



## Changing the Subject: Building Critical and Compassionate Communities in English and English Education Classrooms

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### *Introduction: Semicolons and Mockingbirds*

Awakened at midnight by the teacher phone chain, I stumble, half-conscious, into the kitchen. A voice informs me that we'll be having an emergency faculty meeting at 6:30 a.m. and then says something I don't understand but awaken instantly upon hearing. I say I don't understand; my colleague repeats, more softly now, that one of our students killed his parents yesterday. It's all over the news, he sadly explains. Numb, I call the next person on the chain, leave the kitchen, and turn on the television. I place my hand over my gaping mouth as his smiling school picture flashes up on the screen. He was one of my 10th graders last year, in my fourth-period college prep English class. I search my memory, frantic to remember what he wrote about, what he said, how he acted. I come up (full and yet) empty: he seemed average, polite, quiet, always sporting a charming, shy grin and bashfully averting his eyes. He had perfect attendance and terrible handwriting; I remember suspecting a learning disability. What had I missed? What had we all missed? God, what had I missed?

*COUPLE FOUND SLAIN IN L. MACUNGIE HOME  
Friday, March 3, 1995*

*A Lower Macungie Township couple were fatally shot in their East Texas Road home yesterday.*

*The bodies of George Howorth, 46, and his wife Susan, 48, of 4524 East Texas Road were discovered in their home late yesterday afternoon by their 20-year-old son Stephen, according to state police at Fogelsville.*

*At a midnight press conference in the Lower Macungie Township Municipal Building, police said they were searching for the couple's 16-year-old son, Jeffrey Leigh, and the family's car, a 1993 red Chevy Lumina. The license number on the vehicle is 527-56B.*

*Jeffrey was described as 6-feet tall, 140 pounds, with short dark brown hair.*

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*The teen-ager might have been wearing blue jeans and a jacket with Emmaus Swimming written across the back and his name printed on the front.*

*Capt. Robert Werts, Commander of Troop "M" of state police said they "are going on the basis that he his armed."*

*Stephen, a Penn State University student who is doing an internship at a local oil company, came home from work and found his mother, who had been shot multiple times, lying on the dining room floor. George Howorth's body was found in the kitchen. (Todd, Jackson, & Logan, 1995, A1)*

The Friday morning paper confirms my sleepless fear; this was not a dream. I arrive in the choir room for the faculty meeting, nauseous after passing grave, armed police officers at the school entrance. Believing that Jeff might return to school, his classmates and I somehow muddle our way to the weekend. The next day, Jeff was apprehended several states away; his car had run out of gas on I-70 in Missouri, and more details about the murders surfaced.

*I told you I would do it Steve; you can't say I didn't warn you (Franklin, 1995, p. A3).*

Jeff had scrawled this sentence, among others, in that miserable handwriting of his onto a piece of paper he had left on the desk in his bedroom. As I read the sentence in the newspaper, I was struck by the semicolon. I had taught him how to use that mark of punctuation just the year before, around the same time that he was reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it has come to symbolize the host of questions that have plagued me ever since: What did I actually teach Jeff? What, in fact, did he learn if he could pass quizzes on the book's characterization and narrative techniques and use semicolons correctly (even during murderous rage) but somehow never internalized Harper Lee's message of respect?<sup>1</sup>

How, exactly, did I want my students to change as a result of having been in my classroom? How can secondary English teachers help prevent violence? How can we imagine a teacher preparation that would sensitize prospective teachers to our students' holistic needs?

In my first years of teaching, I had relished control and order: I was the kind of teacher who planned out the academic year, then the four marking periods, then each month, each week, each day. I wanted my students to experience academic rigor, gain skills, and have fun while doing it. But my tidy system of fulfilling curricular objectives in literature, vocabulary, grammar, and composition seemed empty, meaningless, after March 3, 1995. While I periodically invited my students to integrate their "personal" lives with their "academic" lives (I was progressive enough at the time to have them, for example, explicate a favorite song as poetry), they and I both knew that I emphasized the "academic." Primarily, I wanted to "prepare them for college." How empty that seemed now, too. I privileged their academic selves and somehow viewed their personal lives as potential academic interference. I was doing what my own teachers had done to me, what many teachers across America do in their classrooms every day, but I came to understand – from those first difficult days through the ten years since – that I would never be able to teach, would never *want* to teach, the same way again. I knew, for example, that I would never think about *To Kill a Mockingbird* again without letting my grief for Mr. and Mrs. Howorth, Jeff, the Columbine victims, and the many unfortunate others like them, propel me to engage my students' whole

selves in meaning-making. In fact, I've come to believe that as educators, we cannot *stop* at meaning-making, and that we do our students a disservice if we *do* stop there. In the past ten years, which I have spent teaching in urban and suburban secondary and post-secondary schools, I've come to believe that this need is present in *all* of our schools, regardless of level, regardless of location. Although my encounter with Jeff Howorth occurred in a public, suburban school, the intended primary audience for this paper is the body of English educators – secondary and post-secondary; new and experienced; rural, suburban, and urban. This paper is a conceptual practitioner inquiry: it is a conceptual paper that grew out of – and represents a decade-long exploration that followed – a moment of profound disconnect in my pedagogical practice.

In this article, I argue that, wherever possible, English teachers should not consider English or English education curriculum as an end in itself but rather a *means* to an end – the building of a critical and compassionate community both within and beyond the classroom. Building such a community involves a re-imagining of the teaching of English, as well as the preparation of future English teachers, as the creation of opportunities to engage in literacy practices that, through the performance of both skills and dispositions that involve wrestling with issues of difference, foster a critical, compassionate way of being in the world. In this article, I advocate for a two-layered approach toward fostering a more holistic, humane English education for American youth. In the first section of the article, I discuss how English education, traditionally conceived, might contribute to youth violence. In the second portion, I describe the ways in which both secondary English classes and post-secondary classes for prospective English teachers can be conceptualized and taught in order to cultivate critical and compassionate communities both within and, ultimately, beyond schools.

*As citizens [responding to youth violence], you and I might believe the most urgent task is to make it harder for young people to get hold of guns. But as people who are professionally involved with the schools, we might also want to cast a critical eye on how students are being educated. (Kohn, 1999)*

*Indeed some of us did not die. Some of you, some of us remain, despite that hatred that violence that murder that suicide that affront to our notions of civilized days and nights. And what shall we do, we who did not die?...I do believe we cannot even aspire towards safety without respectful reckoning with completely different, religious, world views, embraced by most of humanity. This will take study, and time. (Jordan, 2002, p. 13)*

### **A Framework of Chasms and Contact Zones**

By most accounts, it was academic failure that propelled high school junior Jeff Howorth toward parricide: apparently, he had failed a test in one of his classes and had recently received a low SAT score on or shortly before that terrible day in March, 1995 (e.g., Ramsland & Dashner, 2005).<sup>2</sup> While clearly – thankfully – Jeff's way of dealing with his academic frustrations was extreme and atypical, it serves as a powerful reminder of the rage that sometimes accompanies schooling during adolescence. Adolescents too often experience schools as places in which they are powerless, even victimized, feeling trapped and lacking opportunities to make significant decisions in their lives. Though our schools may not intentionally create such experiences for our students, it seems incumbent upon all of us in the field of education to work actively against them wherever possible, creating alternative experiences in which students feel known and valued as individuals and are positioned as decision-makers – that is, as actors rather than as acted-upon (Freire, 1970/2000).

*Chasms* It may be in the personal chasms, not only between students/ academic and

personal selves (their “in-school” and “out-of-school” selves) but also between students and subject matter that the roots of violence can be found. The first chasm, *within* students, is not directly observable, but, like the wind, its presence can be verified by looking at its effects. English teachers, for example, are sometimes frustrated by their students’ “lack of “voice” or “personal style” and bemoan vapid compositions – or by students who have difficulty thinking independently because they are accustomed merely to following directions. In the most famous chapter of *Telling Writing* entitled “The Poison Fish,” Ken Macrorie (1985) coins the term *Engfish*, which he uses to refer to the “phony, pretentious language of the schools” that students believe teachers expect from them. His first sample of a student’s use of Engfish provides a humorous yet realistic example of the way academic-sounding language eclipses student voice:

I went downtown today for the first time. When I got there I was completely astonished by the hustle and bustle that was going on. My first impression of the downtown area was quite impressive.

Macrorie’s Engfish demonstrates that, even in their writing, youth sometimes seem to hold subject matter at arm’s length, filters of real or imagined ‘academic’ expectations firmly between them. There appears to be a profound mental distance that students often need to travel before they can engage meaningfully with and be transformed by both texts and by other human beings in school.

A second chasm, the chasm between youths’ in-school and out-of-school selves, is, I think, intertwined with the chasm between youths and school subject matter. The disconnect with subject matter results from not only the organization of schooling but also the expectations of schooling. Teachers and students in most public schools must contend with what Sizer (1999) calls

anonymity...the curse of the overloaded, overspecialized, overcomplicated American comprehensive high school...[where any] warmth does not arise from careful knowing. The specialness of each adolescent is denied – unless that adolescent is “special” for some specified reason. The “unspecial majority” (as the authors of *The Shopping Mall High School* aptly put it) drifts through school genially – until there is a crisis.

The “‘culture’ of obedience” (Soelle, 1984, as cited in O’Reilley, 1993, p. 59) in our schools unquestionably enables this anonymity and fuels passivity among students. Darling-Hammond (1997) believes that “many well-known adolescent difficulties are not intrinsic to the teenage years but are related to the mismatch between adolescents’ developmental needs and the kinds of experiences most junior high and high schools provide” (as cited in Kohn, 1999). A system of language arts education that emphasizes fixed bodies of academic knowledge over a multiplicity of personal interests and voices, as I did in 1995 and before, asks students to master “academic discourse” in part by checking their use of “I” at the door – and often, with the “I,” their unique voices, styles. and, ultimately, senses of agency as writers (O’Reilley, 1993).

I shudder to recognize my former teaching self in Sizer’s depiction of the superficiality that often characterizes teacher-student relationships in secondary schools, yet I am heartened by his refusal to name teachers as the only cause of such superficiality and his argument for systemic changes that would enable deeper knowing (both of people and of subject matter) and greater community-building. bell hooks’ (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy provides one way of imagining an alternative to the curse of anonymity; she believes that as educators

our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual

and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 13)

The deep engagement in the classroom that hooks imagines is an intentional response to the intra- and interpersonal chasms so evident in schools; in an interesting reversal, she situates this engagement as a “necessary condition” for learning rather than the other way around. Below, I discuss how engaged pedagogy can inform the work of English and English education classrooms.

**Contact Zones** In addition to the chasms described above, youths’ school lives are also characterized by friction that results from the various social groups and ideologies present in and around schools. American high schools are characterized by diversity: students and teachers from different value systems, social classes, genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, personalities come together under one roof, and friction is inevitable. Mary Louise Pratt’s term “the contact zone” (1991) serves well to illustrate this convergence; she uses it

to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (p. 34)

Though Pratt’s design of the term is related to an examination of a text written by a 17th-century Peruvian man and bearing an intriguing Spanish colonialist imprint, it provides useful and equally intriguing applications to modern English and English education classrooms, in which a much more subversive colonialism is often attempted, at times by teachers and at times by students. American schooling systems often evidence contact zones, for example, when Black youth are required to attend predominately White schools, when students’ home language is not recognized in schools, or when schools in communities of poverty are persistently under-resourced. Within our schools, as Lensmire (2000) demonstrates, the term “friendship groups” is often euphemistic in the reality of the diverse classroom: students form social groups just as their adult counterparts do, and these groups serve an exclusive, rather than inclusive, focus. “Hierarchies of influence and assumed value,” he reminds us, “usually accompany separation” (2000, p. 94). As members of separate social groups, students continually find themselves inside constantly shifting and multiple contact zones, where they may alternatively experience colonizing and being colonized, being powerful and being powerless. Although too many Americans are quick to label only the “powerless” students, those with “thwarted ambition” (Shuman, 1995), as violent or potentially violent, it is imperative that we reject this stereotypical, dualistic thinking and instead acknowledge that the “seeds of terror” (Staples, 2005) reside in all people, that “the trenches” are “dug *within our hearts*” (U2, 1983; italics added).

Conflict between groups is the primary characteristic of contact zones, and such conflict occurs in our schools constantly. One way of identifying these moments of friction is to look for what Dixon (1998) terms “outbursts,” which occur when

latent conflicts among faculty and among students, between students and faculty, or within individuals bubble to the surface [in...] a response to a conflict that expresses a person’s orientation to that conflict and to the social and political conditions that underlie it. (xi)

While the stories told in Dixon’s edited volume demonstrate the wide range of outbursts

possible – from outbursts of silence to outbursts of insensitive laughter during a keynote speech –, her message is clear: outbursts are a natural byproduct of social interaction, and while some outbursts generate productive, even liberatory, dialogue, others, clearly, are harmful and can serve to silence others. In English and English Education classrooms, the potential for both productive and destructive outbursts is high, given the emphasis on literacy practices grounded in social interactions. When outbursts inevitably occur, the importance of the teacher's response cannot be overstated. In the moments after an outburst, an English teacher, for example, might focus primarily on behavior and discipline (emphasizing rules and conduct), on a return to the subject matter (emphasizing academics), or on the outburst itself (emphasizing in-the-moment social realities). In their work on middle school students' talk about race, Schultz, Buck, and Niesz (2000) advocate compellingly for the latter, arguing that

In order to educate children to participate in a democratic and pluralistic culture, we need to engage students and the adults who teach them in deep, and sometimes painful and conflictual, conversations about their daily school lives....This kind of engagement and conversation is at the core of democratic education. (p. 34)

The willingness of teachers to have these difficult conversations is, it seems, at least partially dependent upon both the awareness of the in-the-moment "social and political conditions" (Dixon, 1998, p. xi) that contribute to classroom outbursts and the belief that having such conversations and engaging in other ways to "mine difference" through literacy practices for educative purposes (S. Lytle, personal communication, 2001) are in fact an important aspects of our work as English educators. hooks (2003) reminds us that these educative purposes should include the fostering of pluralism, which she defines as

a response to the fact of diversity. In pluralism, we commit to engage with the other person or the other community. Pluralism is a commitment to communicate with and relate to the larger world – with a very different neighbor, or a distant community.... [T]he democratic educator works to create closeness [in...f]orging a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, splitting. (pp. 47 & 49)

Palmer (2001) refers to this stance as "the intimacy that does not annihilate difference... [w]hich is exactly the opposite of doing violence." Fecho (1998), for example, provides a compelling classroom narrative in which he responds, in a way that fosters pluralism and intimacy, to a student outburst – "Latonya...blurted, '[Nikki Giovanni] making fun of the way Black people talk'" (p. 75) – by leading himself and his students toward "an increased understanding of our mutual and multiple perspectives about language" (p. 76). Teachers who engage in this work have broadened the scope of the kinds of "texts" that can be examined in English classes to include the social "texts" present in classroom life. In his work, Gee (1996) refers to these texts as discourses – "stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, [and...] arguments" – and Discourses – "ways of being in the world...which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (p. 127). Working together with students to engage in critically reading the d/Discourses of the classroom, with an eye toward community-building both within and beyond the classroom, does much to close the "chasms" mentioned above by explicitly addressing contact zones. This expanded scope of literacy practices and goals for language arts classrooms opens up possibilities for the kinds of "deep" learning and knowing referenced by hooks (1994) and Schultz, Buck, and Niesz (2000).

It is essential, however, for this kind of critical reading in English and English education

classrooms to be accompanied by an emphasis on what it means to treat others with compassion. In fact, though perhaps counter-intuitive, the acknowledgement of and critical inquiry into classroom contact zones is a powerful way to build a compassionate community. Conceptualizing compassion, or empathy, as a literacy practice can provide a powerful way to engage with the language arts; doing so involves looking beyond the traditional definition of literacy as "being able to read and write" to include social processes undertaken to achieve particular social purposes (Gee, 1996; Street, 1994). One of the main lessons in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is to regard people different from you with empathy: "If you can learn a simple trick...you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1977, p. 34). Interestingly, as Stanford (1995) notes, psychological studies have found "gang-involved and delinquent youth" to "function at immature levels on Kohlberg's moral judgment scale, reflect the egocentric bias typical of younger children, demonstrate low levels of empathy, and use...externalized attributions of blame and euphemisms to disguise the seriousness of their crimes" (Cobb, 1993, as cited in Stanford, 1995, p. 38). It is necessary for English and English education teachers to integrate empathy-building into their curricula as a response to the fact of diversity in our classrooms.

### ***Transforming the creators, contents, and purposes of English and English Education curriculum***

For our middle and high school English classrooms to respond to the chasms and contact zones in our students' lives, I argue that both secondary English classes and post-secondary classes for prospective English teachers must be re-imagined as spaces in which to cultivate critical and compassionate communities within and beyond schools. Below, I describe this re-vision of English and English education as consisting of three primary strategies: revising our understanding of (1) the *creators* of our curriculum, (2) the *content* of our curriculum, and (3) the *purposes* of our curriculum. In this two-level approach, I take up Rose's (1989) diagnosis that "More often than we admit, a failed education is social more than intellectual in origin" (p. 225) and hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, described above; I emphasize the social nature of literacy teaching and learning because I have found this dimension of teaching to be largely under-emphasized in middle school, high school, and college/university settings, particularly in the current standards-based era that focuses almost exclusively on content knowledge while paying little attention to the important sociological functions of schools. In choosing this focus, I endeavor to inspire and challenge English teachers and their university counterparts to create courses of study that invite "compassion as a mode of critical inquiry," which O'Reilly (1993) describes as "examin[ing] our subject matter... through a glass of tenderness as well as...reason" (p. 82).

Part of what makes the idea of "compassion as a mode of critical inquiry" so challenging in English classrooms is actually their long-standing association with the practices of "critical reading and writing." In English courses, the term "critical" often implies "criticizing" in the sense of "finding fault" and is very much a part of the discourse of *literary theory*, whose lineage can be found in Aristotle (350 BC) and Addison (1712). This definition of "critical," though, is at odds with the way the definition of "critical" that is central to *social theory*. In social theory, the term "critical" is rooted in an understanding of the social world as characterized by unequal power relations and a dominant culture and ideology that oppresses and silences many individuals. English educators' practices associated with literary critique range from teachers writing dissatisfied remarks with red pen in students' margins to students, teachers, and professors who associate writing "critical" academic papers with taking a tone of disapproval. These practices can be imagined as indicators of the presence of violence and even the rewarding of violence – the emphasis on tearing down rather than building

up – in the field of English. In this field, then, the need for building, particularly as described below by Havel (1992), becomes even more important:

We must try harder to understand than to explain. The way forward is not in the mere construction of universal systemic solutions, to be applied to reality from the outside; it is also in seeking to get to the heart of reality through personal experience. Such an approach promotes an atmosphere of tolerant solidarity and unity in diversity based on mutual respect, genuine pluralism and parallelism. In a word, human uniqueness, human action and the human spirit must be rehabilitated.

Critical theorists, in fact, argue that “the basis for thought and action should be *grounded* [my italics]...‘in compassion, [and] in our sense of the sufferings of others’” (Habermas, as cited in Giroux, 1983, p. 9). In the paragraphs below, I describe three aspects of imagining English and English education curricula that engender not only critical but compassionate communities before and after graduation. In doing so, I argue that English curricula that centers upon the literary notion of critique alone does not provide the kinds of learning experiences that our students need to wrestle productively with issues of difference and to foster a critical, compassionate approach to being in the world; however, a re-imagining of literary critique *in the service of* social critique – that is, addressing and responding to social inequities and oppression – has the potential to create highly relevant and productive learning communities.

***The Creators of English and English Education Curriculum*** Understanding *both* students and teachers of English as potential resources for and directors of curriculum is essential for creating critical, compassionate communities that look at the relationship between the world and the word (Freire, 1983). Involving students in setting the agenda for their English and English education classes helps diminish the likelihood that students will experience these classes as yet another thing *done to* them. Instead, our classrooms can become places in which students and teachers gain practice in collaboration across personal differences and in responding to and contributing productively to the world around them. In this kind of classroom, students and teachers are understood to be active agents in their world, and their capacity for making decisions is valued; therefore, numerous opportunities are provided for them to make choices about their schoolwork, and to do authentic literacy work that they deem relevant. Teachers and students who enact their agency are engaged in the work of being *subjects*, people who act, rather than *objects*, people who are acted upon (Freire, 1970/2000).

Amid considerations of lesson planning, the implementation of standards, the selection of texts, and the evaluation of student writing, for example, instructors of English and English methods classes often have little opportunity to consider the deeply personal and gravely important philosophical questions that must be asked about one’s reasons for teaching. As I mentioned earlier, too many years had passed before I asked myself how, exactly, I wanted my students to change as a result of having been in my classroom and to push myself to think beyond the perception that the primary purpose of teaching is to prepare students academically for college. At both the secondary and post-secondary levels, there is a need for explicit talk about the range of purposes of teaching English (e.g., teaching English to promote non-violence or social justice) and how to make pedagogical decisions that advance such purposes. It is especially important for instructors of pre-service English teachers to make new teachers aware of their pedagogical agency, to emphasize the potential they possess to actively create curriculum that advances their personal philosophical goals.

To strengthen their students’ self-efficacy, teachers of both secondary English students



and pre-service teachers should incorporate a great deal of student choice in their curriculum and provide authentic opportunities for students to set their own socially-conscious goals that evidence a critical, compassionate orientation toward difference.<sup>3</sup> Whenever possible, English and English education faculty should present their students with choices, for example, about which texts to read, which pieces of writing to revise, which topic to research, even how to conduct class activities. Such invitations are the foundation for community-building in the classroom. For example, middle or high school English teachers can ask students not only to write a persuasion or personal letter but also to require the writers to demonstrate compassion or empathy – “step[ping] into the shoes” of someone with whom they disagree strongly – in their text; I wish, for example, that I had asked Jeff Howorth to compose such a letter. These kinds of literacy practices can help students see that they are not alone, imagine solutions, and perhaps most compellingly, provide opportunities for them to identify something they care about and work toward change in that area, giving them an increased sense of self-efficacy in their lives. Moreover, instructors could involve the students in determining how to identify and assess compassion or empathy when they see it in both life and literature; role-playing moments of compassion and lack of compassion in life and literature can be a particularly powerful way of initiating these conversations. Such assignments recall Freire’s (1983) understanding that “reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world” (p. 5). Another example of an assignment that both connects the reading of world with the word and strengthens teacher agency is to ask student-teachers to identify a particular aspect of their own teaching practice and to conduct research on it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Regarding all members of our classes as participants in a shared community fosters a sense of belonging, creates personal investment in the work of the class, and, more broadly, prefigures the kind of democratic society that many Americans find innately appealing and desire to strengthen.

***The Content of English and English Education Curriculum*** Supplementing traditional and scholarly literary texts with textual artifacts of the complex social world in which we live, can facilitate the work of the shared community described above by providing real-world subject matter at which to look through “glass[es] of reason *and* tenderness.” Sources for such authentic texts are limitless and can concern events in students’ diverse lives, communities, and countries; events in areas unfamiliar to those in the classroom community; and events the members of the classroom community share in common. Lensmire’s (2000) approach, for example, is to solicit “student-authored stories that direct students to cross boundary lines that divide them from other people, stories that imagine others as possible sources of learning, meaning, value, friendship, and love” (p. 110). Creating opportunities for teachers and students to be a part of a community, a community in which all teach and learn from one another (Freire, 1970/2000) helps increase the probability that participants will be a part of – and perhaps create – such communities in the future, a worthy goal. It is important to understand, though, that the supplementing and the expanding of English curriculum may not necessarily mean adding to it in a conventional sense. Alternatively, Bizzell (1997) encourages, we can re-conceptualize English and English education curriculum through the lenses of compassion and critique, not try to cram more subject matter into our already-crammed old curricula. Bizzell’s demonstration of the kind of thinking necessary for re-conceptualization of curriculum is instructive:

Instead of asking ourselves, for example, “How can I fit Frederick Douglass into my American Renaissance course?” we need to ask, “How should I reconceive my study of literature and composition now that I regard Douglass as an important writer?” (1997, p. 736)

Expanding the range of the texts used in English and English education classes to include real-world texts that are not “literature” (and it is productive for students and teachers to in conversation about what constitutes “literature”) allows students and teachers to engage in the mining of difference for educative purposes described above. For Stock (1995), this kind of expansive approach is inherently transformative; she writes in *The Dialogic Curriculum* that “when students name the worlds in which they live[,] they take an important first step toward making and remaking those worlds beneficial for themselves and others” (p. 18).<sup>4</sup>

Because secondary English classrooms are the traditional domains of the study of how human beings express themselves through language, they are fertile grounds in which to plant the seeds of compassion. When we analyze literature in terms of character development, character flaws, plot development, rising and falling action, resolution, the nature of comedy and tragedy, the nature of protagonists and antagonists, we are often talking about the drama around the choices that human beings make – and the consequences of those choices. English teachers often ask their students to explore these subjects through the process of writing, and we grade them on these products. We grade the quality of their writing: their usage of semicolons, perhaps, not the level of their compassion. One can easily see how the “glass of tenderness” and the “sense of the suffering of others” can be eclipsed by the more prominent, more seemingly urgent “glass of reason” that is the glass of standards, the glass of standardized and high-stakes testing, the glass of teacher manuals, of worksheets, of rote memorization. A different kind of learning occurs, however, if we shift our emphasis, for example, in the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* from the identification of the minor characters’ roles in the tragedy to a consideration of the ways in which tragedy can be averted by looking critically, in life and literature, for the seeds of violence. In this example, a teacher might ask the students to locate non-fiction texts (on the web, or in magazines, books, films, or TV shows) in which tragedy is prevented in order to compare the actions of people in real-world “rising action” with those in *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the many different ways such a study could culminate is in the class’s creation of a pamphlet or booklet on violence prevention for display and distribution to peers visiting the guidance office.

O’Reilly (1993) reminds us that “the first step in teaching peace is to examine the ways in which we are already teaching conflict” (p. 31). It is striking to recognize how much of the literature I taught as a high school English teacher – and have since seen in dozens of high school classrooms as a teacher educator – is primarily violent in nature. The presence of violence in the world seems over-represented or over-emphasized in the texts frequently read in secondary English classrooms – Roald Dahl’s short story “Lamb to the Slaughter,” *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lord of the Flies*, to name a few. The frequent appearance of these texts in secondary English reading lists seems to beg the questions of to what extent faculty and students notice and/or address this pattern – and whether these texts have any cumulative effect on faculty and students. Might these texts desensitize youth and adults to violence? Shape our worldviews to include an understanding that violence is an inevitable part of life? Unwittingly perpetuate violent behavior? Promote it? Glorify it? While I agree with Wolfe (1995), who argues compellingly for the inclusion of conflict-based literature in the English classroom because “reflecting rationally upon the nature of human conflict can help students deal in healthier ways with challenges they face in their own lives” (p. 54), I urge English educators to be aware of the patterns of texts used in their schools and to exercise caution (particularly of a critical, compassionate sort) in their choices.

Using the classroom itself as a text, and engaging in a critical study of it, is another area of possibility for English and English education classes. As described earlier,

classrooms are contact zones in which and outbursts are inevitable and desirable. Looking together at the classroom d/Discourses (Gee, 1999) is a pedagogical move that takes advantage of the uniqueness of classroom life. The texts (for example, verbal and non-verbal behavior during a difficult class discussion) are not only accessible to all members of the classroom community but also situate all members as both authors (producers of text) and critics (analysts of text). As Fecho's (1998) work indicates, such work is at once extremely difficult and important. "Invit[ing] multiple perspectives while acknowledging the privileging and silencing that accompany them" is necessary, Schultz, Buck, and Niesz (2000) argue, to understand and engage with one another democratically and "to teach students how to live equitably in a pluralistic society" (pp. 34-35).

The study of classroom textual artifacts is especially important in teacher preparation coursework because, as is true of all teacher preparation experiences, teachers seem much more likely to try approaches to classroom practice that they have experienced as students. The kinds of artifacts that teacher educators and pre-service teachers might study together include course syllabi (particularly the syllabus of the course they're taking at the time), the teacher educator's daily lesson plans and teaching methods, local teacher preparation program texts (such as guidelines, handbooks, and assessment rubrics), curriculum and textbooks used by English teachers, and narratives and research written by practicing English teachers. In addition, of course, are the texts we produce together in our classroom – our verbal and non-verbal behavior, as mentioned above – and representative data of this behavior for us to examine, such as videotape or a written transcript of an uncomfortable class discussion. Looking together at such classroom-based data requires teacher educators to be alert for and willing to inquire into moments of tension that arise during class time (Bieler, 2005); these collaborative inquiries can yield important opportunities to engage in empathic critique with other members of a shared community, while at the same time, such engagements are subject to further empathic critique by additional members of the community.

Toward this end, different kinds of pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of how to teach a particular subject matter (Shulman, 1987), are needed for both secondary English teachers and post-secondary English educators: pre- and in-service teachers must be challenged to discover not only how to teach their students, for example, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with objectives produced through the glass of reason (such as "Students will be able to identify at least five ways in which Harper Lee creates suspense" or "Students will be able to describe the central metaphor of the mockingbird in the novel and explain three examples of characters to which the metaphor applies"), but how to use the novel as a tool to promote the kinds of self-examination about which Durkheim (1920), Giroux (1983), and O'Reilly (1993) have written. Cochran, DeRuiter, and King (1993) offer a distinction between Shulman's *pedagogical content knowledge* and what they termed *pedagogical content knowing* that seems germane to teaching English teachers to use empathic critique in the classroom. While they acknowledge the usefulness of pedagogical content knowledge, Cochran and colleagues argue that the concept borders on the positivistic (since the teacher determines beforehand how she cause particular behavior in her students), while "pedagogical content knowing" grows out of a commitment to the notion of situated, socially constructed knowledge and stresses instead the always-evolutionary nature of classroom life. They define pedagogical content knowing as "a teacher's integrated understanding of four components...[:] pedagogy, subject matter content, student characteristics, and the environmental context of learning" (1993, p. 266).

This turn toward a more postmodern understanding of pedagogical knowledge is highly contextualized and therefore appropriate not only for the complex nature of secondary English studies but also for the purposes of creating a contextualized classroom

community. The experience of student teaching provides student-teachers with authentic opportunities to engage in pedagogical content knowing, and teacher educators who facilitate student teaching seminars can provide opportunities for student-teachers in different contexts to discuss how they can make, or are making, pedagogical decisions that are responsive to the unique classroom communities in which they are teaching. Teacher educators, including classroom- and university-based mentors during student teaching, can support student-teachers' pedagogical content knowing by encouraging adaptability and flexibility in planning lessons, thus engaging with them in a continually reflective and responsive pedagogy. Pedagogical content knowing challenges educators to consider "teaching" as not just "teaching a subject" or "teaching youth," but as a generative interplay between them – so that the subject matter is allowed to change students and their class, and the students are allowed to change the subject. For this kind of work, teachers truly need "consummate skill at both planning *and* going with the flow" (S. Lytle, personal communication).

Although some student-teachers might not, at first, look favorably upon such a postmodern approach to teaching because concreteness often assuages the fear of inexperience, teacher educators would be wise to acknowledge the sense of instability that emphasizing contextuality might induce and explicitly model pedagogical content knowing in the teaching of their courses. Teacher educators might even introduce their students to Cochran, DeRuiter, and King's concept, engaging students in discussing pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge – and what difference these distinctions could make in their own teaching. One of the central components necessary, I think, to modeling this way of knowing is the establishment of a critical, compassionate community in the methods class. This kind of community pivots on the idea that students and teacher learn to agree to disagree, "not because 'everyone has their own opinion' but because justice demands that we recognize the inexhaustibility of difference and...organize the conditions in which we live and work accordingly" (Trimbur, 1997, p. 454). For example, a teacher educator might invite the pre-service teachers to study their own behaviors in class meetings, to be reflexive about the contextually understood social groupings that inevitably form within any class, including methods classes. Similarly, a teacher educator could use a moment of conflict over subject matter that arises in her class as an opportunity to engage one or several of these preparing teachers in hypothetical, immediate, response to dissention among students in the classroom (Bieler, 2005). Teacher educators, then, should be well-equipped to prepare pre-service English teachers for outbursts inside their future contact zone-filled classrooms when they look through a "glass of tenderness" not only at students in the teachers' classrooms but also at the pre-service English teachers themselves. In the same way, future English teachers themselves are most effectively prepared for the classroom when they have learned to look through this "glass" at themselves and their colleagues. Engaging intentionally in pedagogical content knowing is, it seems, a helpful and respectful way to respond to the contact zones that naturally occur in and through literacy practices in social settings like English classrooms. Uncomfortable moments, which usually result from some form of difference, should not and cannot be avoided in English classrooms:

A healthy learning tension occurs in classrooms where teachers and students openly and deeply interrogate texts and film, interrogate each other, and interrogate themselves. Through talking, reading, listening, and viewing [that is, *literacy practices*] – with high degrees of both patience and rigor – students get better with language and more knowledgeable about alternative ways of dealing with conflicts; therefore, they are likely to get better and wiser at handling trouble when it arises in their own lives and relationships....Reflecting rationally upon the nature of human conflict can help students deal in healthier ways with challenges they face in their own

lives. And such considerations can help us, as English teachers, realize a major goal of the literature curriculum: to enrich students' lives and personal growth. (Wolfe, 1995, p. 54)

In both high school English classrooms and in college-level English methods courses, the establishment of an environment of tenderness, mutual respect, self-reflection, and the critical examination and production of texts has become increasingly important – not just to help prevent school violence but to promote justice in and around schools. Perhaps, in secondary English classrooms and in college methods courses, it can soon become commonplace for students to view those who “mock” them or make them feel powerless or voiceless not as causers of self-loathing, pain, and depression – but as Harper Lee’s “mockingbirds,” those who are often victims themselves and in whom they will likely find some beauty if they respectfully step into the contact zone and take the opportunity to engage tenderly both with them – and with themselves. In this kind of generative environment, more of our secondary students and pre-service teachers, we can hope, will leave our classrooms with more than just a tragic, working knowledge of semicolons.

***The Purposes of English and English Education Curriculum*** The words of Audre Lorde (1984), unsurprisingly, (re)present this hope beautifully. Though she writes here specifically of women, her powerful imagery communicates an important goal to which all secondary English students, English teachers, and English teacher educators might aspire:

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized....

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. (pp. 36-37)

It is exciting to imagine what can happen if we take Lorde’s words to heart when planning our lesson plans, units, and curriculum. The idea that “teaching is an art” is not uncommon to encounter, but taking seriously the notion of teaching as creating art, as writing poetry, as realizing our dreams, requires us as teachers to be unabashedly purposive and courageously personal in practicing this art form.

The idea of teaching purposefully (and purpose-fully) is rooted in Freire’s (1970/2000) notion of *praxis*, which he defines as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51) – and which Greene paraphrases as “a kind of knowing that surpasses and transforms, that makes a difference in reality” (as cited in Stock, 1995, p. 18).<sup>5</sup> When we engage in praxis as teachers, we are orienting ourselves with respect to the world in a particular way: we are acknowledging and use our power to make change, rather than using our power to maintain the status quo. Bono (2004), the powerful social activist and lead singer of and primary lyricist for the rock group U2, illustrates this orientation with a compelling image:

I used to think the future was solid or fixed, something you inherited like an old building that you move into when the previous generation moves out or gets chased out. But it's not. The future is not fixed, it's fluid....The world is more malleable than you think.

Similarly, Dewey believed that we are “participant[s] in an unfinished universe rather than...spectator[s] of a finished one” (Garrison, as cited in Lensmire, 2000, p. 84). Engaging in *collaborative* praxis involves reflecting and acting *together* toward social transformation and holds, perhaps, greater promise than individual praxis for lasting change, due to its provision of additional support and resources.

In order to facilitate their praxis, pre- and in-service English teachers need to understand that they have choices as well as agency in determining the purposes for which to teach. Recently, for example, while talking with two students in my English Education course who are creating a collaborative unit on composition, I tried to illustrate what I mean by thinking purpose-fully about secondary English curriculum with the example of persuasive letter writing, an activity that combines two common secondary English objectives – writing persuasively and writing formal personal letters. I told my students that from my perspective, there is an important difference between viewing the characteristics, structure, and mechanics of persuasive letter-writing as your pedagogical purpose and viewing the characteristics, structure, and mechanics of persuasive letter-writing *in the service of something else* or as *a means* to a broader purpose. Teachers taking the latter approach imagine purposes for their teaching that are closely aligned with their philosophies of education. For example, a teacher who wants to promote justice in and from her classroom might still require her students to write a persuasive essay, but she would intentionally design the requirements for this essay in a way that lines up with her philosophy. She might begin by asking her students to identify a current unjust situations, close to or far from home, in which they are personally or not at all personally involved, and about which they care deeply; she could then ask her students to choose one of these situations and write (and, optionally, send) a persuasive letter to someone who is in a position to do something about the injustice. We need to provide opportunities for pre- and in-service teachers alike to develop, articulate, and plan lessons that are consistent with their own unique philosophies of education – and to gain experience in realizing that philosophy through their daily teaching practice. Philosophy of education statements, tucked neatly into plastic sleeves in the front of student-teachers’ portfolios, are often listless, detached, and formulaic. However, because of their near-omnipresence in teacher preparation programs, they represent one potentially promising jumping-off point from which student-teachers and teacher educators – and new and experienced teachers – can engage in dialogue about the purposes of teaching English and ways to actualize these purposes in daily classroom life.

We have arrived at a place in our history – and/or I have arrived at a place in my history – during which it has become of utmost importance to reconsider what we mean by ‘outcomes,’ who gets to determine them, and what kind of world we are creating through them. Clearly it is difficult in the current era of mostly high-stakes, standardized tests to focus our classrooms on empathic critique and community-building because dispositions, obviously, are not easily measurable, quantifiable, or assessable. But an argument could be made that now is the time during which an emphasis the building of critical, compassionate communities is most important. For students and teachers in English and English education classrooms, the challenge is to be courageous: though jaded teachers scoff at idealism, the time has come for us to retain and to funnel the energy of our idealism into the classroom and to be courageous when we encounter resistance. hooks (2003) claims that “Education that serves to enhance our students’ journey to wholeness stands as a challenge to the existing status quo” (p. 181), an understanding that seems to fuel rather than dampen her conviction. I have much to learn from hooks and others like her who interpret the difficulty in the road ahead to be a sure sign of the need for me to travel that road. Atticus, who is one of the primary heroic figures in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, shares hooks’ passion; in the novel, Atticus surprises his son Jem by referring to Mrs. DuBose, a recently departed, bad-tempered elderly woman as “a great lady” because she was trying to overcome a

morphine addiction before she died. Atticus, in his explanation to Jem, whom Mrs. DuBose often upset with her mean-spirited words toward him, counsels him:

I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. (Lee, 1977, p. 116)

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### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> The central metaphor of the novel is referenced by one of its main characters in this way: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (Lee, 1977, p. 94).
- <sup>2</sup> Ramsland and Dashner (2005) note that Jeff knew about the Freeman brothers, Lehigh Valley youth who murdered their parents and youngest brother on February 27, 1995, just a few days before March 3, 1995, when he committed his own murderous crimes. Ramsland and Dashner claim that according to a psychiatrist, Jeff "had been inspired by the Freemans, but...had no allegiance to skinheads or neo-Nazis [like the Freemans]. He even disliked racism."
- <sup>3</sup> Of course, as critical educators are well aware, it is problematic for educators to espouse a socially critical stance and to require their students to embrace that stance as their own (Ellsworth, 1989); such a requirement for philosophical alignment only

devalues student voice and can be construed, ironically, as oppressive.

<sup>4</sup> Pre- and in-service teachers can take advantage of the many print and non-print resources for expanding the range of content they draw upon in their classrooms. In addition to books like *Writing to Make a Difference: Classroom Projects for Community Change* (2002) and *Education is Politics: Critical Teaching across Differences, K-12* (1999), websites such as <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/> and <http://www.teachingforchange.org/> provide ideas as well as a sense of hope that results from being a part of a larger community of like-minded educators.

<sup>5</sup> That the series of standardized tests pre-service teachers are required to take in order to prove their competency for licensure is called the “Praxis series”™ is, I think, a terrible affront to and terrible misunderstanding of Freire.

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