Addressing Students Responsively and Critically

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In the provocative volume, *Fires in the Bathroom*, Kathleen Cushman inter-views high school students to learn about advice they may have for teachers. For the students, who "often feel like prisoners, fearing reprisal if they reveal weakness or speak the truth," it must have been a pleasure to be addressed as people with informed perspectives, insight, and wisdom.[1] In the introduction to the volume, Lisa Delpit remarks on the distinctiveness of research devoted to learning from students, as opposed to learning about them; listening to students, in her words, is "about seeing students as complete human beings, with minds, hearts, and souls, rather than as test scores to be raised."[2] Cushman's work and Delpit's justification of it, come close — in the language of educators — to embodying the philosophical perspective for which Gert Biesta argues in *Beyond Learning*. In bringing students together and asking open-ended questions about their sense of a good teacher, Cushman set up the intersubjective contexts within which students could "come to presence."[3] In contrast to many of the lessons students experience in schools, where they are expected either to read a literacy unit and respond to comprehension questions, or to perform a set of math problems designed to drill them in algebraic equations, Cushman did not specify which aspects of student selves she hoped to call forth. Delpit says the students were addressed as "complete human beings," because students were invited into a relationship and were expected to express themselves in whatever way they saw fit.

This contrast between pedagogies that invite the whole person into a relation-ship and instructional strategies that are designed to call out specific, foreseen student traits helps me understand both Biesta's recommendations for educators and his criticisms of humanistic educational ideals. In responding to the long-standing tendency of educators to commit themselves to a central educational ideal — such as the education of a "rational person" — Biesta argues that humanistic ideals, in general, operate as forms of surveillance and control, inciting students to approxi-mate the specified traits of, for example, a rational person — only to be excluded when they fail to live up to the standard. In Biesta's words, humanistic ideals posit "a *norm of humaneness*, a norm of what it means to be human, and in doing so excludes those who do not live up to or are unable to live up to this norm."[4] His recommendation that educators create intersubjective contexts in which students can come to presence is — in a way — a recommendation that is intended to bypass the coercive and exclusionary force of ideals. Instead of an ideal, Biesta offers us a part ethical, part ontological description of the contexts that facilitate free expres-sion, and — out of full blown respect for an individual's freedom — he finds it preferable that students come to presence as themselves, regardless of whether they approximate some ideal.

For those of us who still have some fondness for particular educational ideals, Biesta's criticisms of humanistic ideals leads to a dilemma. My own commitment to a humanistic ideal — the education of critically conscious students — may indeed lead me to enact forms of surveillance and exclusion in my classroom. If, for instance, I assign readings and ask questions intended to call out students' analyses of the economic power relations shaping contemporary schooling, and only respond positively to those students who successfully offer the sorts of analyses I hope to see, I would, in fact, be enacting one version of the modernist pedagogies Biesta criticizes.[5]

However, my trepidation concerning the exclusions that I enact is tempered by Paulo Freire's demonstration that the tools of critical consciousness may in fact be sorely needed by subaltern students who seek to freely come to presence in the way Biesta hopes. For Freire has demonstrated that critical consciousness plays a constitutive role in enabling colonized students to move beyond the disabling myths dominant group members tell about them, their families, and their community. The oppressed students Freire worked with in Brazil, for instance, would only gain respect for their own perspectives as they engaged in the processes of learning to think critically, for it was partly the process of dialogue and the tools of critical consciousness that allowed them to see themselves as contributing members of their society, and not just as incapable drunks, as the land-owning class often portrayed them.[6] Biesta's ethical and ontological arguments on behalf of students coming to presence do not prepare teachers to respond to such polarized political contexts, whereby prevailing discourses already define subaltern students as substandard. In politically polarized contexts, many youth are already unwilling to express themselves freely and thus cannot come to presence in the ways Biesta hopes.

Thus, I am seeking, in this essay, a way of thinking that combines the nonimpositional character of Biesta's posthumanism with Freire's sensitivity to the politics of intersubjectivity. By detaching Freire's dialogic pedagogy from the end-goal of educating a "critically-conscious" student, and by developing pedagogical strategies that mix the open-ended pedagogical orientation of Biesta with the critical forms of address recommended by Freire, educators can expose students to critical political orientations while treating them as complete human beings.

POLITICAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Writing within a language that might be appropriately called "modernist" or "humanist," Paulo Freire offered a path-breaking description of colonial education and a pedagogy designed to restore colonized students' humanity. Freire's absolutely fundamental argument, that the education of oppressed peoples needs to consider their existential predicament, shows both his attunement to political intersubjectivity and the shortcomings of a humanistic discourse, which leads to generalizations about the "oppressed." Consider his description of oppressed students:

> The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the

oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation, between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account.[7]

Biesta's warnings concerning the violence of humanistic generalizations certainly apply here, for we are left with a deficit conception of oppressed students, cursed by a divided being. If we begin, in contrast, with Biesta's premise that we cannot know a student, that each student is mysterious and unknowable, generalizations about oppressed students are preempted; rather than making generalizations about a student and preparing a pedagogy for her condition, we have no alternative but to do what Cushman did, to ask her about her views.[8] Yet, Freire — the astute teacher — was grappling with something profoundly real in this passage, for there are many cases in which students will not voice their own perspectives, when the words that issue from their mouths reflect the power dynamics of their intersubjective context: we've all seen contexts in which students choose to be spectators, instead of actors, or choose silence instead of speaking out. Freire is undeniably right to ask educators to consider the existential situation of oppressed students, however, we avoid humanistic essentializations if we focus on the student's intersubjective context and avoid making assumptions about the students themselves. For individuals respond to oppressive circumstances in a diverse and unpredictable variety of ways.

Consider, for instance, the intersubjective circumstances one Latina student describes in her high school in the Southwestern U.S. Carla, interviewed by Mariella Espinoza-Herold, was forbidden from speaking her primary language; she studied a European-based curriculum, and her teachers expressed a patronizing view of her abilities. In Carla's words,

I didn't like to speak English. Teachers would call my parents to school to tell them that I didn't want to speak English. They would say things like, "This is America and English is spoken here!" I didn't like their pushy ways.… They wanted me to greet them in English every day. The more they demanded, the less I would speak English.… One day, I was 5 minutes late and was sent to after-school detention. Mr. Moreno was in charge of detention that day. He'd tell me, "Speak in English or I will not let you go home this afternoon." I wouldn't do it and we stayed until after 6:00 p.m. My parents were so worried.[9]

Indeed, in Espinoza-Herold's interviews with Carla, she joined another student in saying that "they felt so strongly about assaults on their language and identity via the hidden curriculum that they had to create a defiant and oppositional self in order to maintain and survive in the school environment."[10] When Carla recounts the factors that made her feel defensive, she reports a wide range of factors from strict disciplinary policies with a disproportionate impact on Latina/o students, to a tracking system that segregated her into academically nonrigorous classes, to the complete absence of classes that reflected Mexican traditions of understanding, to teachers like Mr. Moreno, whose hostile attitude was especially painful. These overlapping messages sent to Latina/o students constitute punitive modes of address: they tell Carla that she is expected to be disorderly, unintelligent, and

disrespectful. Such modes of address would not determine exactly how Carla's expresses herself, although we should not be surprised if she responds with silence and opposition.

Biesta's descriptions of the intersubjective contexts that allow students to come to presence emphasize that plurality is absolutely fundamental to an individual's self-expression. "Coming into presence," he says, "is … a presentation to others who are not like us."[11] Carla was indeed surrounded by difference, yet the intersubjective field in which she was involved would over-determine the sorts of expressions she was likely to enact.[12] She was able to resist Mr. Moreno's insistence that she speak English, and this a sort of coming to presence, but that does not look like a desirable way for a young person to come to presence. If "coming to presence" is to serve as a humble sort of ethical guide, we need, like Freire, to have a language that allows us to discuss the power asymmetries within particular intersubjective contexts.

By itself, the concept of "intersubjectivity" does not prepare us to understand the sort of micropolitical factors that inhibited Carla's coming to presence. Philosophers writing within phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions developed the concept of "intersubjectivity" to capture the social dynamism of human interaction without implying that social exchanges are due to individual planning or conscious decision making on each individual's part. Following Martin Heidegger's description of "being-with," philosophers have argued that humans are first and foremost constituted in relations with others, that who each individual becomes unfolds in relation to the give-and-take of social relationships.[13] For educational theorists, such as myself, this basic ontological claim leads to a pedagogical emphasis on locating educative patterns of social relationships in educational contexts, and away from a focus on the individual learner. In much phenomenological philosophy, intersubjectivity is described in terms of people's interrelations without attention being paid to the micropolitics of those encounters. Yet, the accounts of pedagogical interactions by students and teachers continually reference plays of power — many which fall along familiar fault lines, such as economic class or race, and many which are specific to the particular subgroups involved.[14] Hence the term "political intersubjectivity:" so we do not lose sight of the ways in which intersubjective contexts have a political aspect that is critical to determining whether they are indeed educative contexts. In neocolonial contexts in the U.S., the political intersubjectivities of many classrooms rearticulate previously colonial relations of power between people of color and white people — a sociological fact that makes Freire's early analyses of colonization particularly relevant in today's context.[15]

Teachers wade into the intersubjective contexts already in motion in schools. As we saw in Carla's high school, the give-and-take of social relationships was shaped by historic colonial relationships as well as by the interactions of particular people in the school site. The teachers' insistence that Carla speak English rearticulates long-standing tensions, dating back to the era in which the U.S. seized this land from Mexico. Carla's difficulty in coming to presence had everything to do with the insistence by dominant group members that Spanish be removed from the public realm and the resistance of Latina/o peoples to cultural domination.[16] These histories

continue to shape tracking and curriculum policies in schools and partly determine what can and cannot be said in classrooms. Educators who wish to offer Carla the opportunity to come to presence in such contexts will need to be self-conscious about the political intersubjectivities they participate within, and they will need to utilize a range of rhetorical strategies.

Responsive and Critical Modes of Address

Like Carla, many students in contemporary societies are sharply attuned to the ways in which teachers position them, and their awareness may be a response to the patterns of control that operate in contemporary societies. Michel Foucault argues that societal processes of surveillance and control are now decentralized: norms of appropriate behavior — such as the rational person, the well-behaved student, or the critically conscious student — are employed by people in particular social contexts to assess the degree to which individuals adhere to the norms in play; when students deviate from those norms, they can expect to be subject to a variety of social pressures designed to bring them in line.[17] Educational research offers us many examples of students who are aware of these processes of control. Some students speak critically of the assumptions teachers make about them and of the futures teachers appear to have in mind for them, and many students are quick to resist and withdraw when a teacher speaks in ways they find demeaning or controlling. Thus, teachers who endeavor to help students come to presence would do well to offer inviting modes of address to students, expressions that call out student strengths in the present and in the future.

The "responsive" modes of address, for which Biesta argues, are the most inviting ways of approaching students, for they are intended to invite the complete human being into the relationship. Yet, the practice of asking students for their perspectives is — by itself — limited, for students often need visions of possibility and intellectual tools to enter social relationships in ways they find affirming. For students such as Carla, critical modes of address would supply such visions of possibility and the tools that very well may allow her to come to presence in ways that would not be possible had Mr. Moreno simply asked her for her opinion.

I rely on Elizabeth Ellsworth's concept of "modes of address" to describe the signals schools and teachers send students; such signals partly constitute the intersubjective possibilities and limitations of a particular space, that is, they contribute to the creation of an intersubjective field with its own characteristics.[18] Students respond to teachers' words or to school policies, and these moments of difference can be exciting and productive, or painful and coercive. A teacher's signals also tell students something about how they might comport themselves in educational contexts. Teachers address students through the content of their words, through the curricular materials to which they expose students, and through their bodily expressions and tone of voice. Students respond to these layered messages, acting in ways that are partly determined by the parameters of a particular educational setting. As groups of students respond to the school's and teacher's signals, and interact with one another, schools and classrooms come to have a climate, or an intersubjective sense of what is possible and what is impossible. Modes of address

do not merely communicate a content from one person to another; they set meanings in circulation in a particular intersubjective space. The teacher who clamps down on one student's caustic remark sends a signal that reverberates through a classroom space. When students report with pain and anger that their teachers did not allow them to speak their primary language — whether it be Spanish or Navajo or Black English — it often shows much more than a decision about the language of instruction, that indeed the students feel their identities were not welcome in the school space.

When Cushman asked students for advice on teachers, she was enacting a responsive mode of address, as was Espinoza-Herald, when she asked Carla about her school experiences. Both researchers were primarily interested in coming to understand students' assessments of their schools and teachers. Both researchers were outsiders to the students' schools, so they were not immediately implicated by the power dynamics that transpire in those spaces. In response to Espinoza-Herold's questions, Carla was not pushed to be defensive but could respond as she wished, with criticism or compliments, using Spanish or English. Cushman says that students were quite willing to talk as soon as she showed genuine interest in their perspectives, however, she considered it quite a challenge to figure out questions that did not put words in the students' mouths; she and her associates would continually probe to find the ways students were thinking. After they asked a question, they would sometimes say, "Is this the right question? What do you think the real question is?" — hoping this would signal to the student that the interviewer was genuinely interested in the students' perspective.[19]

Biesta guides us toward responsive modes of address with his suggestion that teachers should inquire about the students' own positions:

> teachers and other educators have a crucial task in creating the opportunities and a climate in which students can actually respond, they also have a task in challenging their students to respond by confronting them with what and who is other and by posing such fundamental questions as "What do you think about it?," "Where do you stand?," and "How do you respond?"[20]

These questions show Biesta's primary concern with helping students come to presence, for "the first responsibility of the educator is a responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique, singular being."[21] Exactly what it takes to create the opportunities and climate in which students can actually respond is itself a rather difficult question, for it is often not enough to simply ask students what they think. Biesta's ethical and ontological argument on behalf of helping students come to presence does not offer us the political sorts of understandings that it would take to create the opportunity and climate for Carla to come to presence in her high school.

Freire's critical mode of address provides an example of a way of teaching that is designed to counter the sort of neocolonial power relationships operating in Carla's school. Two aspects of his dialogic pedagogy are worth noticing here. First, the form of dialogue itself addresses the student as an expert in the creation of knowledge. If dialogic partners set themselves the task of understanding an injustice

in the student's life, they commit themselves to a process of give-and-take in which the student's existential knowledge of her predicament positions her as knowing more than the teacher. Freire hoped students would simultaneously experience a sense of being an expert and of being in an egalitarian relationship with a teacher — allowing the student the opportunity to recognize intersubjective spaces in which they need not defer to a dominant group or ideology.[22] Indeed, in Espinoza-Herold's interviews with Carla, she created a space in which Carla volunteered her insights freely. The second mode of address in Freire's method is distinctively critical, for it addresses the student as someone who has already seen that the dominant ideology does not explain their experiences and who is interested in explaining those events using structural conceptions of power relations. For Carla, historical knowledge of the Mexican-American war and subsequent efforts by "white" peoples to seize control of land and jobs would help her understand her educational tribulations as part of a larger sweep of history; it could enable her to see that the treatment she received was not merely personal but was due to her group membership in a colonized region. Critical modes of address often seek to call out a student's sense of moral indignation and willingness to commit to social action in their communities. Given the perspectives Carla expresses in her interviews with Espinoza-Herald, Carla would probably be one of those students for whom a Freirean pedagogy would be the sort of mode of address that would allow her to come to presence. However, there are many students who would not find Freire's approach liberating and who — for any number of reasons — would shy away from the vision critical educators have in mind for them.

Notes Toward a Posthumanist Critical Pedagogy

A critical pedagogy devoted to enabling all students to come to presence would need to offer students a wide range of modes of address. Responsive and critical modes of address can be combined with modes of address that call students to artistic creation, to humorous commentary, or to reflection on conserving values they hold dear — to mention just a few possibilities; that is, students who are addressed in a multitude of ways have the greatest possibilities of coming to presence in ways they find affirming. Multiple forms of address increase the possibility that students will find some combination of classroom messages that invite them to strengthen themselves. In short, a multitude of forms of address invite as many complete humans into the classroom as possible.

When a teacher enacts a plurality of forms of address in the same classroom space, it alters the meaning of each of the forms of address. A classroom where the teacher addresses students responsively a good portion of the time creates a context in which more narrow forms of address have a less exclusionary character. Given Biesta's argument for the ethical and ontological primacy of helping students come to presence, I agree that the teacher's first responsibility is to look after the specific subjectivity of each individual student. As teachers, we are called to help students express themselves in ways that allow them to find out who they are in particular intersubjective contexts. Moreover, a teacher's steady commitment to the coming to presence of each individual helps create the sort of intersubjective space in which

students and teachers together seek the growth of individuals as individuals. This human-to-human connection is more basic than political agreement and disagreement and sets the context for humane and vivacious interpersonal exchange. Students who are treated as complete humans are more likely to treat others as complete humans. Indeed, a responsive mode of address creates the conditions for students to listen to others, for the teacher helps to create an intersubjective context in which listening to others is one of the primary forms of interaction. This is the meaning of Myles Horton's profound statement: "people tend to listen to those who listen to them."[23]

In a respectful, intersubjective context, the teacher is free to send many modes of address into the classroom space, for even though critical, artistic, or conservative modes of address call out more specific traits of students than responsive modes of address, these narrower ways of putting a life before the student occur within a context in which students already feel that they are free to respond as they would like. If, for instance, a teacher spends some time addressing students in a Freirean vein, as potential citizen activists, they can view these moments as an opportunity to understand the world from a particular vantage point — knowing they can freely voice their appreciation and discontents without being railroaded into one sort of identity. At the same time, the students are indeed challenged in the way Biesta asks: where do they stand? What are the moral stakes? Teachers should feel justified in expressing their political perspectives in the context where we assume a plurality of subjectivities and a plurality of political persuasions. Students should be able to clue the teacher that they appreciate critical modes of address or find them limiting, and all parties can allow classroom interactions to evolve based on the collective wisdom expressed in a particular intersubjective context. Indeed, in many of the most exciting classrooms and schools, one finds an expressive, egalitarian atmosphere that thrives on multiple modes of address and a cacophony of voices.

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1. Kathleen Cushman, *Fires in the Bathroom* (New York: New Press, 2003), 188.

2. Ibid., xvi.

3. Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning* (Boulder, Co.: Paradigm, 2006), 43.

4. Ibid., 6.

5. This sort of thing happens in the classrooms Ira Shor describes in *Empowering Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 72–73.

6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 17–18.

7. Ibid., 30.

8. This is one of the ways in which Biesta follows Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 75–76.

9. Mariella Espinoza-Herold, *Issues in Latino Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 70–71.

10. Ibid., 133.

11. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 49.

12. "Overdetermined from without" is the phrase used by Franz Fanon to describe the formation of his identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 116.

13. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 153; and Fred Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), chap. 2.

14. For example, Espinoza-Herold, *Issues in Latino Education*, 117. The politics of an elementary school classroom are described in Kristi Fassio, "The Politics of Young People's Lives and Literacy Practices" (PhD diss., University of Utah, 2000).

15. Many scholarly accounts of schooling in neocolonial contexts are available. For instance, Donna Deyhle, *Reflections in Place: Connected Lives of Navajo Women* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009); Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); and Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

16. See, for example, Martha Menchaca, *The Mexican Outsiders* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

17. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.

18. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 19–36.

19. Cushman, *Fires in the Bathroom*, 185–86.

20. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 28.

21. Ibid., 30.

22. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65–66.

23. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road By Walking* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1990), 229.