THEORIZING A REVISED CRITICAL PRAXIS: A JUGGLER'S ACT

I count myself among the many women and people of color who struggle to achieve the goals of a critical pedagogy in their writing classrooms but who meet with enough student resistance that they may question the effectiveness of their praxis. Student resistance is a reminder that power is not always derived in hierarchical fashion (from university president to dean to teacher), but is instead derived from the broader culture and is unevenly inscribed in the classroom. While teachers do possess a degree of authority by virtue of their official status within the institution, the power they possess relative to their students is mediated by other factors, such as gender, race, class, and the subjects they teach. Much of the scholarship on critical pedagogy, however, assumes a more linear power dynamic, where teachers possess greater power relative to their students (Giroux, Graff, and Shor). In listing the “basic tenets in the literature of the sociology of education,” Lisa Delpit describes how “[i]t is an issue of power are enacted in the classroom.” They include “the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers of textbooks . . . ; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling,” and the power of corporations to shape the labor force (568). No mention is made of the forms of power students exercise. This type of top-down depiction of power tends to obscure at least as much as it reveals about the nature of our interactions with students in the composition classroom. My concerns with power and pedagogy arise out of my own struggles in writing classes, especially in advanced, discipline-specific

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writing classes, where student resistance is most acute and where my status as a middle-class, white female seems to undermine my status as a university professor.

A more complex portrait of power in the writing classroom is needed to enable the development of critical pedagogies that will be more responsive to multi-linear power relations among teachers and students. This article is an attempt to develop such a portrait and then to use that rendering to theorize a new pedagogy that may be better able to assist women and people of color in addressing the power dynamic that emerges in their writing classrooms.

Especially relevant to my argument, then, are the challenges women face as critical pedagogues but also relevant are issues of race as they impact the effectiveness of critical praxis for writing teachers. Race and gender complicate issues of power in the classroom for educators, who find that their physical presence is overwritten with difference in ways that undermine their authority as teachers. This is not only the case when the teacher is different from her students. Even white teachers teaching classes of all or mostly white students are involved in race-based power relations since in “a culturally pluralistic society like America, whiteness does not exist in isolation from non-white cultural constructions such as ‘blackness’” (Comfort 549). Instead, the danger in such a context is that the power and privilege whiteness confers will be effaced. The larger point here is that students interpret their teachers, classmates, and themselves based on specific institutional and social markers that communicate information about power that transcends the context of the classroom. Institutional authority, then, may not be the greatest determiner of power in the classroom as much scholarship assumes; instead, these “readings” and the forms of power they articulate can place teachers who are women, black, Latina, gay, lesbian, disabled or who are marked by other signs of diminished status in society at a distinct disadvantage when they engage in a critical literacy praxis based on power sharing.

Keeping these complexities in mind, in this article I focus on developing a multi-linear portrait of power, using a section of “Business and Organizational Writing” (ENG368) as an emblematic example of how power develops and circulates in writing classrooms. This portrait would be incomplete without a critique of my own efforts at enacting specific critical pedagogical interventions; closely attending to these details reveals a great deal about the nature of power in writing classes. The practices I critique—negotiating generative themes, decentering the classroom, and demystifying overproduced epistemological categories—are common in critical pedagogy. Often these tactics have engendered resistance rather than power sharing with students, a development that has vexed me for years. Recently, I have recognized that at least part of the problem is an inadequately theorized (linear) model of power found in much of the scholarship on critical pedagogy, which has led me to divest myself of institutionally-derived authority but without building an alternative authority that students can recognize and incorporate into their readings of me and the classes I teach. What I needed, I began slowly to realize, was a revised critical-feminist praxis that better addressed the contingencies of power in a gendered writing classroom by disrupting normative readings of authority, making space for alternative narratives of power, knowledge, and subjectivity to emerge.

This revised praxis moves away from the familiar teach-the-conflicts model of critical cultural studies toward a more explicitly feminist approach. It enables more effective power sharing by transcending normative academic discourse patterns and subject positions, which is similar to Patricia Bizzell’s concept of “speaking the Fool’s rhetoric” from her article “Praising Folly: Constructing a Postmodern Rhetorical Authority as a Woman.” Speaking from a position normally prohibited in academia, the fool articulates alternative formulations of reality to bring about democratic social reform and encourage critical literacy learning. Thus, I incorporate the subject position of Folly from Erasmus—“a woman in a fool’s cap and bells and an academic gown, speaking from a rostrum to an audience of similarly attired men” — into this revised critical-feminist praxis (“Folly” 27). Folly’s off-center positioning enables her to “break taboos.” Typically, fools are even able to insult kings and still keep their heads because of their positioning outside “serious” discourse. As Bizzell argues, the rhetor-fool is able to assert a position that is both anti-foundational (not claiming to have the knowledge) and anti-essentialist (not claiming that the knowledge can be known only by one group). Instead, the fool validates points of commonality between rhetor and interlocutor (30). In this way, the woman-rhetor-fool is released from the confines of masculine authority by acting out of compassion rather than out of skepticism, enabling her to give voice to ideals, values, and goals that foundationalist, essentialist, agonistic rhetors would disavow (40-41). The teacher-rhetor-fool can build alternative authority by transcending important discursive boundaries in the classroom, gaining respect from its actions rather than from institutional positioning. She exploits the conflicts and contradictions that underwrite power imbalances in classrooms for the opportunities they offer for critical intervention. Understood as praxis, the position of woman-rhetor-fool offers possibilities for promoting power sharing in classrooms where more standard critical practices have proven less effective.

In many respects, living and working with an awareness of variable forms of power in the classroom feels something like being part of a three-ring circus. Rather than resist this impression in favor of reproducing a more typical academic argument, I would like to work with it, using the variability this metaphor suggests as a component of my argument. Traditional academic
arguments have frequently been critiqued for their limitations in rendering the complexities of lived experiences, especially the experiences of individuals from traditionally disenfranchised social groups. Among the many scholars and critics who have underscored the inadequacies of agonistic rhetoric and poetics are familiar names: Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Elizabeth Flynn, and Patricia Bizzell. This article advances these critiques of traditional rhetorical conventions, in part, through its own non-traditional structure.

Rather than being organized around a thesis, this argument is organized around a metaphor — the circus — which conjures up images of movement, variability, unpredictability, chaos, and control. These are features of power as well. This metaphor, then, affords me more intellectual mobility within the confines of an academic argument to explore the multilinearities of power relations in the classroom by mirroring some of its effects in the structure of my argument. Mostly occupying the position of “juggler” in this article, I can locate myself both as participant and observer in the events, practices, and theories under scrutiny. Juggling is an apt metaphor for my role in the classroom. As a teacher, I often feel as if I am juggling a lot of balls as I try to understand and respond appropriately to the nuances of power in the classroom while still teaching writing. Many times I expertly balance the demands of literacy instruction, the goals of critical pedagogy, and the shifting power dynamics of the classroom. However, I often drop a ball or two, and at those times, I find that my training in critical pedagogy has left me with a limited range of strategies for addressing the contingencies of power that arise in my classes. In the circus and in the classroom, the juggler-teacher is both a master manipulator and a secondary performer, deserving of the audience’s attention but whose skillful performance is easily overlooked in favor of the more spectacular acts occurring under the big top. As a teacher-scholar-performer, I move about this argument in much the same way I might move about a circus tent, juggling the multiple concepts that form the basis of my critique and shifting my perspectives in an effort to create a portrait of power that is more dynamic, more unstable, more like the lived experiences of power relations women and people of color negotiate when they enter a classroom. This multiplicity of perspectives is necessary to my critique of the masculinist models of critical pedagogy and is an important step toward a revised critical-feminist praxis.

So, imagine if you will that we are all under a circus tent. The tent and the rings represent the body of knowledge on critical literacy education. There are three rings under the big top, representing the three subsections of this article to which I direct your attention. In the first ring are the issues of power and resistance in the classroom, especially as they relate to the teacher’s identity. In this ring, I demonstrate that some scholarship misleads critical pedagogues by presenting this power and resistance hierarchically; instead, my experiences demonstrate that power and resistance are dialectic responses enacted by teachers and students alike. In the center ring, I critique specific critical interventions and practices I have used in classrooms. Understanding why fairly typical practices fail is a necessary step toward a revised praxis. In the third and final ring, I present a revised critical-feminist praxis that incorporates the position of Folly into a teacher-subjectivity. Here, I work toward a critical praxis that begins with establishing shared ideals and leads toward collective acts of critical, democratic social intervention.

As in the circus, the teacher-scholar-juggler can be a main event, attracting the attention of the spectator-performer-students and even other teacher-performer-scholars. But more often the juggler is a side-show, whose performance is seen as a backdrop to other events occurring under the big top. As I move around this argument, your perspective on me and my act will change, and my relation to the acts around me will change as well. Despite the relationship-dependent nature of perspectives, you can always recognize me as the juggler juggling. This metaphor illustrates much about the argument I am trying to make about critical praxis. An effective critical praxis needs, in my estimation, to be responsive to the nuances of local conditions in classrooms. I’m imagining a critical praxis that is always moving — among and between other acts occurring in the classroom, disrupting normative power relations to enable the development of critical consciousness.

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JUGGLING THE BIG RED BALL: THEORIZING POWER AND RESISTANCE IN THE GENDERED WRITING CLASSROOM.

The red ball lands in my hand. I toss it back into the air and maintain a very straight back so as not to tip the plate spinning on my head. My eyes are fixed on the objects in the air. The ringmaster escorts the high-wire and animal acts into the rings. You watch as a woman on a precariously tall unicycle whizzes by.

Generally, critical pedagogy aims at addressing the “always already existing conflicts between students and teachers” by critiquing dominant ideologies and by disrupting normative power relations in the classroom in order to bring about greater social equity (Shor 17). Critical pedagogy assists students in seeing the connections between their “real lives” and their educational experiences, increasing opportunities for genuine investment in literacy learning (Shor 17). In theory, it shifts power from a teacher-center to student-center in the classroom as students and teachers together engage in a
problem-posing praxis, achieving what Freire describes as a teacher-students/students-teacher dynamic in the classroom. Ira Shor refers to this dynamic as “power sharing” throughout *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Power sharing is an essential aspect of critical praxis that encourages students to assume full-fledged roles as critical citizens: “Without formal participation in decision-making, students develop as authority-dependent subordinates, not as independent citizens” (Shor 31). My experience tells me that these ideals are difficult to achieve in actual classrooms. Students are not waiting to be liberated, and they often do not welcome democratic praxis. Thus, just how this ideal of power sharing is to be achieved and under what conditions is the question I am considering here.

In the first ring of my argument, I take a close look at this power-resistance dynamic as it emerges in a business writing class (ENG368). The more detailed understanding of power and resistance that emerges in this section informs my proposals for a revised critical-feminist praxis.

Much to my surprise and frustration, students frequently adopt unproductive reactive postures in response to my attempts to share power, and I, much to my disappointment, often react in equally unproductive ways, despite my commitments to critical pedagogy. The problem here is that although I am quite capable of performing alone, my intellectual commitments to feminism and critical pedagogy tell me that the best critical performances come about when concepts are juggled among a group of engaged intellectuals; clearly, that is not going to happen in a situation where a single engaged juggler operates in isolation from potential partners. I throw out concepts, and the students often let them fall to the floor. It’s hard, sometimes even seemingly impossible, to get a critical dialogue going in such an environment, which I find very discouraging.

A traditional teacher-student dynamic in which knowledge descends hierarchically from a speaking-subject to listening-objects is always present and interferes with my attempts at dialogue. In fact, student resistance exists even before the semester begins because it has been formed (at least in part) by years of repressive educational experiences. Shor describes student apathy, a common form of resistance, calling it the “Siberian syndrome.” However, he cautions us not to be fooled by appearances, for “Siberia is a site of human agency, a lived experience, not a mere passive withdrawal” (27). Gloria Filax, in “Resisting Resisters: Resistance in Critical Pedagogy Classrooms,” reminds us that critiques of power in the classroom should take into account that “[s]ocial change and social inertia are both effects of everyday resistances between and among individuals and to social institutions” (261). In other words, it is a mistake (and has been my mistake) to assume that resistance, even in the form of student apathy, is passive or that it cannot lead to social change, for resistance,
reacting to my imposition of power, are enacting power of their own through resistance. It is neither helpful nor, in my estimation, accurate to describe this dynamic linearly. Power and resistance are dialectical — mutually informing, always active and reactive. Power is not linear, but variable and shifting. The relationship between power and resistance in the classroom is complex, and scholarship that treats it linearly leaves much of what makes critical pedagogy work (or not) unidentified.

Looking at power through a feminist framework makes it difficult to maintain the presumption of unilateral power relations in the classroom, as it becomes very apparent that the gender of the teacher and the subject of the course both play important parts in how power is enacted in ENG368 and other writing classes. In the case of ENG368, gender — both my gender and the gendering of the subject I teach — is an important yet under-recognized variable in the power-resistance dynamic. Feminist scholars have convincingly argued that writing instruction is a feminized pursuit (see, for instance, Miller and Holbrook). The gendering of composition occurs at all educational levels and in all types of writing courses (“service” and “advanced” alike). However, because of the high concentration of students from masculinized majors in the school of business, in ENG368 gender becomes a more obvious and acute concern. As I will argue throughout this article, much of the power students enact in this class (and other classes I teach) is based in normative gender relations, which inscribe all things “masculine” as carrying greater authority and cultural capital.

Accordingly, my gender and the gendering of the subject I teach seem to play major roles in how power and resistance are enacted in this course. The English department offers ENG368, but the School of Business and Public Affairs (SBPA) requires it for graduation, which stands in contrast to most of the other advanced courses for business majors. As an “outsider” course, ENG368 is perceived by the students as another unfairly imposed general education requirement rather than as an important component of their majors. The knowledge I teach and the pedagogy I use also contrast with much of what students have become accustomed to in the SBPA courses. Many courses in SBPA are taught by lecture. Students cram for mid-term and final exams, and attend (or not) lectures for the rest of the semester. In contrast, my problem posing critical praxis seems alien to the students, who are skeptical about its value and, thus, are reluctant to shift to more active roles as learners in order to accommodate it. Knowledge that is generated through reading, writing, and discussion is less familiar to the students and therefore more suspect. They are also unprepared for the writing assignments and intellectual focus of ENG368. Many of them enroll in this class expecting it to focus entirely on how to write a good résumé and effective memos. They are not expecting to have to think very carefully about the nature of writing in a corporate setting and are reluctant to see the value in doing so. What’s more, the management, accounting, and computer science majors are counting on the hierarchical corporate power structure to work in their favor upon graduation. They have a strong investment in normative power relations. Finally, my own physical presence, which is overwritten with gender, creates tension for these students who have become used to having male faculty in advanced, discipline-specific courses. The SBPA faculty are largely male, whereas in the English department, female faculty have a slight numerical advantage. In writing classes, as is typical at other universities, women instructors far outnumber men and are far more likely to be non-tenure-track. Thus, the ideological conditions are set for students to dismiss the content of my course and resist my authority as a female teaching an “outsider” course in a feminized field using suspect pedagogies.

The circus metaphor helps clarify the gender and power issues that emerge here. In masculinized disciplines that rely on didactic models of instruction, students behave because years of prior exposure to similar educational methods have encouraged them to internalize their oppression. Oppressive educational practices include gender-coding knowledges, which teach students to treat certain forms of authority with respect and others with defiance and to accept certain intellectual activities as valid and dismiss others as irrelevant. This is a form of social conditioning into which most students have been thoroughly inculcated. In a similar way, the lion tamer’s act depends on prior behaviorist conditioning of the animal — on the lion’s acquiescence to the master’s superiority after many hours of coercive training. In contrast, the juggler’s act is more improvisational, and the skill of this improvisation can be lost on an audience that is awestruck by the lion tamer’s showy performance. My course, with its focus on students’ writing and its emphasis on dialogue, loses respectability in the eyes of students who have become accustomed to a more masculine role for teachers and a more didactic mode of learning.

Although the power-resistance dynamic has been under theorized in critical pedagogy scholarship, most scholars are aware that gender plays a role in power-sharing. Shor, for instance, indicates that he is aware that his body, with all of its ideological trappings, enables him to accomplish certain goals in the classroom. In this way, he can be seen as taking advantage of what Peter McLaren calls a “narrative of identity.” For McLaren, the classroom can be understood as a “site of the teacher’s own embodiment in theory/discourse, ethical disposition as moral political agent, and situatedness as a cultural worker within a larger narrative of identity” (216). Students read the teacher through this narrative, which pre-positions the teacher within a constellation of acceptable/expected ideas and behaviors. Shor takes advantage of the “authority” he gains through his “status as a tall, veteran, white male professor”
to “transform [his] initial unilateral position” (Shor 19). When he relocates himself into “Siberia,” his “white male professor’s body [is] there with its socially-vested authority” (22). The contact zone created by transgressing this boundary is made successful by specific ideological conditions such as how gender, race, class, education, military status, and power are written on people’s bodies.

My body does not move about the room in the same way that Shor’s does; when I move into student-occupied space, classroom power relations are not altered in the same way because my body carries different ideological accents. Thus, the role of transformative intellectual can and should differ markedly from one teacher to the next depending upon ideological conditions. Some of the classroom difficulties I have encountered may result from my attempts to enact a generic (actually “masculine”) praxis. Because power isn’t adequately theorized in much of the scholarship on critical pedagogy, my posture as female critical literacy educator has tended to be reactive at times as I attempt to juggle whatever variables the classroom throws at me, catching many but dropping some. What’s more, I would prefer that students participate in this juggling act by collaboratively engaging in critical dialogue rather than reacting against it.

As long as I leave the “narratives of identity” underwriting the class undisrupted, I will be fettered in my attempts to move toward this more collaborative teaching-learning space. The position of rhetor-fool discussed in the final section of this essay offers possibilities for disrupting these narratives by providing the critical-feminist literacy educator with tools for revising these narratives and developing a more collaborative relationship with students. In the absence of an effective means for disrupting these conditions, most of what I do in the classroom, despite its grounding in critical pedagogy, actually seems to reinforce normative power relations and stimulate resistance. In the next section I take a closer look at the shortcomings of specific critical practices I have attempted in ENG368. Drawing on some of the scholarship by women and people of color who have experienced similar forms of resistance in their classrooms, I seek out some of the factors that may undermine power sharing.

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JUGGLING THE RED AND WHITE STRIPED HAT: A CRITIQUE OF MY OWN FAILED CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM.

I step in between the elephant act and the lion tamer. To my right, a lion jumps through a ring of fire. The crowd cheers as the lion tamer imposes his will on the “king of animals.” A red and white striped top hat lands in my hand. I catch several balls in it and then release each object again. A plate is still spinning atop the pole on my head.

Aside from my own troubled history with education (including dropping out of high school for a year), my profile as a teacher of college composition is fairly typical. I am female, white, middle-class, forty-something, and unmarried. Demographically speaking, I look like most other writing teachers. However, I don’t really gain any prestige or authority from this typical profile. In fact, the reverse seems more accurate. Normative power-knowledge relations place the subject that I teach below more masculinized fields of knowledge (such as the sciences or management) and place me (as a consequence of gender inequality) below the white, male professors who possess greater socially-vested authority. Students, thus, enter my writing classes with a complex set of expectations based on socially-derived knowledge about gender, race, authority, and power. Their understanding of my attempts to share power and their willingness to participate in that process is, at least in part, shaped by those expectations.

I believe in the value of sharing power as a central tenet of a critical praxis; however, I have begun to question the value of specific practices that are supposed to support it. Acts that are disruptive of normative power relations, such as arranging the desks into a circle or teaching at an off campus site, may have a different impact when the teacher’s body is female or black or otherwise different from the white, male, fully-able, heterosexual norm. When difference from the assumed norm is inscribed on the body of the teacher, students may understand attempts to share power differently because power is relative to the specific material conditions in which it operates. To illustrate a bit further using a specific tactic advocated by Shor, when a woman moves into the back of the room and takes up residence beside the students in “Siberia,” her presence is less disruptive than a man’s because she is behaving more within the norm for women in their capacity as caregivers. Care giving requires close, personal, one-to-one contact with those needing care. What’s more, since women’s roles in society often fall within a mother-whore dichotomy, such movement is likely to be sexually charged as well. Consequently, my movements into student-occupied spaces, despite their grounding in critical pedagogy, may actually reinforce (rather than disrupt) normative, gendered, power relations.

As long as these dominant narratives of identity remain in place, I will continue to find it difficult, indeed, at times, impossible to enact a critical pedagogy in ENG368 because my critically-informed actions may provoke conditioned forms of resistance from the students. For instance, in an effort to engage students in “wider ideological conflicts” and to encourage them to question constructed categories such as “knowledge” and “objectivity,” Kathleen
McCormick recommends encouraging students to "interrogate their sources by placing them in larger cultural and historical contexts" (213). In ENG368, I attempt to assist my students with investigating the ideological underpinnings of over-produced epistemological categories relevant to "professional" fields. For instance, one semester I included an article by Dorothy Winsor called "Engineering Writing/Engineering Writing" that discusses the role texts play in producing knowledge in engineering. Following a pretty standard practice for critiquing texts, I asked the class to consider the implications of the assertion that the texts engineers write generate engineering knowledge. One student replied that engineers conduct design experiments and learn from them, and then they write what they learned so that other engineers can learn it also. Leading the students a little, I remarked: "That’s certainly part of it, but there seems to be something more to the claim. What else might be going on here?" The same student responded in a huff, "That’s a stupid question!" This hostile response conveys a sense of where power was located in the classroom. The students were willing to play along with the discuss-the-reading game until it reached a point where they felt challenged, threatened, or otherwise uncomfortable. Then, they could pull the plug on the discussion, which this student did quite effectively. The other students acknowledged this student’s power by clamming up for the remainder of the class period, underscoring the fact that the teacher is not the only empowered member of the class.

I resisted this exertion of power by trying to engage the class on different points of discussion. Then I attempted to assert power of my own by reminding students of upcoming assignments, and then I dismissed the class, drawing upon my institutionally-invested authority to determine when class begins and ends. Thus, a portrait of a dynamic interaction emerges, where it is difficult to locate power hierarchically in the classroom. The student who resisted my probing question was enacting a form of power he derived partly from his gender, race, and positioning as an advanced management major with some actual workplace experience. I responded by enacting institutionally-derived power to "manage" the classroom. The rest of the class indicated their recognition of the greater power of their peer in relation to their teacher by withholding their participation for the rest of the class period. (Even the fact that I possess the grade book didn’t trump this student’s exertion of power.) This instance indicates that practices advocated by critical pedagogy need to be modified for the individual classroom in ways that account for specific contingencies of power.

Recognizing that I was facing challenges in the classroom for which I was not well prepared, initially I sought the council of colleagues, most of whom advised me to back off of the democratic social project that informs my teaching. Some also advised me to avoid teaching the most problematic courses, like ENG368, all together. Fortunately, I have a supportive Associate Dean, who recognizes that gender-bias is a real issue but who also recognizes that university tenure and promotion committees will not be interested in these matters. She has advised me to "build authority" for myself with these students. Following specific advice, one semester, I attempted to "build authority" by inviting a prominent business leader to class to talk about the importance of workplace writing; he also happens to be a graduate of our university who credits much of his success to ENG368. He is now an Executive Vice President for one of the largest banks in the world. The students listened attentively to this man’s story; however, whatever authority he carried into the classroom that gave him credibility with the students also left with him. Comments on course evaluations continued to describe me as “overly intellectual,” “unrealistic about the workplace,” “unsupportive,” and, most cuttily, “unqualified to teach writing.” Interestingly, I did receive a small point gain in the numeric course evaluations. The folly of this experiment, which I tried out of desperation, brought home an important point related to gender and teaching. As a female writing instructor, I cannot gain, even by association, the cultural capital that society accords to a white, male, business leader, just as standing close to the lion tamer does not elevate the juggler’s act to the level of a center-ring performance. Bringing this man into class did little to alter the major narratives of identity around gender, race, authority, and knowledge production that seem to form the ideological subtext of writing instruction and point toward the need for an alternative form of authority-building.

While this situation is especially acute in ENG368, these conditions extend to other writing courses, especially service courses where it can be very difficult to get students to take their learning seriously. Other critical pedagogues offer helpful readings of the power-resistance dynamic that emerges in writing classrooms around issues of gender and race. In “Women’s Work and Critical Pedagogy,” Julia Ferganchick-Neufang calls for a new conception of critical pedagogy that will be more responsive to the challenges women face in writing classrooms. She reports that women who are committed to a critical democratic project in their classrooms often meet with resistance that is not described in the literature on critical pedagogy. This resistance seems to be at least partly a response to the teacher’s gender. Karen Fitz and Alan France see the resistance they met in an introductory writing course as evidence of students’ agency as they cling to “the essentialist realities authorized by the dominant culture” (17). Race is another important source of resistance. Shirley Wilson Logan argues that students resist the “very presence” of a black woman teacher in the classroom and that this presence alone is insufficient for bringing about the kind of social change necessary to improve race relations. Instead, establishing "the appropriate framework for teaching and learning" seems
necessary to disrupt inequities around race as they emerge in the classroom (56). These scholars emphasize that power is personal and political. It responds to specific classroom contingencies and to larger ideological conditions. It undermines critical literacy education and is evidence of students’ agency. Power is complex, variable, contingent, and very difficult to address effectively in any writing classroom. This scholarship indicates that the upper-division business writing classes that I have been focusing on in my argument may merely be a more extreme example of the power-resistance dynamic that emerges in many writing classes.

Part of the problem I face as a critical pedagogue is that, for the sake of clarifying the dynamics of power, many scholars have under-theorized power. In a recent CCC article on constructions of whiteness in critical pedagogy, Jennifer Seibel Trainor argues that acts of racial othering stem from multiple motivations: “individuals take up aspects of available political rhetorical forms for reasons that aren’t just political, for reasons that are part of a private process of identity formation” (638). She argues that an under-theorization of the nature of whiteness “help[s] produce the kinds of troubling conservative rhetoric that so frustrates critical teachers” (634). As with discourses on power, critiques of race in the classroom often over-generalize white subjectivity, equating it with a racist stance. When white students resist multiculturalism, they may also be resisting a discourse on race that casts them in the negative position of “good/bad,” “innocent/racist” dichotomies (633). A similar argument can be extended to discourses on gendered power relations in the classroom. Students are responding to discourses on gender that cast writing instruction in the “things to be gotten out of the way” category. My efforts to engage a critical praxis in ENG368 are a challenge to that construction. With no other options at their immediate disposal, the students position themselves to resist this challenge. My challenge, then, as a critical pedagogue is to create opportunities for the students to construct identities that will be more conducive of power sharing in an advanced writing class.

Although my own portrait of power is clumsy in many ways in this “ring” of my argument, I have attempted to demonstrate that the standard depiction of a linear power dynamic in the classroom – between empowered teacher and oppressed student – is both inaccurate and misleading and may contribute to the perpetuation of an unproductive power-resistance dynamic in the classroom. A linear model of power encourages teachers to divest themselves of institutional authority but leaves them without the means to construct alternative subject positions that students can respect and share in. Under these conditions it is difficult to share power with students effectively and promote the democratic principles of critical pedagogy. In working toward a revised praxis in the next ring, I advocate a shift in subject position for the female critical educator that disrupts traditional narratives of identity and enables more effective power sharing.

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**Speaking the Fool’s Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom: A Critical Praxis for Disrupting Normative Power Relations.**

Stepping in front of the center ring, which contains the tightrope act, I stop long enough to extend my right leg to the side. With my knee straight and my back slightly arched, I point my toe upward and expertly bounce a green ball off the tip of my oversized shoe. It resumes a large orbit over my head.

In my business writing classes, more so than in many others I teach, I feel alien. I rarely feel that the students and I are actually speaking with each other. It feels more like speaking past and around each other. I don’t have much of a sense that I can or that my students want to share power with me. I have even less of a sense that they are interested in the democratic project of critical pedagogy. In ENG368, my gender, the gendering of the subject I teach, and the critical praxis I use are in conflict with the mostly male business majors, their philosophies and beliefs, their intellectual values, and their goals for the course, which tends to diminish opportunities for critical dialogue.

Some recent scholarship has begun to complicate our understanding of the roles gender, race, and class play in the formation of power relationships in the classroom (Comfort, Gonsalves, Welsh, among others). However, most of the major statements on critical pedagogy reinscribe a more reductive view of power in the classroom. This may be a consequence of the split between those who theorize and those who teach. Those who theorize tend, as a result of gender, race, and career paths, to be “unfamiliar with the conditions under which the practitioners work” (Ferganchick-Neufang 23). By contrast, “those who teach are more often women whose experiences, authority, and job security differ markedly from those who theorize” (23-24). In an effort to increase the descriptive power of an argument, critical pedagogy has tended to generalize from the experiences of the few to the classrooms of the many, and this may be a source of much frustration for women and people of color in the writing classroom. Don’t get me wrong, here. Theory, by its very nature, is supposed to generalize. The problem, then, has as much to do with how theories present themselves as with how readers take up those theories.

Scholarship is in many respects like lion taming: the scholar imposes her/his argument on a larger body of knowledge to produce a convincing intellectual act. If teaching were more like lion taming, then I wouldn’t really
have a problem achieving critical democratic goals in the classroom (but, then again, one can't really impose democracy and still call it a democratic practice). Instead, classrooms are dialogic; cracking the whip cannot change that fact. It can only encourage students to muffle their responses to unfairly imposed authority. Teaching is more like the unicyclist's precarious trip around the big top with an unwieldy passenger on her shoulders. The forces of gravity are always working on the cycle, the cyclist, and the passenger in understandable ways according to the laws of physics. Yet, even with this knowledge, it is very difficult to compensate for gravity and stay upright.

Despite its limitations, theory is one of the tools we have to assist us in maintaining our balance. However, it is more useful for identifying the broad principles of critical pedagogy than it is for defining specific practices because it lacks a necessary level of detail regarding the material conditions of classrooms.

James Berlin and Patricia Bizzell define some of these broad principles of critical pedagogy for the composition classroom. In "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin asserts that knowledge is a "product of the dialectic" among "observer, the discourse community . . . . and the material conditions of existence" (692). The study of rhetoric is a means of giving students "control over their own lives" so that they can become "agents of social change" (694-5). Working toward a specific application of Freirean critical pedagogy, Bizzell advocates social-epistemological rhetoric as a means of encouraging critical self-consciousness of one's situatedness, bringing the learner into a more direct and reflective relationship with the world ("Academic" 137). Critical pedagogy should help students see how their lives are intertwined with the lives of others around them, how their choices are constructed by social context, and how their decisions have a ripple effect in society. Critical pedagogy also includes assisting students in recognizing relationships in the classroom as a significant part of their "real" lives. These are certainly the goals I was aiming for with the failed critical practices I discussed earlier. I now realize that in order to achieve these goals, it is necessary to disrupt narratives of normative power relations in the classroom, thereby opening up spaces for students to respond to their teachers and their classmates as individuals rather than as representatives of an overproduced ideological category.

I would like to reclaim my ideologically overwroughtbody for its potential as a critical pedagogical tool. This means a profound shift in the way the position of critical educator is enacted, if for no other reason than calling attention to our bodies as text means speaking a taboo discourse in the classroom. However, it may also mean speaking our bodies into a more empowered position by undermining the gendered narratives of disempowerment that are pre-written on them. Therefore, among the obstacles critical pedagogy needs to address is the ideological baggage about difference that students carry into classrooms. Students have internalized unequal power relations that inscribe them into passive roles under the teacher's authority. They also carry narratives about who we are both generically—as teachers—and more specifically—as women, people of color, and literacy educators. However, before the democratic project of critical pedagogy can be undertaken, the unspoken subtexts of the class should be voiced so that they can be addressed.

If, as Shor argues on the first day of class, he starts at "less than zero" with his students because the students have already internalized the alienation taught by the curriculum, then it might be reasonable for me to conclude that as a female teacher of a feminized subject, I might be starting at less than zero multiplied. I lack both culturally derived power (as a female) and intellectual respect (as a teacher of writing). I do not carry corporate authority or the respect that might develop with age or come with height. I do gain some power from the color of my skin, my middle-class upbringing, and possibly from institutional positioning as a tenure-track professor. These are facts that I must recognize when imagining how I might share power with my students. I also need to be cognizant of the fact that negotiations over power (or anything else) are predicated on the sense that each party stands to gain something in the bargain. One obstacle I face in sharing power with my students is their perception that I don't bring as much to the bargain as a male professor or a science professor would. Thus, the basis for power sharing has to develop differently for me because I am situated differently in the educational enterprise.

Patricia Bizzell addresses some of these complex issues of authority-building in "Praising Folly: Constructing a Postmodern Rhetorical Authority as a Woman." She sees the emphasis on critique in critical cultural studies as problematic, characterizing it as frequently being deconstructive without being reconstructive. As a consequence of this emphasis on deconstruction, "our confidence" that people can "work toward a new and more just social order" is undermined (39). Agnostic cultural critique that focuses on ferreting out inequalities without posing alternatives or correctives leaves a void in its wake that may make reform seem unrealistic. Bizzell advocates assuming the role of "woman-fool" as a means of reviving confidence in the possibility of collective social action. From this position, the rhetor acts compassionately and speaks "about the egalitarian social order" as a dream (40-41). "Expressing socially rebellious views in the persona of Folly has other advantages besides simply removing fear of speaking, potent though this advantage is. . . . [The fool's] speech can be especially helpful in a time of skepticism, when avowing anything seems foolish" (40). Thus, while Shor (empowered by his maleness) transgresses physical boundaries effectively by moving into Siberia, women
might be better off transgressing discursive and intellectual boundaries by admitting “foolish” discourses into their classrooms.

The position of rhetor-fool provides the woman literacy educator with more appropriate rhetorical options than does a more masculine intellectual stance, which is founded on skepticism and deconstruction, by enabling her to “break taboos about what may be spoken of” in the classroom (“Folly” 40). As rhetor-fool, then, I may want to break the taboos of gender and the silence around the body in the classroom by making my body present in a jarring way. I can invite public readings of my role as female teacher of a feminized subject, for instance. I can ask students to write anonymously on the first day of class about their expectations for the course based on their impressions of me, the books, and the syllabus. The texts can be shared publicly through a computer-mediated bulletin/discussion board and can provide an opportunity to bring some unspoken subtexts into public view. A somewhat lengthier undertaking could involve critical readings of the many films that have depicted teaching, focusing specifically on clips of student-teacher interactions. Discussions could focus on issues of gender and race as they are written into the film. From the films, we could move into discussions of “ideal” classroom settings. I could pose questions to the students that would get them to imagine more egalitarian classrooms: “How would you alter the student-teacher relationship to make it better for everyone?” We could then use the critical terms we developed during these discussions for critiquing the gendered/raced subtext of our own classroom and for attempting to enact our egalitarian visions.

In fact, this is the very type of project I undertook last semester in my introductory composition course (WRT120, “Effective Writing I”). On the first day of class, I entered the room without a syllabus in hand and without a textbook, but with an agenda. After the students assembled themselves in the room, I introduced myself and asked them to do the same. I asked them how they felt about their first day of classes in college. After a brief discussion, I asked them to close their eyes and imagine their versions of “the ideal writing class”:

Imagine that you are enrolled in the best writing class in the world. First, imagine what the room looks like. Is it large or small? What kinds of desks, tables, or chairs are in the room? Is there other equipment or supplies? Now, imagine the writing you do in the room. Imagine that you are enjoying the writing, even though you may be working very hard on it. What kind of writing is it? Can you see it? Think hard. Visualize yourself writing something you are very interested in and very pleased with. What is it? Now, imagine your classmates. Who are they? What do they look like? Give your imaginary piece of writing to one of them. What does s/he say about it? Look around the room for your teacher. What does s/he look like? Approach your teacher and give her/him your writing to read. What does s/he say? How do you feel when you get the piece of writing back with comments on it? What do you do with your writing at that point? Imagine that you have finished the piece of writing. You are happy with it. Now, open your eyes and write your vision down. We are going to try to use your visions of the ideal writing class as a basis for designing our class this semester.

I followed this exercise with short excerpts from a variety of texts on composition and critical pedagogy over the next couple of weeks. The students took a careful look at the program-recommended textbooks, examining their relative strengths and weaknesses and selecting assignments from them to include in the “ideal writing class” proposals. We talked about teacher-student relationships and what makes them work or not. Students wrote me into their “syllabi” by designing activities for me to lead or participate in. Then we shared the “ideal syllabi” and negotiated an actual syllabus for the course. We taught and we learned from that syllabus for the remainder of the semester.4

This critical practice was out of the ordinary, and it gave voice to some of the unstated narratives that underwrite my classroom. The activity caught the students off-guard and caused them to confront their expectations for me and this course. One student wrote in her journal that “On that first day when you asked us to close our eyes and imagine the perfect writing class, I thought it was a trick. I was afraid to imagine the perfect class because I thought that when I opened my eyes you would say, ‘Well, you’re in college now, so snap out of your fantasy worlds and get to work!’” By enlisting them in my dream of a classroom based on power-sharing, I caused the students to articulate their fears along with their fantasies, calling both into question. Practices such as these signal my confidence as a teacher and indicate that I actually do have some power to share—the power to decide what we do in the classroom. My willingness to actually give up control over certain aspects of the classroom indicates that I am not motivated by a need to impose authority, but by a desire to engage students in a teaching-learning process. These kinds of practices may help me earn authority through “personal efforts . . . and . . . by personal characteristics” rather than by institutional positioning alone (Delpit 577).

In order for these types of self-reflective practices to develop into a more serious basis for critical inquiry, however, the woman-rhetor-fool needs to establish a long-lasting foundation for dialogue. This type of rhetorical authority can be established by seeking a set of common values that the teacher and students can use to build visions of social change. Bizzell provides an example of this vocabulary building:
Rhetorical authority works to gain agreement by pointing out or creating relations between the rhetor’s values and the values of his or her interlocutors. For example, a rhetor discussing sexual equality with interlocutors who believe in sexism might ask whether these people also value general human equality and fair play. The rhetor could suggest a contradiction between these values and sexism and argue that sexism must be abandoned. (“Folly” 29)

By establishing shared values, the rhetor also establishes a basis for knowledge-making within a social dialectic. This critical act is more reconstructive than deconstructive. It holds promise as a basis for sharing power in a classroom taught by individuals whose gendered or raced bodies mark them as other because it encourages both rhetor and interlocutor to interact on common ground and, thus, transgress differences that might otherwise divide them. What begins to emerge here is a vision of critical-feminist praxis that shares power through building a classroom community. It does not do so at the expense of difference; harmony and dissent are both welcome here as part of the on-going process of identifying and exploring these shared values. My students and I didn’t always agree on which aspects of the “ideal writing class” to include in the negotiated syllabus, but the very fact that we were having these discussions meant that much of what gets taken for granted in writing classes was available for questioning and that we all participated in building the classroom community. For instance, many of the students wanted attendance to be optional and for all writing to be done during class time. We discussed the concept of community and how it emerged in their “ideal classes” and talked about what happens to that vision of community if no one attends. Similarly, we discussed the benefits and drawbacks of doing all the writing in class; we discussed the writing process, differences in the work habits of individual students, and teacher feedback on writing. From these discussions we negotiated a combination of in-class and out-of-class writing that met everyone’s needs. More important than what was negotiated was the fact that there was negotiation. The students had limited or, in some cases, no experience with power sharing in the classroom; thus, the experience of negotiating the syllabus, of studying some composition pedagogy, and of enacting our collective vision was a lived experiment in citizenship education, which is one important goal of critical pedagogy.

Acting as woman-rhetor-fool, I took advantage of my lesser social status to develop a close working relationship with the students as we negotiated the course syllabus. I also took advantage of this positioning by calling attention to aspects of teaching and learning that often go unnamed or that appear as digressions from course material. For instance, I broached the subject of a teacher-student, power-resistance dynamic. What causes it? What keeps it going? If we wanted to put an end to it, how would we go about it?

“Digressions” such as this call even more of the ideological subtext underwriting a class into the open, where teachers and students can engage in collective acts of critique and reconstruction.

Digression, indeed, is part of the Fool’s rhetorical strategy. Bizzell argues that because the “foolish speaker is different, [and] distractible . . . this means that other choices ruled out by the adoption of any authoritative position should have an easier time asserting themselves” (“Folly” 39). The rhetor-fool is released from the obligations of the agonistic rhetor, who asserts knowledge rather than negotiating it and who commands attention rather than sharing it. To expand further on this metaphor, since the woman-rhetor-fool is not the king, she shouldn’t try to occupy a position of dominant or unilateral authority. Her body and social standing would undermine her authority in such a role. Instead, she should take advantage of her ability to call attention to othered perspectives, to speak the unspoken, and to call taken-for-granted assumptions into question as a more effective mode of critical engagement. The Fool’s speech is not a-critical or a-political discourse. She doesn’t speak just for fun. Instead, positioned at the margins of society, the Fool speaks with a voice that is disruptive of the status quo; her visions are in themselves critiques, and her insistence on speaking is a challenge to normative power relations.

This shift to the Fool’s rhetoric also enables the teacher to address one of the underlying conflicts between students and teachers—the basis of knowing in the classroom. In a traditional (banking) classroom, the teacher lectures to the students and fills them with knowledge. This results in passive repetition of received knowledge. In the problem-posing classroom, the teacher engages students in critical and self-reflective dialogue about generative themes, and helps students recognize and reflect on their locatedness in an ideologically overwritten world. In the critical-feminist classroom, the teacher-rhetor-fool engages students in the process of establishing a critical discourse founded upon common values and then in the creative act of building a vision of a different world that is founded upon those values. This is a tremendous shift from standard teacher-student dynamic, which involves convincing students to abandon their values in favor of those sanctioned by the discipline. Here, the rhetor-fool uses the values students already hold dear as a foundation for new learning in a new context—where teachers and students collaboratively build knowledge. Speaking the Fool’s rhetoric, then, is not an invitation for me to point out where students are suffering from false consciousness; the Fool doesn’t lord her knowledge over the king. Instead, the Fool draws the king into a different epistemological sphere where alternative knowledge is possible and where she can encourage the development of critical consciousness.

How might I become the woman-rhetor-fool in my business writing classes (ENG368) and advance the project of critical pedagogy? I can anticipate
right away that I share many values with my students that can be used to establish a critical vocabulary. Although I recognize that capitalist values promote inequities, I do, indeed, want my students to be successful. They value this as well. I also know that it is neither reasonable nor desirable for them all to aspire to be cultural workers in the academy; in that case, their “success” will need to be imagined as occurring in a variety of professional contexts. A critical-feminist literacy pedagogy will need not only to assist students in developing a critical consciousness, but also in understanding how they can make use of that consciousness and still draw a paycheck, as their teachers do.

I can use the Fool’s rhetoric by inviting students to imagine and articulate the conditions of their success. A revised version of the “career project,” one of the major writing assignments for ENG368, might begin with the concept of “success” (or another shared value as determined by the class). Similar to the first day of class assignment in Effective Writing I (WRT120), where the students and I examined some of the conditions of an ideal writing class, assignments in ENG368 might involve a collective probing of “success” as a concept: What is success? How does one achieve it? What does it cost? What are the benefits? These discussions could lead into writing utopian business proposals that articulate equitable models of success. Research projects could ask students to locate actual places of employment where some of these conditions exist and, then, to imagine what it might take to bring the missing elements of their visions into place. While it is true that students may be suspicious of these assignments (as were my WRT120 students with the “ideal writing class” project), it may also be true that these types of assignments can bring alternative discourses (taboos, even) into the open. For that reason, it could also be useful to have the students explore their ideal visions of “success” in relation to their business writing class: In what ways is this class supposed to help you achieve your goals? These types of writing assignments have the advantage of enlisting students as rhetor-fools themselves by encouraging them to articulate their egalitarian visions as well. So it is not that I will play the fool for my students, but that the classroom will become a venue for many foolish rhetorical performances. Such revisions change the nature of writing assignments by foregrounding imaginative reformulations of reality that support shared egalitarian principles.

But more than changing writing assignments, the concept of the woman-fool-rhetor signals a change in subject position for the critical feminist teacher and a different understanding of critical pedagogy. As rhetor-fool in the business writing classroom, I want to avoid developing “traditional authority,” as was recommended by the Associate Dean. Instead, I want to build what Bizzell describes as “a rhetorical authority that moves from margin to center, a center that is reconceived as expanding the circumference” (“Folly” 41).

Bizzell may be imagining a classroom where the various student-centers of power are brought together in a matrix that intersects with teacher-centers of power, both of which should be understood as variable. This does not amount to an erasure of power relations; instead, it is a critical reflection on them – a recognition of interdependence in the face of difference. It is a pedagogy that is built on affirming certain values, such as respect, community, curiosity, creativity, equality, and difference. Teacher and students, alike, draw authority from these commitments. It rescues dreaming and imagination from exile at the hands of academic skepticism, recouping these intellectual acts for their potential to disrupt the status quo. The teacher who advocates and enacts these discursive transgressions will certainly be abdicating traditional authority in the classroom; however, as I have been arguing, for individuals with difference inscribed on their bodies, traditional authority is a hindrance to power sharing. Instead of traditionally derived authority, the teacher-rhetor-fool might appear to have an authority that is grounded in mutual respect and commitment, an authority that students can share in and draw upon as they engage in acts of critical literacy. In such a context, juggling is no longer the solitary act of an isolated teacher, but the collective act of an engaged group of students-teachers.

I step to the side of the center ring, making room for a small parade to pass. Several members of the troupe fall out of line and begin to pull objects from their pockets—bananas, brightly colored flowers, and toys. They toss their objects to me and to each other, creating a series of arcs between us that are at once both ordered and chaotic. The lion tamer and high-wire acts continue to draw applause from the crowd, but the enlarged juggling act has drawn attention of its own from many of the fans in the stands nearby.

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Notes

1 Typically, 60-70% of the students in a section of Business and Organizational Writing (ENG368) are men, which contrasts with the gender demographics of the university as a whole. By contrast, women make up 60% of the student population in the typical Effective Writing I (WRT120) course, which is consistent with university demographics. Like the rest of the University, in ENG368 white students typically make up 85-90% of the class. Most of the students in ENG368 are juniors and seniors in various business majors like accounting, management, and marketing. There are usually 2-4 English majors (out of 25 students), who are taking this class as part of the Business and Technical Writing minor.

2 However, Lisa Delpit problematized this notion for us more than a decade ago in “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children.” She demonstrates that students’ understanding of authority (as earned
or given) is dependent upon their social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Therefore, even though the institution may see one teacher as roughly equal in status to the next, students may recognize sharp differences.

3. Due to the vagaries of scheduling, I have not had the opportunity to teach ENG368 in some time.

4. A modified version of this assignment could be included as a first assignment in ENG368. However, my sense is that the strongly pro-capitalist values of the business majors would likely require some alterations to the assignment so as to bring those specific ideological subtexts into dialogue.

Works Cited


