

# EXPLORING PROFESSIONAL UNCERTAINTY IN CRITICAL LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: A COLLABORATIVE STORY OF POLITICAL TRANSITION

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## INITIAL THOUGHTS

There's something about the teaching of language and the teaching of language teachers that seems to resist autobiographical inquiry as a legitimate source of knowledge. There remains a sense that what distinguishes our knowledge from other spheres of educational knowledge is a formal and demonstrable understanding of "language," no matter how often and how fully we might assert that there is no "language" without speech, negotiation, and context (Canagarajah, 2013; Harris, 1998). To be sure, language pedagogy and language teacher education have enjoyed their social, ecological, and spatial "turns" (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Kramsch, 2002; Pennycook, 2012), and even narrative research has made inroads into TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) related fields (Barkhuizen, 2011). But in many ways, TESOL still functions as a "service field...preoccupied with instrumental and applied value" (Luke, 2008, p. 308). As such, the teaching of English language teachers seems to be particularly vulnerable to a tendency to objectify life practices under the guise of the applied sciences of language and evidence-based outcomes. Yet, from our experiences working with diverse teachers of English, we feel it is important to emphasize the inherently cross-inter-transcultural nature of our work and the uncertainty that comes with it. Given the current political climate and widespread reactions to globalization, we believe there was never a more important time to reassert that this work is more than a matter of objectifying language and culture and training teachers in best practices.

This paper outlines a dialogue between English language teacher educators that emerged during our respective graduate classes taught in the United States and in South Korea in the fall of 2016. During a time when Donald Trump ascended to the Presidency of the United States on what many perceived to be a divisive and racially charged platform and South Koreans were taking to the streets in a series of historic protests that resulted in the impeachment of president Park Geun-hye (Choe, 2016), we sensed the crucial role these social and political happenings played in our classrooms. We created a collaborative electronic journal where we hoped to support one another's teaching by sharing stories about our respective courses. We placed no limitations on the contents of the teaching journal but committed to write at least once per week. This short paper reflects our efforts to come to some understanding of how this simple tool acted as a platform of support during a time when political events challenged our sense of purpose in language teacher education classrooms. The journal exposed uncertainties we felt regarding the purpose of our work as self-identifying critical practitioners in our field. We consider ways that this dialogic storytelling practice led us to juxtapose our strategies for engaging in overtly political action-discourse during times of civic unrest. And we hope this paper might offer teachers and teacher educators an example of how narrative dialogue can enable us all to rethink and rearticulate the nature, purpose, and relevance of critical practices in what looks to be an era of prolonged political uncertainty.

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### THE CLASSES/SITES

Following brief introductions of our teaching settings in our separate voices, we outline an ongoing theme that unfolded during our semester-long journal writing exercise. We have presented a key tension in our strategies for dealing with topic politics in our respective classrooms, focusing on the initial identification, the ways it came to define our understanding of our teaching, and the broader concerns we expressed with respect to it. We offer our thoughts in a way that allows the journal entries and our subsequent reflections on them to give a rough account of the courses themselves, while emphasizing our understanding of how they impacted our pedagogical work.

#### CATHERINE

In Fall Semester, 2016, I had the opportunity to lead a Critical Pedagogies class with in-service teachers as part of their Masters in TESOL course in a university just outside of Seoul. I was excited at the prospect of teaching this class, which I had taken during my own Master's course as a student of Curt's. My experience, some seven years earlier, had been an overwhelming one, both emotionally and intellectually, as it was the first time in my educational journey that I had truly engaged with the political and social tensions in my personal and professional life. I had long been attracted to subversive teaching practices, but it wasn't until the class with Curt that I was allowed a space to articulate the difficulties I faced and explore how to work through these in alternative ways. This served as a catalyst for my professional and academic journey as I began to develop my own critical orientations to education. I shared this distinct memory with my students on the first day of class in the course introduction primarily as a cautionary anecdote to forewarn them of what was likely to be an emotional and, at times, difficult journey. I also shared with the students my hopes for them that they would take a lot from the course, as they embarked on the challenge of rethinking their orientation to their profession. The class, which consisted of six participants from the United States, two from England (including myself), and one from Korea, seemed excited by the challenge.

I designed the course to introduce social and political ideologies relevant to our field, in order that we may use them as a means of interrogating our own classroom practices. I focused on foundational texts (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Pennycook, 1989) followed by a piece specifically chosen for its comprehensive discussion of critical issues in English language education in Korea (Sung, 2012). I hoped that we would forge theoretical understandings of literature in order to initiate meaningful action in the form of critically-oriented lesson plans in the teacher-learners' classrooms. As two of the five grading components demanded that the students design lesson plans to be taught and reflected on, the majority of the readings that I selected were centered around practical applications of critical language teaching in practice. Thus, the overall objective of the course was to engage in social and political critique that would serve as a foundation for the curriculum design to be implemented into the students' English language classrooms. As the readings were done outside of class and responded to on our class Facebook page, it was what we did in the space of our classroom that would act as a bridge between these two domains. Further, in a period of such global political instability, in a class where political tensions in the field were central to offering a basis for exploration of classroom practice, engagement in political discussion was both expected and encouraged.

#### CURT

Fall 2016 marked an exciting time for me. For the first time since beginning my current faculty position, I was able to name, design, and teach my own graduate course. I chose to focus on theoretical accounts of language and social practice and implications

for socially engaged language teaching and research. I did so in part because of recent shifts that our faculty had made to our Composition & TESOL graduate curriculum. We had recently voted to increase the number of research courses in our curriculum. While I didn't have any objections to a heavy emphasis on empirical research, I was concerned that a reduction in the number of electives and fewer opportunities for theoretically oriented courses might exacerbate a tendency among students to circumvent fundamental philosophical questions regarding the political, institutional, and social implications of their work. It was my hope that our Special Topics course would provide tools through which we could articulate the purpose of our work as language teachers and researchers. As a foundation for discussions, I chose to focus on a set of contrasting conceptual lenses, including structuralism, interpretivism, cultural Marxism, performativity, new materialisms, and posthumanism. I hoped that discussing vastly different and contradictory ways of framing language and social practice might invite participants to draw on their own experiences and a broader set of philosophical traditions as they developed their academic work. I saw it as crucial that these emerging scholars would become comfortable challenging authoritative claims within/about our discipline as they began the daunting task of creating their senses of academic, personal, and social purpose.

Reconnecting with Catherine through our collaborative journal instilled a sharp and challenging perspective into my reflections. Despite my own disillusionment with many of the ideas that informed the Critical Pedagogies course she took with me seven years ago, discussing concepts and activities with her showed me how our shared political sensibilities could act as a basis for support. For years, I had admired Catherine's ability to cut through excessive theorizing in order to find a kernel that she could build into her pedagogical work. As a teacher educator, I had come to appreciate the immediacy with which she engaged the political dynamics around her classrooms. I hoped to draw inspiration from her courageous and direct handling of current political debates and to get some ideas for a wider range of activities and ideas for engaging these in class meetings. In other words, I didn't want my Special Topics course to become a weekly ritual of talking and teaching about theory, and I thought that her approach to debate and her willingness to play with classroom formats would help me come up with concrete ideas for doing this.

### **AN ONGOING TENSION: TOPICAL POLITICS OR THEORETICAL DISTANCE**

We set up our collaborative journal on a shared Google doc with only a vague sense of what we wanted to accomplish. We simply committed to describing classroom events and using the document as a means of talking through our pedagogical aims and the activities we developed to meet them. As the semester progressed, our discussion tended towards our uncertainties regarding what we were attempting to accomplish and how we were going about doing so. In addition to acting as a mechanism of support and an avenue for venting, it also became a means through which we made associations between our classroom challenges and larger questions about our purpose for teaching these courses. Despite the many similarities in our pedagogical leanings, our broader social contexts seemed to inspire a series of dichotomies that became key points of reference for the ways we came to understand our work. In the section below, we trace one tension that developed over the semester—that of overtly discussing topical politics versus emphasizing theoretical tools for inquiry. We have included fairly long excerpts from our collaborative journal in order to trace the development of this key distinction and to emphasize that what we are offering here is not a traditional qualitative analysis, but a juxtaposing of our respective stories as they emerged in our semester long dialog.

## AN INITIAL DISTINCTION

The tension that we have decided to focus on in this paper came about during the first week of our respective classes. Catherine began her first class meeting by immediately homing in on political positions with which class participants identified.

*On day one, I asked to them to discuss with each other what they stood for to kind of see which perspectives people were bringing to class and if they were able to evoke a bit of self-awareness. I took part in this activity too so that I wasn't asking them to expose who they were whilst keeping myself protected behind some kind of professorial neutrality. I want to really see how much the students can challenge their own ideas and identify contradictions in what they stand for/believe and their actions in and out of this classroom. So, another major goal of mine (and the reason that I told the class what I stood for in week one) is to kind of do away with that neutrality in the classroom that is expected of me as the instructor and to even the balance by trying to challenge the typical teacher-student hierarchy. (Catherine, September, 2016)*

Curt distanced himself from overtly political stances and contrasted his approach by describing an emphasis on theoretical/conceptual tools as a centerpiece of classroom discussions:

*I admire your courage to begin with this political "coming out," but I wouldn't do it. There are too many political dynamics and beliefs in the class that I simply don't understand....I think after making repeated mistakes throughout my career when characterizing or describing political "positions" among my students, I've developed a strategy of always returning to a concept or a theoretical position. So I'm taking a "theoretical hats" approach....My hope is that, by presenting some of the history of language and social science research, I can give students an opportunity to see where some of our common-sense assumptions in scholarship come from, and as a result, we might create some space for them to bring in new ideas or new perspectives. (Curt, September, 2016)*

Catherine responded by sharing some of her own difficulties as a student of Curt's years earlier. She described the difficulties she felt in this constant movement "back to theory," noting that it constitutes a sort of "challenge to everything" one might believe:

*It's an incredibly big deal to have all the things that you have taken as constants or absolutes be challenged, and when you identify as a group that has the right to speak about how history has slighted you—it's a weird and kind of all-encompassing feeling which completely changes how you see everything—maybe this attempt to get educated to widen our views of the world actually narrows them so that we become so entrenched by these "new," "enlightened" ideas that we can't escape them. (Catherine, October, 2016)*

It is worth noting that Catherine saw a more explicit focus on topical politics to be an alternative to challenges students might encounter within Curt's pedagogical approach. She suggested that Curt's tendency to undermine "common-sense" views by injecting theoretical inquiry into underlying beliefs could be alienating to students. She saw efforts to directly confront everyday politics as a safe point of departure from which participants might begin exploring other perspectives.

*“POLITICAL” IMPOSITIONS*

As the semester progressed, we both recognized an increased tendency to focus on the upcoming U.S. presidential election. This was initially met with excitement in both of our classes. In the case of Curt’s class, this provoked a welcome energy to the more subdued discussions of assigned readings.

*Last week there was a moment when everything seemed to click. We were discussing the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), when one person of color in the class described intense feelings of anxiety that came with driving through a rural Pennsylvania town peppered with Trump signs. This led several students from Middle Eastern countries to describe stark differences they felt on and off campus. We created an interface between “academic” and political discourse in the classroom, and I felt like we were finally using theory to generate new understandings of our personal experiences. This is the first time this semester that I remember really using the theory and making something new of it—the first time they didn’t seem intimidated by theory. (Curt, October, 2016)*

At the same time, South Korea spun into political turmoil resulting in weekly protests exceeding up to two million people (Park Impeachment Filed, 2016). Some students in Catherine’s class participated in the protests that were taking place after classes each Saturday. There was a buzz in the room and an overwhelming willingness to share opinions about what was becoming a sensational political scandal. Class time was dominated by political discussions, which increased as the U.S. election neared. Compelled by a nagging feeling that focus on action was somehow more “useful” to the students than extensive discussion, the journal was filled with my frustrations on how to mediate this.

*CONTRASTING STRATEGIES OF AVOIDANCE*

We both expressed stories of success during these emotionally and intellectually charged classroom events but were quickly overwhelmed by an acute sense of uncertainty that ultimately led us to write this paper. In Catherine’s class, Donald Trump became a point of focus, and his campaign was perceived as synonymous with racist and sexist rhetoric and conjured up feelings of dread and concern, which was increasingly palpable in discussions and activities. Her students were connecting with the events in the U.S. in extremely emotional ways. Some expressed personal turmoil following breakdowns in familial relationships strained by opposing political positions, while others were fearful about what the election of Donald Trump meant for them as people of color. This led to a sustained focus on the American context and subsequent feelings on Catherine’s part that these discussions were failing to serve as either meaningful social acts or as pedagogically valuable interactions to these teachers of English in Korea:

*I really like them as a group, but I am feeling my own inadequacies about the fact that we’re not really doing anything. Everyone is engaged and mostly on the same page, but we kind of seem to keep getting off track. I am feeling anxious that the conversations take on a life of their own and become dominated by a small group, and I am having a hard time managing that. I’m also feeling like we’re not really doing anything in class. I am feeling desperately like we need to be doing something with these ideas. (Catherine, November, 2016)*

She conceded that during a time of political unrest, classroom discussions on topical politics could instigate an exaggerated distinction between events inside and events outside of the classroom. To talk of “politics,” in any sense, while protesters are chanting in the streets is to invoke an immediate challenge to the one who dares call oneself political.

While Curt maintained his emphasis on a sequence of theoretical tools, he also voiced his support for “just talking”:

*I struggle with that feeling that “discussions” can be empty rituals—and at worst they become places where we just reinforce institutional roles and entrenched beliefs. But, as I see it, there are really few places where we can just stop and focus on ideas and how we discuss them. I mean, where else is academic discussion built into our daily rituals? The fact that it’s hard doesn’t make it irrelevant. Seems to me that if we’re doing it right, then we’re always looking for ways to enrich it and make it an effective form of learning and action. (Curt, November, 2016)*

He was, however, beginning to face his own challenges as his class dealt with an increased tendency to focus on the U.S. election. Rather than explicitly shutting down or avoiding these discussions, many participants expressed apprehensions that they were not fully grasping the theoretical concepts that served as the “contents” of the course. Curt’s journal pointed to a number of interactions in which students subtly (or not so subtly) discouraged any conversation that invoked topics that had already been covered in previous discussions. There were repeated calls to focus on the weekly readings and to devote adequate time to mastering the course materials. Through the collaborative journal, Curt considered how his broader approach might have instigated this response:

*I think that this might have created a sense that learning the different theoretical positions was either more important than—or had to precede—expressing one’s own political position. I guess I worry that this might serve as a means of avoiding the more difficult and more personal experiences and might diminish the value of personal entries into larger political discussions. (Curt, November, 2016)*

He continued by suggesting that the mastery of theory can be alienating, and it can create a setting in which individuals’ opinions and reflections don’t seem to carry intellectual weight until they have theoretical tools to adequately present them. Catherine agreed with this concern and elaborated on the ways the desire to achieve theoretical mastery had played a negative role in her class:

*I used theoretical ideas that I was more familiar with than anyone in the room to “win” an argument—completely ignoring the student’s reasons for holding that view and copping out by hiding behind it and being an authority on it. It kind of creates a hierarchy in the class where theory supersedes experiences and those who understand the theories best are superior to those who don’t. (Catherine, February, 2017)*

Curt responded with a final declaration of uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of this theoretical distancing during a time of such fear, anger, and impulse towards tangible action:

*My “think-theory” approach, which would begin with trying to work out the conditions that led to these views, is too close to justifying those views or tacitly accepting them. I wonder if it’s possible or correct to treat Trumpism and Trumpists according to this detached “let’s think through the basis of their views” approach. Is that approach inherently alienating now that my students (many of whom are from majority Muslim countries and most of whom are not from the U.S.) are under such direct attack? (Curt, February, 2017)*

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

We acknowledge that our initial approaches to these courses set the tone for how the classroom interactions played out throughout the semester. As we returned to the journal, we observed that the political climates and the frustrations we felt in our classrooms were underpinned by our own concerns about how to best mediate the perceived demands on us as teacher-educators. We used the journal as a home to articulate these frustrations, leaning on one another as a source of professional and personal solace. We noticed that our dialogues were filled with ongoing concerns over inaction, which are only partially represented in the exchanges we shared in the above section. The relational nature of these discussions helped Curt to articulate concerns over generating a sense of political detachment through his emphasis on theory. For Catherine, the journal served as a space to express concerns about the limits of large group classroom conversations and the sense that times of political unrest could accentuate a perceived gap between “mere” dialogue and social action. We agreed that talking explicitly about the political nature of our work, during a time of political unrest, could instigate an exaggerated distinction between events inside and events outside of the classroom.

It is worth considering a need to move past the opposition that critical educators have taken to the teaching of content (Freire, 1970). O’Donnell’s (2015) notion of “investment banking education” is useful here. According to the logic of “investment banking education,” rather than content serving as a pacifying force in oppressive education regimes, it is the development of adaptive and marketable skills that investment banking education is predicated upon. Rather than knowledge of content, the current education market ultimately requires learners to refine skill sets uniquely attuned to a service based economy (O’Donnell, 2015). The point here being that, even when we foster critical practices, it is still important that our collective educative experiences are part of the larger educational investments required for success. As each of us must survive in a system premised on demonstrable skills and measurable achievements (St. Pierre, 2011), acts as simple as pausing for discussion, sharing a personal experience, or revisiting a concept previously taught, could be justifiably seen as somehow beside the point. It is important to maintain compassion for ourselves and our students as we flirt with their/our very purpose for seeking out an education. They need the skills that are being demanded of them, and they expect us to support them in their pursuits of them. As teacher-educators we know this, and this feeling of needing to give students what they want is justifiable and probably necessary.

Rather than justifying our teaching or giving accounts of “what worked” in gestures towards best (or even good) practices, our collaborative journal enticed us to emphasize our perceived failures and concerns. We feel this sort of emphasis can help us (as individuals and as a profession) foster a capacity to respond to our distinct local settings and to cultivate fluidity with regard to our habits of thought, purpose, and practice in the classroom. Many of us are concerned, upset, and even terrified about the political challenges we currently face. It is worthwhile to recognize that, while many of these challenges are not “new” per se, the scale, tone, and reach of these challenges might

demand a capacity to rediscover some of the most fundamental tenets of our teaching. This is not something that educators need to (or should) face alone. Our ability to relate to one another through our uncertainties is a means through which we might recreate our individual and collective missions as educators. Through collaborative narrative practices that embrace the uncertainties that we understandably feel, there is strength to be found in expressing these alongside trusted allies willing to do the same.

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