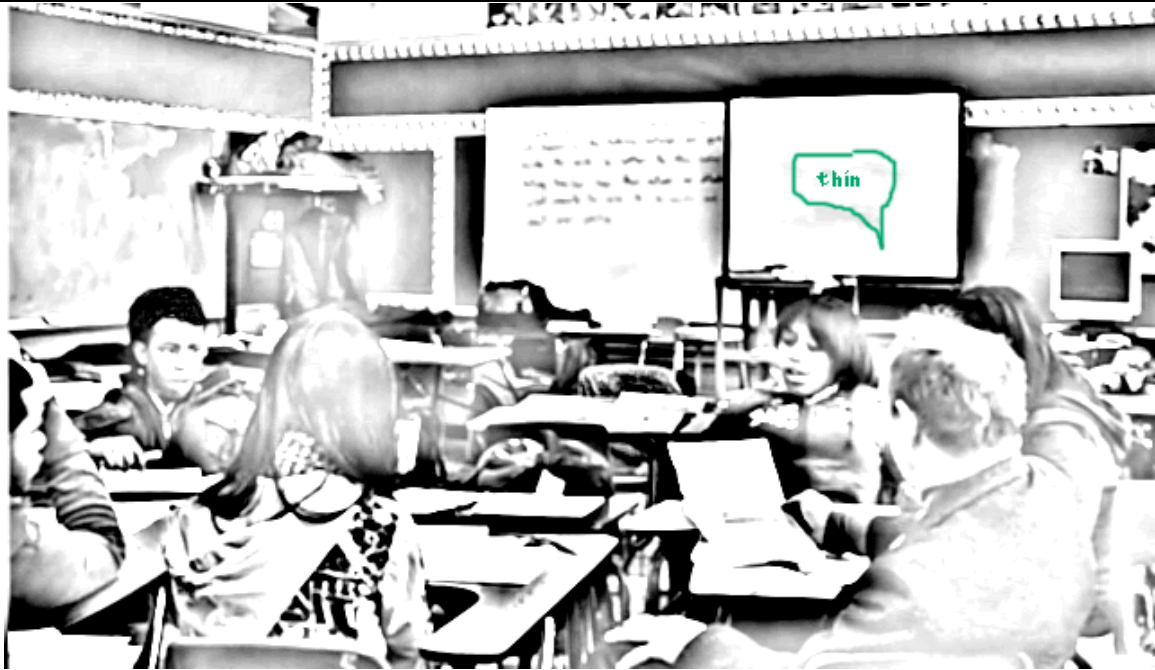
2



G: Love will always be thick and

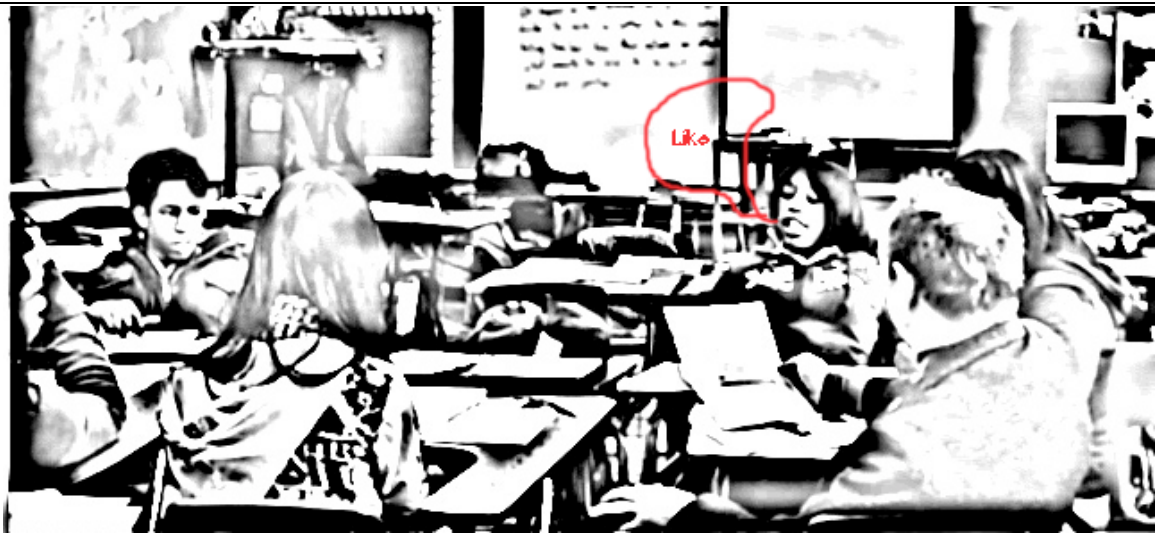


5



Thin

6



Like

7

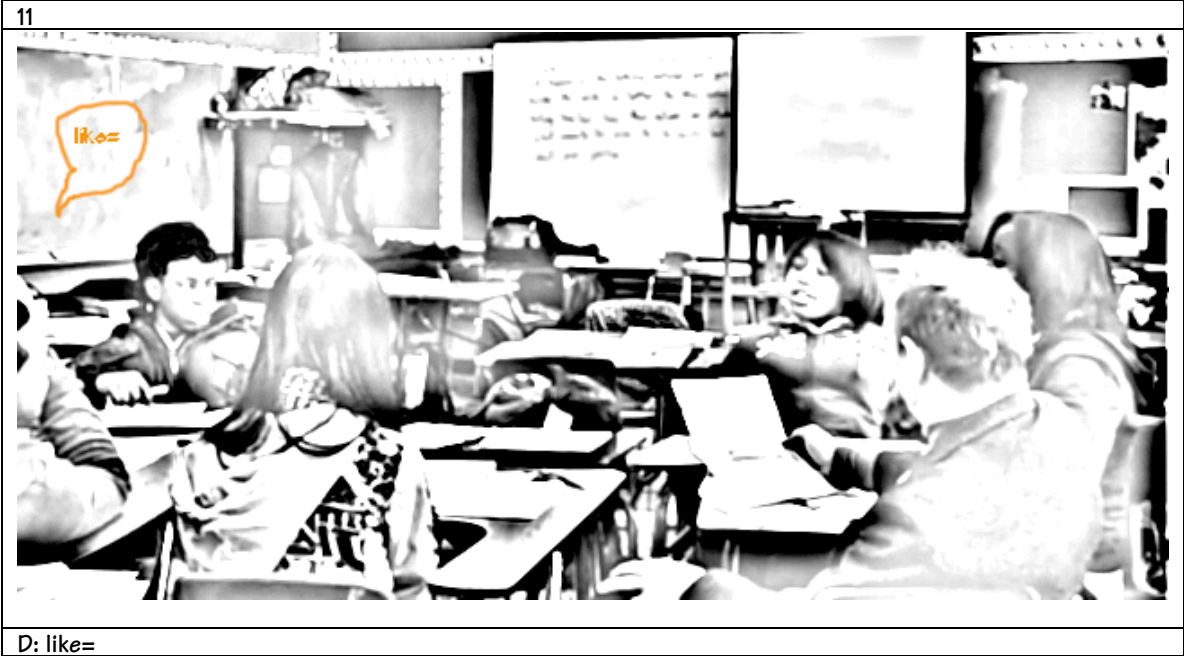


8



(0.57)





12



(.37)

13



A: =OH MY God=



14



G: YOU'RE gonna explain what she means?

15



D: Yeah::

16



(0.3)

17



D: Yeah, Cause I know, I think I know what she means but I don't know

18



A: CAUSE, People always say, like

19



(0.4)

20



A: when someone gets married, they always say

21



A:

um:::::

22



A: "thick and thin," [like/
G: <yeah]

23



K: Long <as they be together, between them]
 A: [it was, it was Always be/
 A: rough times



24



A: and it'll always be [GREAT it'll/
 D: <hard times]

25



A: Yeah

26



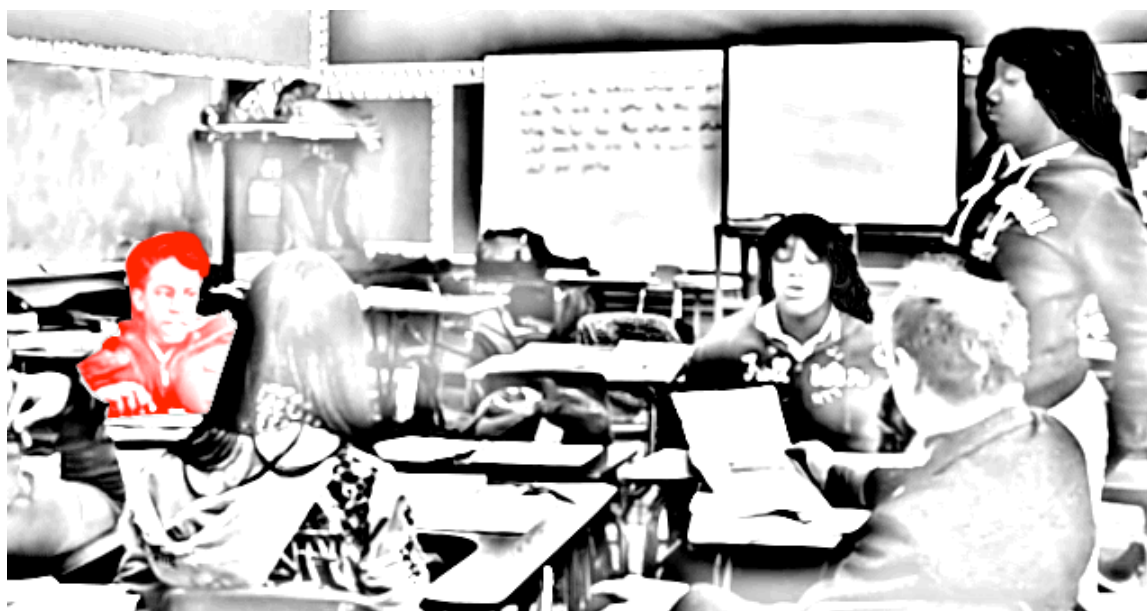
A; it'll always be great times and always be hard times but

27



A: [It will never be/
K: <SO THICK]

28



(.36)

29



A;

[right/
K: <means]
K; hard

30

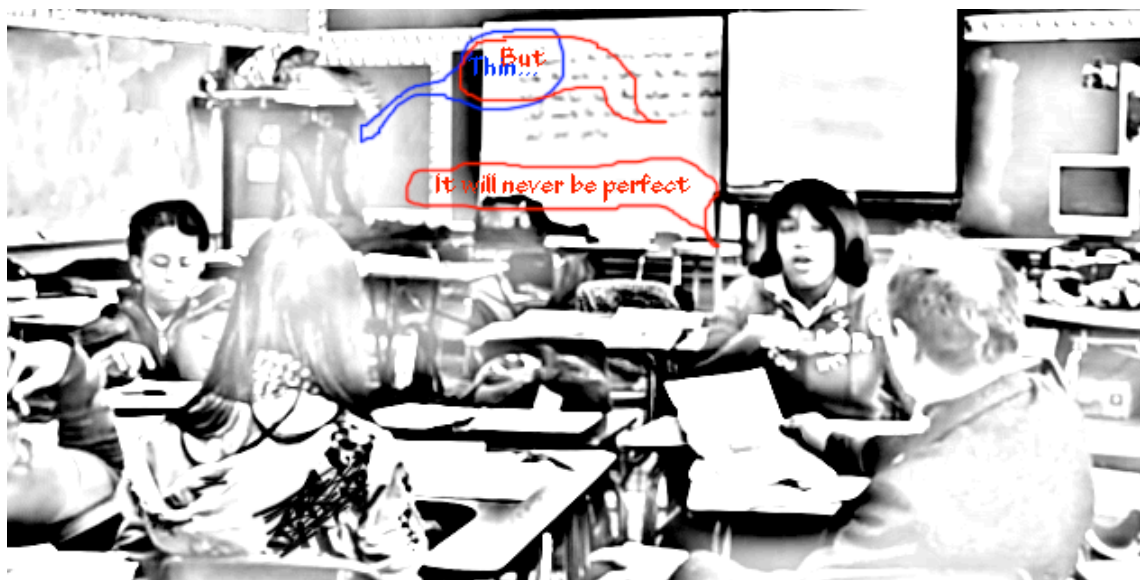


31



(.85)

32



A: [But it will never be/ perfect
K: <thin]

33



(0.2)

34



A: [It'll always gonna be/
K: <Yes it will]



35



A: thick

36



(0.2)

37



A; and thin.

Guide to chapter 11: Thick and thin

1



G: What do you mean “thick and thin”?

2



G: Love will always be thick and thin.

3



4



(0.67)

5



G: thin.

“What do you mean thick and thin?” I ask Ana.

I then repeated the phrase “thick and thin,”

spacing out the two adjectives in order to

emphasize the elements of the metaphor that I

want Ana to help me understand. Ana is

slouching in her chair, a sign, in this case, of

relaxation. She is also puckering her lips and

looking downward—reflecting and considering

my question. All members of the group are

looking at her in expectation of Ana’s answer

and leaning towards her (a sign of solidarity and

encouragement). Kelvin is looking at both of us,

but his body posture is not as attentive. Though

Ana is the focus of attention, she is not on the

hot seat. We have moved from laughter to

serious contemplation, but they are linked

together in the positive atmosphere that we are

enjoying, and suggest how ambiance can

facilitate serious thought.

6



A: like

Ana responds to my question with an immediate retort (“like) but then raises her head upwards and takes a deep breath, signaling to the group that she is thinking carefully about what she wants to say. We can see in her body language, in the breath she takes and her upward stare that she is contemplating my question. Everyone is focused on her. Darryl, sitting diagonally across from her leans in, a sign of expectation and solidarity.

7



Nobody speaks, a collaborative show of support for Ana, allowing her to think. Maleeka taps her pen three times, a staccato: tap, tap, tap. Ana is leaning back, her eyes are closed, she is thinking, searching for the words that will convey her thoughts. Everyone is looking at her, waiting expectantly and giving her time.

8



(.57)

9

M; Shelly, what you want?=

10

D: You always like *somebody* like

11

D: like=

12

(.37)

Maleeka thinks Shelly is looking for a comb or brush, and speaks to her softly and quickly, running her words together. It is not a side conversation really, just an aside not meant to divert. The attention is still on Ana who is still pondering how to answer the question posed. Darryl, however, makes a double breach of etiquette: he both interrupts (i.e., answers a question directed at Ana) and speaks for her, “You will always like somebody...” He has taken advantage of the silence to take the floor.

Ana makes it clear that Darryl has overstepped his bounds. First she just gives him a withering stare. She follows up her gaze by exclaiming- at the highest pitch and decibel level recorded so far, “Oh my God” as she points to him. She is laughing, however, a sign of disbelief merging with a demonstration of good humor. She looks towards me as if asking for support, for confirmation that Darryl’s interruption is out of order. I look at Darryl with quizzical humor, which Ana’s good-natured response allows me to do.

13



A: =OH MY God=

14



G: YOU'RE gonna explain what she means?

Darryl is smiling and looking at Ana, his forearm stretched out towards her. Roth writes that in conversation “normally one person speaks at a time with minimal overlap or gap (Roth, 2006, p. 241) and here the breach of that etiquette has motivated Ana to respond forcefully. However, at other times as we shall see, overlapping conversation, though making it harder for the observer to catch all the talk, is part of a collaborative exercise in figuring out a problem and developing a dialogic conversation. Here, it raises the decibel level of the conversation. As the teacher-guide, I make an effort to repair the situation because, despite Ana’s laughter, Darryl has breached the standard academic protocol of one person speaking at a time while the others listen attentively. I look at D and say, softly, “you’re gonna explain what she means?”

15



D: Yeah::

16



(0.3)

17



D: Yeah, *Cause* I know, I think I know what she means but I don't know

18



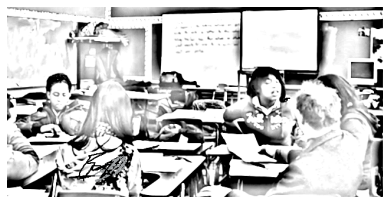
A: *Cause, cause* PEople ALways say, like,

laughing. She lifts her upper body higher and lets it sink twice, as if rocking in a vertical direction. Her raising of her posture may have signaled to Darryl that he should back off, because he then says, “but I don’t know,” thereby inviting Ana to retake the floor, which she does. There is camaraderie in this interchange between Darryl and Ana, a respectful play- surrounded by laughter and maybe a bit of flirtation—that helps create an emotional climate that facilitates

Ana is still laughing and Darryl is still smiling. He may be interrupting her, but he is engaging the topic that Ana initiated thus showing respect for her writing and ideas. Darryl certainly doesn’t act embarrassed; instead of backing down after being challenged, he says, “Yeah,” drawing the word out as he smiles and looks at Ana. He believes he has something worthy to say, not just interrupting for the sake of taking over (though this may be part of his goal as well). Ana inclines toward him, asserting authority by pulling her pants up higher on her waist and placing hands on hips. But she also laughs, as if in mock outrage, her lips apart, a sign of solidarity or, at least, of acceptance and maybe friendship. I, too, am smiling as I look at Darryl. Clearly there is an infectious nature to the good humor that Darryl and Ana are sharing despite the breach. As Darryl continues, “I know, I think I know what she means,” Ana inhales deeply, still

serious discussion. On the other hand, Darryl says little throughout the rest of the conversation indicating, maybe, that he feels unwelcome.

19



(0.4)

20



A: when someone gets married,
they always say

21



A: um::::::

22



A: "thick and thin," [like/
G: <yeah]

Ana pauses briefly to collect her thoughts. She turns her head away and closes her eyes, reinforcing this idea and also as an instinctive contemplative gesture, “CAUSE, cause PEople always say ‘thick and thin.’ Like when someone gets married, they always say um:::::, like”; a short pause of half a second follows before Ana continues. This time, nobody interrupts, and Darryl, in particular, leans forward to listen to her. I am looking at her too, inviting her to continue. The pauses that continue thought are again visible when Ana says “um” and draws out the “m” for over half a second following it with a brief pause of over a quarter second, her eyes closed, her hands on hips, and her forward lean—all joining to establish her possession of the floor. Nobody interrupts, except for my brief “Yeah” of encouragement. The mean intensity of this segment (as measured by decibel level) is half as loud as the mean intensity of the previous one, demonstrating that Ana is relaxed on center stage and is not being challenged in any way. She then repeats the words, “thick and thin,” having put them in the context of the habitual, “they always say,” an indication to her that the sentence must have an important meaning.

23



A: [it was, it was ALways be/

K: Long <as they be together, between them]

A: rough times

Ana is now interrupted again, this time by Kelvin, but this breach of etiquette is not accepted by Ana with good humor. She shows her objection to Kelvin's interruption, and her unwillingness to cede the floor, by raising her voice and pitch, by leaning forward hands on hips, and by facing me, the "teacher," to make sure I will give her my full attention. The maximum volume in this section, when Ana says "ALways," is five times the volume of the previous section's highest amplitude and by far the loudest words uttered so far, a sign of her battling to keep the floor. The raising of her voice is a threatening sign, a contradiction to the friendly, relaxed environment that has been constructed so far.

24

A: and it'll always be [GREAT it'll/
D: <hard times]

Amazingly, Ana and Kelvin now lower their voices simultaneously to be in tune with each other, evidence of solidarity, respect, and positive emotions (Roth & Tobin, 2009). It is as if they are anticipating each other's voice intensity. Thus, without teacher interference, both Ana and Kelvin have instinctively collaborated to lower

the high decibel level from the previous frame, a sign of synchrony even as they are speaking at the same time, which is generally seen as a sign of conflict. Interestingly, Kelvin is feeding off the discussion, trying to make sense of the phrase "thick and thin" that Ana is grappling with. He may be undermining Ana's "role" as the addressee, but he is dialogically

engaged with the problem she is confronting. He is not making eye contact with anyone and he is, now, not speaking loudly; he's just trying to figure it out. In a sense, he is both aiding and undermining Ana at the same time. It should be noted that Kelvin, by using the infinitive of the verb "to be" ("as long as they be together") for the third person plural, is making use of Black English which, as Gee (1996) points out, is vernacular in many Black communities and, indeed, makes perfect sense and is being grammatically well applied here. Darryl also enters the conversation in an effort to help Ana. Seeing her struggle to find the right words, he softly offers "hard times" as a possibility for the meaning of "thick."

25



A: Yea

26



A; it'll always be great times and always be hard times but

Ana recognizes Darryl's contribution by saying "Yeah," and looking at him. Assertively poised, both her hands on her hip, she retakes the floor temporarily. Everyone is focused on her, with Darryl clearly leaning in to listen. Only Kelvin continues to avoid eye contact with anybody. His mouth is open as if he's still contemplating the meaning of "thick and thin" just as Ana is doing, but he has temporarily stopped speaking thus allowing Ana to drop the pitch and

volume of her voice. Though they may be competing for the floor, Kelvin and Ana are in a sense partners, discovering together what those words mean.

Ana, though she now has the floor to herself, is struggling to make sense of what she is saying|thinking. This is clear in her three repetitions of the phrase "it'll always." Both the volume and frequency of her voice have diminished greatly; it is a sign of uncertainty but also of

relaxation; she doesn't need to shout over anyone to be heard. She is figuring things out as she speaks, her words and thoughts recursively creating and modifying each other.

27



A: [It will never be/
K: <SO THICK]

28



(.36)

29



A: [right/
K: <means]
K; hard

30



A dialog-dance begins now between Kelvin and Ana. They are both seriously engaged with parsing the meaning of the phrase “thick and thin,” and though they seem competitive on the face of it, with voices and frequencies rising when ever they speak simultaneously, they are also in sync with each other and listening to each other. This is clear from the very start of this episode when they both pause for .36 seconds in the middle of their overlapping proclamations and resume them at the same moment and almost at the same volume. This same pattern repeats itself a half a second later when they both pause again, this time for .85 seconds, and then resume at the same moment. They are partners despite everything. This is could only be discovered on the microlevel of analysis.

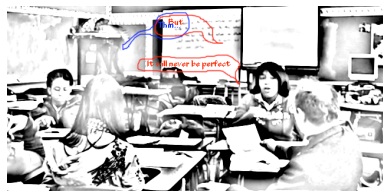
When Ana says “it will never be right,” she spreads out her arms (bent at the elbows), her fingers are tense and extended. She self-corrects what she has been

31



(.85)

32



A: [But it will never be/ perfect

K: <thin]

33



(0.2)

34



A:[It'll always gonna be/

K: <Yes it will]

35



A: thick

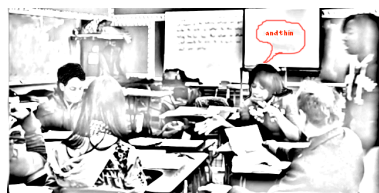
saying, changing the phrase “it will never be right” to “it will never be perfect” thus adding nuance to her meaning and corroborating Merleau-Ponty’s insight that “my own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think” (Derrida, 1978, p. 11). Meanwhile, Kelvin is now looking in towards the group where as before he was looking down, a signal that he is ready to share his insights. As Ana says “right” (“it will never be right”), Kelvin says “means hard” (“so thick means hard”), a startling parsing of what Ana is saying but with different words. These two are singing a duet and working together, listening to each other, even as they jockey for position and talk over each other. When Ana says, “it will never be perfect,” Kelvin suddenly engages her directly rather than in a “chord,” replying to her, “yes it will.” Ana holds her own, “It will always be thick,” she says as she squares her hands across from each other to help us picture the difficulties, “and thin,” her hands unsquaring themselves, the pitch of her voice rising, her right-hand fingers sloping downwards to indicate easier times. The following pause of a second and a half

36



(0.2)

37



A; and thin.

without anyone speaking turns A's statement into a temporary if uncertain finale and allows me to probe other aspects of her poem.

Chapter 12: Love is what you want it to be

Transcript

G: And love can be hate or madness?
 S: [yes/
 K: <Big mistake]=
 ((laughter))
 A: ="YEAH most of the people does–
 G: You agree?
 D: What?
 S: Nothing
 (0.2)
 G: So, so does that mean you can love someone and hate them at the same time?
 K: =no=
 A: =YEAH=
 D:=yeah=
 S: =Yes, your mother
 (0.8)
 S: [I hate/=
 G: <yeah] that's right=
 A: =YEAH, cause I, ah [love my mother, but sometimes I be hating her/
 D & K: <(???)/
 G: right
 M: you gonna ask?
 A: especially my father.
 G: [What do you mean by madness?/
 K: <(???)
 GF: Do you mean by [madness/ do you mean like angry?/
 K: <(???)
 GF: [Or do you mean like crazy?/
 A: <Yeah, like your feelings], emotions for a person that you love that you
 (0.3)
 mostly love.
 (1.4)
 G: SO
 (2.0)
 G: if LOVE, if LOVE is hate, WHEN love is hate, is that what you want it to be?
 A: no ((very softly spoken))
 G: So when you write, "but love," you say, "but can love be hate or madness, love is what you want it to be." So can you control what love is?
 (0.4)
 M; no, [love Is just like/
 S: <you can't control emotions]
 G: You can't? ((asking Shelly))
 K: =YES YOU COULD
 A: YOU gonna control [YOUR emotions but not your lover's emotions/
 K: <If you think about it you probably could hold it in because I
 always do that] Because I don't like crying in front of people.
 A: TehHehHeh ((loud mocking laughter))
 M: So you be crying in front of people?
 K: [I be about to cry, I be about to cry but I don't cry./
 A: <he be, he be tears in his eyes ((mock sniffles))]
 K: [That mean you like a bitch/
 D: <(???)
 A: <NO but like] I'm saying that you can control your emotions, how you feel for that person, but you can never control your lover's emotions
 (0.5)
 A: emotions.
 G: So if we say love is what you want it to be,
 (1.7)
 G: you're saying
 M: it seems, it's emotions and feelings
 D: (????)
 G: When your emotions are (.) going nuts on you, like when you're [really/ hating

A: <yeah]
G: someone or angry at someone, then you're not, then love isn't what you want it to be.
A: yeah.
G: love is just, sounds like love is just taking over
(1.4)
A: [most of the time/
K: <I don't understand what you'all talking]
(3.0)
A: SEE IF WE WAS TALKING about this in class and stuff like this with the groups and stuff this would be more interesting. I'd be ready to come to school. Like when I wake up I go like, "(sigh) OH GOD, DO I REALLY GOT TO GO TO SCHOOL?" Like I don't want to step into the school building, [I be like/
K: <(????)]
D: <(????)]
(0.5)
A: Soon as I step in I be like, Oh, god

The Cartoon

*Love is what you feel for someone,
But can love be hate or madness?
Love is what you want it to be.*

Excerpt from Ana's poem

1



G: And love can be hate or madness?

2



S: [yes/

K: <big mistake]

3



K: <Big mistake>
 ((laughter))
 A: =“Yeah most of the people [does/
 G: You agree?



4



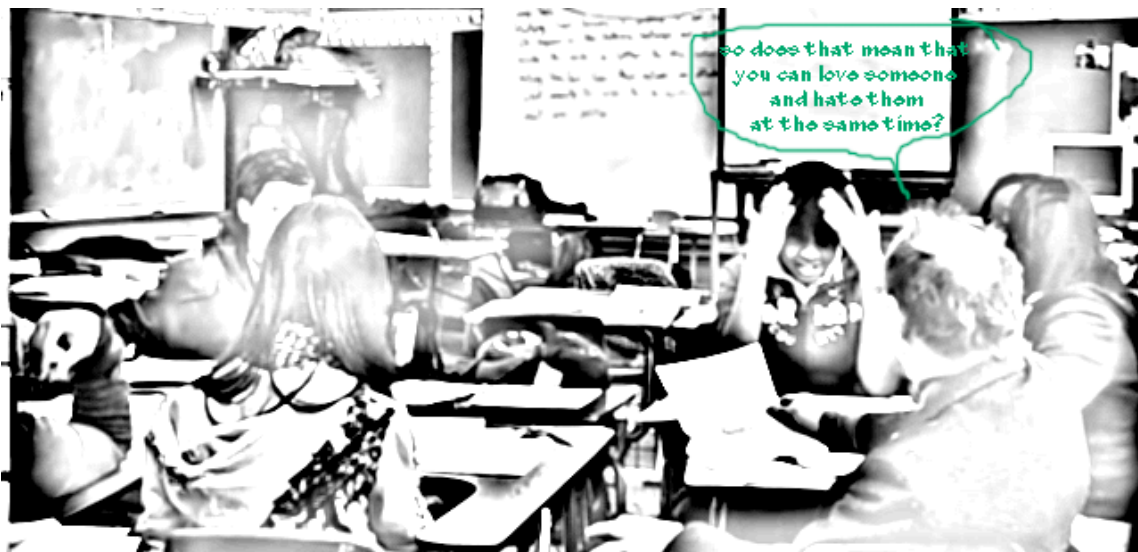
D: What?
 S: Nothing

5



(0.2)

6



G: So, so does that mean you can love someone and hate them at the same time?=-

7



K: =no
 A: YEAH=
 D: =yeah=

8



S: =Yes, your mother



9



(0.8)

10



S: [I hate/=
 G: <yeah] that's right=
 A: =YEAH, cause I, ah

11



A: [love my mother, but sometimes I be hating her/
 D & K: (????)
 G: right
 M: you gonna ask?

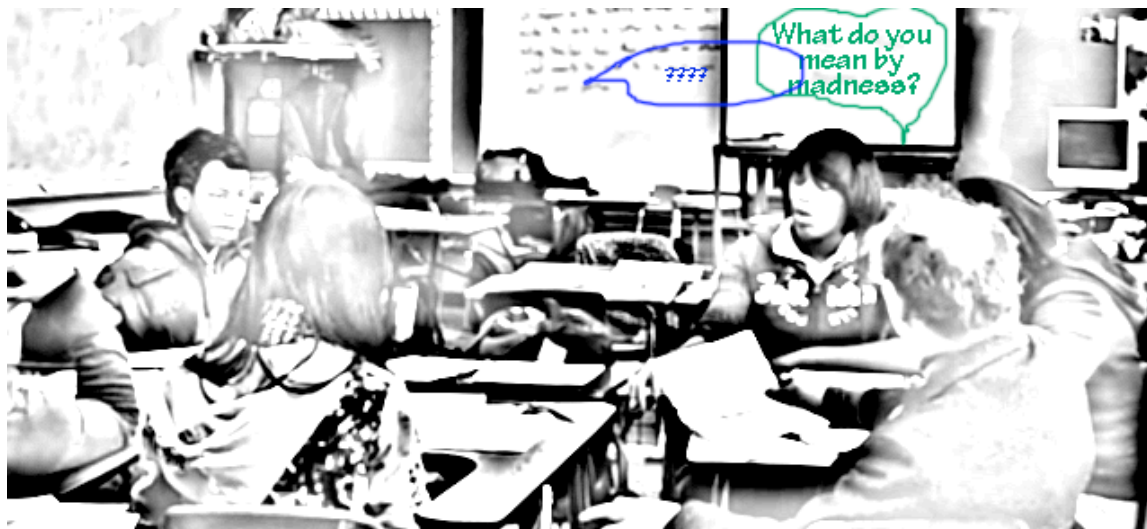


12



A: especially my father.

13



G: [What do you mean by madness?/
K: <(???)]

14.



GF: Do you mean by [madness/ do you mean like angry?/
K: <(????)]
GF: [Or do you mean like crazy?/
A: <Yeah, like your feelings], emotions for a person that you love

15



A: that you

16



(0.3)

17



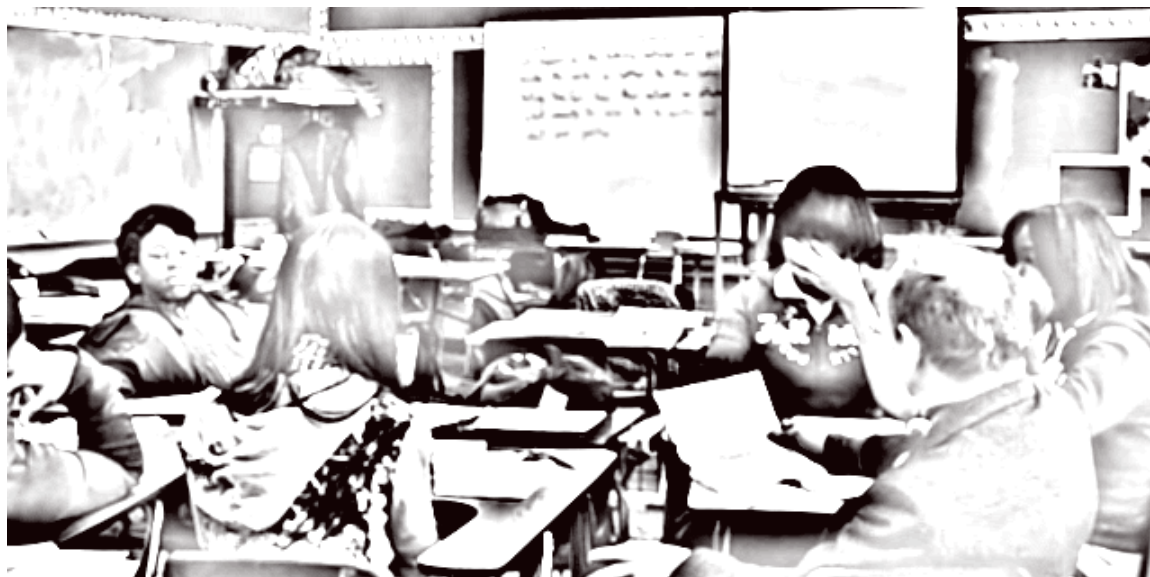
A: mostly love.



18



19

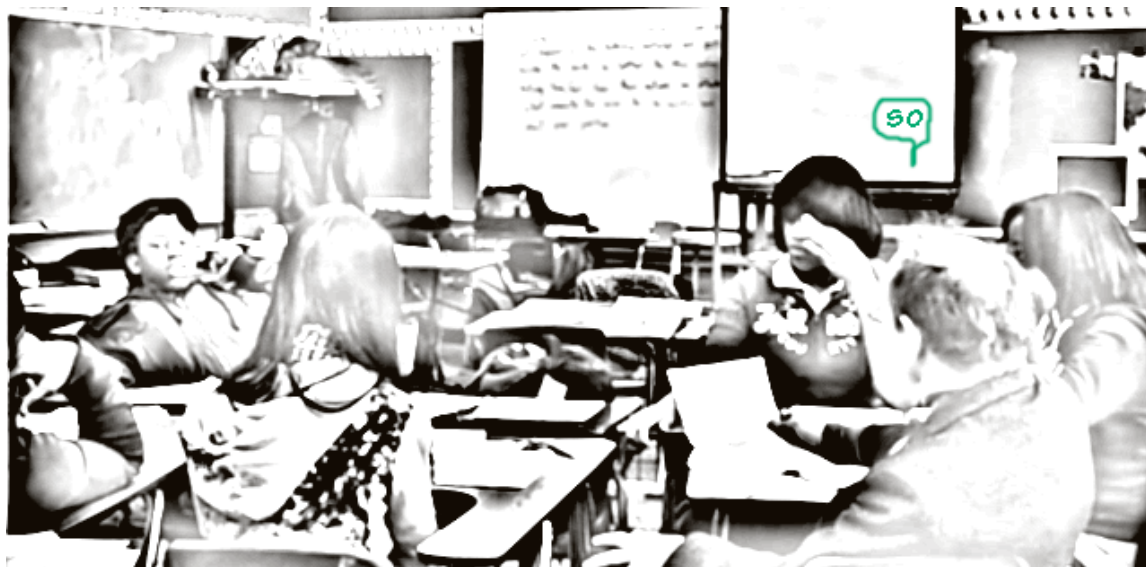


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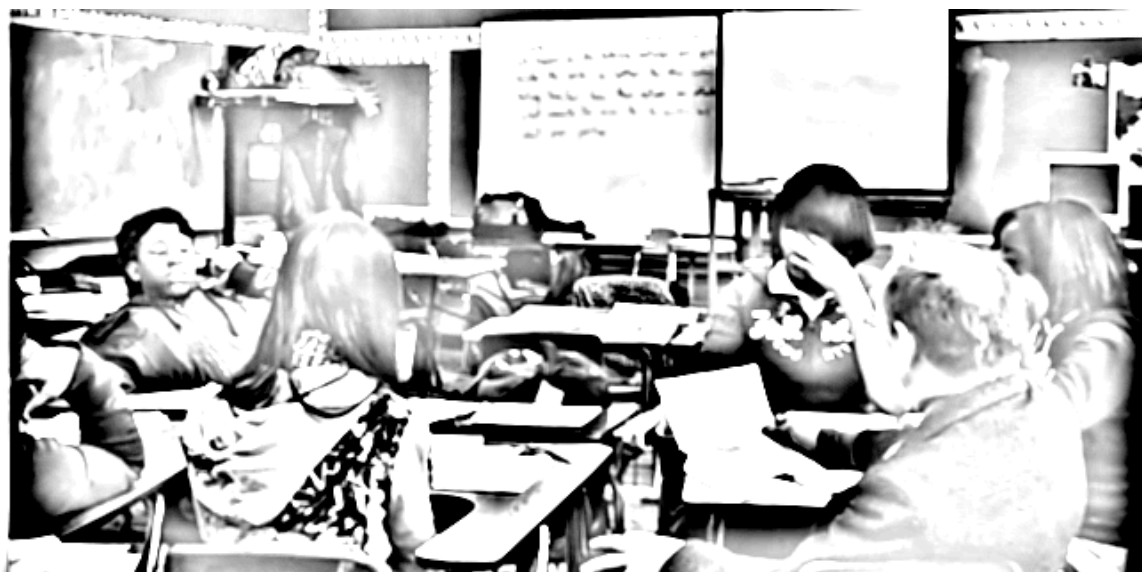
(1.4)

21



G: So

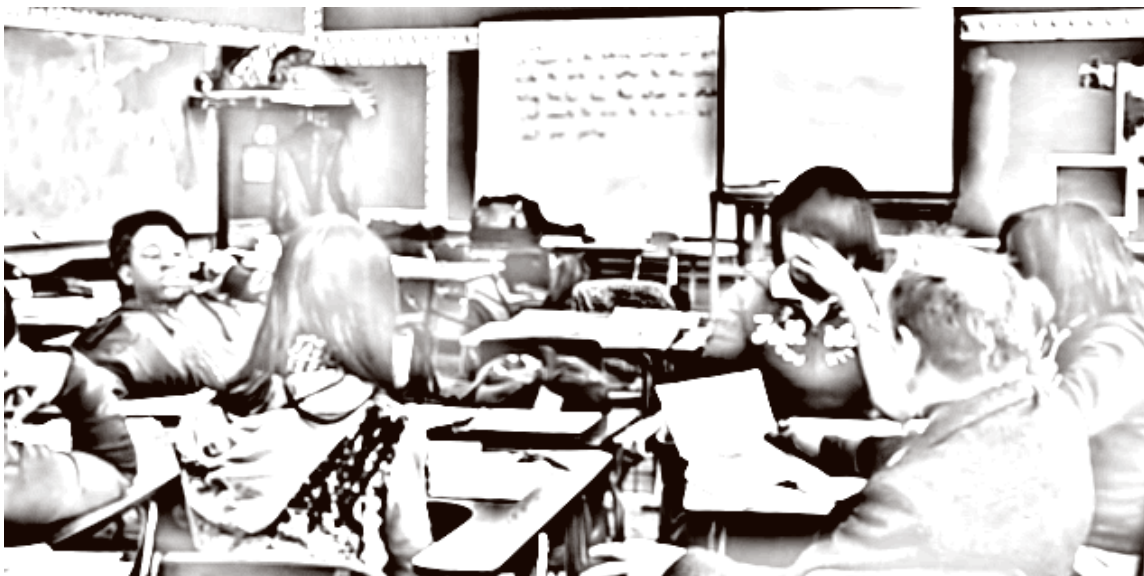
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23



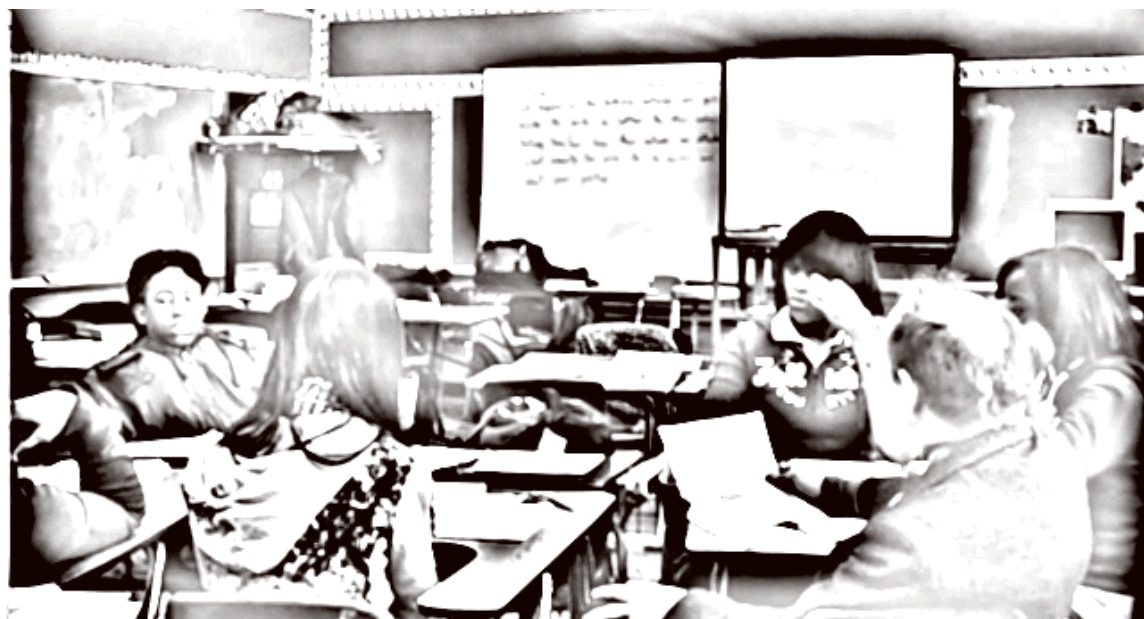
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25



26



(2.0)

27



G: if LOVE, if LOVE is hate, WHEN love is hate, is that what you want it to be?

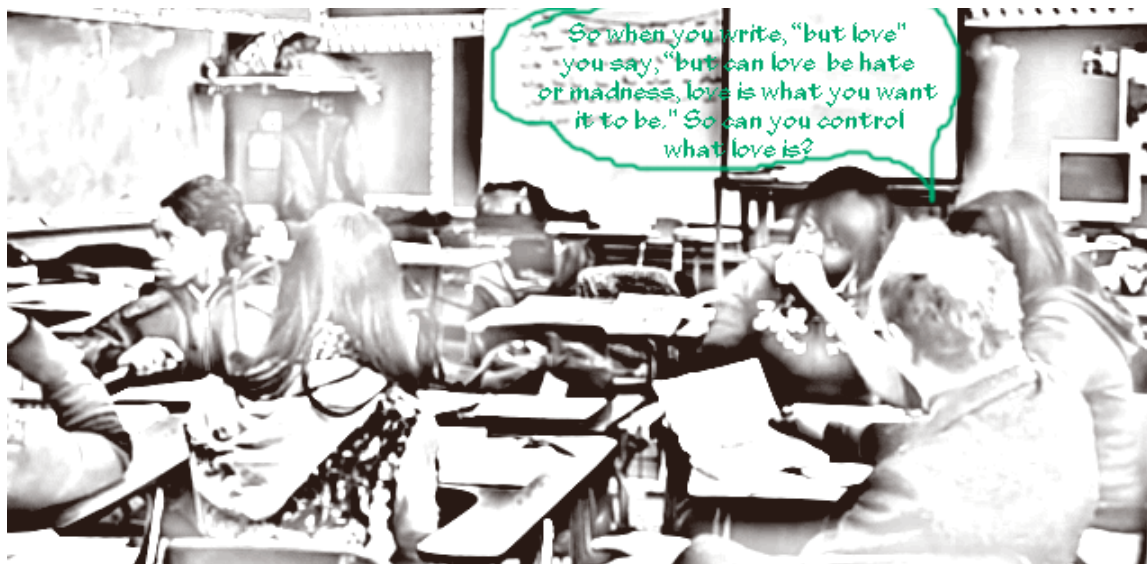
28



A: no



29



G: So when you write, "but love," you say, "but can love be hate or madness, love is what you want it to be." So can you control what love is?

30



31



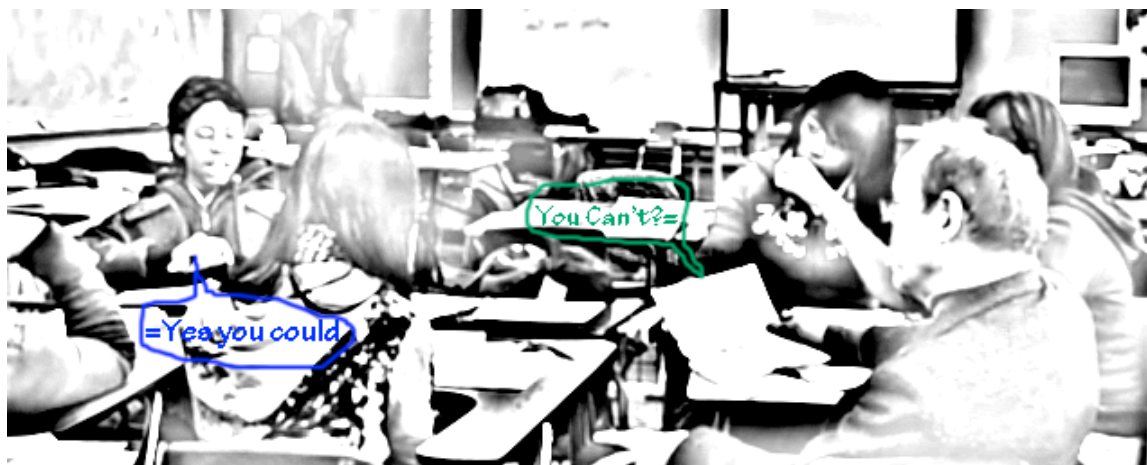
(0.4)

32



M: no [love is just like/
S: <you can't control emotions]

33



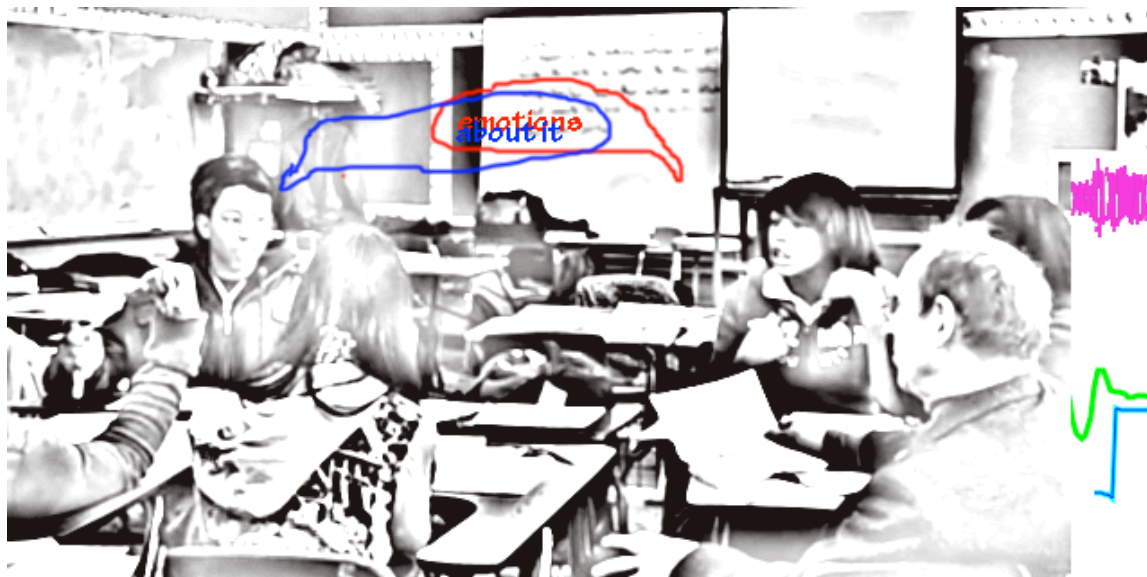
G: You can't?=
 K: =Yes you could

34



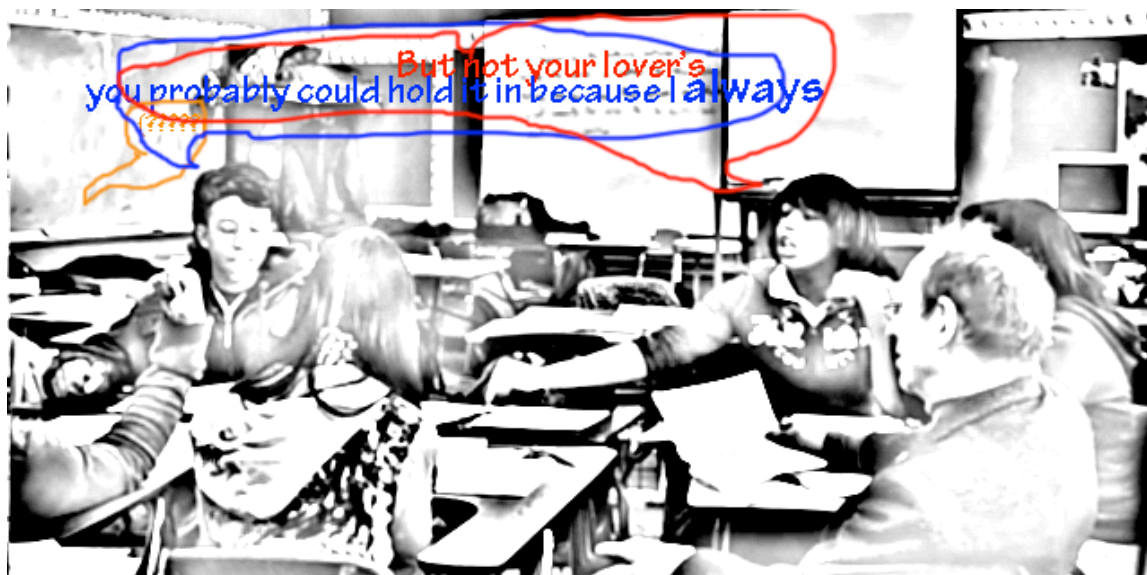
A: YOU gonna control [YOUR
 K: <If you think

35



A: emotions
K: about it

36



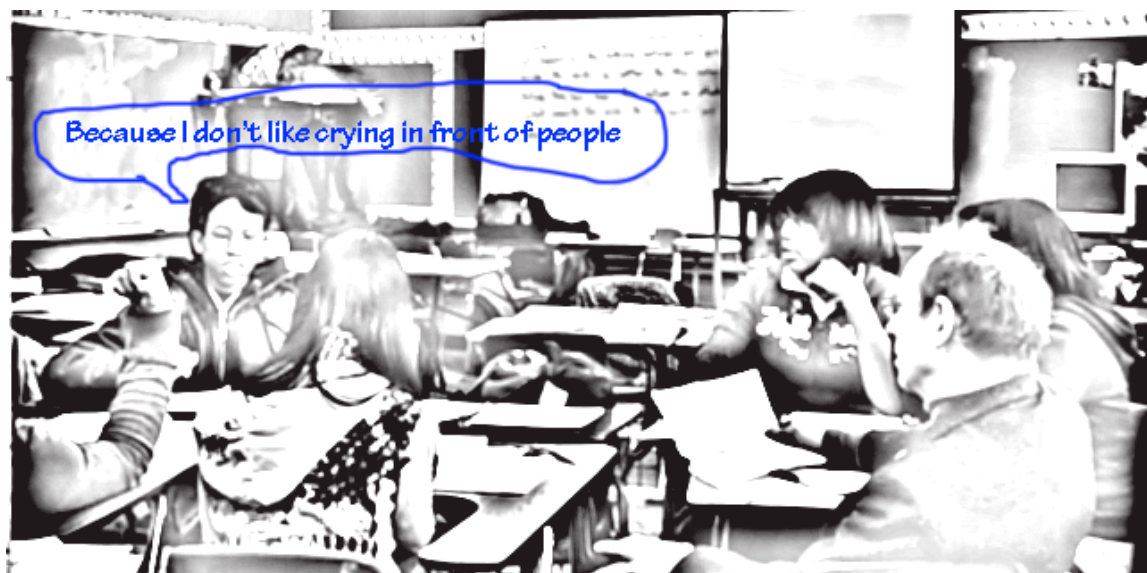
A: But not your lover's
K: you probably could hold it in because I always

37



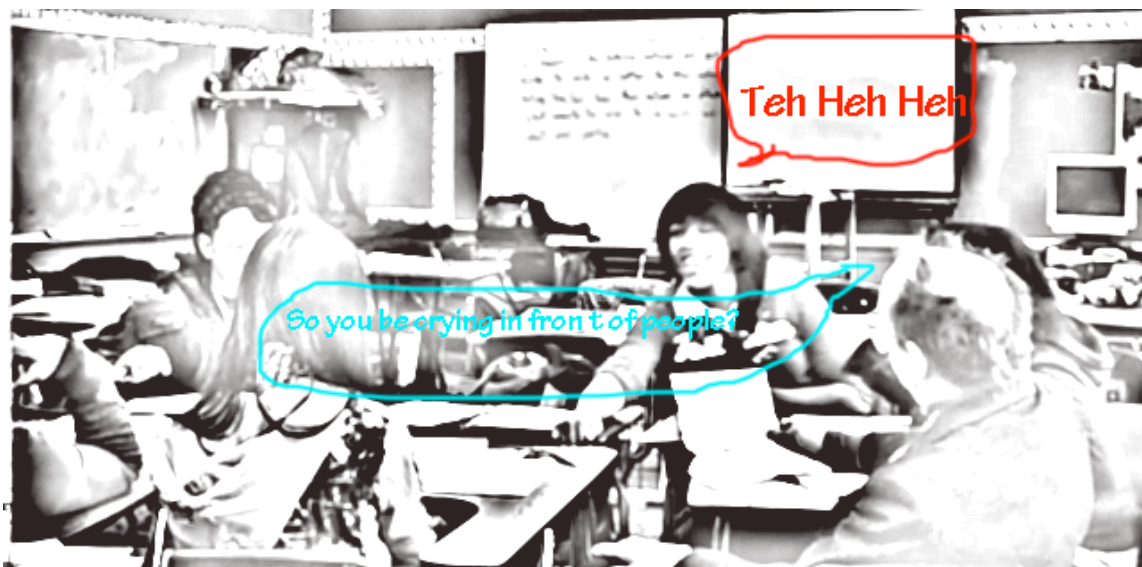
A: emotions/
K: do that]

38



K: Because I don't like crying in front of people.

39



A: TehHehHeh ((loud mocking laughter))

M: So you be crying in front of people?

40



K: [I be about to cry, I be about to cry but I don't cry./

A: <he be, he be tears in his eyes ((mock sniffles))]

41

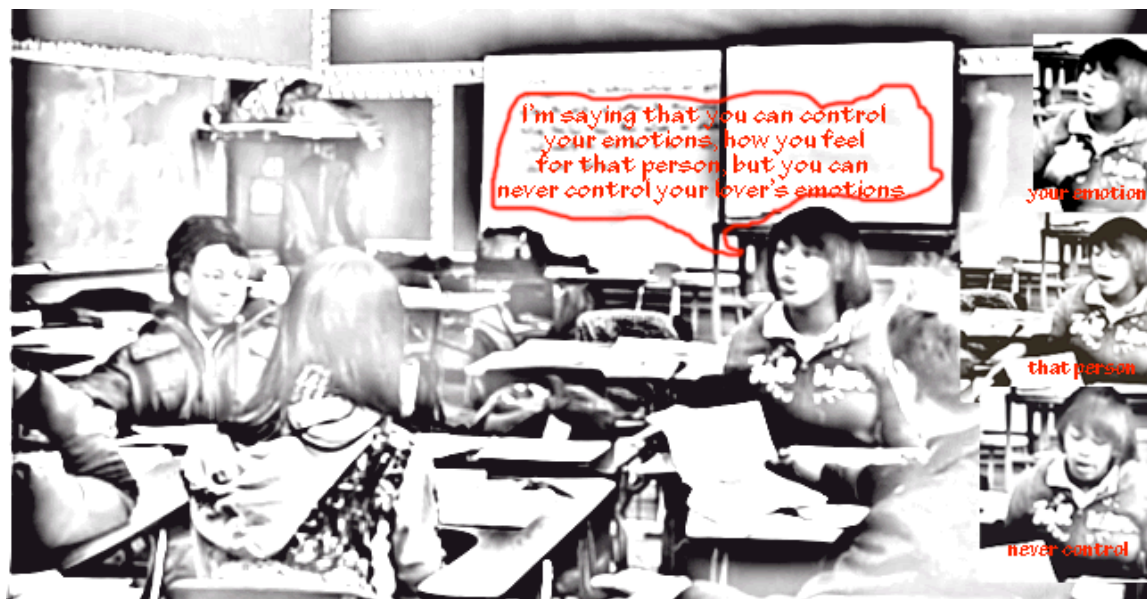


K: [That mean you like a bitch/

D: <(?????)

A: <NO but like]

42



A: I'm saying that you can control your emotions, how you feel for that person, but you can never control your lover's emotions.

43



44



(0.5)

45



A: emotions.

46



G: So if we say love is what you want it to be,

47



48



49



50



(1.7)

51

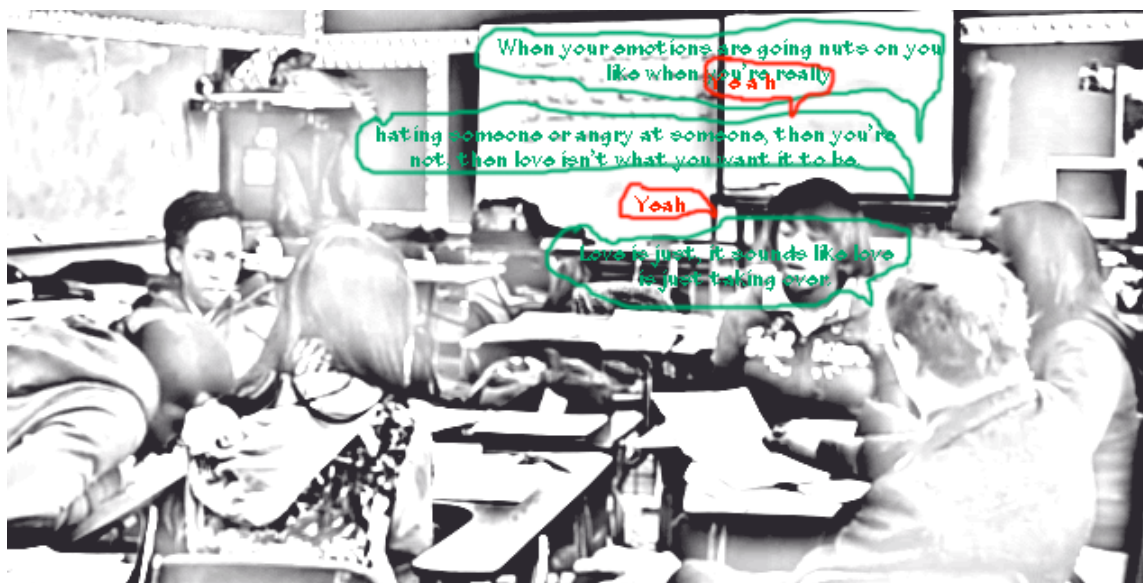


You're saying

M: it seems, it's emotions and feelings

D: (?????)

52



G: When your emotions are (.) going nuts on you, like when you're [really/

A: <yeah]

G: hating someone or angry at someone, then you're not, then love isn't what you want it to be.

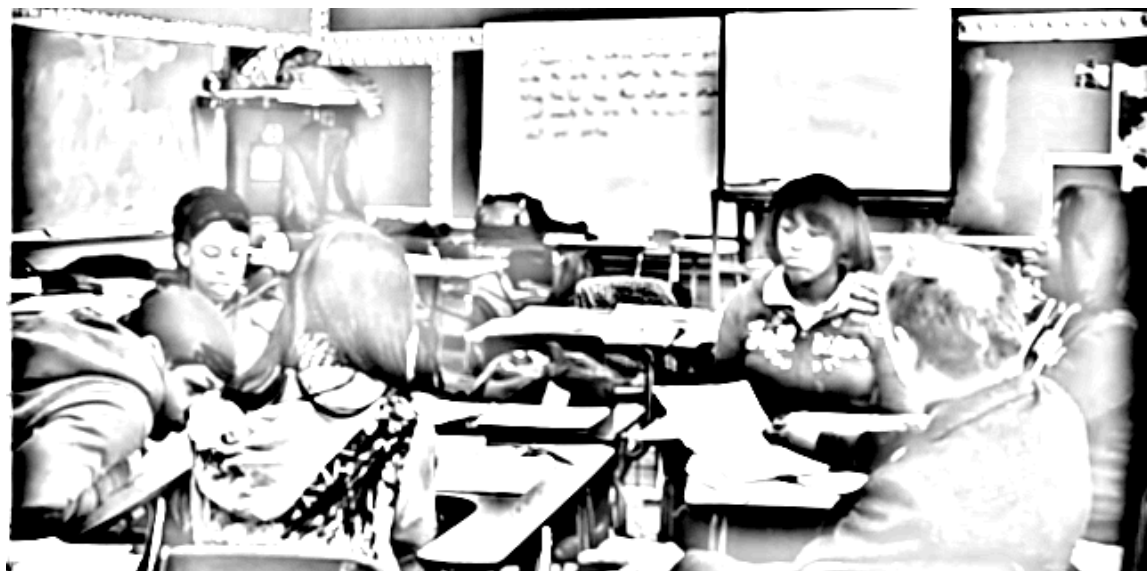
A: yeah.

G: love is just, sounds like love is just taking over

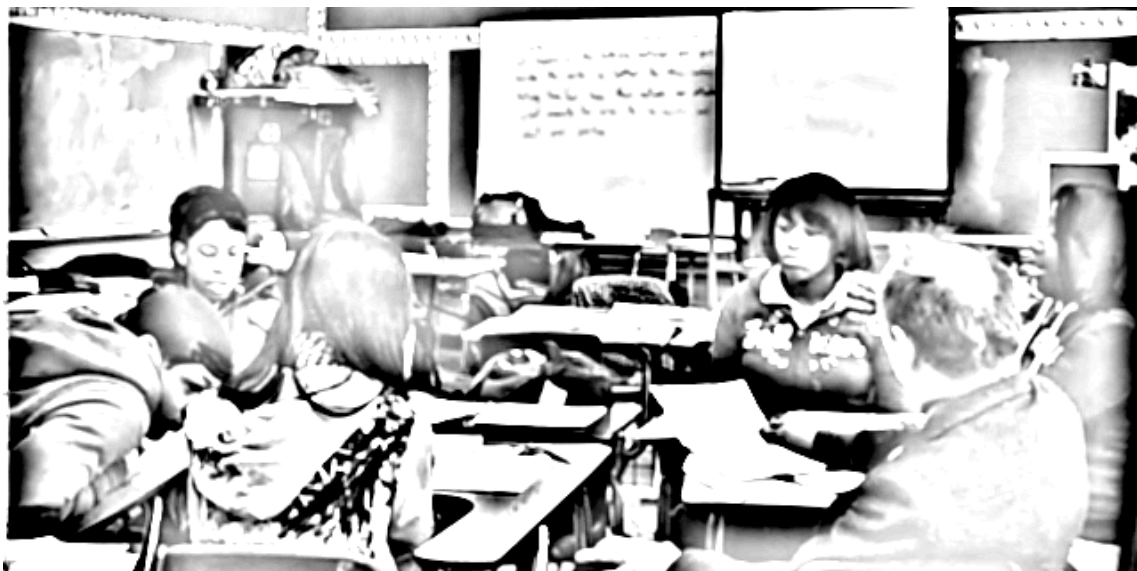
53



54

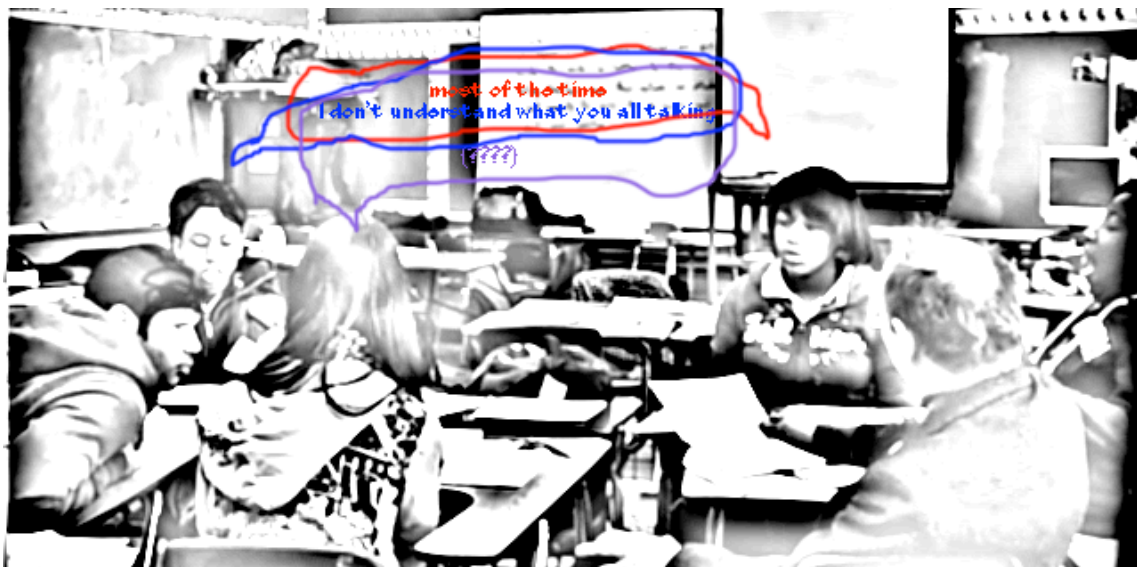


55



(1.4)

56



A: [most of the time/

K: <l don't understand what you'all talking]

57



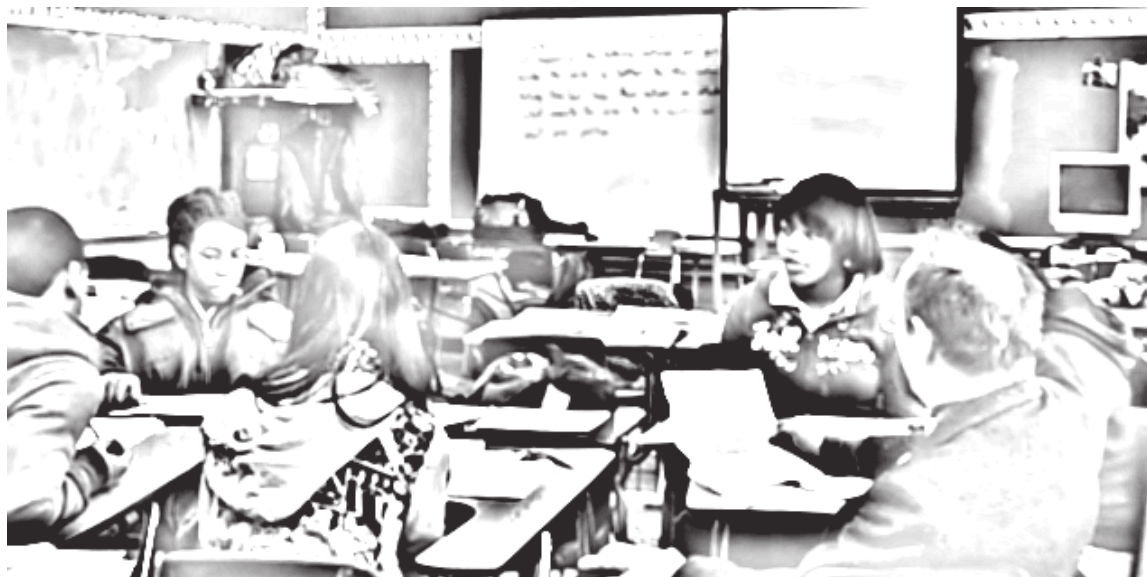
58



59



60



61



62



63



(3.0)

64



A: See if we was talking about this in class

65



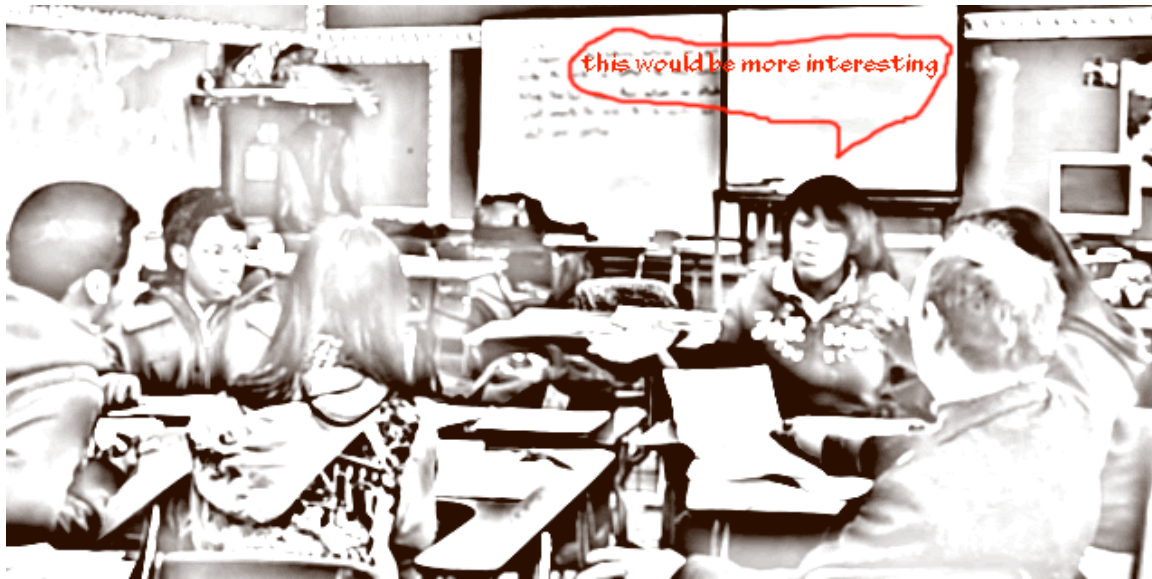
A: and stuff like this

66



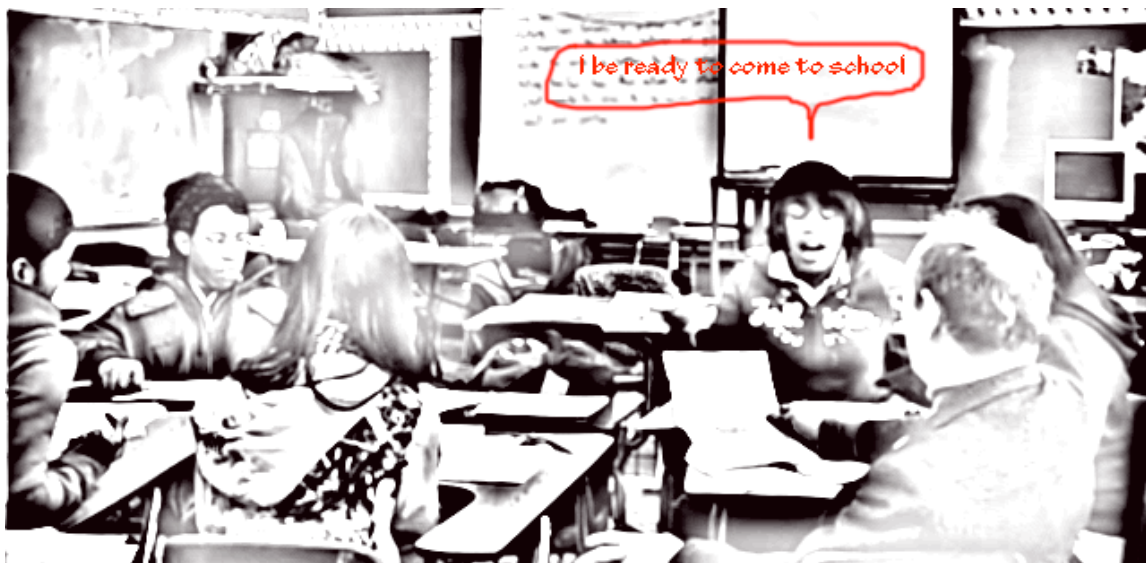
A: with the groups and stuff

67



A: this would be more interesting

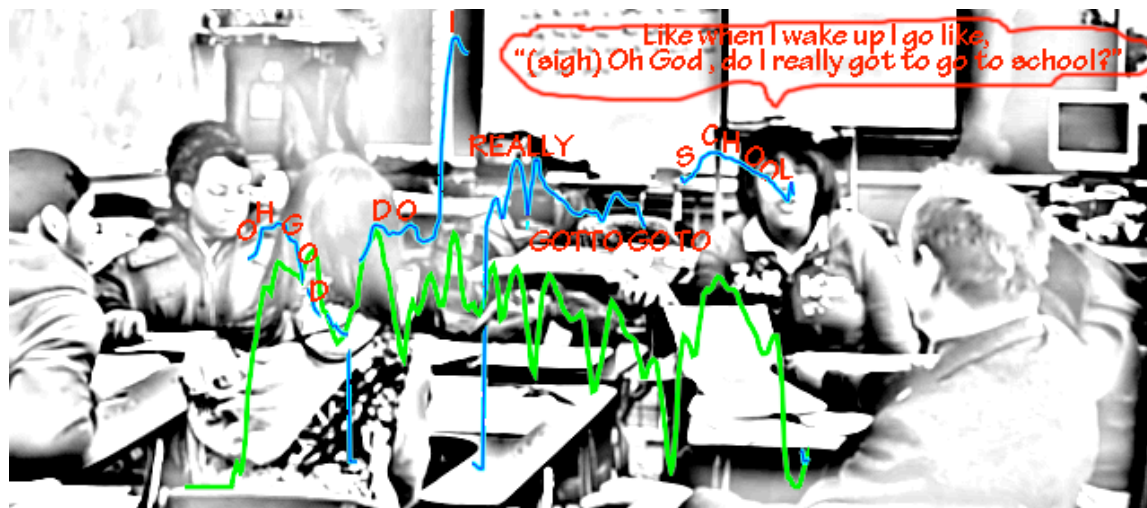
68



A: I'd be ready to come to school

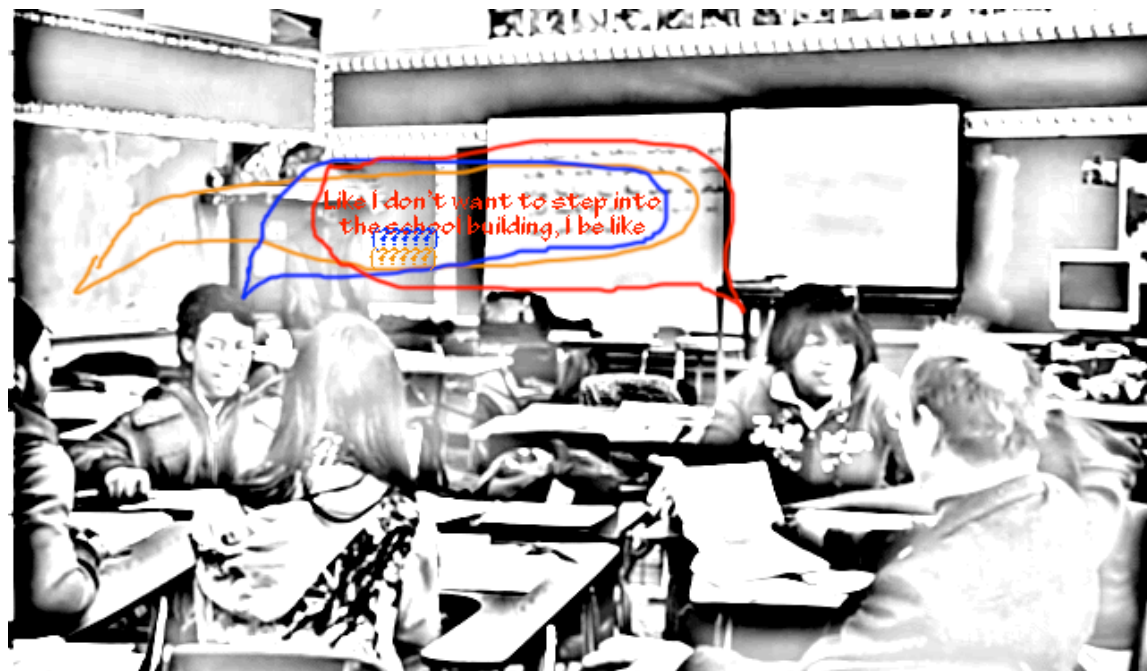


69



A: Like when I wake up I go like, "(sigh) Oh God, do I really got to go to school?" (See mp3 to right)

70



A: Like I don't want to step into the school building, [I be like/
 K: <[?????]
 D: <[?????]

71



72



(.5)

73



A: Soon as I step in I be like

74



A: Oh, god

Guide to Chapter 12: Love is what you want it to be

1



G: And love can be hate or madness?

Shelly, who has been pretty quiet thus far, immediately answers “yes,” to my question, a sign of the issue’s immediacy for her. She utters the word confidently and in her normal speaking voice.

2



S: [yes/

Simultaneously, Kelvin says, “big mistake,” while Ana nods quickly, affirmatively, eliciting laughter from Maleeka and me. We have a few moments of contradiction here. Though the humor helps create a positive ambiance, the shifting of attention to Kelvin, and Maleeka pointing at him and smiling, takes attention

3



K: <Big mistake]
((laughter))

A: =“Yeah most of the people [does/

G: You agree?

I follow up her comment by looking at her and asking: “you agree?” This further diverts the focus away from Ana. Ana responds impatiently; after all we are here to discuss *her* poem. She looks at me indignantly, her hands flat on the table, her lips pursed, and she raises both the power and the frequency of her voice to get my attention. She is demonstrating in no uncertain manner her desire to be the focus of the group. After all, she is the reason we have come together.

4



D: What?

S: Nothing

Shelly does something (not visible) and Darryl looks at her and asks, softly, “what?” She responds at the same volume, “nothing.” Whatever their side interaction, it is not meant to take away from the group conversation.

Ana, after her loud but unfinished statement, brings her hands up to her face, maybe a sign of surrender to the confusion around her and the uncertainty of what she wants to say.

5



(0.2)

There is a very brief pause after the short interchange between Darryl and Shelly, in this case enough time for me to try to repair the situation and get us back “on task.” I look at Ana, signaling to her that she should continue exploring her thoughts.

6



G: So, so does that mean you can love someone and hate them at the same time?

My question generates enthusiasm from all participants, and refocuses the group.

7



K: =no
 A: YEAH=
 D-=yeah=

Kelvin answers, “no” immediately; Ana looks at him as if to say-“you bugging” but says simply, and at almost the same decibel level says, “Yeah.” Darryl immediately agrees with a low yeah. Clearly, the

question resonates with the experiences of these students, though the specifics of those experiences differ. It is when differences are voiced that dialog and investigation can start and we can begin to seriously know each other. This type of rapid-fire interchange can only be documented at the microlevel and is data to establish enthusiasm with what is being discussed.

8



S: =Yes, your mother

Then Shelly immediately interjects “yes, your mother.” Her right hand hooks to the side as if to say, “Obviously, duh!” Kelvin’s right arm is suspended in mid-air, as if had been about to say something but refrained from doing so as Shelly spoke. Everyone looks at Shelly, clearly impressed that she has come up with such a perfect example that they can all relate to. There is a pause of almost a second while everyone absorbs what she has said.

9



(0.8)

10



S: [I hate/=
G: <yeah] that's right=
A: =YEAH, cause I, ah

a sign of anger but of

enlightenment. Here we see the collaborative thinking|speaking dialectic at work, the infectiousness of good-feelings during successful group work. My happiness at the connection Shelly made is clear from my smile directed at her. Unlike some of the previous interruptions, Ana clearly welcomes Shelly's contribution because it helps her to clarify her own thoughts. Though three people are talking at once in this instant, it is all affirmative, as if we're patting each other on the back simultaneously.

11



A: [love my mother, but sometimes I be
hating her/
D & K: (????)
G: right
M: you gonna ask?

We see here how speech and gesture are inseparable, dependent on each other for the construction, conveying and sharing of meaning. Ana makes her gesture with the group in mind. And my smile responds as fully as words could. I have included the sound file here for those

Ana makes eye contact with Shelly, smiles, and her right hand mimics Shelly's left hand- all signs of solidarity. Her voice is high pitched- virtually equal to the highest pitch recorded so far, and she is loud and excited. This time, the high volume of her voice is not

Ana enthusiastically continues, feeding off what Shelly said and rephrasing it in terms of her own experience, "I love my mother but sometimes I be hating her." She faces me as she speaks, smiling broadly, explaining to me, the teacher, what conclusion she's reached with the help of the others. Her hands are now poised on the same horizontal plane, the left hand

who are reading an electronic copy rather than a hard copy so that the reader can actually hear what Ana's epiphany sounds like. Maleeka asks her, "you gonna ask...?" but stops in mid-track as Ana continues her thought. Darryl and Kelvin are having a serious and quiet side conversation that, because of their distance from the recorder, is indecipherable.

12



A: *especially my father.*

Ana holds her hand to her chin, dramatically drumming a finger against it, indicating that she is still trying to make sense of love and hating, all-at-once, the same person.

There are contradictions present in the past 20 seconds of this vignette. Maleeka, for example, says almost nothing, and when she does Ana, who is her good friend, ignores her. Darryl adds very little to the group discussion though he was the first "interrupter" at the beginning of the "thick and thin" vignette, and Kelvin, who was so vocal during the "thick and thin" discussion, has been mostly silent thus far. And yet, as has been pointed out, silence is also a vital part of a conversation, and all members of the group seem actively engaged even when they don't speak frequently. In other words, they seem receptive to what is being said even as they don't contribute much in the way of verbal dialog. Their body language and their mostly attentive silence all convey immersion within the group. For Ana, whose poem is being discussed, the conversation is incredibly fruitful. Shelly, especially, helps her to explore the significance of the words Ana has used in her poem. Though many in the group say, almost instinctively, that one can hate and love the same person all-at-once, Shelly's "yes, your mother" seems revelatory to Ana who was still thinking about how her personal experience with her

mother and father made the concept of hate-love together profound and rich. Shelly's comment was the spark that set the blaze.

Self-to-text, one of the most important literacy strategies in current literacy pedagogy, was integral to self-discovery in this conversation without the term itself being even mentioned. It is a term that is relentlessly drummed into students' brain without much to show for it. When allowed to emerge organically, however, it is a natural resource that students lean on.

13



G: [What do you mean by madness?]

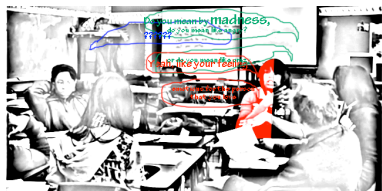
K: <{???

I continue to probe Ana about the words and phrases of her poem, now moving on to the concept of madness by asking Ana what she meant when she chose that word. She slowly turns her attention to me as I direct

in the background, which probably accounts for my voice being a bit louder than usual. I'm clearly trying to get the attention of the group. Meanwhile, a few words into my question. Kelvin again begins his own conversation with Darryl. His voice is just louder than mine (71 dB vs my 68 dB), a sign that he is making an effort to be heard over my voice. Reviewing the video, I sense that, even though Kelvin is disrupting my question, he is speaking about something serious—probably somehow related to our conversation. The fact that neither he nor Darryl are laughing gives me this impression, for often when students try to subvert, they are “fooling around” rather than seriously engaged in dialog. It would have been appropriate to entertaining what was on his mind, or to gently rebuke him for withdrawing from the group focus, but, at the

time, I may not have been paying *conscious* attention to him since I was involved in my own conversation with the others; I might even have been unaware. That such obliviousness can occur within a group of six people is a reminder of how hard it is for a teacher to be fully present even in a class of five students. Important data will always be missed despite the desire to see and hear everything. One of the reasons videotaping classes is to make visible such missed data. Interestingly, though Kelvin is speaking with Darryl who is sitting directly across from him, he is facing in toward the group, an indication that he wants to be in two conversations at once. At the moment, he may be finding his private dialog more useful, than the group conversation.

14



GF: Do you mean by [madness/ do you mean like angry?/

K: <{????}

GF: [Or do you mean like crazy?/

A: <Yeah, like your feelings], emotions for a person that you love

Since there are two conversations occurring simultaneously, it is difficult to understand what is being said and the solidarity of the group is being undermined—a contradiction. As I question Ana by asking, “do you mean by madness, do you mean like angry? Or do you mean like crazy?” Kelvin continues to

for if I were I would be able to get the group to coalesce. Meanwhile Ana is involved and excited by my question. Before I have finished asking, she is answering “YEAH, like your feelings, emotions for the person you love.” She raises her voice to be heard above the din, and at least in this case it seems to work because as she completes her sentence, Darryl and Kelvin have stopped speaking and returned their attention to the group; everyone now is focused on Ana.

As Ana utters the word “feelings,” her hands—fingers widely separated—cross in front of her body, a gestural illustration of how feelings/emotions can be moving in opposite directions at once. It’s as if her body grasps the contradictions that co-exist within her emotions before she has found the words to describe it, very much like hate and love inhabiting the same space at the same time. This type of realization is crucial to the essence of understanding the world in which we live and the multiple interacting fields that Bourdieu writes about, the nuanced and contradictory lives that we lead.

15



A: that you

16



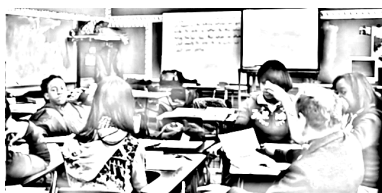
(0.3)

17



A: mostly love.

18



Ana, influenced by the interchange with Shelly and the others, by the “link” between her new insight and the discussion of but a few seconds ago, now finds it necessary to change her “love” to “mostly love”—a bit of an epiphany about how complex love can be. That she is not so happy with her new insight is apparent in the much less categorical movement of her right hand, with fingers unaligned, by her rubbing her eyes with her left hand- almost as if she is wiping away tears. Her voice, about 3.5 times softer than her previous lowest volume (57.4 dB vs. 62 dB (5.5×10^{-7} w/m² vs .000002), signifies the gravity of her insight.

19



20



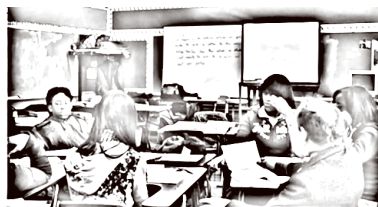
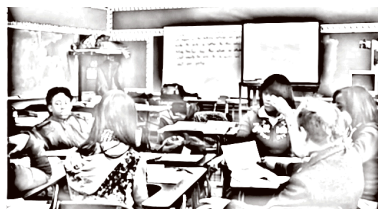
(1.4)

21



Micro analysis reveals that I interrupt the emotionally-packed pause at the moment it has become equivalent in duration to Ana's previous phrase, almost as if I were, unconsciously, balancing her phrase and the group silence, allowing the weight of her realization to sink in. Both last 1.4 seconds. I cut short the pause with an energetic, "so," to move us along.

Then there is a long pause (#22-26).



(2.0)

The pause lasts for two seconds, twice the length of the standard maximum silence before a change of speakers is expected (Roth, 2006). It gives all of us a bit of time to collect our thoughts. What is remarkable, especially in light of the previous 10 seconds in which two conversations were co-existing, is that this silence remains uninterrupted for so long and that now nobody interrupts me as I speak, a sign of engagement with what I am asking and of group solidarity.

27



G: if LOVE, if LOVE is hate, WHEN love is hate, is that what you want it to be?

confusing idea. Ana's expressions, first scratching her head, with her hand over her mouth, then looking at me with her cheek resting against her hand, and finally with her hand covering her mouth and her head slightly tilted, are cumulative indications that she is thinking about my question, that she is engaged.

28



A: no

times spoke at the highest volume is now speaking at the lowest. This variance in voice level represents, I think, a combination of uncertainty, realization (maybe a painful one), and thoughtfulness. I have indicated this combination of qualities by painting Ana in an almost transparent and cloudy pink. Where once she garnered everyone's attention by speaking loudly, now she does so by speaking very softly.

As I resume to dig further into the meaning of the words Ana's used in her poem, she looks at me a bit confusedly, maybe still thinking about the "almost love" she just uttered and that represents a difficult and

Ana answers my question in whisper, "no;" at 59.6 dB. It is way softer than any thing so far within the main conversation. Ana, the same person who at

29



G: So when you write, "but love," you say, "but can love be hate or madness, love is what you want it to be." So can you control what love is?

The classroom teacher walked into the room as I was speaking, and the members of the group look in his direction though, as becomes clear, they have listened to my question.

30



31



(0.4)

32



M; no [love is just like/
S: <you can't control emotions]

The conversation has suddenly become much softer, a sign of the gravity of the concept being discussed, a gravity that comes with the shared experience of being embroiled in emotional turmoil. Shelly and Maleeka, the two who have been least vocal so far, are the first to place their opinions in the circle. Shelly, cutting off Maleeka, says, "you can't control emotions." Kelvin straightens up in his seat and gestures with his right hand, index finger pointed and looking towards Shelly as if to indicate, "I disagree with you." The group has indeed coalesced again, fiercely focused on a discussion that resonates deeply for them all.

.33



G: You can't?=
K: =Yes you could

I question Shelly about her statement, but Kelvin immediately and quickly interjects- countering Shelly's opinion and answering the question directed at Shelly with a loud "yes you could," elevating the decibel level of discussion and, possibly, setting the stage for

conflict. Shelly, whose body posture has been relatively still since the conversation about Ana's poem began, turns toward him. Meanwhile, Ana has stayed silent, her chin leaning on her left hand, her head tilted, her eyes staring outward but not at anyone.

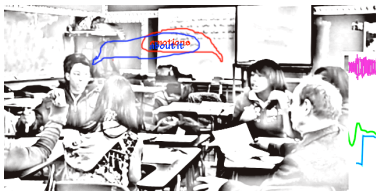
34



A: YOU gonna control [YOUR
K: <If you think

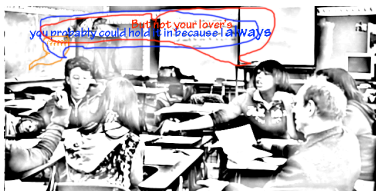
Ana suddenly re-enters the conversation in full force. She raises her voice to the highest decibel level thus far recorded, taking issue with what Shelly said but seeming to agree with Kelvin, "YOU can control YOUR emotions, but not your lover's emotions." Her mouth is wide open and both her hands are placed demonstratively against her chest to indicate that she can control *her* emotions. Then she extends her right arm, and her right index finger strikes twice on the desk next to her to indicate, forcefully, that you can't control "your lover's" emotions. As she strikes the desk, her left hand remains against her chest, corporally expressing the "your" and "your lover" conflict, giving resonance to the passion of her words and to a conflict she seems intimate with.

35



A: emotions
K: about it

36



A: But not your lover's
K: you probably could hold it in because I always

37



A: *emotions*/
K: *do that*]

is drowned out by Ana who is defiantly looking at Shelly who, in turn, is looking at Kelvin. Again, Kelvin and Ana are involved in a dance, raising and lowering their voices together, arguing and listening at the same time. The excitement is high, the involvement is great—all indicated through voice and body—and yet there is a sense of things spiraling out of control, of contradictions emerging in the sense of students trying to outshout each other and score points rather than listening and responding. At the same time there is a rawness to the sound and feel of the discussion, one that is teetering on the border of wounding and healing.

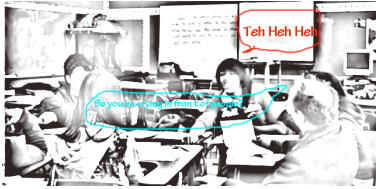
38



K: *Because I don't like crying in front of people.*

Then, suddenly, Kelvin is the only one speaking, and Ana and everyone is staring at him in surprise. He has just admitted something intimate, that he cries but holds the tears back in public. not an easy admission for a twelve-year old male student from a rough community. Despite the commotion of voices that simultaneously lit into each other, listening was also taking place and the group has followed Kelvin's thread. He has now brought himself into the conversation in a very vulnerable way, admitting something that is hard for a young male student to admit in front of his classmates, and yet he felt comfortable enough to do it, to bring his personal life into a school discussion. His hands, at the moment, are suspended, uncomfortably, in the air above the table.

39



A: TehHehHeh ((loud mocking laughter))

M: So you be crying in front of people?

Ana pounces. She bursts into loud laughter but it isn't contagious and nobody joins her. Maleeka looks at Kelvin and asks in a disbelief that carries along with it the highest pitch so far recorded and a quick rhythm, "You be crying in front of people?"

40



K: [I be about to cry, I be about to cry but I don't cry./

A: <he be, he be tears in his eyes ((mock sniffles))]

I am looking at Kelvin and am upset that Ana is making fun of him. Kelvin, however, does not lose his composure in the least and, if he is hurt by Ana's reaction, shows no sign of being so though he does throw her a sidelong glance of which she seems

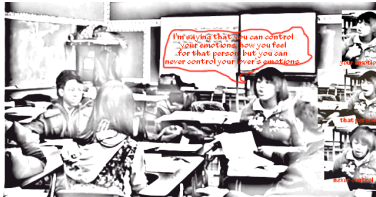
oblivious. Instead, he calmly responds to Maleeka's question even as Ana keeps ragging on him. He wipes his hand across his face, simulating the wiping of the tears that he sometimes feels but won't show. As he finishes, his voice gets slower and softer; everyone is listening to him so there's no need to raise his voice; there is an aspect of a confession to his words and his gestures. The yellow composite sound waves above shows how the voices increased in volume as Ana and Kelvin competed for the floor and how they then decreased again as the focus of the group rested on Kelvin.

41



K: [That mean you like a bitch/
D: <(?????)
A: <NO but like]

I wasn't aware that he had used it until I examined the video. Ana turns her attention away from Kelvin and retakes the floor.



42

A: I'm saying that you can control your emotions, how you feel for that person, but you can never control your lover's emotions.

downward when she talks about "her lover's" emotions—he being in a different place from her.

In this sense her gestures are metaphoric, signaling the distance between how she feels and how her lover feels.

Ana is still mocking Kelvin but Kelvin just elaborates, unselfconsciously using the word "bitch," to indicate that "real guys" don't cry publicly. The word, itself, elicits no response from anyone in the group and

To do so, she gets loud again and she directs her attention to Darryl and Shelly across from her, probably to take their attention away from Kelvin. Her right hand gestures to illustrate what she is saying; it is against her chest when she says, "your emotions" and points

43



44



(0.5)

45

A: *emotions*.

Nobody has interrupted her; they are all listening as Ana has gone from loud and emphatic to barely audible and reflective.

Ana very quietly repeats the word “emotions,” and looks down—as she reflects on and, seemingly, relives the experience which drove her to write the poem.

46



G: So if we say love is what you want it to be,

47



48



49



50



(1.7)

51



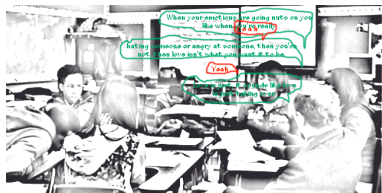
G: You're saying

M: it seems, it's emotions and feelings

D: (?????)

Upset with the mocking of Kelvin but struck by the deep sadness that Ana exposed afterwards, I go back into Ana's poem to help her and the rest of us understand what she is trying to convey. There are long uninterrupted pauses while I search Ana's poem for grounding (I had not seen it before we got together), trying to formulate what to say and how to continue. Maleeka, who has been pretty quiet, notices me struggling and comments about "emotions and feelings," a generous effort to assist me, a sign of solidarity with her teacher, but I seem not to pay attention though Ana, looking unhappy, turns toward her. Darryl says something but he is far from the camera and it is not decipherable

52



G: When your emotions are (.) going nuts on you, like when you're [really/

A: <yeah]

G: hating someone or angry at someone, then you're not, then love isn't what you want it to be.

A: yeah.

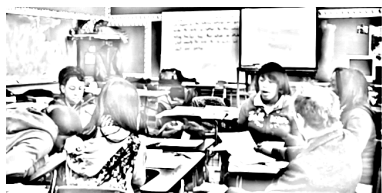
G: love is just, sounds like love is just taking over

My statement, directed at Ana, seems to be embraced by the group. Darryl is now leaning far into the group and listening as I fumble to form my question. Ana, by interjecting two “Yeah”s at almost the same loudness as my speech, the first while looking at me and the second as she nods and looks at Shelly, lets me know that I am closely describing how she feels. She nods and

looks at Shelly across the table. Then she turns to look at me, her lips closed and downturned.

Kelvin is facing in my direction but his stare looks as if he's somewhere else.

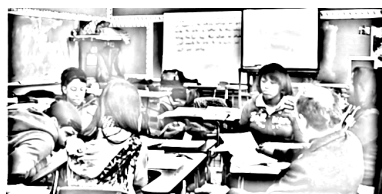
53



54

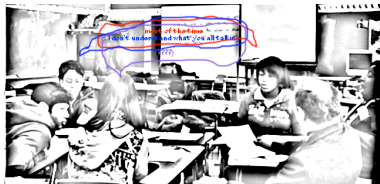


55



(1.4)

56



A: [most of the time/

K: <I don't understand what you'all talking]

with me, but looks downward, as if she is pondering. Darryl and Kelvin are looking at me, Darryl leaning in as close as he can from where he sits. After the first long pause, Kelvin says, “I don't understand what you'all talking” and I wonder if I'm losing them, if I haven't located properly where they are and if I mistook the silences for engagement.

Everyone is focusing on the dialog between Ana and me, almost as if we were in a fishbowl and they were observing us. And there are long pauses as Ana seems to consider my questions. She doesn't make eye contact

57 - 63



(3.0)

64



A: See if we was talking about this in class

65



A: and stuff like this

Suddenly Ana looks at me and unleashes a high frequency, full of passion, riff about how excited she is by the conversation. Nobody else seems to react, maybe because Ana is speaking so quickly, and at a higher pitch than at anytime so far in the conversation, even banging her hand on the desk in front of her for emphasis.

66



A: with the groups and stuff

67



A: this would be more interesting

68



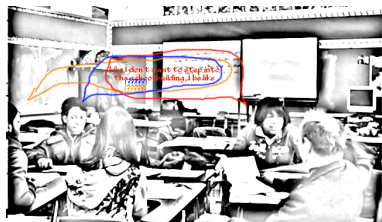
A: I'd be ready to come to school

69



A: Like when I wake up I go like, "(sigh) Oh God, do I really got to go to school?"

70



A: Like I don't want to step into the school building, [I be like/

K: <(?????)

D: <(?????)

For Ana at least, the conversation so far as been a rollercoaster of insights and emotions. She and I, together, formed the group to discuss her poem during school hours. She has probably never received this much attention in school for something she has written, and the group probably never spent so much time taking seriously the writing of one of their peers. The discussion has presented Ana with a new understanding of what school can be like, one in which she can, through her writing, work with peers to make sense of her life.

71



72



(5)

73



A: *Soon as I step in I be like*

74



A: *Oh, god*

Chapter 13: When love breaks

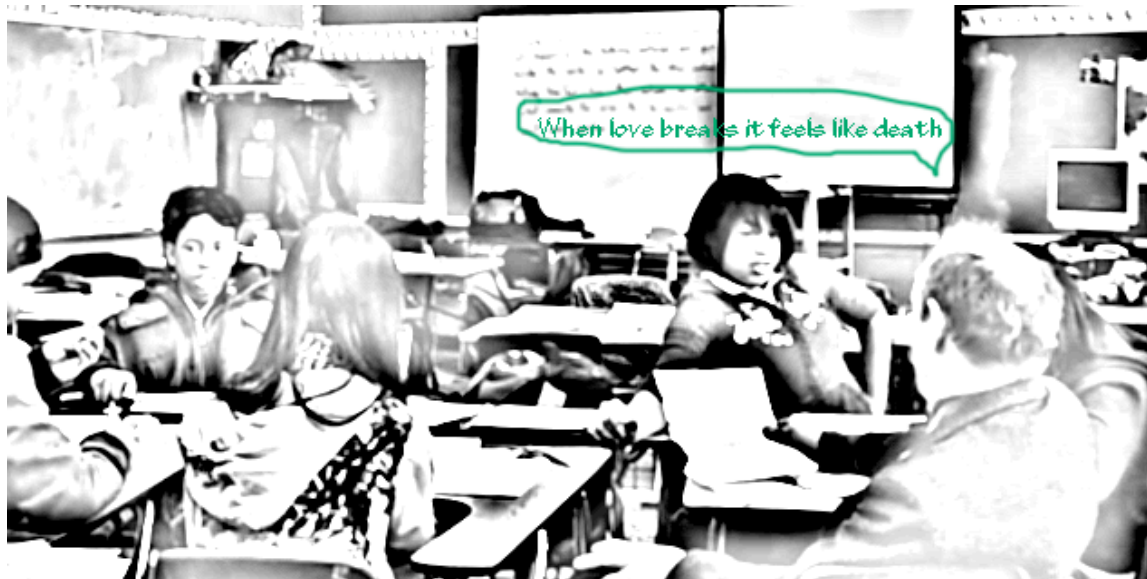
The transcript

G: When love breaks it feels like death.
(1.4)
A: Yeah because some people like, when they=
G: =So does love break like that?
A: Sometimes, like the relationship just ends.
G: like snaps?
(0.4)
A: [Yeah:::::like/
G: <when you say] breaks, it's like=
D: =(("snaps" his maker cap on to his maker to illustrate the snapping sound))
G: you know, when you say "breaks" it's like this ((indicate break by putting my fists together and then twisting them apart))
G: you know, breaks is like this ((puts hands together, palms facing downward, and then collapses them together, palm facing palm))
D: If that's true, you care
G: more like that ((indicating the gesture that Kelvin is making—two fists abutting each other and then yanking them apart))
S: Yeah, like someone=
A: YEAH, he just be like, it's OVER
K: That's what I thought
S: Yeah, like Ana did to Kelvin
M: The heh heh heh ((lauging))
K: Like Jaquan did with you
((8.5 seconds of laughter))
G: But love doesn't always go like this, does it? ((indicating an abrupt break with hands))
(0.9)
G: Like sometimes=
A: =most of the time, people just be like, it's over, I'm near the door=
K: =because that means, that means, That means [it wasn't love then cause love/ is not that easy
A: <While someone gets hit by a pile of crates]
((laughter,-1 sec.))
D: (???)
A: Cause I'm sure gonna bang him upside his head with a pile of crates [cause you ain't going out that easy/
K: <No, love ain't like that]
K: That means you never loved him.
G: So that's what I would think [too/=
K: =Yeah
M: <that don't sound] right at all
G: So that, I would think that if you really loved someone and you got into a fight with them, there'd be something like, um::::
(1.5)
G: it would take a while
(0.5)
A: not even
G: not even?
(0.7)
K: yes even
(0.2)
A: yes even? ((laughing))
(1.0)
D: Wait, wait, what?
A: Huh?
K: I'm confused

The cartoon

When love breaks, it feels like death.
Excerpt from Ana's poem

1



G: When love breaks it feels like death

2



3

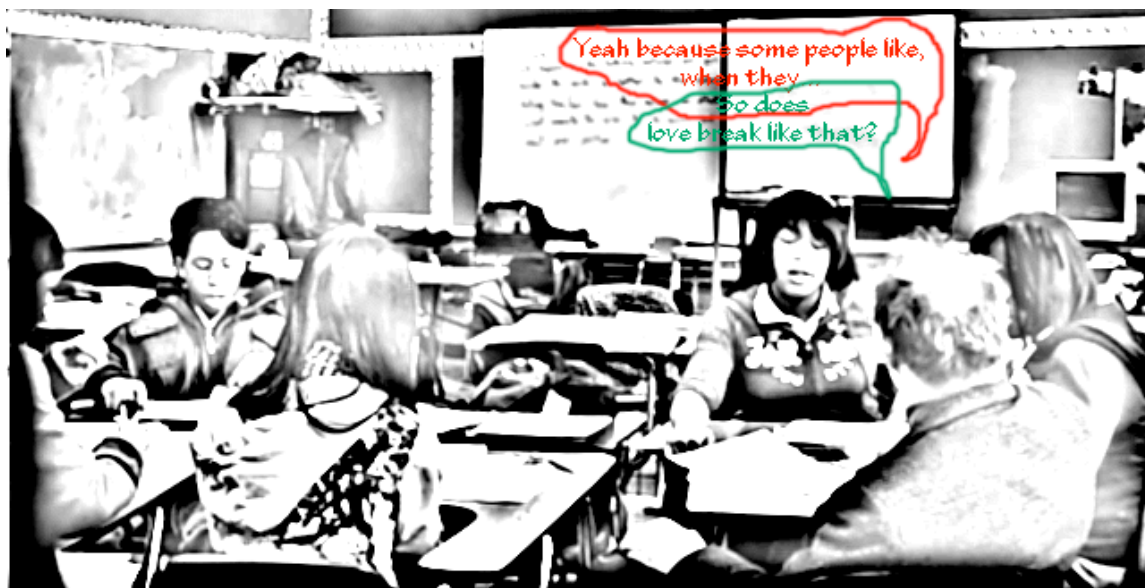


4



(1.4)

5



A: Yeah because some people like, when they=
G: So does love break like that?

6



A: Sometimes, like the relationship just ends.

7



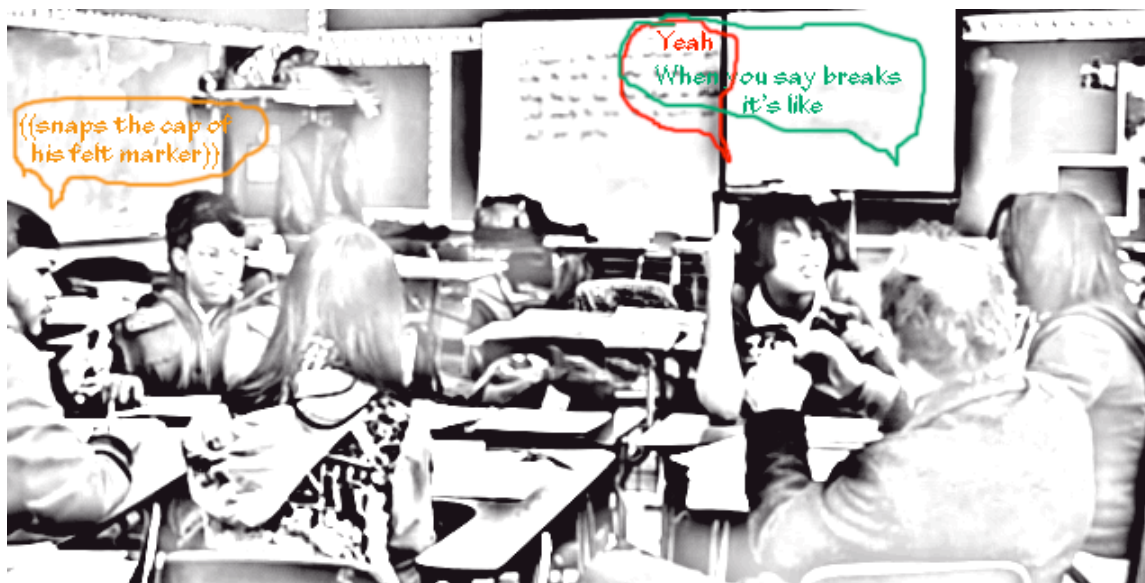
G: like snaps?

8



(0.4)

9



A: [Yeah:::::like/

G: <when you say] breaks, it's like=

D: =((“snaps” his marker cap on to his marker to illustrate the snapping sound))

GF: you know, when you say “breaks” it’s like this ((indicate break by putting my fists together and then twisting them apart))

10



G: you know, breaks is like this ((puts hands together, palms facing downward, and then collapses them together, palm facing palm))

D: If that’s true, you care

G: more like that ((indicating the gesture that Kelvin is making—two fists abutting each other and then yanking them apart))

11



S: Yeah, like someone=
A: YEAH, he just be like

12



A: It's Over

13



K: That's what I thought

S: Yeah, like Ana did to Kelvin

14



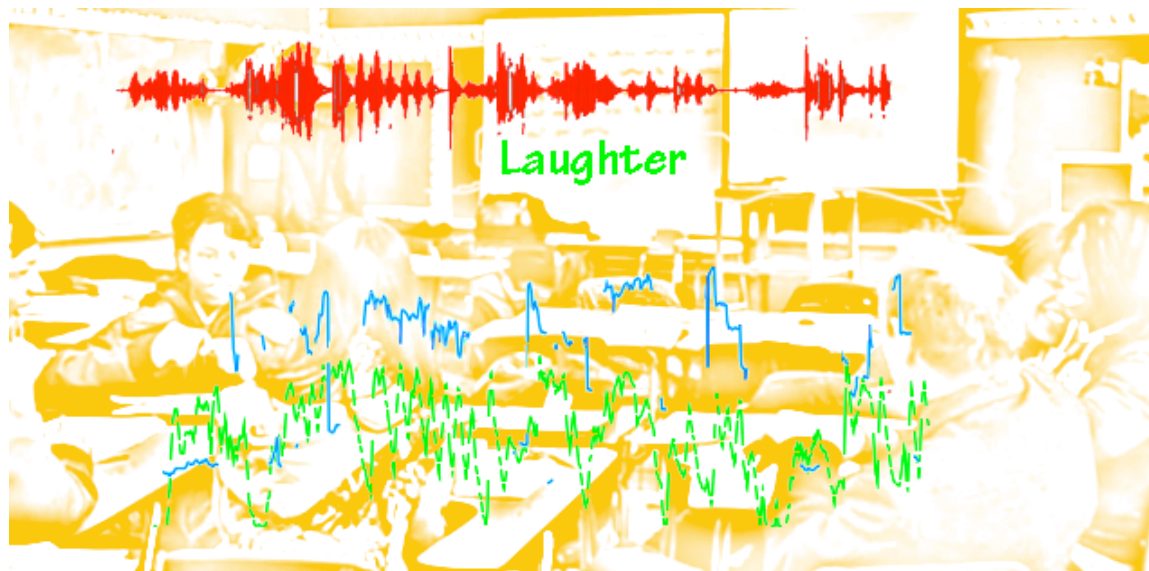
M: Teh heh heh heh ((laughing))

15



K: Like Jaquan did with you

16



((8.5 seconds of laughter))



17



G: But love doesn't always go like this, does it? ((indicating an abrupt break with hands))

18



19



(0.9)

20



G: Like sometimes=

A:=most of the time, people just be like, it's over

21



A: I'm near the door=
 K: =because that means, that means=

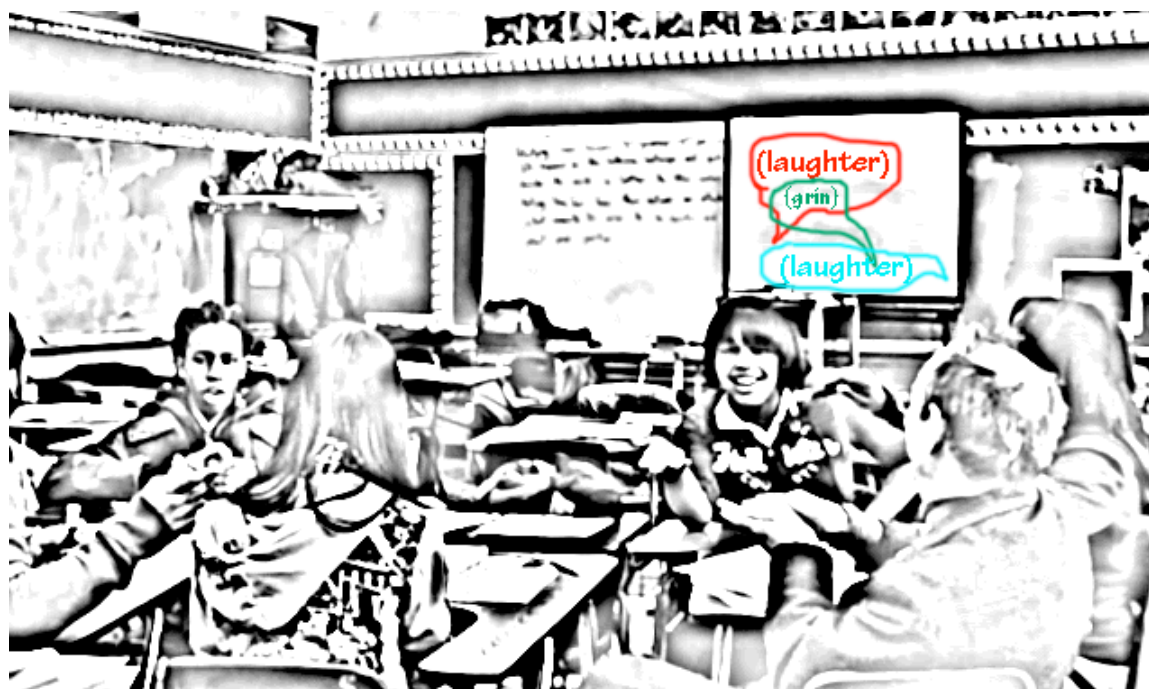
22



K: That means [it wasn't love then cause love/ is not that easy
 A: <While someone gets hit by a pile of crates]



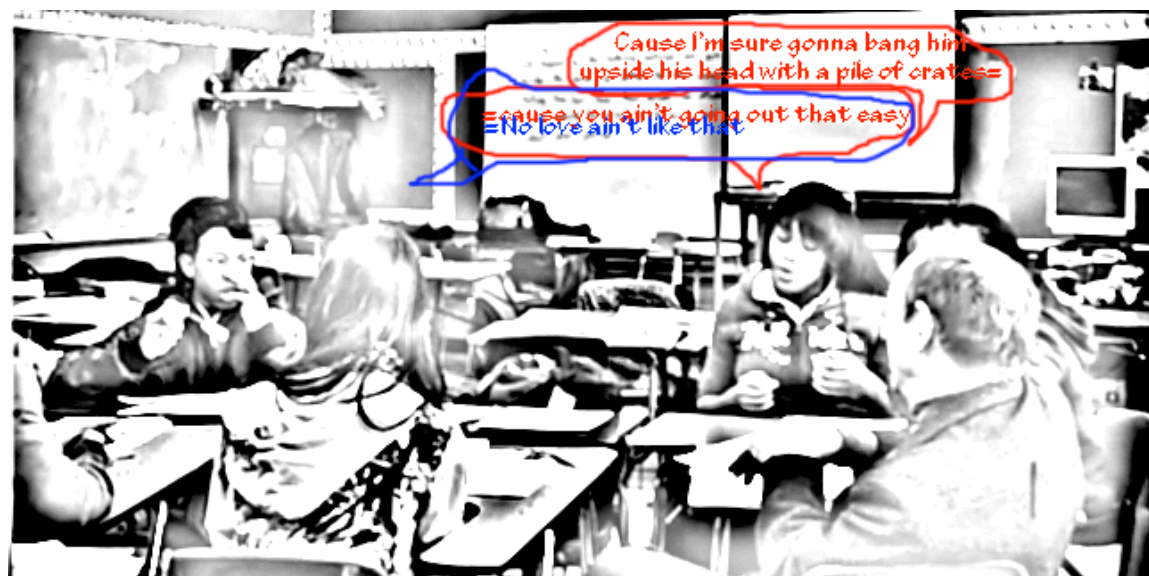
23



((laughter,-1 sec.))

D: (????)

24



A: Cause I'm sure gonna bang him upside his head with a pile of crates=

K: =[No, love ain't like that/

A: <cause you ain't going out that easy]

25



K: That means you never loved him.

26

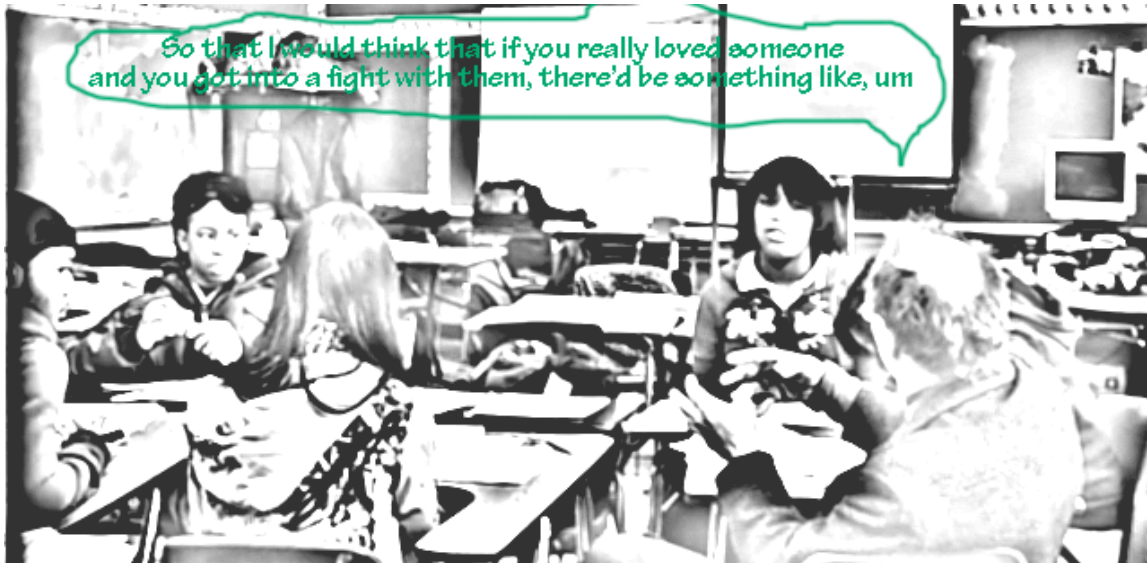


G: So that's what I would think [too/=

K: =Yeah

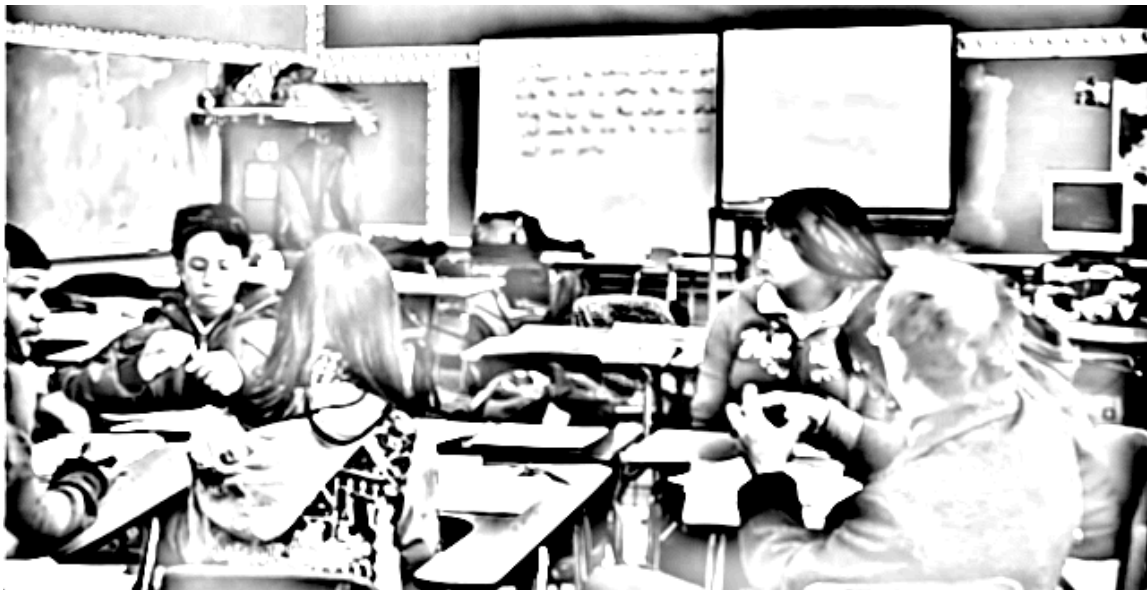
M: <that don't sound] right at all

27



G: So that, I would think that if you really loved someone and you got into a fight with them, there'd be something like, um

28



29



30



31



(1.5)

32



GF: it would take a while

33



(0.5)

34



A: not even

35



G: not even?

36



37



(0.7)

38



K: yes even

39



(0.2)

40



even? ((laughing))

A: yes

41



42



43



(1.0)

44



D: Wait, wait, what?

A: Huh?

K: I'm confused

Guide to Chapter 13: When love breaks

When love breaks, it feels like death.

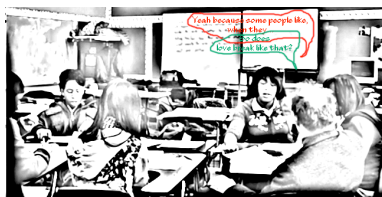
Excerpt from Ana's poem

1



G: When love breaks it feels like death

2



A: Yeah because some people like, when they=

G: So does love break like that?

6



A: Sometimes, like the relationship just ends.

There is a long silence, over one second, after my question. After the pause, Ana and I have the floor to ourselves and everyone is focused on what we are saying; there are no side conversations anymore. My effort to repair the split of the group, to make us into one group again, seems to have worked. When Ana does speak, I interrupt her response to my question, not a strategy I generally ascribe to. I am trying to get her to think about how breaking love really feels, to think about if love really “breaks,” and if the metaphor of death for a love that comes apart is well chosen. If so, why? Ana is being reflective again, drawing out the “sometimes” in her phrase.

7



G: like *snaps*?

“other group” is drawn in, and they are all paying attention to what we are saying and doing. Thus, there are no interruptions despite the pauses that might facilitate them. These are the magic moments that a teacher relishes. We are talking about words, the difference between love “snapping” and love “breaking,” and the “feeling” that is bound to both those metaphors.

8



(0.4)

9



A: [Yeah::::like/

G: <when you say] *breaks*, it's like=

D: =(("snaps" his maker cap onto his maker to make snapping sound))

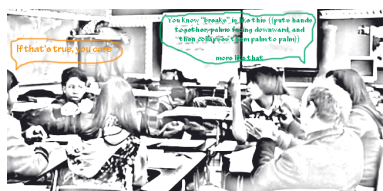
GF: you know, when you say “breaks” it's like this ((indicate break by putting my fists together and then twisting them apart))

consciousness, a bit of sound to mask my lack of words. Without microanalysis, I would never have noticed Darryl's anticipatory solidarity with me. In his version of a love falling part, love “breaking” has a brittle sound.

Ana is back on track, thinking about words, her words, and she and I are in synchrony. Our hand gestures waltz with each other and she is smiling. The

We are a group in synchrony again, everyone engaged even if silently as is clear from the gaze in their eyes, all focused on Ana and me. I am struggling with finding a word to transmit the many different ways that love can “break,” but Darryl comes in right on cue, in total step with me, by snapping his marker cap at the precise moment that I need help in finishing my sentence. I do not think I was aware of that “snap” in the moment, but the sound file in Praat brought it into my

10



G: you know, breaks is like this ((puts hands together, palms facing downward, and then collapses them together, palm facing palm))

D: If that's true, you care

G: more like that ((indicating the gesture that Kelvin is making—two fists abutting each other and then yanking them apart))

Everyone is participating, verbally or gesturally.

Maleeka holds her two markers together and then splits them apart, leading me to acknowledge her tonal illustration of breaking love by saying, “more like that.” My own attempt to demonstrate, visually, a love that ends is woefully insufficient, a recognition of how hard it is to equate words with feelings. Nevertheless, it inspires others to try their own hands at it (literally speaking). Kelvin gestures a different type of break—

a tenser one, as he pulls his marker cap away from the base, the exact opposite movement of what Darryl did, to indicate a relationship breaking (one that I wish I had picked up on at the time). Though I was not agile enough to reflect on the variation of the “breaks” that the group responded with, they, together, portrayed the polysemic nature of deteriorating love, improvising with the tools at hand and demonstrating the many different forms of communication we need in our daily lives in our attempts to express ourselves.

11



S: Yeah, like someone=

A: YEAH, he just be like

All except Shelly is gesturing with their hands, forming a chorus of passionate movements. Shelly, is trying to be heard but stops speaking as Ana interrupts, loudly, passionately and personally. For the first time, she is not talking about an abstract concept like “love”

but about a person (“he”) who did something to her. She makes eye contact with everyone in the group as she speaks.

12



A: It's Over

13



K: That's what I thought

S: Yeah, like Ana did to Kelvin

as it applies to the concept of “breaking” relationships” and is quite definitely successful text-to-self connection-making. It begins with Shelly inserting, as an example of a “break up” that just ends abruptly, the dumping of Kelvin by Ana. Ana laughs with self-satisfaction and makes eye contact with Shelly (I had known nothing about their relationship). Kelvin just grits his teeth into a hard smile and stares at Shelly.

14



M: Teh heh heh heh ((laughing))

I previously told the group that using

names of people in the classroom was not allowed, that we should not “get personal,” but I am not on the ball right now.

Everyone remains engaged, but it's almost as if by making herself vulnerable, Ana made it easier for her peers to personalize the discussion in ways that hurt the group. Indeed, the 10 seconds following Ana's reflection on her own relationship take a turn that grabs me by surprise and makes me uncomfortable even

Maleeka is laughing, but it's unclear if she is responding to Darryl's remark or if she is joining in the fun that Ana and Sheryl are sharing at Kelvin's expense. Kelvin stares stonily at her.

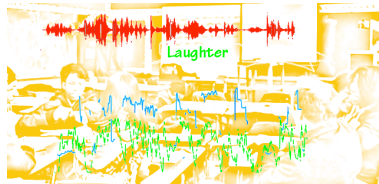
15



K: Like Jaquan did with you

Kelvin, on the other hand, is on the ball and he repartees immediately. Both Ana and Darryl stare at Shelly and gasp, their jaws dropping simultaneously.

16



((8.5 seconds of laughter))

Eight and a half seconds of laughter, this time at Shelly's expense, cascade around the room. The laughter is itself polysemic—partly mocking, partly sympathetic, partly embarrassed—all these meanings

clear in the sound of the laughter but not in the fact of laughter per se or in a measurement of how loudly or quickly it rolls. Just as silence can be electric or stagnant, taut with anticipation or dulled by indifference, laughter, too, can express a range of feelings. Because Shelly is facing away from the camera, her reaction is hidden, but Kelvin is clearly smirking. While Shelly's remark seemed to cause hilarity between Ana and her at Kelvin's expense, Kelvin's remark generates group-wide laughter at Shelly's expense. Details about students' relationships with each other entered the classroom discussion bearing witness, to some degree, to the casualness with which these students accepted my presence among them, with all the benefits and detriments that casualness has for learning and teacher-student relationships. Before this interchange, I had had no idea that Kelvin and Ana had been an item. Looking at the video now, I don't think I grasped the degree of nastiness in the banter that was taking place. On revisiting the discussion through the video, however, it is clearly visible and audible.

17



G: But love doesn't always go like this, does it? ((indicating an abrupt break with hands))

18

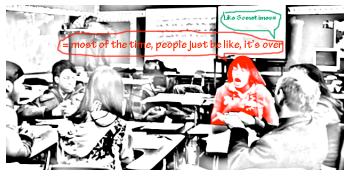


19



(0.9)

20



GF: Like sometimes=
A:=most of the time, people just be like, it's over

Instead of seeking to repair the damage to our group solidarity by confronting the contradictions to discourse that are taking place I ignore them and seek repair by focusing on Ana's poem. Ana is still laughing while Kelvin glares angrily at Shelly; he has been wounded and has exacted revenge.

The almost second of silence following my question is a sign that the group is coming together again, though it is impossible to tell what is really going on with each of its members.

21



A: I'm near the door=

K: =because that means, that means=

22



K: That means [it wasn't love then cause love/ is not that easy

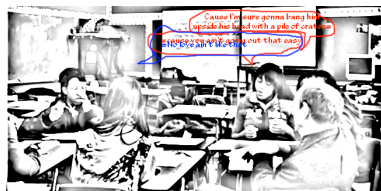
A: <While someone gets hit by a pile of crates]

23



((laughter,-1 sec.))

24



A: Cause I'm sure gonna bang him upside his head with a pile of crates=

K: =[No, love ain't like that/

A: <cause you ain't going out that easy]

The past eighteen seconds have displayed two very different experiences with love on the part of two middle-schoolers. Ana's experience is that love can end in a second, unexpectedly, abruptly. At the moment she feels that a relationship will end quickly but not without a fight, without her lover being "banged upside the head with a pile of crates." I laughed as she said this and she returned my laughter, a sign that we could make fun of her fury, because we were "ok" with each other. There was a high level of confidence and even camaraderie between us even though Ana is feeling pain. Kelvin is also experiencing pain. He may still be smarting from his breakup with Ana. For him, love doesn't "snap" all-at-once, but breaks at a slower pace. "Love is not that easy," he says. "Love ain't like that," "that means you never loved him." The vehemence with which both Ana and Kelvin are expressing themselves, the high decibel level of their speech, the forward leans of their bodies, and their active hand motions all are conveyers of their own drive to figure things out. They are not battling just to score points.

25

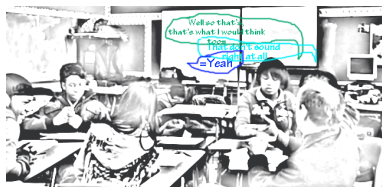


They are shouting and listening at once, seriously tackling an issue which tackles them, seemingly on a daily basis. Breaking love is one of the burdens they carry with them to school. That

K: *That means you never loved him.*

these former twelve-year-old “lovers” are searching sincerely together, through dialog, to help explain what love is really about, despite the bad feelings that may exist between them, is revealed continually during these 50 minutes as both Kelvin and Ana show their vulnerabilities and their pain.

26



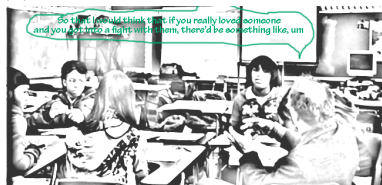
G: *So that's what I would think [too/=*

K: *=Yeah*

M: *<that don't sound] right at all*

One of my strongest memories from this session is Kelvin sitting up straight, looking at me, and saying “YEAH,” almost thankful that I listened to him and responded positively to his opinion, “That means you never loved him.” Darryl and Shelly are, meanwhile having a side conversation, a contradiction though it only lasts a second.

27



GF: *So that, I would think that if you really loved someone and you got into a fight with them, there'd be something like, um*

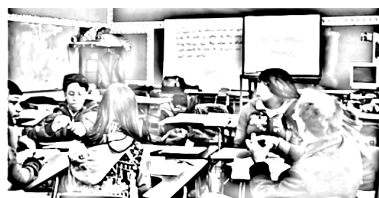
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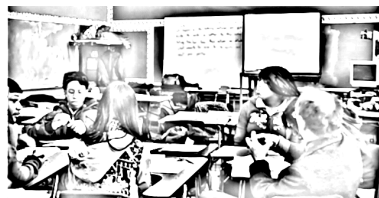
30



31



32



(1.5)

33



GF: it would take a while



A: not even

During the second and a half it takes me to finish my sentence, none of the students talk. Indeed Ana turns to look at Kelvin while Darryl and Shelly turn their attentions back to the group. Ana turns to me as I say that “if you really loved someone, “it would take a while to break up.

After half a second Ana speaks, but she is not budging from what her experience has taught her thus far.

35

GF: *not even?*

36



37



(0.7)

38

K: *yes even*

39



(0.2)

We experience another energetic half second of silence, and this time Kelvin reasserts his position.

40

A: *yes even?* ((laughing))

41



42

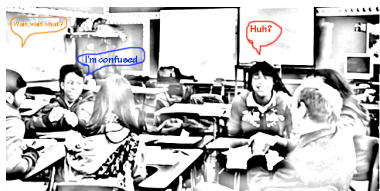


43



(1.0)

44



D: Wait, wait, what?

A: Huh?

K: *I'm confused*

Ana turns to him and laughs. She questions Kelvin. A few seconds ago these two were speaking loudly, forcefully, adamantly. Now they are speaking softly and gently, and listening patiently, allowing the silence to become part of the dialog, part of the brew that allows thought and language to interact dialectically through one another.

There is another long pause. Kelvin admits, “I’m confused,” but he is laughing along with Ana and everyone else that is seen by the camera. It is not a bad place to be when discussing a complex subject.

It is noteworthy that the conversation ends with laughter on a harmonious, and quiet note. The two main protagonists here, Ana and Kelvin, have been arguing and collaborating, confessing and attacking. But now the group seems to be one again.

Chapter 14: Reflecting on my methods of analysis

I have used a variety of methods to help perceive student qualities that go to the heart of their academic potential though they are ignored by school systems of assessment. These include most significantly passion for intellectual discussion and investigation, reflexivity and collaborative engagement with peers. I have produced transcripts to analyze the words and sentences that my students have used; scrutinized their talk (by analyzing the rhythm and intensity of their speech and of their silences); and watched them interact (by observing video of their body postures, movements, eye gazes, and facial expressions). To underscore moments of passion I painted students red who exhibited strong emotion; for deep moments of reflection I used pink. When I believed a student has attempted to shame another, I overlay scenes of interactions with a yellow filter. I tried to escape quantification of any phenomenon though, in some cases, measurement lies in the shadow of my methods. For example, I represented increasing speech volume, measured in decibels, by increasing the point size of the letters in the phrases spoken. The point size I selected was calibrated to the decibel measure. Still to report that someone is speaking at 57 dB tells you little about the person or his voice, unless, like a musician with perfect pitch who can sight-read, you can read a decibel chart and hear the volume referenced. I hope my use of color viscerally transmits what numbers can't.

In an effort to escape the constraints of any code or representation, I also included, occasionally, sound files. These, unfortunately, can only be accessed if reading a digital version of the document. Still, the sound file communicates a human quality to what is going on that numbers and colors on a printed page cannot do.

In true multilectical spirit, all these methods of communication must be seen as overlaying one another, as working together to form a sense of the whole. Each method by itself only gives us a slice of reality, and what we are seeking is as full a picture as possible. We should always remember that we are dealing with individual human beings, not symbols or cardboard representatives of class or racial stereotypes. The entire scheme that I have devised, however, does not make any sense at all unless there is the political will to rethink educational policy and to reformulate our concept of what student qualities schools should attend to and cultivate.

The transcripts

Each of the three chapters that details a discussion about Ana's poem begins with a transcript of that conversation written in accordance with standard conversational analysis conventions. Even just analyzing this artifact, we can see that these students are grappling with metaphoric concepts—love as “thick and thin” or as “hate or madness” and love as some “thing” that “breaks.” Aristotle wrote that the “command of metaphors” was a “mark of genius” because using them well “implies an eye for resemblances” (2000, part 22, para 4). Here, these 12-year-olds are seriously exploring how the metaphors can clarify their feelings. Furthermore, the transcripts, by themselves, make clear that these twelve-year-olds have intimate knowledge of what love can be like, and that it is important to them to find the words that will express their experiences. It is for this reason that Ana's poem, that included these metaphoric phrases, resonated with everyone in the group. The transcripts reflect this resonance to the degree that each participant, at least at some point during the discussion, says something pertaining to the central ideas that are circulating within the group. It should be noted that this is maybe the first time these students are, as a group, so intensely examining the writing of a peer. With more practice, they could do so even more profoundly.

Language Arts classes should help students find the language that will help them probe the meanings of their lives, indeed that should be one of the primary goals of a language arts class. We see this occurring in the vignettes I have analyzed.

Thus, as Ana was trying to explain what “thick and thin” meant, Darryl helped her by saying “hard times,” to which Ana responded, gratefully, with a “yeah.” Then Kelvin built upon Darryl’s insight and Ana’s acknowledgement of it to say, “so thick....means hard” even as Ana was still working on the puzzle. The construction of knowledge here is a group endeavor, spurred on, in this case, by my asking the right questions and by students seriously, intensely, and perceptively engaging with each other within an environment that we collaboratively (if unspokenly) agreed would be a safe one.

When the students discussed if one could love someone and hate someone at the same time, it was Shelly who moved the discussion forward by providing a concrete example of a person that she hated and loved simultaneously (her mother). Her offering immediately caught fire with Ana and the others. Ana responds, “Yeah, cause I love my mother, but sometimes I be hating her.”

From a careful reading of the transcript itself, it can be seen that even as individual students fought to be in the spotlight, they were pushing each other on to think through the metaphors that Ana used.

From the transcripts alone then we can learn that these students can engage in parsing figurative language and that they can collaborate with each other to gain insights into the relationship between words, ideas, and feelings. None of this can be gleaned from test scores.

What do the transcripts not tell us?

Since we interpret text through our own experiences and invent voices and attitudes to accompany the words we read, much as we do when we are absorbed in a novel, we cannot know with any degree of certainty the emotional tenor that accompanied the thoughts and speech of the students involved. We do not know if they were speaking loudly or softly, slow or rapidly, high pitched or basso. We do not know how they were interacting, what was transmitted by the looks in their eyes or the shrugs of their shoulders. In short, we cannot tell from reading the transcripts alone if they were participating with verve, if they were engaged or merely going through the motions of discourse. And because in a group conversation many are often silent, we cannot tell of what this silence consisted. Was it one that tingled with anticipative energy and receptive enthusiasm, or was it stagnant and dull?

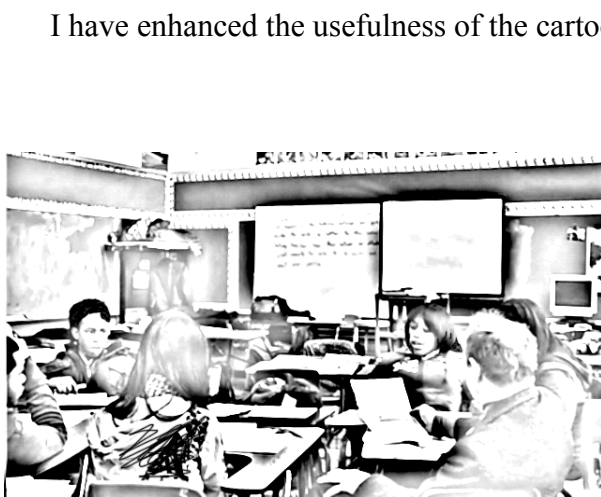
When we confront one another face-to-face, we absorb visual, aural, and kinetic stimuli all at once to form an instantaneous idea of whom we are communicating with (though we can easily misread and we can change our minds based on new information.) A printed document, however it is designed, cannot communicate so multilectically. Meso- and microanalysis can help us come closer to a full reading of research subjects.

The cartoon

The cartoon format, made possible through microanalysis, allows us to see static images of fluid gestural language; the transcript by itself hides these aspects of communication. Because of the ethical imperative to protect the privacy of those depicted, I have altered the hairdos of the participants, lowered the resolution of the pictures, and converted the images from color into

gray scale. Though these alterations together remove us from some of the fullness of the captured event, we can still observe participant movements and facial expressions from the images.

In the image below, though nobody is verbally communicating, all participants whose faces we see are directed towards Ana, letting us know that the group ambiance is characterized, by engagement (focus on Ana) and by collaboration (nobody is seeking to seize the floor from her). If we consider engagement with group discussion and collaboration with group members an important aspect of teaching and learning, then being able to demonstrate its existence within the context of a writing “workshop” is important (especially when it is so often absent in the classroom).



I have enhanced the usefulness of the cartoon format by inserting bubble-enclosed text, as they do in comic strips, to indicate the words, or the absence of words, that occurred within the same moment of time as the gestures depicted within the accompanying image. Obviously, this is not an exact simultaneity, as our movements and expressions are constantly in motion. A more micro-dispositioned researcher would do a more meticulous rendition and certainly derive some different insights from doing so more exactly/minutely than I have.

In my attempt to focus the reader’s attention to the emotionally saturated nature of my students’ commitment to learning and to the collaboratively-produced richness of their discourse, I have, added statistically-dependent methods to the cartoon form. I have translated decibels into point sizes in the belief that watching the text grow and diminish graphically will stimulate in the reader an inner voice more representative of the speaking student than a numerical equivalent for

Kelvin and Ana, the way they collaborate even as they compete—raising their voices against one another to be heard while moving towards the same goal of understanding what true love is. Such measuring of pitch and loudness, of the rhythm of speech—how it transitions from quick to slow and loud to soft—are fantastic tools to help us hear what is going on just as our ability to follow - second by second - the movements of lips and eyes aid us to see. Once a vignette is analyzed minutely, we can look at the phenomena newly, and we can see things that before would not have been visible to us. This despite the fact that the numerical data that refers to speech and gestural variation is, by itself, feeling-less and unable to capture the electricity of human interaction. Through a combination of text bubbles, text-size variation, and color all overlaying the cartoon itself, I have tried to translate the data into a form less removed from the humanness of the actual event than numerical “equivalences” would be.

Within the comic we see and hear visually, we watch the students, frame by frame, struggling with the same concept. We watch them being silent in unison and speaking simultaneously. Often they raise and lower the volume of their speech together, as if anticipating each other, as if a conductor were directing their entrance onto the stage. This learning “together” is not even considered relevant to the testing process, which despite emphasis on group work in classroom settings belittles the importance of collective interaction to individual attributes.

Though the transcript alone indicates that the students are pushing each other to delve deeper into ideas, the cartoon format provides us with evidence of the investigation’s passionate nature. Indeed without an emotional commitment to the theme being discussed, it is not clear that the students would be engaged with each other at all. Thinking back on Marx and Vygotsky, these cartoons make clear the unalienated nature of the text students are considering here. The cartoons also helps us understand that the meaning of every utterance is mediated by all

participants in the dialogic relationship (1981), and that meaning is arrived at collectively, every idea linked to previous ones.

We graphically see this dynamic in action, for example, in the second vignette where Shelly says, “yes your mother. Here we notice, in a much more emphatic way than the transcript makes visible, the way Ana’s insight builds

upon Shelly’s contribution. We see Shelly’s gestural language accompanying her words and Ana’s total attention directed towards Shelly.



Indeed, from the eye gazes and facial expressions of all the participants, it is clear that the group’s attention is momentarily mesmerized by Shelly’s contribution—another example of learning together. The vignette, again, demonstrates how the collective is working together, how the participants are instinctually “susceptible” to each other (Roth, 2007), and how every statement is uttered with a listener in mind. Bakhtin, writing about the concept of “addressivity”, emphasizes the importance of “the other for whom my thought becomes actual thought for the first time and from whom “the speaker expects a response” (1986, p. 94). When that response occurs (one that can be expressed verbally or silently, through gestural acts or facial expressions), it is also enacted with the “expectation of a response” thus continuing the dynamic. Even when the addressee’s reaction is muted, or more internally active, it is reflected outwardly in some way and is noticeable even if only on the micro level of analysis. Interpreting these communicative acts well rests on the multilectical nature of the lenses brought to bear on the interactions. The vignettes illuminate these events.

I have also included sensory-dependent methods within the cartoons to provide additional data about what was actually going on in the classroom. These were necessarily subjective, based on my own interpretations of what students were feeling at the time. My in-the-moment microanalysis of their voices and movements, the measured amplitude, frequency, and pitches of their voices, and my personal knowledge of the participants all influenced these assessments. And so when I felt someone was expressing a passionate feeling I painted them red, and when I felt that someone was being shamed I painted the entire scene yellow.

The reliability and validity of tests are undermined because they ignore the role of emotions in both learning and assessment, and are not designed to capture or build upon the feelings students carry around with them.



Reflecting upon one's own ideas is a sign of scholarly inclination, and at times my students seemed to be overtly immersed in rethinking their own thoughts. I have chosen the color pink to



represent such instances of visible-aural reflection. In every case that I have dubbed reflective in this way, the student in question spoke very softly (as indicated by a small type).

In the example above, Ana ---whose loudest contributions are much louder than anyone else's, is speaking in barely a whisper. I have asked her to reconsider the line in her poem, "love is what you want it to be," and here she



In

spreading enthusiasm with the learning process. Mr. C., for example, was able to work so well with his students because they trusted him to be on their side: he spoke their language and appreciated the street as a welcome partner in the school. Though I could not have the same type of relationship with these students as Mr. C. could, I was able to construct with them a different ambiance of trust. Indeed, Ana allowed me entry into her world through her poem because she believed that she could safely reveal to me aspects of her life outside school. Without that trust, the classroom teacher and I would probably never have known about her poem. Indeed I know of five students in Ana's class who wrote for themselves (some poetry, some autobiographies, some fiction) and who, for good reasons perhaps, did so under the radar of teacher and administrator perceptions. There may have been many more. So trust between students and teachers should be seen as a facilitating condition of learning. As it is now, trust is rarely spoken about when we speak about student performance in school.



In the off-prints at right and below, we can visually corroborate the relationship of trust



established between Ana and me. At right, for example, Ana is smiling, we are making eye-contact, and our hands are creating a welcoming circle, unconsciously cavorting with each other,

with her arm and hand vertically positioned between my horizontally spaced hands facing in toward her hand. Careful analysis of the video focuses our attention on the fact that “a hand is not simply part of the body, but the expression and continuation of a thought which must be capture and conveyed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 68). Here, the movement of Ana's hands and

mine together radiate trust, fun, and engagement with an intellectual concept, all signs of solidarity with each other. We are enjoying the moment and we are listening to each other. In the off-print to the left, Ana directs her attention to me as she develops her new insight based on Shelly's previous remarks. In both instances, the quality of trust and good humor between us, as facilitators of learning, is apparent. They were brought to my attention through microanalysis and would have not been visible without it. Where though does the concept of "trust" figure in the discourse about teaching and learning in the public schools?

What do the cartoons not tell us?

There is an aspect of the cartoons that is as formulaic as trying to quantify emotion and intelligence with graphs and statistics. I suspect that the use of red to represent passion, for example, would lose its luster if repeated multiple times within and across research studies (and of course the color itself may signify differently to different readers).

Though I quote what students said during our class, it would have enhanced my study to include their reflections on the actual vignettes that I have used here. For that reason, just as I had asked Ana to read over what I had written about her in the first pages of this investigation, I asked her, towards the end of the year, if she would review these vignettes and tell me what she thought was "going on" within them. She seemed indifferent to my proposal and we never met to review them. When I consulted with Mr. C. about it, he told me that he didn't think it would be fruitful, too much time having passed since the actual discussion and Ana had moved to other things. Still, having Ana's perspective (and those of her participant-peers) on what was happening would enrich this study and make it more polysemic and polyphonic.

In the same vein, my system of representing non-verbally filled time with offprints that are void of text is problematic. It takes longer to read through the images of silence than it would to

actually experience that silence if measured chronometrically (though not necessarily if measured by sensory duration). If my scale of image to elapsed time were different, the experience of reading the silence through images would also be different. Nevertheless, some choice had to be made, and just as different individuals may experience identical events differently- as interminably long or frustratingly short for example, so different readers will feel the silent frames differently, or read through them at different paces. This indeed is an issue with the entire concept of the cartoons. They convert fluid motion and conversation into static images and thus render a very different sense of time than that radiated through the actual lived experience.

Sound files

Occasionally, I have included sound files to accompany the cartoons. They serve as a reminder that our interactions with each other cannot be reduced to a word on a page or a snapshot of conversation. Our voice can be diagrammed, but the diagram is not a substitute for the real, in-the-moment experience of listening to someone speak just as the vignettes are no substitute for the experience of conversation. Still, I hope the addition of voice files keeps us aware that, even though each of us carry with us the marks of class, and race, we are analyzing and assessing individual human beings. Incorporated into our voices (as in our glances and gestures) are those very immeasurables—passion, trust, reflexivity, humor, joy, uniqueness—that are all facilitators of what is known as academic learning. They are often squelched and ignored in our schools and go unnoticed by tools of official assessments there.

What the sound files do not do

To begin with, sound files can only be accessed through digital media, thus they are absent in the printed text. The other issue that I have encountered in their use is that the listener often does not understand what the speaker is saying (even when they can hear the excitement, frustration, or sadness in their voice). This goes to the heart of the discussion about street English and academic English, to the different languages that we speak, and the crisis of cultural friction that the schools seem unable to confront in a fruitful way.

The guides

The guides offer a frame-by-frame description the people involved in the discussion, their gestures, their facial expressions, the nature of their interactions with each other, and an interpretation of those events. They are there to supplement the actual cartoons and to contextualize them with careful observational data. My concept was that the reader would first read the cartoons by themselves in order to reap as much as he could from that format. Once read, he would review it again, reading the guide alongside to give him further insight into what was taking place on the micro level.

How my methods illuminated solidarity and contradictions in collective practice

The vignettes offer us a wonderful example of students trying to make sense of language, trying to find the words that express their feelings, and collaborating with each other to reflect on their own experiences. We see them struggling to come to grips with a world that isn't black and white, that isn't dualistic but rather complex, relational, and full of contradictions. In short their discussion reveals a multilectical world in which the many fields in which they act affect their concepts of love. It is a tribute to Ana and her colleagues that all of these intellectual pursuits

emerge from the writing of a 12-year-old who is writing for herself and, by doing so, also serving her peers, discovering words to convey their feelings as well as her own, and generating dialog about an issue that follows them all. Maintaining the relevance of writing to the lives our students lead should be one of the primary goals of those who design and implement literacy policy.

The vignettes also expose contradictions. It clear from the video that students, in the midst of a discussion that was generally good-natured and productive, were also arguing and making fun of one another—sometimes in a nasty way. The informality of the setting, the voluntary nature of our grouping and its existence outside of the grading protocol of the school, facilitated a climate in which these students were willing both to expose their own vulnerabilities as well to purposefully, and mean-spiritedly, expose those of their classmates. What is fascinating is that in two of the three instances of mockery that take place, first Shelly making fun of Kelvin and then Kelvin returning the favor, were directly relevant to the discussion about the difficulty of love and the ways that love breaks. Because I do not know how the discussion documented here continued once our group dispersed, it is impossible for me to know the significance of the negative emotions generated during an otherwise positively “valenced” conversation. What is clear is that the passionate interchanges that took place within our group, whether directed at other individuals or emerging in response to an idea, were deeply influenced by students’ experiences outside of school. Indeed Ana’s poem itself was a response to a romantic relationship that followed her during her school hours. Clearly a researcher cannot be privy to all the worlds of his students.

In the moment, however, the mockery was, almost certainly, hurtful to those it was directed at. Shelly’s back is facing the camera and so we cannot see her reaction to being shamed because

of her breakup with Jaquan, but—and here is where the micro level aids us to understand what is going on—we can see Kelvin grimace, grit his teeth, and then sneer, and we can hear his voice rise as he gets his revenge for having his broken relationship with Ana ridiculed.

When they do occur, however, contradictions are not always easy to repair. Teachers who see themselves as guides must decide when to stop a fruitful conversation to discuss the etiquette of discourse. In the vignettes above, I had to decide if we should take a detour from our conversation to criticize the personalized nature of the examples being used. Later in a part of the session not highlighted here, when I was exasperated with the students' insensitivity to each other, I told Ana "it's not ok to get personal." She replied, "I know, but Darryl just said "let's get Kelvin and Ana to talk about it, but there ain't no love between us," a comment that further served to wound. When I repeated the same admonition to Maleeka she replied, "I know Mr. Fellner, but I'm only doing it because of what Ana said before." For these young adolescents who are struggling with relationships that are sexually and emotionally fraught, tackling the issues of nasty comments head-on in the moment is not always the best course of action for it risks further hurt in a public forum.

The obligation to confront contradictions falls on all participants in a group, however, not only on the teacher. Indeed, throughout the discussion about Ana's poem, each time contradictions became manifest, it was the group that came together to repair them with every student helping to create a space in which the conversation could continue. Microanalysis thus reveals how these individuals worked together to maintain the integrity of the collective because they had a stake in the activity they were participating in.

Though all the students involved in the vignettes above knew about the broken relationship between Ana and Kelvin, it was a revelation to me and shed a new light on the dynamics of what

was going on during our 50-minute meeting. The combination of collaborative searching and combative discourse between Ana and Kelvin could be interpreted not merely as a response to the substance of Ana's poem but also as one feeding off the substance of their experiences together. Had I known about their relationship in advance, I might not have permitted Kelvin to participate in the group. As it turned out, however, he was an important contributor to what transpired. Multiple fields of social life come together in the classroom in ways that are not always predictable.

Other clear contradictions reveal students having short side-conversations that make it difficult to understand what was going on. These side conversations could be interpreted as purposefully subversive of the teacher-imposed agenda, brief diversions without any great significance to or consequence for the dominant discussion, or serious offshoots from the main conversation that, though disruptive, were important to and fruitful for the students partaking in it. In the vignettes above, my tendency is to think of them as relatively insignificant rather than subversive. My determination rests on the fact that every time there was a side conversation, its participants returned to the general discussion after only a few seconds. My methods, however, were influenced by this determination, and so in a number of cases where I could not make out the substance of a side conversation (because those involved were not clearly heard by the microphone), I excluded the interchange entirely. I did so because including these "digressions" would have made it more difficult to follow the transcripts and the cartoons. Another researcher, might want to make an investigation that concentrated on these very side conversations that I excluded.

Multilevel analysis

After Ana, her peers and I had finished our discussion, I felt buoyant and excited. I felt we had just concluded a perfect class. It was this sense of exuberance that drove me back to the vignettes. I wanted to examine them in order to discover what made our session work so well. Reviewing the vignettes, I found that though there were thrilling moments characterized by laughter, insight, and passionate declarations, there were also moments that made me shudder and that could easily have escalated in ugly ways. I was taken aback by the groups resolve to make the session successful despite these contradictions and despite my occasional obliviousness of important events that contributed to negative emotions. The enthusiasm that was generated, the commitment to learning together, the resolve to repair moments of tension, gives a glimmer of what might transpire if such collaborative efforts were part and parcel of education in school. With practice, we could all have learned to be even better in the moment with each other, to share with greater skill our dialogic engagement and thus enrich the experience we were creating and sharing.

Though the data I collected through micro and meso analysis couldn't substitute for the actual voice and look of the students themselves, it gave me evidence to support my contention that students were passionately engaged in an intellectual quest despite school tests that denied their intellectual capabilities and their emotional commitment to learning. The microlevel illustrates, in a way that is impossible to see on the macrolevel and hard to catch on the mesolevel (because it is not consciously experienced), the humanness that voice and gesture make explicit. It provides us evidence of revelatory sparks of insight, made visible through sound, silence and movement. It gives us data to contend that these students can be passionately engaged in the pursuit of self-knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

Schools need to take the time to assess students as they interact with each other in settings that facilitate thinking. They need to recognize the immeasurable qualities that students have as integral to their academic success. By joining micro and meso analysis of student interactions in the classroom with the sound and visual files of those events, we can illuminate those critical qualities not captured by quantitative assessments. Doing so, we can make a case that failing students get excited about ideas and words, are curious about investigating, through language, what happens to them in their daily life, and have the capacity to be reflective. We need schools that build trust, nourish curiosity and excitement, and, by doing so, promote the potential of failing students to be great writers and thinkers.

Chapter 15: Ana's second poem, a new beginning

Many weeks after this discussion was filmed, Mr. C's students were given a broadly conceived writing assignment as an end-of-year project. They could write whatever they wanted for a class newspaper. Ana chose to write a poem. These are the notes Ana wrote during our five minute brainstorming session together:

Surrounded by green and burgundy
 The tighter it gets by the minute
 The room gets smaller (so) I get bigger
 The more you try to see past, the further it gets
 I'm trapped in a box, I can't get out.
 Not expressing, stuck inside.
 The other side

When I asked Ana why green and burgundy, she replied,

A: "Because I hate those colors.

G: It sounds like you're trapped in a box, a green and burgundy box. Since you hate green and burgundy, do you hate being in the box? Try to figure out why you're in there and why the room is closing in on you.

A: Because I can't express what I feel, I can't let the anger out."

G: So what are you saying the box is?

A: I'm the box

G: And what are you angry about?

A: "Love always getting away."

G: “Why don’t you scream or vomit or hit something to let the anger out?”

A: It’s like there’s a tiger inside me, biting and scratching me trying to get out?

G. So that’s one side, the inside. What do you mean by “the other side?”

A: It’s the side I don’t show anyone. It’s like two sides playing hide and seek but they can’t find each other.

G: Think about that more. Try to write about those two sides.

Ana is becoming a serious poet with the help of her classmates, her language arts teacher, and me. Given her failing grades, however, that stigmatize her without capturing even a trace of her passion, creativity, and persistent search for answers, and given the rare attention that school officials give to her writing and the issues that confront her, she is in jeopardy of falling through the cracks. That would be a tragedy for her and for us.

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Part 5
Reflecting on the text

Chapter 16

Pulling the strands together

The hermeneutist, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), wrote, “Understanding begins... when something addresses us” (1989, p. 299), when we are struck by questions, intrigued by what we are hearing, seeing, or feeling; filled with wonder at what is rumbling within and without; awed by what we cannot comprehend. Education, at its best, fires up that sense of inquisitiveness and excitement, the raw materials of the search for knowledge. But in our institutions of formal education, especially in poor communities (Kozol, 2005), the obsession to measure intelligence and rank students, the insistence on curricula that emphasize remediation rather than enrichment, and the enforcing of disciplinary codes that are deaf to student culture douse the spark on which curiosity feeds. When we seek to quantify knowledge and judge intelligence rather than to probe and nourish the immeasurables on which knowledge and intelligence thrive, we destroy whatever tenuous hope these students might still have that literacy blazes the path to freedom, enlightenment, and prosperity. Reading and writing, which at their most intoxicating teach us about ourselves, each other and the world we share, are then severed from their inspirational marrow and left bound to nothing but the demands of the school bureaucracy. When the links between literacy and self-knowledge, success and freedom, dissolves, school becomes a hostile trap, and education a chore to be suffered rather than an adventure to be savored. Alienated from the academic path, students will then, as the statistical data makes clear, search for fulfillment in other ways and other places. Many of these will be dangerous and dismal.

Yet standardized tests and the mania to make them the central affirmation of student worth lead us down this very path of dysfunction and contradiction. Tools of quantification and a gauge to measure who conforms to the “standard,” they tell us only what we already know, dividing

students into winners and losers with Blacks and Latinos/as firmly in the latter category. Because these tests reflect dominant ways of perceiving and evaluating, there is no place in their matrix for those who don't fit the "standard" mold. Indeed, the tests are deaf to the language of street and home, indifferent to the knowledge that strays from that of the privileged, and blind to the things my students "carry." Unable to make sense of those they are assessing, often unable to even attract their attention, the tests translate the exuberant intelligence and passionate searching of my students into numbers and letters that signal deficiency and inferiority. If we then look at these adolescents through the deficits that are highlighted by those tests, and then teach only to those deficits – focusing on the failure of categories of people according to standards, values and perceptions of other more dominant categories of people – then my students will continue to receive scores affirming their inability to do well in school. Indeed, the ten years of No Child Left Behind makes this case well. And so the Justins, the Anas, the Ashleys and the Tiffanys – who I hope I have well represented as incisive thinkers, creative wordsmiths, philosophically reflective, warm and engaging, witty and funny, are discarded as failures.

But it is not their failure but the system's that should leave us aghast. Its inability to view my students multilectically, to welcome their many overflowing worlds, each one permeated by multiple interactive fields of social life, shuts out from consideration the fullness of who they are and what they have to offer.

We are right, of course, to be alarmed when seventh graders read at third grade level, when their vocabularies are meager and their code-switching skills insufficient, and when their writing contains errors of grammar and spelling on every line. These are serious obstacles to their intellectual growth and future prosperity, an enduring legacy of poverty, joblessness, racism, and economic systems that necessitate massive inequality as a sustaining force. Their endemic nature

reflects damningly on macro structures supported by the forces of power and wealth that have little interest in their eradication. And yet stifling as macro structures can be, we are not powerless to transform them, for they are not isolated or stagnant, and the edges that define field boundaries are porous, elastic, and, indeed, imaginary. Changing one's practice on the meso scale of activity, during the conscious enactment of daily life, and sensitizing ourselves to what takes place on the micro level, affects what takes place on the macro scale of seeming permanence—that's what multilectics teaches.

And so we can resist wherever we are, most incisively by challenging dominant modes of perception and the practices that emerge with it. Doing so won't immediately transform the macro structures that categorize my students as worth-less. And work on the meso and micro level is not a substitute for agitation for systemic justice and decency. But within the damaged spaces of schools, we can begin to "destroy the experience of daily life" (Marcuse, 1970, p. 103) by perceiving students as multidimensional individuals who, whatever their reading and writing skills, deserve an education that moves them, engages them, and transforms formal teaching and learning into experiences to be lived rather than burdens to be endured.

What I hope the previous pages have made clear is that students who are deemed failures by a barrage of statistical evidence are as intelligent, inquisitive and thoughtful as the children of the most favored members of society. When we teach to their strengths rather than their weaknesses, and when we respect and welcome their worlds of experiences, they will respond with passion, critical thinking and imaginative riffs. When we give them the freedom, through laughter, to transform classroom space into a place a little more familiar and less hierarchical than it would be without their co-participation, they will feel less alien in the schools they are forced to attend. Meanwhile, regardless of what test makers report, students will produce amazing texts in their

language arts classrooms when we take their writing seriously. To do so we need to focus more on the substance of their thinking than on the correctness of their style; seek and identify the kernels of deep thought-emotion that lurk in often formulaic writing, and probe with them the ideas they are trying to unravel. If we respect our students, they will reveal themselves to be complex and multidimensional young men and women despite the official statistics that flatten, categorize and stigmatize them.

It is really not so complicated. We need to abandon the blinders of quantification, to shake off the obsession to measure and rank. Students are not products that, by definition, have an exchange value. Schools should not be factories. Instead, we should perceive, multilectally, that every student is a complex individual who thinks and feels and seeks, who learns and grows through interactions with others. Schools need to make those interactions as fruitful, as exciting, and as nurturing as possible.

Revisiting multilectics

Throughout this text, I have emphasized the importance of a multilectical approach to living in the world with others, stressing particularly the applicability of multilectics to teaching and learning. Multilectics joins the Hegelian/Marxist concept of dialectics with the Bourdieusian notion of multiple and borderless interacting fields of social life. Additionally multilectics, in contrast to the Marxist and Bourdieusian reification of macro lenses, embraces multiple scales of analysis – macro, meso and micro – in order to provide a fuller understanding of the whole.

Crucial to interpreting phenomena on the meso and micro scales of activity is the role of emotions. As William Sewell (2005) points out, macro structures are often transformed by the passions that simmer and explode on the meso level of activity, which is in turn infused with the micro. When multiple perspectives serve to illuminate multi-scalar analysis, a true understanding

of multilectics emerges and we see social life in all its polysemic and polyphonic complexity. From my standpoint, multilectics also serves the axiological imperative of seeking a world that is more just and joyful, one in which power does not reside in the hands of a few. In this sense, multilectics embraces the Marxist position that the world as it *could be* and *ought to be* belies life as it presently exists.

Like any theoretical lens however, multilectics, when it is accessed formulaically, can become dull and rigid, a determiner of findings rather than a guide to help you on your search. For that reason, it is important never to take one's experiences for granted, and to embrace the artist's way of seeing newly.

The multilectical teacher

Once accepting a multilectical world, it became critical for me, as an educational researcher, to apply multilectical perceptions to the art of teaching and learning. As part of this mission, it is vital to examine what a teacher who embraces a multilectical path might look like. Mr. C, though he never identified himself in either multilectical or dialectical terms, embodied many aspects of multilectical teaching in his practice.

To begin with, Mr. C was both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about language arts. He loved words, delighted in language in its most capacious sense, and read and wrote for pleasure and enrichment. He was as eager for intellectual growth as he wanted his students to be. Thus he had some of the basic tools needed to co-construct a learning environment in which the quest for knowledge was both a goal and a method.

Enthusiasm reveals itself on the meso and micro level. It emerges from passion and, being contagious, ignites and embraces passion in others. How can we expect students to rave about prose and poetry, or even to just appreciate the power of the written word, if their teachers do

not? That there are so many teachers of language arts uninspired by the art of language is both a reflection on how teachers are recruited, educated, treated, and paid, and on the priorities of our society's policymakers. Mr. C. consciously nurtured the passion for knowledge and thus gave students the space to nourish that passion in each other. What facilitated their expression was the tolerance – indeed the encouragement – of the languages students had at hand to elaborate their thinking. This is visible in the micro analysis of Part 4. There we see students, free of any demand to use academic English, pushing each other to make sense of Ana's poem. Without censorial restrictions, they reach crescendos of enthusiasm as they analyzed their own experiences of love.

In the spirit of multilectical pedagogy, Mr. C also conceived of the classroom as a co-created learning community rather than as a space filled by students and teachers forced to fulfill pre-determined tasks and formulaic assignments. His implicit goal was for the space he shared with his students to be one of exploration, one shaped by those present and produced by their contributions. Though definitely conscious of his role as “the teacher,” he understood instinctively that the emotional climate within the classroom rode on a web of evolving social relationships rather than on ones that were predetermined and hierarchical. Seen this way, trust between and among students and teachers became an elemental glue of classroom solidarity, a structure that facilitated learning as a collective enterprise in which every student's voice was valued.

Whenever he was not overly hobbled by official demands, Mr. C sought student input both in determining curricula and on the ways to implement them. Towards the end of the semester, for example, student mock trials based on the Bill of Rights (only briefly addressed in this text) organically emerged from the students themselves as they debated the justice of sending

adolescent girls who had committed crimes to juvenile facilities. In the process, they learned what opening and closing arguments were, how to write them, and how to construct and debate the reasoning paragraphs that made the logical case leading from the first to the last paragraph.

Clearly, for a teacher to work in isolation, without the support of his colleagues and supervisors, can be exhausting, depressing and, over time, often untenable. And students, if they are not welcomed in their fullness elsewhere in school, may not get sufficient encouragement within one class alone to keep pursuing an academic trajectory. But Mr. C. pushed where he could and, without ever using the word “multilectic,” sought to educate his colleagues about the benefits of multilectically inspired perceptions and methods. He, meanwhile, resisted the institutionalization of formulaic pedagogy.

Lefebvre, Foucault and Harvey all write about the need for ideologies to establish control of space in order to spread. If Mr. C’s classroom could become known as an alternate space, a liberated zone, a territory under the sway of multilectical thought, then the possibilities of bringing other classroom spaces under its sway would increase. That it did not become such a zone can be attributed to a host of conditions including the power of the administrative regime to repress student passions, the systemic obligations Mr. C had to fulfill in order to maintain his employment, the many teachers who did not share Mr. C’s perceptions, and the many fields of social life to which students belonged that rebelled against the very notion of school. When thinking multilectically, all these fields are considered pertinent to an analysis of educational successes and failures; there is no easy finding of cause and effect.

Still, Mr. C’s enthusiasm and knowledge about language arts and his commitment to serve his students by including them in classroom decisions went a long way to make the class a refuge from what students were used to. He had the added advantage of coming from the same

community as his students and thus embodied an understanding of the dangers they faced as they sought to navigate the terrain of academic life. He could move the way they moved and speak as they spoke. In his bones he carried a life rhythm that was attuned to theirs. Fluent in both the culture of his students and that of the school, he was often able to dissolve the borders between them, making school, more familiar and thus less threatening and invasive. He could meet the students on their own terms, pushing them to reconsider their ideas and their ways of expressing them without making them feel lesser or inadequate. Students were able to speak their minds and express their passions through the words and gestures they had available to them without risk of censure, and they were able to push back, sometimes with anger (though not violence) without fear of punishment. Mr. C knew when to challenge them and when to give way, and he could improvise easily and with humor. Because students trusted and respected him, and he them, school and street were often able to blur. Indeed, the moments in which school and street merged were the richest ones for all of us, and when Justin declared, “shit, I’m going to carry this paper [the 1st Amendment] with me wherever I go,” we all knew he had gained knowledge useful to him in whatever fields he was in. Multilectically rich, Mr. C’s class enthusiastically welcomed all fields of activity into the classroom.

I came in on Mr. C.’s coattails, and so I benefited from his street “cred,” from the “cultural capital” he had with his students, though I had to earn my own “cred” as well. Layers of social life, the web of relationships formed by students with each other and with Mr. C, mediated all participants’ relationships with me and mine with them. I took advantage of my favorable entry into the classroom by embracing multilectical stances. I did so by taking each student seriously rather than imagining her or him as a representative of an ethnic or racial group, meeting them on the field of banter, and challenging but not judging them. Justin was willing to spend time

reading with me in the library despite the humiliation that he risked by doing so because he knew I respected him and had his back. Again the unmeasurable quality of trust, rarely spoken about in teacher education programs, mediated both a desire to learn and willingness to struggle to overcome a serious impediment to academic advancement. Tobin writes that “relational bonds between participants in a lesson are mediated by in the moment emotions, emotional energy, and emotional climate,” (Tobin, (in press), p. 5) and in Mr. C’s class, these tended to be infused with respect, humor, ease and debate that, like an aroma, filled the space we shared and thus facilitated learning.

How micro analysis illuminates

Like the relationship forged with Justin, the one that developed between Ana and me was mediated by the relationship she had with Mr. C, by his relationship with me, by her own curiosity and passion, and by the good-natured and respect-imbued interchanges we had about her writing. Taking place under the radar of official surveillance, driven by our mutual desire to have our work read by the other, it evolved into a magical session involving not just the two of us but four other students, two of whom invited themselves to the gathering after being thrown out of their own class for misbehavior. Though I felt exhilarated by our 50 minutes together, moved by the rhythm of the conversation and the passion of the interchanges between us, it was not until I reviewed the videos of the discussion and subjected it to micro analysis that I was able to understand what had taken place.

Seen from a micro perspective, the immeasurable qualities of knowledge and meaning – those associated with emotions – became starkly visible. These are the very qualities that, when addressed and cultivated, can transform a classroom from a damaged space into a refuge for learning though they are totally ignored by official tools of assessment. I was, indeed, surprised

by how much was revealed at the level of micro analysis that was hidden to me during my participation in the group discussion.

Through the micro lens, the complicated and sometimes counter-intuitive ways in which students listened to each other (sometimes listening and speaking simultaneously) became apparent. They were able, together, to build a dynamic that respected the stances of all participants without exhortations by an authority figure. Rather than having insights extracted from them by a teacher, the epiphanies that emerged arose organically through dialogic interaction with the other members of the group, a collective construction of meaning rather than one imposed on them. The micro view, then, revealed qualities that go to the very heart of learning. Furthermore, the importance of the gestural and aural dimensions of reflexivity, respect, trust and enthusiasm, were made manifest through micro analysis though these find no place in the conceptual framework of policymakers.

Even without Ana's declaration, "If we were talking about this in class...I'd be ready to come to school," the fruitfulness of the group's effort was manifest in its solidarity and in each person's contributions to the collective spirit of engagement. Looking at the video through a micro analytic lens, we saw participants working together to create understanding not only in the synchronic and anticipatory rhythm pitch and power of their voices and the pauses that shaped them, but in the ways their voices and their silences were bound to corporal motion and to facial expressions that are inextricably part of speech. That the group repaired every contradiction, self-healing itself, was a sign that these individuals had a stake in the discussion, and that they were exploring ideas that were important to them.

Together, we were using language to, as the Scandinavian poet Tomas Tranströmer writes, "walk into" ourselves (Orr, 2011, p. A6), and to explore what we found when we got there.

Unlike so much of what Ana did in class that she considered “fake,” she was now using language to help her understand herself and her place in social life. Nowhere, however, in the tests that measured her abilities was there a sign of her spirit of inquiry, her love of language, and her pursuit of self-knowledge and understanding on which academic achievement could ride. Her worth, represented by official numbers on a page, swept away the very qualities that marked her as a poet and thinker of merit and a human being of vast potential.

Methods

Such small groupings of students, gathered improvisationally in the moment in response to student writing, could be a viable model for teachers and students who are chafing under the requirements of official protocol. Of course, they rely on spontaneity, flexibility, trust, and a willingness to engage in “la perruque.” They would vary from place to place because of the different participants involved, but there would be common threads that tied them together. These include radical listening to what students say, write and do; attention to their needs both individually and collectively; and refusal – within these spaces – to judge or measure their worth in any way, concentrating instead on love of language and the exploration of ideas. Critically, how students speak and interact would be understood to mediate the investigation of concepts. With practice, students and teachers could become more skilled at implementing these spaces of inquiry, which would emerge organically from the needs of students. With time, such sessions could even become part of accepted practice, not scheduled in formulaic ways or configurations, but appropriated often and as needed. Teachers, finding ways of facilitating small groups of inquiry arising from student writing and speech, could gradually mobilize students, teachers, and administrators to accept them as integral to what takes place in school. In this way, activity on the meso level of activity could transform more macro-imposed structures.

Simultaneously, use of videos for reflecting on events and familiarity with methods of micro analysis would help all participants observe more closely their own interactions and revisit ideas that had emerged, thus fostering deeper investigation into ideas expressed and their importance to self and community. The data that emerged from micro analysis could also become part of assessment procedures, more vital and representative of what students have to offer than the marks that currently tarnish their names.

Whether learning in small groups or larger ones, multilectical methods never lose sight of the emotional dimensions to teaching and learning, the multiple fields of activity that mediate student performance, the welcoming of student vernacular in all its gestural and aural fullness, and the refusal to judge worth or quantify accomplishments.

Assessments and multilectical thought

Priceless knowledge is lost to educators and students because of their inability or unwillingness to observe on the micro scale of analysis. The body language and dialogic richness of collective meaning-making, signs of engagement with learning, are lost to methods of assessment that reject close observation in favor of lenses that only reflect concerns of the macro universe.

Yet, under current structures, classroom teachers do not have the time to review hours of video of classroom activity and subject it to an analytical gaze. We would, indeed, need another life to examine our first lives moment by moment in slow motion, and then we would have an avalanche of data filled with descriptions so thick that we would have no way of making sense of it for the many individual students we teach. Meanwhile we would inevitably come across the conundrum that reflecting on the video artifact is not the same as being reflective in the moment; and that every method of analysis yields different insights at different times.

But what meso and micro analysis can do is sensitize us to what we miss in our daily absorption of social life, what we fail to notice and also what we notice unfeelingly and unreflexively because it is so familiar. The multilectical way asks us to sensitize ourselves to each other, to address and recognize each other profoundly as a pedagogical method to advance learning. This we can only do through careful, non-judgmental observation, aided by what we learn from micro analysis. We do not need to subject every classroom interaction to micro analysis, but we should do so occasionally, and certainly when contradictions shake our routines. Students, teachers and administrators should always be reflecting on their practices and gaining insight into improving them for the benefit of all participants, and meso and micro analyses are superbly suited to this mission.

Maybe more than anything, meso and micro analyses remind us that students are much more than what answers on tests reveal about them, and that emotions – reflected through language in its fullest sense – are deeply entwined with learning and academic achievement.

Revisiting the artist's way

“It’s more like I’m having an experience than making a picture”

The painter Cy Twombly (Kennedy, 2011, para 10)

It is obvious, sad to say, that repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived have driven all spontaneity and naturalness from the field, and, in short, that products have vanquished works. Repetitious spaces are the outcome of repetitive gestures (those of workers) associated with instruments which are both duplicatable and designed to duplicate...

Henri Lefebvre (1974, p. 75)

I have made a few concrete suggestions that I believe will help schools better address students like the ones I work with. They are pedagogical methods, grounded in ontological, epistemological and axiological stances. These acknowledge the complexities of social life; recognize, welcome, and value the experiences of students; resist quantifying intelligence; and assume worth despite what any system of measurement might indicate.

Though I believe the methods I have suggested are worthy, viable, and could make huge differences within schools, they are useless if they are not imbued with the theories that make them dynamic and visionary. If they are implemented without deep understanding of and commitment to the multilectical concepts from which they spring; if the collective|individual dialectic from which dialogic investigation emerges is ignored; if the sense that “feelings is first” (cummings, 1923, p. 208) is relegated to second, third and fourth because feelings can’t be measured; and if the collective community that makes a school cannot embrace the idea that life is more than obedience to dominant grammar, spelling and syntax—important as these are, then the methods I have suggested become formulaic tasks, each one a boring and repetitive chore done only because it is required.

The problem is, of course, that educational institutions, structurally designed to maintain and reproduce the status quo, rely on formulaic approaches to teaching and learning that won’t rock the boat. Just as the system demands that teachers abdicate their own idiosyncrasies and passions, dulling themselves down to conform to imposed time constraints and production quotas, the powers behind educational policy demand that all students learn the same things in the same way at the same pace under the same conditions. Instead of probing the uniqueness that resides within each student and probing the “great events” often hidden in student writing and speech, schools are dedicated to burying what makes each student special, the uniqueness that

emerges from collective interaction. Rather, schools submerge students in standardized drivel that can be measured and weighed but won't address their lives nor release them from the stigmatization of failure that the marks on their records certify. From the most macro level structures down to the most micro level ones, from the most micro to most macro, it is a transformation in ways of perception that needs to be revolutionized.

Multilectics offers us a way of seeing newly. It acknowledges the permanency (Harvey, 1996) of macro structures while recognizing their vulnerability to the demands and passions that burst forth, often unpredictably, on the meso level of social life. It makes visible the unconscious activity of micro level interactions that are salient to what takes place on the meso level. Multilectics envisions a world that is complex rather than simple, co-constructed and contingent rather than pre-determined and fixed. It demands attention to the very qualities that go to the essence of what makes us human, our “desires, concerns, [and] fears” (Harvey, 2000, p. 234) that mediate everything we do. These emotions are most atavistically bound to the way we speak and move, the quality of our voices and the improvised gestures that accompany all communication. Micro analysis hones in on these manifestations of feelings, and multilectics – which embraces the micro level as one scale of analysis – never loses sight of the emotional dynamics that animate social life on every scale of activity.

As I reflected on my own research in underserved middle schools, I began to think that multilectics was not only a lens through which to understand social life, but also an essential attribute of what it means to be human. What we know, what we do, who we are is manifested through interdependent and multilectically engaged methods of expression – gesture, gaze and voice – that mediate how we see and are seen. Each one of these is imbued with the macro characteristics of class, race and ethnicity, the meso influences of family, culture, fields of

activity; and indeed the micro and individual characteristics of self. In their interactivity, they make each one of us unique despite all that we share.

So accustomed are we to the practical, the efficient, and the measurable, we don't realize that, at the core, these manifestations of thought – gesture, gaze and voice – are the artist's raw material, the tools they use to help us to know ourselves. With that in mind, I explore the consequences of suppressing these aspects of student identity, and re-emphasize the artist's offering to educational research and pedagogy.

Seeing newly

I introduced this text by writing about the artist's way of perception and its applicability to research and pedagogy. The world, seen through the eyes of an artist, is constantly in flux, transformed continually by the constant motion of what forms and is formed by space as well as by the multiple perspectives and distances from which phenomena are viewed. Dialectically engaged, background and foreground are understood to be borderless creators of each other rather than separate entities. I believe that if teachers, students and administrators viewed themselves as multilectical co-constructors of the classroom space, each person mediating the others' place within the whole, the classroom would be a less alienating place, there would be less need to impose control, and students would enjoy the process of learning.

Maybe more than anything, it is the desire to see newly, with Cezanne's "widened eyes," and the thrill of the search, that excites the artist's quest. The most important tool the artist has to spur himself on is the need to seek beyond the familiar, with curiosity rather than judgment, so as to understand the world in its fullest sense. I believe this spirit of adventure is desperately needed in our educational institutions – the desire to embrace the unfamiliar, to welcome difference

without judgment, and to always emphasize the exhilaration of the journey towards knowing and discovering over the need to quantify and measure accomplishments.

Meanwhile, as the artist works, he depends on his entire body to communicate. His representation of what he sees is infused with expression at every moment, with every mark on canvas like a signature, a sign of his particular touch.

What we don't sufficiently recognize is that there is an artist at the core of each one of us, part of our body-being. Everything we do pulsates with the visual, the musical, the kinetic and the conceptual, with gesture, gaze and voice. In everyday life, when our lips form words, our hands speak images – two languages, one visual, the other aural, starkly different in their architectures, that are really only one language. Unless we are acting or lack the tools to speak or move, speech without gesture or gesture without speech seem stunted and inadequate, providing one dimensional representations of the complex concepts we attempt to convey. Our thoughts need the visual and the vocal to become the thoughts that they are, to be complete (McNeill, 2005). Indeed, in our fullness, each one of us is a multi-media event. Just like the painter, performer and musician, we need our artistic tools to communicate. Our speech is music, our gestures painting. As we interact, we seamlessly sculpt both what McNeill calls “iconic” gestures (p. 45) and abstract metaphorical images with our bodies. Meanwhile, our voices reverberate not with the narrow limit of words themselves but with the emotions that permeate them and give them meaning. Poetry suffuses even the most mundane interaction, and every act of communication is an improvised dance, contingent on context and a response. Intuition, improvisation, experience, and the tools at hand – our methods of perception and production – are all constantly in play, creating the evolving interactive and artistically rich composition that we call social life.

Though speech without rhythm and gesture, vacant of intonation, pitch and corporal expression, would eviscerate human beings of the very essences we associate with being human and alive, we don't often – unless we are conscious micro analysts – stop to notice these phenomena. Rather, we comprehend (and miscomprehend) each other instinctively, get a “sense” or “impression” of the other as we address and are addressed. Sharing the syntax of communication and the ability to interpret a range of improvisational twists because they are so firmly attached to the core of the familiar, we internalize the art of our interchanges, barely stopping to consider or to delight in the joy and flexibility of the way we know each other. When intimate, we add to our language the pleasure of touch and silence, drawing us closer to one another in a way that words, by themselves, are unable to do. Language in its fullest sense allows us to be with each other deeply. Writing, theater and the visual and musical arts move us because we each embody the artistic at the deepest center of our beings, at the place where emotions and thought, inseparable, begin and intertwine.

Every aspect of us, then, is multilectical through and through. Take away the way we move, speak, and gesticulate, reduce the space in which we act to the strict edges of our body-border, to the monotone and the one dimensional, and we become shadows of humanity and duplicates of each other. Many of our institutions, and our factories, armies and prisons are designed for this very purpose, in the business of constructing mass-produced spaces in which we walk stiltedly, dully and identically, following the beat of control rather than the rhythm of self. Within these controlled spaces, defined by rigid boundaries rather than the imaginary ones of a multilectical world, we become Foucault's “docile bodies,” our multidimensional selves squeezed flat.

And schools fit right in.

It is, of course, most egregious in poor communities of color where the culture of students deviates most from the dominant standards and thus threatens the status quo. Rather than welcome, scaffold, encourage, enjoy and seek a terrain of mutual respect and understanding on which learning can flourish, educational policymakers and functionaries attack the most visible manifestations of how student knowledge differs from what is required and expected, and that is the way students move, speak and interact. Yet these are the qualities that define the very essences of who they are and that are inextricable from thought and feeling. Micro analysis makes this clear. As officials demand that students, almost literally, step out of their own skins, they crush the curiosities and passions that ride on these deeply in-corporated aspects of how we are in the world with each other. Thus, through a combination of design, ignorance, indifference, obtuseness, fear and intolerance, we squelch the very qualities on which learning thrives, and exile those students unwilling to endure the violence implicit in the official agenda.

I am suggesting another way, one that applies the artist's way of perception to educational research and pedagogy. I have stressed the importance of seeing the world multilectically, recognizing that each one of us, at all times, is subject to multiple fields of social life whose borders are imaginary. We are, each one of us, imbued with characteristics of class, race, nationality and ethnicity, and traits passed down through family and acquired through social groupings that cannot be separated or shorn from one another. We move through fields of employment and education, each one leaving its mark on us. We are all branded by the practice of the powerful and the structures that serve them. Wherever we go we carry with us the imprint of being in the world with others. The collective and the hegemonic breathes through all we say and do. "We" and "I" are inseparable always. Yet though we are all alike, we are also each

unique, what e.e. cummings calls,

“Some

one” (1923, p. 460),

and individual and collective resistance, as well as imaginative leaps that embrace the oughts and the coulds, always illuminate the road ahead.

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