

## The promises of student talk: The Harvard public issues series and stuttering pedagogies

### As promessas da conversa estudantil: a série de questões públicas de Harvard e as *stuttering pedagogies*

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**Abstract:** Amplifying student talk in schools was one of the multiple reforms of the 1960s-1970s that targeted the passivity and mindlessness of US schooling. The *Harvard Public Issues Series* (Oliver and Shaver) was a “new social studies” curriculum that explicitly promoted classroom discussion. Through a close analysis of this curriculum, I will examine student talk as a desired pedagogical practice. I plan to historicize educators’ focus on classroom talk and utilize feminist and postcolonial critiques of the presumed universal effects of student dialogue (e.g. Boler). Materials to be examined include the Public Issues curriculum materials and teacher manuals, secondary scholarship on the *Harvard Public Issues Project* (e.g. Bohan and Feinberg) and on classroom discussion, and my own recollections of teaching the new social studies as a beginning teacher.

**Keywords:** student talk, new social studies curriculum, pedagogical objects of desire.

**Resumo:** A ampliação das conversas estudantis nas escolas foi uma das múltiplas reformas dos anos 1960-1970 que se contrapunham à passividade e a falta de atenção nas escolas dos Estados Unidos. A série de questões públicas de Harvard (Oliver e Shaver) contribuiu para um currículo de “novos estudos sociais” que promoveu

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explicitamente a discussão em sala de aula. Por meio de uma análise detalhada desse currículo, examinarei a conversa estudantil como uma prática pedagógica desejada. Pretendo historicizar o foco dos educadores na conversa em sala de aula e utilizar críticas feministas e pós-coloniais dos supostos efeitos universais do diálogo entre os estudantes (por exemplo, Boler). Os materiais a serem examinados incluem os materiais curriculares de Questões Públicas e manuais de professores, bolsistas secundárias do Harvard Public Issues Project (por exemplo, Bohan e Feinberg), discussões em sala de aula e minhas próprias lembranças de ensinar os “novos estudos sociais” como professora iniciante.

**Palavras-chave:** conversa de estudante, novo currículo de estudos sociais, objetos pedagógicos do desejo.

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Educational researchers tell us that curricular reforms generally remain on the margins of teachers’ work and are short lived. Larry Cuban (1989, p. 2), for example, writes memorably, that policy rhetoric and curriculum reforms are like “hurricane winds sweeping across the sea, tossing up 20-foot waves, while a fathom below the surface, turbulent waters swirl”. However, “on the ocean floor there is unruffled calm”. The ocean floor in Cuban’s (1989) metaphor consists of the dominant and stubborn practices of teacher-centered classrooms in which teachers do most of the talking and decision-making about topics of study, use of time, and processes of learning. In Cuban’s narrative, the US teaching practices of *then* and *now* are painfully continuous, and fundamental educational reform efforts have been trivialized to incremental changes.

This article offers a counter-history. Over three decades of teaching, I have remained dedicated to student-centered teaching, especially the prioritizing of student discussions and talk, which I first came into contact with in the 1970s via the *Harvard Public Issues Series*. This realization of how deeply a curricular reform impacted and still shapes my teaching works against many tales spun by educational researchers as well as ideas of history, temporality, and dis/continuity. I pursue the contingencies of this pedagogical approach and consider the changing contexts of my classroom discussions amid swirling dis/ruptions, intensities, and uncertainties. Thus, I toggle back and forth between “then”, when I first began structuring student discussions as a beginning teacher, and “now”, when I continue to prioritize student talk in quite different sociopolitical and educational contexts. In moving across these different teaching events and times, I consider intra-actions of teachers, students, and knowledges in order to theorize teaching practices as “quantum temporalities” (Barad, 2010, 2014), events haunted by other

times, matter, and yearnings, disruptions of disruptions, or stuttering. Barad sketches her approach to memory and history:

Remembering is not a process of recollection, of the reproduction of what was, of assembling and ordering events like puzzle pieces fit together by fixing where each has its place. Rather it is a matter of re-mem-bering, of tracing entanglements, responding to yearnings for connection, materialized into fields of longing/belonging, of regenerating what never was but might yet have been (2015, p. 406-407).

## Yellowed beginnings

My copy of the Harvard *Public Issues Series (PIS)* is held together with yellowed tape – tape that flings itself free and falls to the floor as I turn the pages of the introductory booklet, *Taking a Stand* (Oliver and Newmann, 1967b). Beginning in 1967, the materials were published by Xerox in inexpensive booklet formats about 50-60 pages in length; the paper is thin. Each of the 32 pamphlets (see Bohan and Feinberg [2008] for the full list of topics) was inexpensive: the *Guide to Teaching the Public Issues Series* (Oliver and Newmann, 1967a) gave the cost of a booklet at 30 cents if at least 10 copies were ordered. My beaten-up set of booklets was used a lot, copied again and again, and the thin paper reveals the wear. As a beginning teacher in the Midwest, I followed the *PIS* format and my students talked about Billy Budd's hanging and John Brown's Revolt in both middle school and high school classes. These cases were part of the *Taking a Stand* booklet, which focused on developing strong discussions. The *PIS* offered an interdisciplinary approach to social education and emphasized active participation of students within a broad inquiry approach that was developed through case studies. *PIS* was expected to be used in tandem with or to supplement other materials and sources.

I was introduced to the *Public Issues Series*, based on the *Harvard Social Studies Project* (1967), by Fred Newmann, a Professor of Social Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who co-authored the curriculum with Harvard Professor Donald Oliver, James Shaver and other doctoral students, and collaborating classroom teachers (Bohan and Feinberg, 2008, 2009; Evans, 2011). The work was supported by the US Office of Education and Harvard University. The *PIS* approach was described as:

Teaching high school students of average ability to clarify and justify their positions on public issues...using historical, fictional, and contemporary situations as illustrations of basic value conflicts. It introduced a number of concepts and theories

from the social sciences, law, and philosophy. And it attempted systematic instruction directed at the development of discussion skills (*Guide to teaching*, 1967, p. 3).

I became re-acquainted with the *Public Issues Series* when I encountered recent scholarship on the history of social studies curricular reforms (Bohan and Feinberg, 2008, 2009; Evans, 2011).

The *PIS* materials diverged from the pack of new social studies projects and materials that were conceived and written in the 1960s and 1970s and focused on sustained study of the disciplines, such as, anthropology, geography, political science, and history (Evans, 2011). *PIS* focused on the study of “conflicts caused by differing definitions and interpretations of the meaning of liberty, security, and public welfare” (Oliver, 1957, p. 291-292). “The teaching strategies used by the Harvard Project (*PIS*) centered on rational discourse and envisioned a ‘model’ classroom discussion setting that might best be described as a ‘seminar or coffeehouse round table’” (Evans, 2011, p. 158). The reason-centered model taught students to move away from opinions by providing reliable evidence, definitions of key terms, and useful analogies. *PIS* pamphlets were among the most popular of the new social studies materials with 20% of teacher respondents on one survey reporting that they used them.

### **Cold War contexts of the *Public Issues Series*: Teaching students to think for themselves**

The new social studies efforts were a part of reforms framed and incited by national security concerns. As World War II priorities recalibrated into the urgencies of a global Cold War, new educational analyses and practices surfaced. Some educators pushed to facilitate active, independent learning environments, which supported proper political socialization. Such political aims were central to the British primary schools movement (Walkerdine, 1984) and to Erikson’s developmental theory of youth (Medovoi, 2005). With the help of skilled teachers, students could eventually become autonomous thinkers and citizens (Medovoi, 2005). However, as long as schools demanded conformity and old-fashioned approaches to teaching and learning, independent and rational citizens would remain a dream. In addition to citizenship education, national leaders were also concerned with alleged Soviet supremacy in scientific and engineering manpower, and funded projects to strengthen curricula surfaced across the disciplines (Evans, 2011).

Sociologist Charles Silberman (1970) characterized the crisis in the classroom as “mindlessness” – outdated practices that emphasized behavioral conformity rather than intellectual or creative rigor. Silberman (1970) chronicled rigidities, refusals to change, and passivity; too many school subjects expected one right answer and one route to that answer. In 1969, high school students offered their own

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diagnosis of schooling's ills, including its “destructive effects on human beings and their curiosity, natural desire to learn, confidence, individuality, creativity, freedom of thought and self-respect” (Montgomery County Student Alliance, 1969, p. 147).

Frederick Wiseman's 1969 documentary film, *High School*, spotlighted the routinized passivity of students in a Philadelphia secondary school. Teachers did all the talking, and students did as they were told without question, including accepting undeserved punishments and enlisting as soldiers in the Vietnam War. Equally on display was the inadequacy of the instructional methods used by educators; even the cool young teacher who invoked Simon and Garfunkel's song “The Dangling Conversation” to teach poetry only exhorted her students to “notice the difference”. Only at the end of the film were students portrayed as having their own ideas and criticizing the stifling system.

Critics of mindlessness in schooling wanted teachers to reach youth by being exciting, innovative, and critical of the past. For example, Postman and Weingartner (1969) advocated that good teachers center their attention and activity on the dynamic process of inquiry itself, not on the end product of static knowledge. *Summerhill School* (Neill, 1960/1995) offered evidence that children and youth had to develop their own interests and could not be forced to learn via rules and norms. A curriculum reform project for urban disadvantaged students highlighted relevance to students' lives as key. In *Toward Humanistic Education: A Curriculum of Affect*, Weinstein and Fantini (1970, p. 28) argued that “unless knowledge is related to an affective state in the learner [...] its influence on behavior is limited”. The authors explained: “Concerns, wants, interests, fears, anxieties, joys, and other emotions [...] contain the seeds of ‘motivation’” (Weinstein and Fantini, 1970, p. 28). However, other educators pushed for discipline-based innovations, which were especially notable in science and math (Rudolph, 2002). Beyond the classroom, television networks such as PBS and NBC engaged in public pedagogy, offering lectures and debates about racial de-segregation to help citizens civilly debate and adapt to social change (McCarthy, 2010). Thus, post-war education to develop youth into inner-directed, autonomous citizens who could augment national security took various forms.

### **Hope for educational reform in the social studies**

Within this urgent call for education for thoughtful and well-educated citizens, Ronald Evans (2011) chronicles the development of seven social studies curricular approaches in the 1960s with additional projects coming later. These approaches were dubbed “the new social studies” and embodied both a national optimism about education and national security concerns. The *Public Issues Series* made social

studies a practical apprenticeship for youth to debate public issues from revolution to population control to privacy (Oliver and Newmann, 1967a).

I was drawn to *PIS* because I believed that young people deserved stimulating classroom activities and direct connection with timely and relevant controversies. The *PIS* case study approach allowed in depth and nuanced discussions. However, despite my investment in student discussions as central to high school social studies classrooms, I could never really pull off the Public Issues model. The model focused on the teacher's ability to identify and clarify a public issue for discussion and sort out "evidence claims" from "emotional unloading" and from "values in conflict". I soon abandoned those distinctions, because I found that they put the focus on the discussion process and its rules rather than on substantive issues. There was a legalistic, reason-centered skew to the *PIS*, which was never a good fit for me. So I remained devoted to and a believer in classroom discussion practices despite failures to do it right, that is, to emulate the new social studies model.

I longed for the curriculum and discussions to *touch* secondary school students and believed that relevance was key. I could touch students by engaging them with current issues and dilemmas; finding the right topics and approaches seemed to be the cornerstone of this approach. Thus, my desire for connecting students with vital questions and issues skewed my teaching and texts toward cultural studies rather than toward legal and philosophical questions. While *PIS* helped form my commitment to student talk in classrooms, it proved too restrictive in its procedural and policy emphases. The *PIS* booklets instructed me that through class discussion, students could build, clarify, and defend thoughtful analyses. In my experience, however, sustaining discussion to accomplish all of those aims reintroduced a heavy teacher direction and management.

Failures to learn and to succeed according to conventional definitions are openings for investigating different kinds of knowledge and relations – from disparaged places (Halberstam, 2011). My failure to enact "proper" discussions of public issues yet to keep engaging with classroom talk cut in several ways. I both hewed to the public issues approach and broke from it. Barad (2014) terms this a "disruption of disruption", or a *stuttering*. Gunn and Rice (2009, p. 215) suggest that stuttering involves "states of being that are not sewed-up in advance, states that elude representation". I utilized the public issues approach (a disruption of traditional practices) and disrupted it by turning away from policy questions and structured reason-centered conversations. *Stuttering*, what Deleuze and Parnet (1977) gloss as "and, and, and", refuses single answers and staid representations. Stammering, generally considered as a failure to speak, opens/pushes language and thinking toward creative possibilities. My disruption of disruption produced different, rather than repetitious, ideas and practices of student talk. This theoretical approach to teaching also disrupts the seeming continuities that researchers have ascribed to teachers' practices.

## **Micropolitics of talk in classrooms**

In the 1990-2000 period, a trio of theories provoked more stammering in my ongoing practice of student discussions. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978) offered different analyses of power and social practices. Productive power joined sovereign power to highlight how ideas of normalization disciplined bodies and subjectivities. Educational practices deemed "good" suddenly lurched: placing classroom desks in circles was no longer liberatory but another form of close-up surveillance. Feminists and critical race theorists offered additional critiques of classroom micropolitics especially talk. For example, Megan Boler's *Democratic dialogue in education* (2004) challenged "feel good" approaches to classroom dialogue specifically around controversial issues involving racism and homophobia. Overall the book laid out "the varied meanings – and interdependencies – of speaking, listening, and silence" (Burbules, 2004, p. xxiv). Some of the contributors did not believe that classroom dialogue could accomplish much and decried fantasies of "the talking cure", a belief in classroom dialogue as "central to social justice and democracy" (Jones, 2004, p. 58). Jones (2004, p. 59) and others argued that "wider social inequalities impact significantly upon the possibilities of shared talking in the classroom", that is, inequality is a "barrier to genuinely productive conversation". If dialogue is to be promoted, classroom conversation needs to recognize "unequally located speakers" (Jones, 2004, p. 58) and the historical and immediate effects of inequality on what can be said and what can be heard. Jones gives an example from a university class in New Zealand in which Maori and Pacific Islander students believed that they needed a separate space for open and useful discussions, and this separation angered the white students. Jones (2004, p. 63) persuades that "our education system is based in the western desire for coherence, authorization, and control, and this desire fuels the call for [...] hearing the voices of the marginalized".

These theorists convinced me that open discussions could reproduce existing knowledge/power relations in classrooms, despite the intentions of the teacher and the participants. These critiques of classroom talk brought me up short and made me question my commitment to this pedagogical process; these theoretical critiques were a "profound fracture" (Roy, 2003, p. vii) that moved me to rethink and refine my expectations of student talk; it was a pedagogical approach that had to be considered within broader aims of justice and ethics. While I never adopted the affirmative action pedagogy that Boler endorsed, which gives marginalized perspectives more classroom time and space, I developed greater attunement to how students spoke, what perspectives garnered greater implicit or explicit agreement, and I became vigilant about introducing and drawing out minoritized ideas. I strengthened course readings

on critical race, feminist, neo-Marxist, and queer perspectives, and sought out readings, videos, blog posts that made it harder to ignore or step around those perspectives.

*Stuttering.* When confronted with the micropolitics of democratic dialogues, I stammered. I became obsessed with the topic, that is, developed an intense connection with these critical perspectives that destroyed the naturalization of student conversations. I taught Boler's book in a number of masters and doctoral courses, so I read and re-read the different perspectives on classroom conversations, inequality, and ethical approaches to democratizing student talk. Given these serious and contentious criticisms, I wondered over many months if classroom discussions mattered. Did they only matter to me? Was I romancing student conversations? I pulled back and gave less time to student talk, relying more on lectures and students' prepared analyses of readings.

Were my classes less exciting? Less engaging? I realized that student talk provided affective intensities that otherwise were less likely to arise. Deleuze's use of affect foregrounds the "audible, visual and tactile transformation produced in reaction to a certain situation, event or thing" (Colman, 2005, p. 11), an increase or decrease in capacity. Affect in teaching – associated with the coming together of ideas, differences, and intensities across students, teachers, and knowledge-- can slow down or speed up events or make moments more or less impactful. When I minimized discussions, classes seemed to lose shape, students appeared further away. Because I learned about students in more open forums--their preoccupations, their cultural reference points, their triggers – we actually seemed to become spatially and temporally distant. Affects sparked by discussions may speed up or slow down classwork, thus, contributing to different feelings of excitement or languor in classroom spaces.

These theoretical/philosophical questions about classroom talk were a "dislocation of thinking" (Colebrook, 2005, p. 3). To teach (as to think) is "not to recreate oneself [...] repeating habitual orientations"; teaching (and thinking) can only occur if there is an "encounter with relations, potentials and powers not our own" (Colebrook, 2005, p. 3). Pedagogy, like thinking, is not a vehicle for exchanging information from one being to another, rather teaching has immanence – "it creates new connections, new styles for thinking and new images and ways of seeing" (Colebrook, 2005, p. 4). Colebrook (2005, p. 4) sees thinking/pedagogy as a confrontation with chaos, "allowing more of what is *not* ourselves to transform what we take ourselves to be". Manuel Delanda (n.d.) writes of this immanence more generally, and his language shifts how educational researchers might narrate teachers, teaching, and curricula: "Communities can't be reduced to the people who make them up; social justice movements can be reduced to the communities that make them up. Assemblages have emergent properties".

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## More stuttering: Affective and embodied entanglements

If *PIS* was a response to hopes/fears of the Cold War – what curricula and pedagogies might we invent for our era of terror, unknown futures, and citizens defined by excitability rather than passivity (Masco, 2014)? In the era of social media incitements and exposures, how might classroom discussions matter? I have entered a new stammering, another disruption of disruption, an inability to articulate a simple authoritative answer. What might classroom talk promise today?

In the last five years, my scholarly interests have turned toward feminist new materialism and affect studies, which help conjure this new pedagogical stammering. How might I bring in these orientations to class discussions, which are still new in education and “not sewed-up in advance” (Gunn and Rice, 2009, p. 215)? How are such perspectives materially entangled with city teachers, urban classrooms, gendered and raced bodies and histories? More stuttering.

The current discontinuity turns me toward Erin Manning’s work on touch and bodily responses (2007) and David Scott’s (2017) analysis of Stuart Hall’s intellectual style – one of contingency and listening. Both approaches are material, contingent; both are grounded by embodied capacities. I sense that they can be part of this creative stuttering that once again disrupts the disruption of classroom talk.

## Discussion

This theorized re-membling of the dis/continuous place of student conversations in my teaching over several decades has simultaneously interrogated fluctuating intensities in my pedagogy. I have used stuttering and stammering to describe these intensive events when difference conflicted with repetition of existing investments and practices. Following Barad (2010, p. 244):

I’ve attempted to write this paper in a way that disrupts the conventions of historical narrative forms that underlie stories of scientific progress: tales of the continuous accretion and refinement of scientific knowledge over the course of history, sagas of progress from an earlier time period to a later one punctuated with discoveries that lead the way out of the swamp of ignorance and uncertainty to the bedrock of solid and certain knowledge.

If an ethnographer observed my classes during these stammerings, I am not certain that s/he would discern the intensities, the conflicts, the floor dropping out from under my usual practice, the disorientation when practices that I thought were fine suddenly stung as inadequate.

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Nevertheless, I agree with Roy's (2003, p. vii, emphasis added) analysis that new concepts or encounters can "shatter existing modes of thinking about the everyday":

Brought to bear on the conditions of schooling, they allow us to access *sudden breathless hollows that can make curriculum swerve from the old terrain*. And what is surprising is that this does not call for grand movements or breaks, nor for great reforms, but depends on the subversive power of the very small and minor 'flections'; secret lines of disorientation.

Histories of pedagogy have not adequately attended to such flections, disorientations, dis/continuities, or stuttering. Teaching is generally considered to be sets of discrete actions in a linear, universal time. Barad's (2015, p. 406-407) "quantum temporalities" enhances our capacity to make other things matter: "re-membering, [...] responding to yearnings for connection, materialized into fields of longing/belonging, regenerating what never was but might yet have been". Such re-membering is also response-able (Barad, 2012) to the complexity and importance of pedagogical events and labor, which now, as then, are readily dismissed as easy and trivial. We urgently need histories that make teaching matter.

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