THESIS

OPPRESSION, INJUSTICE, AND AUTHORITY: CURRENT EVENTS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In the spirit of postcolonialism, transnationalism, critical pedagogy and the banking concept of education, Western tradition has changed dramatically in the past decade. The American landscape, physically and metaphorically, has been altered by oppression and injustice; however, new definitions of oppression and injustice are necessary as a new generation of students exist within a more-tolerant society that must deal with issues of income inequality, racial tension, and gender identification, to name only a few. How, then, can composition react to events found in both broadcast and social media? Is there a pedagogy, a classroom dynamic, a focus, that allows students to better understand the world around them through writing specifically about the issues of prevalence in the media? What does research contribute to the answer? I argue that students benefit from the introduction of current events into their composition studies as a source of topic which each student can find interest based on their right and responsibility to civic discourse. There are issues with introducing current events as the topic, theme, or focus of a classroom, namely their lack of predictability, the overwhelming sensitivity of many topics, and the difficulty of a traditional first year of university study that questions many beliefs traditional students have grown to understand through the voices of reason they recognize as correct or right. Through a close examination of my own students, I identify the difficulties to also include a lack of classroom conversation among students about individual topics. In conclusion, I recognize current events in the classroom as an imperfect pedagogical approach, but the benefits for engagement through writing are worthy of continued research.
INTRODUCTION

One aspect of composition and rhetoric that has always appealed to me is the flexibility of writing as a tool to be used in every discipline, every situation, inside and outside of the classroom. I observe a widely accepted goal of any college curriculum to prepare students for immersion into the world as not only capable employees, but as citizens cognizant of their responsibility for the constant evolution of society and culture. As important as it is to provide students with writing as a skill to be navigated and utilized to contribute to their earning potential as employees, I believe it is equally important to introduce writing as a skill for discovery, exploration, and analysis of society and culture as either fails and/or succeeds. The goals of either are different, but writing can be manipulated to service both.

One of my goals as an educator is to utilize the composition classroom for more than writing. I fully acknowledge that I have a responsibility to my university, my department, and my students to provide those who enter into my classroom with the skills necessary to successfully write throughout their college careers, and hopefully throughout their lives. I have a responsibility to provide students with analytical skills that reject fallacies, recognize effective resources, craft arguments that welcome and respect opposition, and anticipate potential audiences for their work. The flexibility of composition allows me to focus on these unquestionably important functions of writing while introducing arguments and observations about current, relevant global issues.

Technology has allowed for a remarkable amount of information to be available for consumption by anyone with an internet connection. Newspapers no longer exist only in print, news broadcasting is no longer found only on television, and radio programming can exist in the form of podcasts downloaded to mobile devices. It has never been easier to educate ourselves
about the world, through facts and opinions, than it is now. John Gardner and Betty Sullivan claim that “college-educated citizens in the 21st century have to become independent and self-reliant seeks, gatherers, and interpreters of information,” due to the accessibility of information, both reliable and faulty (4). For these reasons, I argue that composition studies could and absolutely should utilize the study of current events as a source of topic for writing assignments.

I am most certainly not the first to introduce and incorporate current events in the classroom, for which I am mostly grateful; without the observations of others within the field who have both succeeded and failed, I would not have had the confidence to engage in conversations, challenge students’ perceptions, welcome rhetorical confrontation, or provide appropriate parameters for writing assignments intended to analyze and discuss current events. Even the naysayers have provided necessary context to help me understand the possible detriments, specifically conflicts and discomfort, both of which I experienced when I experimented with current events in my English 102 course in the spring of 2015. From said experiment, I can now reflect on strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

The focus of my thesis will be to argue that students can benefit from exposure to current events in the composition classroom. I would like to focus on three terms to function as themes for students to focus on when they examine current events; through a closer observation of oppression, injustice, and authority, students can observe current events in a meaningful way. I intend to support this claim through a close examination of critical and feminist pedagogy as the foundation for my role as an educator. It will then be necessary to situate definitions for oppression, injustice, and authority in order to contextualize their place in composition. The banking concept of education, the problem-posing method, postcolonial studies, and

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1 Though the source is from 2004, the same is possibly even more relevant today as traditional students have been raised with the awareness that they can find information with astounding immediacy via the internet.
transnationalism will then function as theories which support the social and cultural implications of my claim. I will conclude with a close examination of my own experiences which have been the ultimate test of application and practicality within the classroom.

**CRITICAL AND FEMINIST PEDAGOGY**

In order to begin my inquiry into student writing, I would like to explore pedagogical theories that best support the type of learning environment to foster a course which values current events as subject for academic composition. I would like to refer primarily to critical pedagogy through the lens of Ann George and her essay “Critical Pedagogy: Dreaming of Democracy,” and secondarily to feminist pedagogy through the lens of Susan Jarratt and her essay “Feminist Pedagogy,” both published in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*.

According to George, “critical pedagogy has also been labeled liberatory pedagogy, empowering pedagogy, radical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, or pedagogy of possibility,” each representing the same goal, which is to empower students against oppression and injustice with their own society and other societies they will have contact with as students and as human beings. In line with critical theory, critical pedagogy aims to “empower students, to engage them in cultural critique, to make a change” (92). Educators aim to “disrupt dominant ideology and to revitalize democratic practice ... for the health of participatory democracy,” and encourage students to “use democratic means to reach democratic ends” (97). Critical pedagogy is a disruption to Western tradition by manipulating principles of civic discourse by which the Western tradition is founded; to encourage democracy is to question the system that fosters current democracy, both in the present as students and in the future as active members of society. Hegemony is expounded and critiqued, which creates opportunity for vacillation in the way

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2 *Oppression* and *injustice* are italicized here on purpose, which I will discuss further later.
students comprehend ideological systems which directly construct their societies, cultures, and lives.

There are three actors that must be considered upon the stage of critical pedagogy: the university/college, the instructor, and the students. George refers to the observations of Kozol, McLaren, Shor, and Freire, who showed equal distaste for the university/college/school for several reasons: schools “ensure that students, particularly working-class students, are thoroughly schooled in passive compliance,” that they “function as ‘sorting mechanisms’ to maintain inequality,” which double as “warehouse[s] for surplus workers,” and that “community colleges with their vocational curricula train students to follow orders and accept subordinate roles in society” (94-95). Critical pedagogy must acknowledge truth in such statements as the motivation for its goal to encourage vacillation in the classroom in response to larger ideologies and systemic structures which education is both framed and functions. Rather than protect students from such claims, critical pedagogy places a spotlight on such accusations and encourages students to “envision alternatives, to inspire them to assume the responsibility for collectively recreating society” (97). Ultimately, critical pedagogy is a process of re-branding which each generation of students is held responsible.

Critical pedagogy begs to reconsider the role of the instructor within the classroom dynamic; a decentered classroom provides the optimal environment for critical pedagogy to succeed. Rather than a hierarchical approach, imagined as vertical with the instructor at the top and students at the bottom, the instructor should instead consider a more horizontal or linear approach, which places all members of the classroom at the same level. To remove the expertise in the classroom from a single individual, and to instead place expertise as a goal for each member of the classroom to achieve upon the course’s completion, is to decenter and alter the
classroom landscape in a way that encourages success through critical pedagogy. According to George, “the instructor is the means expert,” which suggests that the instructor plays the role of a guide rather than expert in the classroom. Edwards, “Educators must live their ideologies to be believed,” which creates a differentiation between authority and authoritarianism which students are then challenged to respond to both inside and outside of the classroom (105). The role of the educator who intends to adapt a critical pedagogy is perhaps the most impractical and difficult transition to embody within a classroom setting. To decenter the classroom is to remove authority, but the conclusion of the course is punctuated by a final grade which is provided via the instructor. The final grade is the ultimate exercise of authority within the classroom, and displacement of said authority is almost impossible in a traditional classroom setting.

Students also play an important role in the success of critical pedagogy. When placed upon the same liminal space as their instructors, students are held accountable for their success in a unique way; their assignment of value for the class is a reflection of their personal contribution to the classroom dynamic. If students put forth the necessary effort, critical pedagogy places control and responsibility in their possession towards success; however, if students fail to do so, the course will lose its meaning and risk not only a failing grade, but more importantly, the inability for students to complete academic writing in a meaningful way that leads to successful academic composition in future classes.

I would like to take the time here to expand on two specific issues I perceive in regards to the decentered classroom. First, I acknowledge that students may misunderstand the displaced authority within a classroom as a conflict to their tuition. Essentially, students pay to take classes to learn from experts and professionals within a desired field. A decentered classroom may result in resentment from students if the instructor does not justify their approach. Also, I recognize that students anticipate their work to be critiqued through the process of assessment. If the instructor removes themselves as a figure of authority within the classroom dynamic, the question of grading must be addressed. There have been significant strides toward experiential education and service-learning pedagogy that assess grades based on a student’s individual and collaborative assessment of their involvement in a class. Students pace and grade themselves, essentially. I have yet to fully explore or prove this system to be effective, though I look forward to opportunities for future research.
A single pedagogy is, for me, incapable of fulfilling my expectations and aspirations of growth as an educator. As much as I identify with critical pedagogy, I also acknowledge feminist pedagogy as an influence for my intentions toward the environment I would hope to foster within my classroom. I will need to depend on the two as a pedagogical binary rather than individual pedagogies independent of one another.

Feminist pedagogy is a result of the evolution of feminism in Western society. Susan Jarratt chronicles the history of feminism and its founding purpose from its inception as the eradication of oppression and injustice. Originally founded from the catalyst of oppression against women in a male-dominated society, members reached out to other groups within society to share experiences, frustrations, fears, and hopes toward a better society of tolerance and acceptance (113). Likewise, feminist pedagogy aims to promote similar conversation in the classroom.

Though I do not interpret gender to be the ultimate division between people, there are interesting observations worth notice in the study of gender differences in writing. According to Jarratt, “several important researchers work in, around, and against a binary division of gender and styles of writing into male / masculine / argumentative / rational / linear / academic over against female / feminine / personal / emotional / digressive” (122). These observations became a set of preconceived expectations of writing produced by men and women, hence feminist

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4 The entirety of my thesis will refer specifically to Western society. I am limited to my experiences; if I am to speak from a standpoint of expertise in any way, I must relate to the society I am most familiar, and the society from which the vast majority of my students have been raised and submerged throughout their lives up until the moment they enter into my classroom.

5 I use the term *members* specifically, as feminism aims to include individuals into a group that exists to negotiate the treatment of anyone in a society that feels they have been oppressed or discriminated against. It is through *membership* within the feminist movement that the cause gains numbers, the masses begin to assemble, and change can be made.
pedagogy had to combat not only gender stereotypes, but the adjacent oppression held against women as less capable of academic composition.

Contrary to my initial reaction to feminist pedagogy, the goal is not to convert students to feminists, but rather to invite the kind of knowledge through conversation that feminism originally depended upon to create a platform of individual experiences tied together by common denominators of oppression and injustice in a patriarchal society.\(^6\) Inspired by decades of activism against gender and racial oppression “feminist writing teachers bring historical and political knowledge of the feminist movement, sexism, and patriarchal structures, along with tools of gender analysis, into the classroom” (118). Feminist pedagogy aims for many of the same classroom practices as critical, including a decentered classroom with students acting as “sources of knowledge” (115).

**OPPRESSION, INJUSTICE, AND AUTHORITY**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *oppression* is “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control, or power; tyranny; exploitation.” From this definition, I can now situate *oppression* as a verb that requires an actor in command of authority, the *oppressor*, which functions within a hierarchical structure above those which are the *oppressed*. Power structure is of great importance for this conversation, and the source of power and authority that places *oppressors* over the *oppressed* will be of great interest to students who are asked to consider *oppression* they have witnessed or experienced in their own lives.

\(^6\) The definition of feminism in 2015 can create cause for concern among students in the classroom. Feminism has recently become a buzzword often associated with a group of high level celebrity men and women who have popularized the term, determined to create a culture of support for equality between genders. Though income equality is of the highest important to many, emotional equality, double-standards, and other gender stereotypes have been questioned in hopes to erect a new culture of tolerance and acceptance that treats human beings as human beings in the most neutral way possible. Also, feminism is seen in more subtle ways in larger society. An example could be Title IX in universities which require equal treatment for any student involved in an educational program, regardless of gender. Also, equal opportunity and a greater appreciation for diversity in the workplace aims to recruit more women not only in companies, but within higher management roles as well.
The definition provided for *injustice* reads “the opposite of justice; unjust action; wrong; want of equity; unfairness.” Accordingly, as the antonym of *injustice*, the definition of *justice* is far more descriptive. Several possible definitions, all from the OED, include “maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment,” “punishment of an offender, retribution deemed appropriate for a crime,” and “judicial authority or responsibility; jurisdiction.” Similar to *oppression*, *injustice* is closely involved with *authority* and dependent upon the ethical responsibility of those who possess authority.

There are four definitions for *authority*, each of which I find interesting and necessary to fully comprehend the ways the term is conceived by the English language. The first definition read “an authoritative piece of writing,” which is interesting in that written discourse is the first mentioned definition of *authority*. If writing, as a noun, is considered first as a definition for *authority*, then students can consider the act of writing as *authoritative*. The second definition is two-part, and claims “Power to enforce obedience or compliance, or a party possessing it,” followed by “Power or right to give orders, make decisions, or enforce obedience; moral, legal, or political supremacy.” In this case, *power* is granted by “moral, legal, or political supremacy” to enforce compliance of rules created to protect a greater system. Who possesses the power to give unto someone else? How is “moral, legal, or political supremacy” achieved? What makes constituents obedient to *authority*?

Perhaps there are answers to these questions with greater consideration of a definition for *authority*. “Power derived from or conferred by another; the right to act in a specified way, delegated from one person or organization to another; official permission, authorization” is given as a third possible definition, one which considers how power is traded, transacted, manipulated,
and shifted between members who hold it to those that do not, or perhaps how it is withheld from those that never will. Oppression is a product of authority in relationship to power. Along the ideas of oppression, the final definition to consider for authority is “As a mass or count noun: a person or (esp.) body having political or administrative power or control in a particular sphere; the body or bodies held responsible for enforcing law and order, providing public services, etc., in a country or region.” I find the final definition to be the most important in relationship to how authority is placed in the possession of some rather than others. When students recognize that they themselves represent the masses, and that the masses must be accountable for their society, they have an opportunity to view authority as something that may not actually be so far from their reach.

**PAOLO FREIRE, CONSCIENTIZAÇÃO, AND LIBERATION**

With working definitions for oppression, injustice, and authority, I would like to consider the work of Paolo Freire, a social theorist from Brazil; his interpretation of education is meaningful as both a theory and as a means for practical application in the composition classroom. Freire experienced poverty and hunger throughout his childhood in Brazil as a result of an oppressive government. He dedicated his work to identifying the oppressive forces in both government and education as the largest power structures within a society. In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, there is a chapter titled “The Banking Concept of Education,” which contributes to the founding theories for critical pedagogy.

According to Freire, systemic education is oppressive, but students are not free from responsibility for the culture of unquestioned information acceptance which allows for oppression to breed. He accused students of mimicking ‘receptacles’ that failed to question the truth and the complexity behind knowledge passed to them from the expert or authority figure.
who controlled their educational institutions. According to Freire, “this is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits,” which indicates students are evaluated on their ability to receive and duplicate information rather than their ability to question and make inquiries of their own (1).^7^ 

The *oppressors* revel in the simplicity of ideology and *authority*, which combined create a culture of acceptance that goes unquestioned by the masses, hence “the more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (2). Essentially, it is knowledge or information that is presented as *simple* that must be questioned. To combat “transferals of information,” Freire instead encourages “acts of cognition” through his answer to the banking concept: the problem-posing method, defined as,

> “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (6-8).

In his counter-method, students are introduced to equal parts freedom and responsibility for their own education. They are encouraged to no longer exist as “docile listeners,” and instead take control of the dialogue in which every member of the classroom, instructor included, recognizes the potential to gain and learn (7). Freire claimed that “only through communication can human

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^7^ Here I would like to consider that teachers were once students. They receive affirmation of their ability to teach others through their ability to successfully complete the same requirements for perceived proficiency. Therefore, the teacher is the product of cyclical institutionalization, and is responsible for the production of more teachers that will encourage the same educational system for future generations.
life hold meaning,” which for his purposes encouraged students to understand that their ideas and opinions mattered and should be openly expressed (5).

The problem-posing method is complimented by the problem-posing educator. Freire believed that educators have a responsibility to their students to break the cycle of expert-provides-knowledge-to-student by accepting the role of peer rather than the role of expert. He encourages a partnership between teachers and students which requires the educator, the classroom authority, to share the responsibility of meaning-making with all other members of the classroom community and the discourse they share. The relationship was specified through solidarity, which he claimed “required true communication,” and qualifies that “the teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking” (5). Students would have to rise to meet their expectations as peer to the authority figure within the classroom, which would demand more of students to provide scenarios and solutions for collaboration and communication. The goal is to obliterate the dichotomies that the banking concept endorses, that there is a distance between student as object and teacher as subject; rather, there are only humans as subjects observing the world as an object, both placed on the same spectrum of authority, working in joint responsibility toward mutual growth (6).

There are two more terms that must be defined and contextualized toward my overall argument: conscientização and liberation. Freire coined the term conscientização, which is defined by his translator as “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (3). I understand this to be a conscious recognition of the reality of oppression in society, which could be considered in two ways: first, students could identify with personal experiences in which they have been victimized

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8 Here it is also important to note that human beings and the world cannot exist without one another, neither can function in the abstract, and humans must recognize their role in the world, not outside of it.
by oppression, and second, an opportunity for students that do not feel that they have been victimized by oppression to consider why that is, and how the differences can be reconciled, not only as individuals, but as members of the collective masses that create the constituency of their society. If conscientização is cognitive, it is then complemented by the action of liberation, essentially functioning as the antonym to oppression. “Authentic liberation – the process of humanization – is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (6). Liberation and conscientização are responsible for complicating knowledge acquisition, denouncing obedience and marginalization, and returning authority to students as members of the masses under constraint of their collective society.

Freire claimed “projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry,” which I interpret to mean that his definition of oppression is that which aims to manipulate people to accept degradation rather than the situation that perpetuates it (2-3). Oppression, then, could also mean that the self, the individual, is robbed of their own potential authority because the system which should foster authority in individuals instead degrades their education to create unconscious followers. Liberation could then be the awakening and awareness of the followers to reclaim their authority through a more conscious education.

Given my own kairotic moment, practicality is perhaps the most disconnected component of Freire’s theory. Not every teacher, especially a graduate student, has the ability to embody John Keating, the fearless professor played by Robin Williams in Dead Poets Society; they cannot wholly encourage the type of rebellion that undoes the socially perceived tradition of education with assessment and successful completion of mandated standards. Freire inspired his
audience to not only reject government-controlled education, but to demand a linear system that placed *authority* and expertise evenly upon all members of a classroom. As an educator, it is difficult to combat the same system Freire warned against when that exact system is the venue for my current classroom, my first opportunity to practice and examine my own pedagogy.

As much as I understand, appreciate, and acknowledge the importance of Freire’s perspective, I must also consider the reality of my own setting, and the most practical way to communicate his ideas to my own students. My students must also be prepared to consider themselves as “receptacles”; it may be the only way they can truly acknowledge their role in a reversal of the effects Freire warned against in their own lives. In the spirit of effective argumentation, I must consider that the opposite vantage point is just as valid. I must also be careful not to assume they *want* to reverse the system. If my students do not identify with experiences of *oppression* or *injustice*, what is the appropriate introduction? Does an appropriate introduction exist? And if my students do relate to and understand *oppression* and *injustice*, how does the academic conversation begin? How does a conversation inside the ivory tower reflect the depth of what *oppression* and *injustice* mean to individuals, communities, nationalities, etc.? Their identities as students, if I am truly interested in maintaining the integrity of Freire’s primary argument, must be established *without my insistence*. If I convince them, through the exercise of my *authority*, the education system is misguided, I function as a mechanism within the cycle of expertise passed to students as receptacles.

How, then, does composition utilize Freire and the problem-posing method? My suggestion would be incremental improvements. I cannot find it reasonable, practical, or entirely effective to encourage the entire doctrine of Freire through the medium of critical pedagogy to students, but I can introduce it. I can make it available to them. I can encourage discussion and
promote *conscientização* of the social ills of their generation. I can assign projects that ask students to learn through writing. I can provide an opportunity for students to study and analyze their own society and culture, but first I have to consider another set of important theories to help incorporate such a perspective into the composition classroom.

**POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND HYBRID PEOPLE**

Critical pedagogy and the problem-posing method correspond well, but they are not alone in the practical critique of *oppression, injustice, and authority*. The contribution of postcolonial studies and transnationalism in rhetoric further enlightens how differences between peoples and their corresponding cultures provide greater opportunities to both acknowledge and challenge *oppression* and *injustice* as both educators and students. More importantly, I would like to explore how either of these theories function through *praxis* in the composition classroom.

Postcolonial studies exist in the wake of colonialism and imperialism. The vast expansion of territory and people placed through hegemonic practices of *authority* and *oppression* has resulted in consequences which must be identified and analyzed. As members of postcolonial America, educators and students have a responsibility to respond to the aforementioned consequences as a practice of civic discourse.\(^9\) Composition studies provide a venue and a medium for such ideas to be considered, through my observations, in two ways: 1) through contemplation of the consequences of history, and 2) through careful examination of current society, culture, and people/events.

As much as movement was a characteristic of colonialism, it exists today as a regular component of daily life. People, things, and ideas move constantly across borders that separate

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\(^9\) Here I would like to acknowledge the presence of international students in the composition classroom. They do indeed exist, but by vast majority, my traditional first year students have been raised in Western tradition as English-speaking U.S. citizens. This does not discredit those that do not fulfill the provided student characteristics, but for the sake of my claim, I will generalize to create a platform from which to describe my students.
locations, cultures, genders, religions, and languages; Gloria Anzaldúa defined \textit{borderlands} as the spaces where these components of society exist in limbo, as the spaces between, which are almost always accompanied by \textit{oppression} and \textit{injustice} due to their often marginalized differences from the societal norms of larger society. Anzaldúa made the observation “the dominant culture has the frame of reference,” meaning that colonialism created the frame of reference against which all \textit{borderlands} are compared (“Toward” 40). It is the responsibility of postcolonial studies to create a new “frame of reference” against which \textit{borderlands} have a greater potential for acceptance and, eventually, \textit{authority} of their own.

In “Terms of Engagement: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Composition Studies,” Deepika Bahri asks for postcolonial studies to be judged on its productivity as a verb rather than a definable noun (74-76). She noticed that postcolonialism is often misconceived as a synonym for “other” or “otherness,” which cultivates an environment where “the naming of the margin in euphemistic terms is a way of reducing discomfort and diverting attention away from precisely those problems of marginality, otherness, and of historical particulars that should be addressed” (77). If placed against Anzaldúa’s \textit{borderlands}, the treatment of postcolonial studies of that as only “others” would mean that the entire discipline of study would focus only on marginalized groups rather than society as a whole. Bahri goes on to explain “the lumping of all the others into one contourless, indefinable category privileges their differences from the mainstream while denying their sameness with it at any level or their differences from each other in crucial ways” (79-80). Anzaldúa’s theory concurred with Bahri’s interpretation and noted that life in the \textit{borderlands} depended on the extent to which individuals were submerged in one culture to feel inferior in another (\textit{Borderlands} 43).
I interpret transnationalism to be such an important term because it does not belong to rhetoric alone; disciplines across the academic landscape study, define, identify, and create through a transnational lens. Transnationalism is a binary between an increase in interconnectivity among people and a decrease in the social and economic importance of borders among nation states (Vertovec, 574-576).

To further situate a definition of transnationalism, I would like to first refer to Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell via their essay “Introduction: Configurations of Transnationality: Locating Feminist Rhetorics,” where they explain that a transnational rhetoric perspective “strives to address how rhetorical concepts are shaped by culture, social, and economic interconnectivities and interrelations and cross-border and cross-cultural mobilizations of power, language, resources, and people,” and that it “attempts to offer a more complex and sophisticated theory of culture, cultural interconnectivity, and language, addressing how cultures transact and interact with one another in a variety of mediums – face-to-face, digitally, textually – and through international policymaking and transnational organizing” (465). Though many concepts of transnationalism sound similar to those of postcolonial studies, transnationalism is concerned with the present treatment of differences between individuals and their interconnectivity, and how said differences are reflected through both oppression and liberation, and the evolution of the former to the latter.

Postcolonial studies are often cross-referenced with composition due to several components that reflect similar ideas and similar anticipative outcomes. Bahri notes that

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10 Though I do not necessarily identify Writing Across the Curriculum as an influence on my personal pedagogy, I acknowledge that students benefit from a writing course that translates to the fields they focus their studies upon. For this reason, I think it is important to consider how the term transnationalism is useful outside of composition alone.
“Composition studies has found commonalities between its concern and those raised in postcolonial studies. The former’s interest in rhetoric, discourse, and power; in the recovery of hitherto silenced voices; in the liberatory possibilities of advanced technologies; and in the relation of text to the social finds echoes, and often counterparts, in the debates dominant in the latter” (70).

Bahri recognizes the potential that postcolonial studies has to liberate the oppressed through the medium of composition. Postcolonial studies and transnationalism work together to identify the oppression and injustice that Freire observed in individuals and groups that are “othered” based on their identities within various borderlands.

There is a need to redefine the kind of people that exist in modernity, post-colonialism, post-imperialism, with respect to years of interconnectivity in the New World and Western civilization. Bahri refers to Jacqueline Jones Royster and her definition of hybrid people as “people who either have the capacity by right of history and development, or who might have created the capacity by right or development, to move with dexterity across cultural boundaries, to make themselves comfortable, and to make sense amid the chaos of difference” (71). Anzaldúa also elaborated on the concept of “otherness” when she explained to Andrea Lunsford that “there is no such thing as an other. The other is in you, the other is in me,” which dares to detach from the assumption that individuals are incapable of gaining perspectives from others, internalizing their understandings, and identifying as somehow ‘other’ themselves (“Toward” 40). Transnationalism does something truly exciting: it encourages an identification of

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11 Reference to the New World and Western Civilization is specific rhetorical choice. I will further develop this particular reference later.

12 Here I would like to acknowledge the theory of the subaltern as a theory that focused on anti-Western society.
differences while simultaneously recognizing the necessity of differences in order to encourage acceptance and tolerance, and ultimately a form of self-evolution.

To use postcolonial studies and transnationalism in a composition classroom is to welcome conversations about the development of Western society; students must first understand the complexity of their own society through history and politics before they can cross-reference with other societies in meaningful ways. The evolution of Western society can create identity within students born and raised into the American tradition, but there are instances of oppression and injustice, namely through violence, that must be carefully considered against current society. Postcolonial studies afford students the opportunity to analyze their ancestry, and transnationalism allows for close examination of current trends congruent with postcolonialism that affect not only American society, but society’s relationship to other societies around the world.

**PRACTICAL UNCERTAINTY**

The theorists and pedagogical minds of the discipline that I have mentioned held certain skepticism about their ideas that must be observed with equal interest. Paolo Freire criticized the unconscious, unexamined mistakes of an educator who followed the exact curriculum and standards of the education system, whose intentions were good, by claiming “unfortunately, those who espouse the cause of liberation are themselves surrounded and influenced by the climate which generates the banking concept, and often do not perceive the true significance of its dehumanizing powers” (6). Some educators do not know that they are fostering an environment for oppression and injustice to re-cycle. They are guilty of the same cognitive dissonance as their students without even realizing it.
Gloria Anzaldúa, in her interview with Andrea Lunsford, confessed that “one of the things I like best about teaching composition is that sometimes I can make a place, as a teacher, for students to do dangerous and experimental kinds of writing. But then they have to go and pass the tests and pass the history essays and do the inside-the-lines kind of writing” (49). As liberating as a critical/feminist approach to composition studies can feel to either educator or student, the rest of the educational system remains the same. Ira Shor furthered this examination when he claimed “it’s a tricky business to organize an untraditional class in a traditional school” (George 97). Critical and feminist pedagogy face the challenge to justify seemingly unconventional methods against a system that favors tradition; however, according to postcolonial studies and transnationalism, tradition is far from what the landscape of society and culture actually immolate.

I recognize that it is imperative to consider the practicality of implementing critical and/or feminist pedagogy into the writing classroom, which is often met with the unrealistic practice of a decentered classroom through the complication of authority within the classroom as it has been utilized in our current system of education versus what critical and feminist pedagogy attempt to radically alter. Critical and feminist pedagogies do not endorse a spectrum; there is no degree or variation of either pedagogy that the original theorists would approve of. In fact, they would argue that the critical and feminist pedagogue must completely adhere to the separation of authority from the position of the educator in order to succeed.

13 Here is perhaps the best opportunity to address the purpose of composition within a larger academic setting. In the limited experience I have as both a student and an instructor, composition has been treated as a service course. The required general education credits received from successful completion of a two-part composition program are designed to prepare students for the expectations of college-level writing in any discipline. If a student successfully completes their composition credits, they in turn have proven their ability to compose appropriate, academic documents. If composition deters from the purpose of creating academic writers, it undoes its purpose within general education requirements.
Here is where I recognize my inability to do so. My professional experience as an educator in the university setting took place as a graduate teaching assistant. I needed the structure to understand how a course is conceived, how a syllabus is executed to uphold both university and department standards, and how assignments are created to achieve student learning outcomes. Classroom management and fair grading practices were learned via observing and communicating with my colleagues and participating in a professional development workshop at the beginning of each semester. My role was that of both student and educator as I learned from my superiors and taught my students, simultaneously, for two years. Of course I was capable of making observations and decisions about how I wanted to teach post-graduation, but my time spent as an adjunct faculty member at Colorado State University-Pueblo was contingent upon my adherence to the solidarity of the First Year Composition program as it had been designed for each instructor to function through unity of expectations and classroom practices. To claim that I was capable of exercising critical or feminist pedagogy completely would be incorrect. Their ideals have influenced and inspired me, but the radical execution of their principles would have been impossible in the setting I have taught thus far.

**CURRENT EVENTS IN THE CLASSROOM: AN ASSIGNMENT**

I argue that current events have a useful place within the composition classroom because young adults deserve the opportunity to participate in civic discourse in an academic setting. I

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14 Yes, this admission is contradictory to my claims of adherence to critical and feminist pedagogy. I chose to discuss critical and feminist pedagogies as theories to begin with, and either have heavily influenced my personal pedagogy, but upon further examination post-defense, I recognize that I am incapable of referring to myself as a critical or feminist pedagogue. The practicality of such a practice is inconceivable within a structured course that depended entirely on student learning outcomes and department expectations as presented via Colorado State University-Pueblo. My allowance to teach at the university depended entirely on my adherence to said expectations, and to assume that I had embodied either pedagogy completely within the limitations of the system is both naïve and untrue. However, I hold that there have been noticeable alterations in my treatment of students and subject since I adopted the idea that each member of the classroom holds expertise worth acknowledging and sharing, and that I am just as capable of learning from my students as my students are from me, which I believe is the foundation of either pedagogy – classroom as community for the collaboration of ideas from unlike individuals.
content that *oppression, injustice* and *authority* can function as themes for students to focus their research when prompted to analyze current events for an assignment. The following will explain an assignment implemented into my own course, and observations about the outcome.

I designed a project to explore the significance of current events as reported in respected domestic and foreign sources. Students were expected to use sources such as *The New York Times* along with several other online, foreign publications to focus on one current event for five weeks. Students were to research, create an annotated bibliography, and compose a five to seven page rhetorical argument that adhered to the theme of *global relevance*. They learned about bias and fallacies as they recognized how arguments were either effective or detrimental to the claims made by different journalists from around the world, and they were encouraged to share their research in class to generate discussion about their findings throughout the writing process. The First Year Composition Program at CSU-Pueblo believes that writing is a process;

15 Here I would like to take the opportunity to address technology within my thesis. I do not often refer to the specific ways that technology contributes to the success of my students and their research needs. I never had to write a paper or complete any project without the help of the internet while I was in college. Even in high school, I was already introduced to the internet and the possibilities it provided for research. The extent of the internet has expanded exponentially since my high school and undergraduate career. The typical, traditional freshmen students I currently teach are between six to eight years younger than I am. Students are now able to not only access foreign newspapers online, but they have an impressively accurate translation function through Google Chrome which allows them access to materials across the world which would have once been unavailable. Traditional freshmen students enrolled in first year classes across campus are not new to the use of internet. In fact, many have had the internet on their phones throughout their entire high school careers. They are not quite as impressed at the advancement of this technology because it has always existed for them. The one theme of technology that I take time to address is the immediacy of the internet. Information that would have once taken weeks to arrive in a format that could be accessed by students in Colorado is now available within minutes of its production, which makes the term ‘current event’ more precise than ever. Their ability to identify their *kairotic moment* as young scholars researching current, relevant sources allows each student to fortify their *ethos*.

16 *Global relevance* was the theme I chose to label the original assignment. Students engaged in classroom discussions about what exactly *global relevance* means, and we agreed that their papers were to focus on events that affected more than just the United States. The most popular topics included the massacre in Paris at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters, the terrorist presence of Boko Haram in Nigeria and of ISIS in the Middle East, and the economic turmoil surrounding the Greek election of Alexis Tsipras into office as the Prime Minister. An after thought was the connection each of these incidents had, and continues to have, to *oppression, injustice* and *authority*. So although *global relevance* was the theme we used in class, I would change the rhetoric surrounding the assignment to include a conversation about these three terms.
therefore, a formal proposal, multiple drafts, and extensive peer review were completed prior to
final submission for both the annotated bibliography and the final paper.\footnote{Also in adherence to the First Year Composition program at Colorado State University-Pueblo, I focused extensively on a learning objective labeled Diversity and Social Responsibility, which claims “In both our reading and writing assignments, you will be asked to consider and articulate the nature of a multicultural society and to recognize the role of aesthetic awareness, language, and cultural and social perspectives, as well as human and institutional systems of the past and present”}

Through the utilization of foreign newspapers as text, my intention was for students to be afforded the ability to identify foreign audiences, the expectations that foreign journalists had of their audiences, and the overall perspectives that reflect the opinions of entire nations. My students depended on Google Chrome to translate newspaper articles from around the world into English; what I failed to recognize at the time was the contradictory elements of translated primary documents. Students consumed information to better understand current events from sources throughout the world. By providing students with the tools necessary to translate their various sources into English, I may have encouraged them to do exactly what Anzaldúa warned against, to erase the primary language and replace it with English, a dominant language. In order to successfully complete the assignment, students then quoted and cited material for their sources in their final documents \textit{in English}, as though English was how it originally appeared in the primary document. This was perhaps the largest failure of my assignment given my intention to successfully incorporate concepts of transnational rhetoric.

**CONVERSATIONS AMONG STUDENTS**

One of the major pitfalls of my composition classroom has been the lack of discussion among students. I had anticipated, with all the naïve hope a graduate student can have, that students would arrive brimming with ideas they wanted to contribute to a classroom discussion about the current events they had been assigned to research; this was not the case. The aforementioned theories can only communicate so much alone; communication between peers
must exist. How can instructors encourage students to share ideas when they are unwilling? How can students better understand the value of conversation within a course that focuses mainly on writing?

I would first like to cite Kenneth Bruffee in his essay “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’,” in which he claims that there is a chain reaction between communication, internalized thought, and written discourse. Bruffee argues that “we learn to think reflectively as a result of learning to talk, and the way we can think reflectively as adults depend on the ways we have learned to talk as we grew up,” meaning that subconsciously, conversation has always served the purpose of communicating information for ourselves and others to contextualize and understand (90). Conversation takes place formally and informally, inside and outside of the classroom, over the course of each person’s lifetime. Through conversation, information is transmitted between individuals, and each individual’s ability to analyze and synthesize information is enhanced by their ability to communicate their ideas and questions to others. Conversations with others generates the kind of thinking that is then practiced alone. Once a conversation takes place, the individuals who participated are then capable of translating their interpretation of the conversation into internalized thought (88-90). Throughout a nonspecific amount of time dedicated to a process where the student reconsiders the conversation, students create their own ideas and interpretation, attempt to view the conversation from the perspective of their communicative partner(s), and ultimately enhance their understanding of the world based on new information acquired from the conversation. In an academic setting, the next step is to write. The written component of the conversation of mankind involves an alternative form of communication that asks the writer to consider previous
spoken conversations, a reflection of their internalized thought, and the production of a product that shows change from the initial conversation to the written argument (92-93).

Bruffee’s intention was to identify the importance of conversation between peers; I argue that his evaluation of conversation, internalized thought, and written product works in a classroom setting where members of the course function as peers to one another, even if they represent different disciplines, backgrounds, etc. He also observes that “the person who does most of the ‘discussing’ in most discussion classes is usually the teacher” (94). In order to eliminate said occurrence as much as possible, student must be willing to participate in a form of rhetoric that inspires and respects their differences as valuable assets within a classroom discussion.

According to Patricia Roberts-Miller in her essay “Fighting Without Hatred: Hannah Arendt’s Agonistic Rhetoric,” individuals must avoid solipsism in exchange to accept an open invitation to participate in discussion rather than taking their singular views as the ultimate truth (587). Arendt’s theories date back to the Greek polis, which impressed her with the power of language and conversation to promote and encourage action toward social change. Roberts-Miller identifies that Arendt hoped to recreate the polis through encouragement to participate with a public realm. “Arendt does not propose a public realm of neutral, rational being who escape differences to live in the discourse of universals; she envisions one of different people who argue with passion, vehemence, and integrity” (589). The classroom, then, should not be a venue for polite conversation or silence; rather, it should encourage disagreement, opportunities for students to prove each other wrong, and to prove themselves wrong, all for the sake of learning.
The conversational element of agonistic rhetoric, a reflection of the ideas of Hannah Arendt, mirrors and compliments the ideas of Kenneth Bruffee. Conversation encourages individuals to recognize the value of collaboration. Should individuals recognize the importance of conversations among individuals unlike themselves, they can begin to successfully anticipate and accept postcolonial studies and transnationalism, value and trust the process of the “Conversation of Mankind,” and participate in agonistic rhetoric to achieve greater knowledge and ultimately stand against oppression and injustice as viewed through their evolving knowledge. Arendt insisted that “good thinking requires that one hear the arguments of other people,” meaning that “speech matters” (593).

To the contrary of the above mentioned idea, and I do find it exceedingly important to discuss this rebuttal in detail, is summarized by the following observation: “The paradoxical nature of agonism (that is must involve both individuality and commonality) makes it difficult to maintain, as the temptation is great either to think one’s own thoughts without reference to anyone else or to let others do one’s thinking” (294). Constant balance is required between one’s own thoughts and the ideas which belong to others. Rather, information and knowledge should be exchanged so that “one wishes to put forward an argument that makes clear what one’s stance is and why one holds it, but with the intention of provoking critique and counterargument” (596). In order to “provoke critique and counterargument,” any communicator must contextualize and understand the ideas and ideologies of their opponent.

A return to the title of the essay is revealing. “Fighting Without Hatred” purposefully uses the term ‘fight’, which indicates that there is a degree of expected combat within the theory.

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18 This is a critique used to identify issues of plagiarism between students. I do not wish to fully analyze the implications of plagiarism as a result of students who freely share ideas and ideologies among each other for the sake of agonistic rhetoric, though I do recognize the potential issue that is occasionally caused. For now, I will label this as an area for further research.
of agonistic rhetoric. Arendt found constant consensus deplorable; her work reflected upon the Holocaust and the societal assimilation of individuals unwilling to question the masses, but rather become faceless members of the crowd. Arendt faulted the selfishness of humanity by claiming “nothing, indeed, is more common, even among highly sophisticated people, than the blind obstinacy that becomes manifest in lack of imagination and failure to judge” (597).

Agnostic rhetoric demands that those involved in the conversation must not be afraid to defend their own ideas. The members of the Greek polis were able to affect social change through their value of rhetoric and public speaking, not through their ability to settle for consensus. If students are given the rhetorical tools to identify themselves in relationship to oppression and injustice, they must be willing to defend themselves and their identities as much as they are expected to consider the possibilities of others. Contradictory, perhaps, but identity is meaningless if an individual is easily swayed by every piece of new information provided to them via conversation. Intellectual beings must discern the truth from the conversations they take part in.\(^{19}\) They must be willing to recognize their opposition and defend themselves and their ideologies.

The reality of silence in the classroom remained. I have considered two possible reasons for why students choose to avoid agonistic rhetoric in return for the painfully awkward quiet. At the beginning of each semester, students nod in agreement to the expectation that all communication in a classroom should remain respectful. Somewhere along the way, students began to identify disagreement as disrespect. Rather than risk the confrontation, the possibility of disrespect, intended or not, has paralyzed students from entrance into an argument.

Alternatively, students have admitted that they choose not to engage in conversations when they

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\(^{19}\) This is another function of internalized thought within the “Conversation of Mankind” that Bruffee does not explicitly identify in his essay. The thought process which follows any conversation is not destined to only breed agreement; rather, the dissonance caused by conversations can have an equally influential effect on participants within the conversation.
feel they are not adequately prepared with enough information to argue their opinions. *Ethos* is one of the most important concepts taught within the FYC program at CSU-Pueblo, and students take care and pride in the creation and maintenance of their own *ethos* in the classroom. I believe they would rather maintain silence than diminish their *ethos*.

I am still in search of an effective remedy for silence within a composition classroom. Peer review, as I teach it, encourages students to become more aware of the other members in the classroom. Each semester I challenge my students to learn the names of all of their classmates, hopeful that the familiarity of names and faces will lead students to more comfortability referring to the ideas of others, in agreement or disagreement. I have also considered disinterest, and recognize that students may not be interested enough in any particular current event to discuss the repercussions among their peers, regardless of my greatest attempts to encourage, even threaten their grades with, their participation.

With rare exception for several international students, I am accustomed to sharing the classroom with students who were born and raised in the philosophies of Western society. Their cultural expectations have been cultivated since birth with influences such as the English language (though it may not be their only language), the undeniable influence of Christianity in a country founded on the principle of separation of church and state, recent increase in conversations which question the existence of gender equality, and race has been recently resurrected as the widest disparity next to socioeconomic status that plagues and divides the United States. Within these complicated societal normalcies, students base their understanding of their cultures. Students who are only versed in Western society may feel uncomfortable establishing opinions of societies and cultures unlike their own, but I believe the entire purpose
of introducing current events into the composition classroom is to disrupt their comfortability, to ask students to imagine the world outside of their understanding.

CONCLUSION

The hardest question to answer after the final outcome of my attempt to incorporate current events into my composition classroom was why. Why continue to defend the necessity of difficult conversations within the classroom? Why risk the awkwardness, the silence, or the disinterest? Why try to simplify Freire, summarize Anzaldúa, defend Arendt, and justify Bruffee? Why risk a syllabus dependent upon the unknown, the unplanned course of current events?

I want students to not only take greater interest in the world outside of the university, I want them to be prepared to participate in civic discourse as concerned members of society. I want their generation to be more capable than those before to have difficult conversations about the ills of society. I want them to be more than aware of oppression, injustice and authority; I want them to actively work against the marginality of the “other,” to defend the defenseless, to value equality. I want them to be capable of disagreement without resentment. I want them to consider consensus a failure. I want them to be unafraid. I want the same things for them as I want for myself, which perhaps explains my resilience against my first attempt, and my first failure.
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