

“Talk Builds Communities”

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At the interdisciplinary Critical Thinking in Teaching and Learning Symposium held at the St. Augustine Campus of UWI in January 2004, a professor of engineering, in closing his presentation, stated that *“talk doh build nutten.”* He was promptly and gently rebuked by his colleague, a professor of linguistics, who succinctly pointed out that *“talk builds communities.”* This single utterance, the revelation that talk builds communities has had a tremendous impact on my thinking and practice as an educator. I have come to actively value the “talk” in my classrooms, e-mails, and during office hours, as well as casual corridor conversations, all of which contribute to nurturing different scholarly and professional communities to which I belong.

Acts of communication always have some ambiguity. We cannot be certain that what we mean is what is understood, nor can we prescribe for any other what they choose to make meaning from. For example, students in a classroom may make multiple meanings from the surplus of semiotic resources available to them, which include dress, gesture, and emotions, in addition to teacher and student talk and texts. They simultaneously construct meanings about the discipline/subject matter they are studying, its relationship to their selves, and their relationships with other members in the class and their teacher. Their communicative negotiations and transactions bring into being the particular identity or culture of that classroom community.

While talk builds communities, certain kinds of talk have a greater potential to build more critical, conscious, ethically minded, responsible, and caring communities than others. In creating the conditions where such communities can be realized we must be mindful that the communication in many classrooms has an authoritative nature. In this historical present, such discourse’s fractal resonances manifest across all socio-political scales, from individual interactions to all aspects of educational, economic, cultural, and political institutions. Everywhere, powerful “authorities” impose, limit, prescribe, and dictate unitary meanings. Common to all of these authoritative systems is a low tolerance for any ambiguity. Curiously, such systems also tend to have a low tolerance for disruptions. They are simultaneously sensitive, yet resistant to change. Their homogenizing, hierarchical approach makes them, ultimately, silencing systems.

In the midst of the radical transformation of our “built” environment and the explosion of communication media, I have become ever more cognizant of how our talk, and community and individual identities are reflexively and reciprocally related to each other. I have also become painfully aware of the fact that while we cannot fully direct the intentionality of our utterances, we must, nevertheless, take responsibility for what we say and to some extent how it can be interpreted, as our utterances as educators also contribute to the development of the communities and individual identities of those with whom we dialogue. This awareness, that is necessarily incomplete, of the unintended consequences of our words and deeds, places an awesome responsibility on educational practitioners not only for the things that we say or fail to say, but also for the identities of the individuals and communities that we share in building and build in sharing. It is a responsibility that we sometimes forget.

Beyond token acknowledgement and tolerance, ambiguity in communication must be actively valued, not as a means for justifying obfuscation and excusing oppression (though these possibilities *must* be acknowledged), but as a means of inviting ourselves and others back into dialogue and conversation in order to deepen our understandings of each other and our selves. This is one route to developing and sustaining care and compassion in our pedagogical practices. Perhaps it may also be a route to justice and joy?

As teachers, there is the need for us to begin to listen more closely and openly to what is being said (and especially what is not being said) by those with whom we interact—our students, colleagues, administrators, curriculum documents, and textbook authors—in order to communicate more effectively from the positions where we stand. Hearing can be painful. However, by cultivating the “care-full” practice of listening—to ourselves and others—we may better be able to answer questions of “what to do?” Listening does not have to be a solitary activity. There is a need to resist the impulse to prematurely silence questions, including our own, through appeals to deaf authorities. It is in valuing and listening more closely to those ambiguous moments when we do not yet “know” fully, not as ends in themselves, but for the potential they harbour for meaning making and learning, that we create spaces (and time) to do differently.

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