Micro-Geographies as Pedagogy: Space, Bodies and Practice

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Communication centers can uniquely serve as sites to question and challenge the manifold ways in which speakers have been conditioned to adhere to traditional power, knowledge, and discursive dynamics. As part of a growing effort to recognize intersectional identities and how systems of knowledge are organized around unequal distributions of power that are gendered, sexualized, raced, and classed, scholars recognize that pedagogical spaces are where the proverbial rubber meets the road (Crenshaw, et al., 2019; Zidani, 2021). That is, historically, colleges and universities were, and often continue to be, built around reproducing, distributing, and institutionalizing colonial ways of thinking. Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999) recognized how this dynamic worked in writing centers, particularly, where writers expect to be "disciplined" into sanctioned academic discourse; they used postcolonial theory to disrupt that expectation and instead promoted a writing center philosophy in which writers develop awareness of their shifting subject positions, "a consciousness marked by the ability to negotiate multiple, even contradictory, subject positions while rooted in dominant discourse" (p. 52). Scholars and practitioners of writing and writing centers have for decades thus considered the ways in which their pedagogies are complicit in – and have the potential to disrupt – colonialist knowledge and discursive practices (Barerra, Bridgman & Matthews, et al., 2021; Hotson & Bell, 2024; Lee-Amuzie, 2023).

Similarly, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and simultaneous national reckoning around race, communication centers started to grapple with important questions about anti-racism and linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2020; Ladva, 2020; Nguyễn, 2021), neurodiversity and disability (Prentiss, 2021), and self-advocacy (Holzberg & Ferraro, 2021). We view this work as important and essential to our own center's operational and pedagogical missions. In the staff training at our communication center, we also consider topics such as mental health, the hidden curriculum, working with LGBTQIA+ people, dis/ability, monolingualism, and the cumulative effects of microaggressions. While we have in place formal and informal dialogic

feedback loops (Carless, 2016) such as client surveys, mentoring programs, reflective assignments for the class that offers academic credit, and channels for anonymous suggestions, and while we support and use formal training opportunities to educate ourselves about issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), our concern for purposes of this essay is that top-down or standardized approaches to training under the umbrella of DEI fall short of establishing the culture of deep and ongoing critical self-reflection necessary for student workers as they develop unique approaches in working with, welcoming, and responding to the needs of the speakers who use the center. We observe that the informal conversations and everyday pedestrian practices that happen in the center go further to support a culture of critical self-reflection and deep pedagogical practice that, in turn, makes our work with speakers more meaningful. We ask ourselves: How do we maintain our center's values of diversity and equity in our everyday practices? How do we ensure that our pedagogical development is always evolving? And emphatically, how might postcolonial and anti-colonial theory inform the work that we do?

In answering these questions, we suggest a theory of *micro-geography* as a framework that gives a vocabulary to the bottom-up approach to inclusivity that our center strives for in our everyday practices. We then turn to the space itself to think about how bodies use and occupy it, to see how aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, and languaging practices guide everyday decisions about inhabiting our spaces: where we sit and stand; how we narrate and curate our individual and collective stories via dry-erase boards; what we choose a backdrop for our online meetings; our ongoing quest for the perfect trail mix in the back lounge. In other words, the various ways in which the micro-geographies of space present affordances by which alternative or even subversive pedagogical practices emerge and *struggle* to express themselves in the center. We seek not to universalize the experiences of our center but to offer our observations to other communication center scholars and practitioners to contribute new vocabularies and insights, challenging others to think about how their own micro-geographies might support decolonization of the center.

Developing a Theory of Micro-Geography

Micro-geography encompasses a vast critical postcolonial discourse which examines the intersections between the designation of space as a colony by means of occupation and the peoples who lived and continue to live in colonized spaces. It is as such a framework that conceptualizes space, firstly as something that emerges out of processes of occupation; secondly, space as something sustained by ongoing processes of designation; and thirdly, space as something which is always contested by those who experience it as an ongoing occupation.

The linkages between space as ongoing occupation, and contestation as ongoing praxis of bodies within it is what micro-geography describes as decolonization. This description of decolonization encompasses the numerous decolonization praxes in the variously designated spaces ranging from the *figuratively small* as astutely demonstrated by Frantz Fanon (1961; 2008), Gloria Anzaldua (1987), and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) to the *figuratively large* (involving coloniality and modernity themselves at the continental and global levels) as seen in the work of Achilles Mbembe (2001), David Harvey (1990), Harsha Walia (2021) and Denise Ferriera da Silva (2015). Additionally, the common focuses among these various demonstrations of the workings of coloniality through space are linked to critical abolitionist traditions which are themselves rooted in de-colonization movements targeting borders in their forms, prisons and carceral institutions, schools, policing and other related institutions as the space constructing dynamics for the material and social reproduction of racism, sexism, genderism, forms of marginalities and exclusions, and other systemically rooted societal inequities (Davis, 2022; Gilmore, 2022).

Thus, micro-geography as a framework also draws from abolitionist traditions and conceptualizes space as something arising out of the processes of constructing parameters or frontiers that transform places into defined domains. In thinking about our communication center from this perspective, we question the internal processes that contrive the formal characteristics which distinguish them from others, define their boundaries (or borders), and therefore denote how said boundaries (or borders) may be traversed and by which bodies. This formulation describes both the spatial processes of occupation – along with the practices or *cultures* of subjugation that sustain them – which are the focus of postcolonial as well as abolitionist frameworks and analysis.

The permeability of the frontiers or borders which demarcate space are inscribed upon bodies as differentiated geographic privileges through the regularizing procedures for traversing them, and the expected practices within them. In other words, the ability of any given body to live within spaces and to traverse the hidden boundaries which demarcate or distinguish spaces are systemic privileges within the categories of race, sex and gender, ethnicity, nationality, ability and so on. Or as Mbembe (2001) might put it: the inscription of race upon any sets of bodies is first and foremost drawn into the ground such that the relative mobilities of various groups relative to that ground are the race- sex- gender- ableist-making processes themselves which in turn set into motion differentiated practices of affect (The New School, 2019; Wiser, 2014). The evidence for such an assertation about the ground (or space) as written with race is demonstrated by the importance of segregation practices to all racist regimes, so that in the final instance different people's relationships to space become the *natural* proof of their racial differences as well as their stratified social privileges (Kaufulu, 2023).

Thus, decolonization as praxis is precisely about the ways in which communities that experience space occupation contest both the frontiers of, and the regularizations engendered within, spaces in ways that are bottom-up and communally directed at the spatial formalisms best identified by the contesting communities (or inscribed bodies) themselves (Fatima et. al., 2017; Gleeson, O'Rourke & Rosenberg, 2021; Mohanty, 2003). Subsequently, the role of the ally or accomplice in decolonization is to stand in solidarity with those communally identified contestations leveraging their relative privilege within those spaces.

By understanding our own communication centers as micro-geographies, we are therefore paying attention to the ways in which communication centers are made up of sets of formalisms (practices and cultures) which make both communication and communication centers designated spaces whose prevailing characteristics could be exclusionary or sustaining of race, gender and sexuality, dis/abilities, indigeneity, neurodiversity and *non-traditional* languaging practices. Indeed, we see *translanguaging* as paradigmatic in the work we do in the communication center as it understands English as a "heterogenous, bustling, complicated, shifting, fluid mix of languages, dialects, and creoles" rather than a fixed resource (Horner, NeCamp & Donahue, 2011, p. 288). In other words, we strive in the center to disrupt assumptions about standard white English—and standard white embodiment in Public Speaking—and instead allow space for language practices that promote open-ended growth,

identity formation, self-reflexivity, and community building (Canagarajah, 2013; Canagarajah, 2022; Stengrim, 2019).

Under our framework of micro-geography, diversity, inclusivity and equity are therefore not simply professed as values but are comprised in the practices and cultures which emerge out of the contestations by users who, in numerous ways, transgress or subvert the procedures for traversing the outside-inside boundaries and the internal practices which constitute the inside, of communication centers. The interface for such transgressions or subversions are bodies because it is through the marking and classification of bodies that occupying spaces establish and expound the practices and cultures – values in actual, day to day practices and how they reproduce themselves systemically – of inclusion and exclusion both on the boundaries and within the space itself. This means diversity, equity, and inclusivity – more than professed values – demand recognition and proactive support for transgressive and subversive bodies as they challenge the formalisms that differentially mark or classify them be it through racialization, genderism, sexism, ableism, nativism (in relation to indigeneity) and by insisting on normative languaging practices.

Finally, this also means diversity, equity, and inclusivity in practice demands a commitment to deconstruct (or indeed decolonize) communication centers themselves as contrived spaces to enable, from the bottom up or below, emergent and unforeseen practices to reconfigure, rearrange and reorganize the space itself. Diversity, equity, and inclusivity – in micro-geographical terms – does not prescribe what an inclusive communication center should be – rather, it surrenders the question of how to define inclusivity and the continuously evolving shape that it takes to the various bodies themselves – within contexts of community – as they identify and contest extant communication center formalisms towards newer paradigms of communication center practices or pedagogies (Freire, 1970). A micro-geographical approach to inclusivity, attuned to questions around how bodies use, move, and perhaps transgress expectations about the space itself, allows for deep engagement around what it means to occupy/disrupt identities and subject positions.

Below, we demonstrate the affordances presented by micro-geographies in a few concrete instances. First, we present a few examples of how reconfiguring the communication center space, in response to how different bodies have contested it, has facilitated new practices and

cultures within our center giving substance to the crucial DEI areas of mental health, gender, sexuality, and race. Second, we consider how the experience of international graduate students teaching speaking-oriented communication foundational courses lays bare several absurdities around what such classes are intended to teach. Third, we think about how the communication center in its adjacency to traditional speaking-oriented curricula might, through training, conversation, questioning, and bottom-up practices, serve to undermine or begin to decolonize the formalisms upholding standard white English, and standard white/heteronormative embodiment, as the common standard.

Values in Practice

We have described in the sections above a problem or a complexity of problems, related to our center's ongoing commitment to evolving pedagogies that respond both to the diversity of the speakers who use our center and to the growth and self-development of the peer-consultants who work in the center. We suggest a theory of micro-geography that begins to provide a vocabulary and lens by which to view and describe how our efforts as administrators to support a genuine culture of equity and inclusion manifest organically and from below, rather than as top-down directives or sets of rules/policies that, though well-intentioned, might stifle the potential of the center. In short, we like to be a bit subversive.

Our communication center serves a Southeastern (US) R1 university campus through approximately 1,200 individual one-to-one in-person and online appointments annually, along with 2,000 unique contacts through class and faculty workshops and other initiatives. It is staffed by a faculty director, two 20 hour/week graduate students, and 12-15 undergraduate student peer-consultants. Consultants are trained in a 1-hour, 8-week course on Peer-to-Peer Teaching and Learning, as well as ongoing training and staff development. While our center is not exempt from traditional (American academic) institutional measures of *success* such as appointment numbers, satisfaction surveys, budgetary concerns, and formal staff training to which we must pay at least lip service, we are more interested in critical and sustained pedagogies informed by postcolonial discourses that shape our everyday uses of the space of the center. In questioning and resisting managerial imperatives by allowing the space to be one of conversation, contestation, and disruption, we make room for a greater range of voices and reflexive practices.

We offer our observations and experiences not as *best practices* or deficiencies to be overcome, but as reflections on how we are challenging exclusionary practices and allowing for a living, evolving pedagogical approach that is continually reorganizing and reconfiguring itself. Specifically, we turn below to the physical spaces of the center and practices among the staff and the speakers who use the center, as well as to the center's unique institutional positionality adjacent to curricular mandates and pedagogical expectations around speaking-oriented courses.

Attention to Space

In opening the center's physical space back up after being fully online during the COVID-19 emergency, we understood that many people were suffering from the effects of isolation and trauma, and that mental health struggles were increasingly common among college students (Hartocollis, 2021). The COVID-19 emergency had forced a break in the taken-for-granted routine practices of the center, such that our *reopening* of the physical space of the center laid bare some of the arbitrariness of its inherent practices. We began to get bored with and question our old rhythms, such as a vacuuming schedule or how the tables should be arranged a certain way, and the formalities and protocols around things like scheduling and email communication. Realizing that what our staff and speakers really needed foremost was a sense of belonging and avenues to process myriad shared and personal traumas, we decided to hire a student artist on our hourly payroll to paint a large mural along the wall of our classroom space, and we replaced standard fare industrial art in our common space with a large whiteboard. We did not prescribe specific outcomes for these changes to the space, but organically some *praxes* and ways of interacting and using the space began to emerge among staff members. Each day we would peek in on the mural's latest progress, and we started using the whiteboard to doodle, draw, and informally communicate as a staff. The mural remains a conversation piece and introduction to the center for the classes and groups who use the space, and the whiteboard fosters community through weekly polls, pictures, and stories. During exam periods, the boards are filled with notes and diagrams from different disciplines and years of study as they have become spaces for preparations and study. Staff members might not see each other on a given day, but they see daily traces of each other in the center. The mural welcomes and encourages diverse perspectives by vividly depicting an array of historical figures from across the globe such as Malala Yousafzai, Nelson Mandela, Helen Keller, and Harvey Milk; it also opens dialogues

about what it means to celebrate and memorialize human complexity, and questions what it means to be a *good speaker*.

After COVID, we also dedicated one of our small private practice spaces to mental health. While some call it the panic room and others the relaxation room, it is decorated with a floor lamp, a bean bag chair, cushions, blankets, puzzles, and games. Anyone can use it to study, take a nap, have a cry, watch a movie, or try their hand at the original Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) version of *Super Mario Bros*.

Other changes to the center have included changing the configuration of our classroom and front desk area to reflect our values of collaboration and egalitarianism; we have arranged the tables such that users are not in rows facing the front of the room but encouraged to engage one another in small groups and move around the room. In arranging the classroom this way, we are facilitating the disruption of traditional hierarchies of power that center privileged bodies and practices as default focal points. In the mural and throughout the center, there are nods to the LGBTQIA2S+ community, BIPOC, international students, people with disabilities, and an array of languaging practices and processes that challenge us to deepen and develop our understanding of culture and communication, some of which intersect with our institution's policies geared towards diversity and inclusivity. However, subsequent changes to the microgeography of the communication center emerged organically and *from below*, not as normative or formal DEI efforts but as a challenge to colonial logics around what such spaces *should* look like and how they should be used.

Attending to space in this way also brings additional awareness of the cultural and communicative interconnections between the speaking center and teaching and learning practices within classrooms, particularly in the speaking-oriented courses whose students use our center most frequently. We have become aware of intersecting cultural-communicative problematics in two main ways: one, the role of our speaking center in our interactions with speakers enrolled in various speaking oriented courses; and two, the relative positions of *non-traditional* bodies in relation to the enforcement of traditional public speaking norms which persist in speaking-oriented courses. In addition to the changes to the space noted above, we thus have a few further examples to illustrate the layered nature of these problematics as we pursue an anti-colonial approach to languaging practices and critical pedagogy.

Attention to Practice

Many speaking-oriented classes at our institution are taught by international students, implementing syllabi with emphasis on the traditional classifications of speeches (self-introductory, special occasion, informative and persuasive). These traditional classifications are further implemented by emphasizing the normative meta-theory of supposed proper speech whose genres are broadly within the expected vocal performances of speaking (such as voice projection, pronunciation, audibility and so on), and the mechanical ones (such as organization, credibility, transitioning, supporting evidence, styles of argumentation, and others). The speaking tradition briefly described entails languaging practices and cultures that are not only US-centric but White, male, and class-centric as well, with overt ableist and cis-genderist traces. Moreover, international students—quite aside from the other languages they might also speak—bring with them different English languaging practices as well. The first absurdity of such a context in which a normative template for supposed proper speaking is either implemented or enforced in a classroom (with all the associated tools for enforcement such as assessments, feedback and grading) is when the person and body deployed for its enforcement are themselves a compelling demonstration of the existence and flourishing plurality of English languaging practices that navigate colonial histories.

The second absurdity is on the receiving end of this enforcement, involving an increasingly diverse population of undergraduate students both in terms of language background and in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, dis/ability status, and socio-economic class, as well as in terms of being more open-minded and outspoken about issues of diversity and inclusion. We end up with a context in which the very communities, both international and local, excluded from the normative speaking practices are *included* by way of diversity-appearing pedagogical practices and institutional mandates that require or suggest that simply including more diverse people and bodies in classrooms and in the front of classrooms inherently transforms the pedagogies used in those classrooms. However, superficial and top-down managerial efforts and assumptions do nothing to rectify the forms of exclusion (racism, ableism, misogyny, heteronormativity, etc.) which undergird such pedagogical practices. This is what we mean by micro-geography as a bottom-up inquiry that interrogates colonialist pedagogy, interweaving the politics of space, the ascription of bodies and the routinization of practices to sustain exclusion despite—to adapt a Fanion term—the apparent diversity by masks (Fanon, 2008).

Untransformed pedagogies facilitate the creation and continuation of communication hierarchies. This is because enforcement, especially when deployed through diversity masks which both gate-keep and sustain exclusionary practices, always suggests a template of speaking and communication against which all bodies should be measured. In other words, untransformed pedagogies institutionally *enforced* by international students despite their own languaging practices are not an argument for the universality of teaching and other professional competence as top-down diversity would suggest, but rather a colonialist expectation that views all *other* languaging practices as less important. It also espouses a pernicious vision of diversity as an ongoing process of assimilating *the others*.

In our center, both undergraduate peer-consultants and students have expressed anxieties not in relation specifically to the different language practices of English per se, but in relation to the enforcement through assignments and grading of a standard of speech and communication which belongs neither to the international student teaching the class, nor to the undergraduate student taking it. The most prominent expression associated with this discrepancy between enforced speaking norms amidst sidelined pluralistic English languaging practices has been, *I do not understand what my instructor expects of me*.

On the surface, such a comment invites introspection, such as what is meant by expectations, whose expectations they are, as well as what being intelligible or understandable means with respect to persons and bodies in racializing, gendering, ableist and other spaces. On a deeper level, however, the same comment also reveals a profound dynamic at the heart of the scenario: that despite students and instructors becoming enjoined in an awareness of some ethereal, seemingly arbitrary set of stated and unstated expectations and assumptions about *good speech*, both parties are aware of the ways in which the *thing* they are supposed enforce or perform (white male and classed English languaging practices) is exclusionary of them. In other words, despite the surface-level diversification of bodies, the exclusionary practices of untransformed pedagogy are plain and obvious to both teachers and students.

We are arguing that bodies come with traditions and practices which contest institutionally designed spaces, and that anti-colonial minded diversity is about bodies unpartitioned and unsevered from their pedagogies. Integral to colonialism and coloniality are the vast transformations of place into the particularities of space, out of which flow the array of

classifications of bodies which differentiate them in relation to each other, and relative to the configuration of privilege of said space.

Conclusion

As communication center practitioners, we can take deliberate positions in our work with speakers enrolled in speaking-oriented courses by facilitating conversations that raise awareness of these issues among our staff, appreciating our centers' adjacency to curricular mandates in speaking-oriented courses and the pedagogical practices therein, as well as through the elsewhere described practices which emphasize diversity from below at the nexus of bodies and spaces. Reconfiguring the communication center spaces, in response to how different bodies and subjectivities have experienced and sometimes contested them, has facilitated new practices and cultures within our own center, giving substance to the crucial DEI work in which we are deeply engaged. By encouraging continuous introspection, self-reflection, and creative engagement with the space, our staff members and the speakers with whom they consult develop a unique repertoire that serves them in traversing boundaries and encountering geographies far beyond those of our humble center.

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