

Expanding the Sayable: Listening, Teaching

Monica Huerta

Princeton University

This isn't my idea. That is, I'm putting my footnote upfront—a top note. A few months ago, my dear friend who teaches in the Italian Studies Department at Bryn Mawr College, Alessandro Giammei, shared a gorgeous-looking text with me. È stata una sorpresa: a syllabus for his course [“Rome as Palimpsests.”](#) If you looked at it you would see that his pedagogical attention extends into this typically-dreary-looking document. French and Italian literary critic Christy Wampole has [written](#) about the syllabus as “a site where politics, law, logistics and intellect meet, and where the soul of a teacher is most visible to his or her students...”[1] Ale's syllabus revealed itself in exactly this way. I leafed through it, stopping at the top of a page whose format I didn't recognize. It looked neither like a reading schedule nor an explanation of assignments, but rather like a list of rules. And so, always one with time for a list, I began reading them. There were statements about not apologizing for having incomplete thoughts, about speaking up even if it was uncomfortable. I peered over the page at him, sipping his (inevitably) lackluster espresso “Did you write these?”

“No!” he said with characteristic verve. “The students did. Every semester I ask the students to set ground rules for our class. And this is what they came up with for this year. Aren't they good?”

Reader, it brings me immeasurable joy to share with you that they were very good.

They were so good that this semester, in the first class for my course, “About Faces: Case Studies in the Histories of Reading Faces,” I planned an exercise like the one Ale did. The course looks at different historical moments where the project of making knowledge and/or art interfaced (haha) with practices and projects of “reading” faces: as in physiognomy, criminology, and early psychology. In part because some of the material we look at is profoundly racist, in part because we explicitly think in the course about what structures something as knowledge as epistemological rather than as belief, in part because in a small seminar, there is a real opportunity to create a distinct micro-culture with one another, I wanted to open up our conversations this way. Before diving into our main questions for the semester, but after establishing who was in the room, I invited students to think broadly and carefully about what kind of learning environment works well, and why, and how they wanted to build it with one another and with me.

“In this pressurized moment, listening to our students’ emerging needs for how they want to, need to learn could be a way of making good on the promise of critique, that is, in my students’ language, of ‘expanding the sayable.’”

At this point maybe I’ll stop, zoom out and gesture to the multi-layered conversations around and about the culture of higher education that have become peculiar flashpoints for political caricature (in the guise of critique). We are, I’ll assume, all too familiar with the ways in which our classrooms can become straw figures in “arguments” about the supposed ills that progressive or, more commonly, “liberal” politics beget. I won’t rehearse those here (for all their clutching towards melodrama, they are for the most part far less interesting than our classrooms), except to bring to the fore the fears that in “catering” to students we put the aims of education in peril, that treating students with what is named hyper-sensitivity

does not serve them, and instead, infantilizes them. But what of the fact that generational divides are real, and that both our students' worlds of origin and the worlds awaiting them have – we know this in so many ways – shifted just as we've been teaching?

This is not an essay about the changing demographics of our students, not exactly. But some easily accessed census percentages do communicate that who our students are (speaking very broadly) is shifting – and, in some cases, say at [UC Riverside](#), where 41% of students identify as Latinx, they have long ago moved beyond the frameworks of wealthy-Anglo-American whiteness from which we inherited many of our notions of both education and curricular excellence. More numbers: Nationwide, in 2007, 66.1% of college students identified as non-Hispanic white. A decade later, 52.9% of undergraduate students identified as non-Hispanic white, 20.9% as Hispanic, 15.1% as Black, and 7.6% as Asian.[2] This year, 56% of the first year class at Princeton, my current institution, have self-identified as people of color, including biracial and multiracial students; 26% are from lower income households, 18% are first-generation college students. I mention these data points to mark (however obliquely and imperfectly) that whether we think about them or not, it's likely that some of our pedagogical practices could benefit from actively listening to what's emerging from our students, but not so as to name it or lay claim to it. The goal, to my mind, is to serve as better mediators between our course materials and our students' lives.

Kyla Wazana Tompkins's essay about another crossroads of inter-generational friction points a way into the distance between the classrooms we're used to running and the classrooms our students might need – and that it's a distinct good (!) that we don't know what they will look like yet. In a forthcoming essay that first appeared as a [Bullybloggers post](#), Tompkins reexamines the debate that ensued after the transphobia experienced in the “Ball-busters” room of Allison Mitchell and Deidre Logue's Killjoy Kastle Lesbian Haunted House event in Los Angeles a few years ago. Rather than relitigate the harm the room caused, Tompkins takes up the question of feminist anger as an important access point to emergent politics, and in so doing, she tries to re-interpret the greater intergenerational conflict at stake. Another way of putting it: the question is how to inherit even beloved intellectual lineages, while acknowledging and adjusting for their limitations, their shortcomings in the light of a new present. As Tompkins writes, “Inchoateness is the point: inchoateness is the affective crossroads at which the articulation of political injury and opposition finds itself before it has a chance to be recuperated into the legibility that is power.”[3]

What if our job is to listen to our students, even and especially if we don't know

what is emerging from them? Is there a pedagogy that is nimble enough for these emergent worlds of learning, thinking? Are we willing to take the risk (following an inchoate form will always involve risk) that what they have to teach us about how to teach them will make our classes more rigorous, more incisive, more critical?

I'll be honest: the conversation with my class about classroom culture did not begin comfortably. (How many potentially fruitful questions lay in the chasm of those first, craggy moments of silence, after they've been asked, when we rush to fill the silence, to cover over the disquiet—theirs and our own?) I introduced the idea, the idea that is not my idea, explaining that I wanted us to think about what helps us best engage in conversations in a seminar – and, necessarily, what kinds of behaviors, assumptions get in the way. There was no immediate, grand epiphany, and the group did not instantly dive in or feel inspired to take a risk. It was, instead, a little awkward.

Just like you, I come to class prepared for awkward moments. I brought onto the screen a table I set up in my PowerPoint deck. It had three columns and many rows. The column headings were: “What do we value? Why is it important? How will we enact it?” The top row was filled with a series of statements I make to every class I teach, letting them know, in short, that as their professor, I value them first and foremost as human beings, and second as students, that I understand that they have allergies, families, pet peeves, aspirations, and sometimes will have skipped lunch. I told them the reason I value them first as human beings and second as students is because I know that they can only do their best learning if they are rested and well (just like me). I promised that I would carry out this value of mine through respecting them, through believing in them, and through being honest with them. I told them that, because of the historical cultures of learning from which we all likely come, that I knew saying this also made me vulnerable to them, made it possible for them to take advantage of me, but that I was nonetheless trusting their maturity and trusting that they would respect me and one another.

“So,” I stood up from the table, and headed to the chalk board (my classroom has a chalk board!!). Substantially stumped, but maybe a little more curious, seven faces looked up at me. “Think about the kinds of classrooms you've been in that have been great, what worked about them?” We would start at the end, and then work our back backwards to what we wanted to call the “value,” then forwards to how we might think of practices to make the value take effect.

Slowly, a conversation unfolded, about the performative habits they'd seen or mimicked in other settings, about the feeling they often had of having to find a way to agree or find or create consensus, about the rhetorical flourishes that seemed

empty to them, but that were how some of their peers made efforts to “sound smart” (“I just want to piggyback” when not piggybacking; “Building off what [someone] said” when not building; restating the previous point with more flourish as though it were a new point...) and about feeling limited by an idea of objectivity. What emerged was a wide-ranging discussion about the (unnamed) classroom culture habits that kept them from learning and engaging in the way that they wanted—and the way that they wanted to engage was deeply. Because these are seniors, they were able to identify some of how those practices might have been structurally and historically produced, they’d found languages in other classrooms for describing these processes.

I make this point to note that your classrooms might differ, they might need more contextualizing in the effects of nineteenth-century knowledge-making and professionalization of the university around “disciplines,” for example. Conversations which happen to be part of our field’s historical and critical purview. That is, we are, in fact, expertly trained to lead those conversations for students, to offer examples that work against the ways that our fields and institutions organize knowledge and knowing. For instance, you might tell them that only in the nineteenth century did professional organizations form for historians, doctors, lawyers, that only in the nineteenth century did the process of being trained in a classroom, in a specialized school for those careers, emerge. In the history of the study of literature, you might share, only in the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century did something like the criticism we do bifurcate from teaching elocution, from the practice of how to embody and so perform a text to treating the text as a meaning-making world to decipher.[4] You might share these historical contingencies, the ones that make sense for your course, as a way of opening up the bounds of even your own position in the university: why you teach in English or Comparative Literature, that these formations are idiosyncratic, too, to the institutions in which we are located, and so part of institutional histories. For example, sometimes I share with my students that Princeton used to have a Biography department: a department where the task was to learn from and with (and so to write) biographies. (In the spirit of experiment, I am tempted by any manner of contemporary critical turns from post-humanism to new materialisms to see what organizing a course around a single life would or could even look like now.) When I taught at Duke, I shared with students there that Duke used to have a [Parapsychology Lab](#), which operated from 1930-1965. The point of digging into any of these with our students is to give flesh to a proposition from a quintessentially nineteenth-century figure, William James, that knowledge is teleological: it’s a topic and debate for another essay, but whose machinations are often at work in our classrooms, especially in the question of what kind of knowing emerges from, with, and about the literary.

Ale would tell me later that his practice – the practice that will now be my practice – began for him during his time teaching and directing the [Prison Teaching Initiative](#) at Princeton, where they were advised to “discuss a class covenant with the students.” The thought was that because the space was marked as anything but a classroom (even if all manner of learning happens there), it was important to consciously and clearly build the sense of an explicit, academic classroom in the space. The insight from this conscious building of a classroom inside a prison is this: that the moment we assume what a classroom even is, or how it works, that’s the moment (through assumption) that exclusionary practices are born, no matter the intentions.[5]

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A subtle transformation happened in our classroom and so in the writing that I have seen students submit so far. Some of it is unwieldy; students are being honest and vulnerable with one another, naming patterns of being seen and seeing and thinking about faces that are not theorized, not contextualized. They are taking the risk of saying what honestly comes up for them. They are more likely to get hurt, to be hurt. I will have to do more of a different kind of work in helping historicize, theorize. It’s my job to honor their honesty and to mediate between what they bring and what I’ve tried to learn about the histories of reading faces, of encountering faces as though they are waiting to be read. But also, through listening to what kind of culture they wanted to create with one another and with me, we’ve actually created a shortcut to the kinds of learning this course hopes students will do, because some of the performativity of the classroom, we’ve agreed to set aside, even if it exposes each of our vantage points as limitations.

I’ve posted the agreements my class reached about what kind of classroom culture we wanted to build on our [course website](#). I posted them there because I promised the students that we would return to them briefly at the top of each class, and because I wanted to offer a public-facing answer to the worries that if we listen to our students, they will not want to struggle with difficulty, complexity, that they will only want their feelings tended to and, more perplexingly still, that somehow their feelings are not something, as their professors and teachers, that we should be concerned about. (This even after decades of Black, feminist, and queer scholarship reminding us of the non-existence of the distance between thinking and feeling.)

In this pressurized moment, listening to our students’ emerging needs for how they

want to, need to learn could be a way of making good on the promise of critique, that is, in my students' language, of "expanding the sayable." By submitting this phrase as one of their goals in our classroom, they meant growing the bounds of what it's possible to say in the classroom, not because they mean to center themselves, but because they recognize that in many ways their vantage points inherently challenge and upend some unhelpful cultural orthodoxies that have prescribed the manner in which we learn for too long. And, as ever, their critical vantage on their own education stands to benefit more than just themselves. For one, their thinking about what it means for them to learn – and what practices and habits get in the way – have challenged me to teach beyond my own limits, too.

But I don't feel compelled to write a romance for you (or me). Without the veil of performance, my students are challenging one another in ways that are respectful but beyond the politeness that has managed so much conflict in the academic spaces I've been in. And as they expand the boundaries of classroom respect, they keep enacting the kind of critical work that I think we all hope our students will take up themselves as a matter of course, not only as the matters of a course – about anything, from our texts to the wide world of cross-cutting currents of capital and power that shape their and our material conditions, even in the classrooms where we meet, and the ones we build. I am learning (slowly), too, to let us all stumble toward different kinds of conversations because we are re-imagining our classroom as we go.

END NOTES

[1] Christy Wampole, "My Syllabus, My Self," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2016.

[2] "More than 76 Million Students Enrolled in U.S. Schools, Census Bureau Reports," [census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/school-enrollment.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/school-enrollment.html), December 11, 2018.

[3] Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "Reflections of a Real-Life Feminist Killjoy: Ball-Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergeneration Queer-Feminist Life," *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings*, Allyson Mitchell and Cait Mcinney, Ed. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019) 152; originally appeared as "Ball Busters and the Recurring Trauma of Intergenerational Queer/Feminist Life," February 20, 2016, bullybloggers.wordpress.com.

[4] The work of elocutionists in the nineteenth century has served multiple research streams, from the histories of gender, race, performance, and wealth. One example of a primary source is Samuel Silas Curry's work. With Curry in mind, Matthias Somers has shown that those he calls "new elocutionists" integrated modern psychology and physiology into how they were thinking about elocution as a form of literary interpretation – and as a valid form of reading and literary instruction. Samuel Silas Curry, *The Province of Expression: A Search for Principles underlying adequate methods of Developing Dramatic and Oratoric Delivery* (Boston: Freeman Place, 1891); Matthias Somers, "Modernism at the University: New Elocution, New Criticism, and New Poetry," *Orbis Litterarum*, 72:2 93-115 (2017).

[5] I want to also point to the crucial work folks like Fred Moten and Stefano Harvey in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, and more recently, Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein [are doing](#) to rethink, broadly, the very meaning of education, of study. And in the field of classics, Sasha Mae Eccleston and Dan-el Padilla Peralta, among others, have been doing [crucial work intervening](#) in the histories of race that shaped their field, and so shaped the knowledges their field creates. These are, of course, just some of the projects that we can turn to as examples for articulating to ourselves and to our students the relation between the histories of knowledge-making and the pedagogies we might cultivate in a circuit with our students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Monic Huerta received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and holds an M.A. in History from Princeton University and a B.A. in History & Literature from Harvard University. She was most recently a Provost's Postdoctoral Fellow at Duke University, where she was housed in the Program in Women's Studies and taught a course on the historical memory of American slavery. She has also taught courses at Rutgers University, Pace University, and the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey in Guadalajara, Mexico. Her research focuses on notions of expression and its relationship to identity in literature, law, and science, especially as they revolve around photography and involuntariness in the nineteenth-century study and representation of facial expressions of emotion. As a fellow at Princeton she will continue work on her first book, *The Evidence of Things Unseen: Involuntary Expressions and the Making of*

Modern Personhood. In addition to being affiliated with the English Department, she will serve as a faculty fellow at Wilson College. At Princeton this fall she will teach an introductory course to Latino literature emphasizing the transnational, multi-racial networks that influence the works of literature we term “Latino.” Her work has appeared in *J19: The Journal for Nineteenth-Century Americanists and American Literature*.

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