Critical Community Building:
Beyond Belonging[1]

By Silvia Cristina Bettez

I am thrilled to be here today to give the keynote address for the Southeastern Association of Educational Studies. It was less than four years ago that I graduated from the Culture, Curriculum and Change program here at Chapel Hill, and I never would have dreamed that I would be invited back so soon to give a keynote!

I am particularly happy to be speaking at this conference because it is a primarily graduate student conference, and one of the first I presented at in my doctoral program. In our crazy hierarchically structured world, we sometimes mistakenly give more credence to the work of faculty members. Although many faculty members produce great work, graduate students often have the most cutting edge information and ideas, not to mention passion.

When I was invited to speak, the conference coordinator asked me if there was something in particular that I would like to discuss, and I suggested the theme of Community Building.[2] This is something I began thinking and writing about as a graduate student,[3] and

Silvia Cristina Bettez is an assistant professor in the Cultural Foundations Program of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina.

I have continued my research on this topic ever since. I have a recently published article in *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* titled "Building Critical Communities Amid the Uncertainty of Social Justice Pedagogy in the Graduate Classroom." It is this theme of critical community building, particularly within the context of social justice education, that I want to take up and expand upon here.

Before doing so, I ask that you indulge me as I give thanks. I didn't get here on my own, nor would this be meaningful without your presence….[4]

The title of my talk is "Critical Community Building: Beyond Belonging."

I have had rare moments in my life when free floating ideas and varied experiences merge to provide me a strong message. Recently I have had such a moment, and the message is about the power of active listening.

Let me explain…

In addition to working on this talk about Community Building, I have also been writing a book, based on qualitative research, about the experiences of mixed race women.[5] The 16 participants I interviewed were an incredibly critically thoughtful group of women who, through storytelling about their ideas and experiences, expose privilege and oppression politics. Entering the research, I particularly wanted to learn what these women might know about how to best communicate across lines of racial and ethnic difference. The main message they told was about the importance of active listening. Several spoke about how they took the time to listen and pay attention to both words and non-verbal cues in order to learn how to best move in and out of distinct groups. Many of the women I interviewed described experiencing pain and frustration at the hands of others who didn't listen and thus made false assumptions about them. And generally, they expressed a longing to be heard; as one person said outright, "Tell your readers to hear us and believe our stories." Thus their narratives portrayed a combination of longing to be heard and testimonials about how the power of active listening can aid in cross-cultural communication.

Also, in my work life as a professor, I have received continual reinforcement from students about how important it is to them that I care about and listen to what they have to say. It matters that I elicit their stories, acknowledge their ideas, and validate their experiences. This occurs primarily through active listening to both their spoken and printed words, as well as non-verbal communication.

And even in my personal life, I have experienced the incredible joy of being truly heard and the immense frustration of not being listened to. As much as I pride myself on being a good listener, I sometimes have to be reminded to listen openly and enter conversations without preconceived ideas of what should be.

Finally, as I delved into many readings about community building, one theme continually emerged—the importance of active listening. Peter Block (2008), for example, states, "Listening is the action step that replaces defending ourselves. Listening, understanding at a deeper level than is being expressed, is the action that creates a restorative community" (p. 132).

I must admit, when I came to this conclusion that active listening is the key, there was a part of me that was like, "Shit, that does not make for much of an academic keynote! That's so damn simple!" But the fact is, it really isn't that simple because context always matters and the context in social justice education is messy with inequities, structures of hierarchies, clashing styles of communication, and conflicting personalities. However, that messy context is also what can lead to the beauty of incredible growth and discovery, of both the self and others.

Also, as will be discussed more later, active listening as conceived here is a particular kind of listening that requires conscious effort; it is a type of listening that some rarely practice and sometimes is virtually absent from classroom interactions. Thus active listening itself may be deceptively simple until we consider what it entails.

Goals

So I have four goals for the rest of our time together:

(1) I want to encourage you all to think of the time we have at this conference as an opportunity for community building.

(2) Through highlighting various definitions of community, I want to disrupt conventional notions of building community and introduce the concept of critical community building.

(3) I want to provide strategies for building critical communities.

(4) I hope to inspire you to continue discussions about community building and ideally take actions toward building critical communities in your lives. And for those of you who teach, I hope you assist your students in doing so as well.

Given that I have named active listening as a key component of critical community building, it would be remiss of me to not provide the space for you to do so with each other. Thus, for the next 10 minutes, I would like you to take the time to speak with and listen to one another. Before you do that, I want to quickly review…

Active Listening Actions

Active listening, the way I am conceiving of it, entails the following actions:

(1) Demonstrating you are paying attention through non-verbal cues such as head nodding, mmm-hmms, and eye contact.

(2) At times, reflecting back what you have heard.

(3) Being open to new ideas that differ from your worldviews.

(4) Refraining from advice giving.

(5) Reflecting for yourself on what you have heard and what you might have learned from it.

(6) Creating space for others to talk.

(7) Asking critical questions.

Please get in small groups, let's say about four people, and talk with each other about the following questions. You can collectively choose which. Please make sure you provide space for everyone to speak at some point and practice active listening. I list eight questions because I want you to have them as a resource for your future community building (these are excerpted from Peter Block's book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 2008, p. 227), but given the time, you will likely only address two or three of them.

Discussion Questions:

(1) What led you to accept the invitation?

(2) What would it take for you to be fully present in this room?

(3) How valuable an experience do you plan for this to be?

(4) How much risk are you willing to take?

(5) How participative do you plan to be?

(6) To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?

(7) What is the price others paid for you to be here?

(8) If you could invite someone you respect to sit beside you and support you in making this conference successful, whom would that be?

(Provide time for activity...[6])

Block's (2008) work has been integral to my thinking on this topic, and the book is a fantastic resource. He argues, and I agree, that a key component of facilitating community building lies in asking the "right" questions. "Powerful questions," he states, "are those that in answering, evoke a choice for accountability and commitment" (p. 106). Accountability and commitment, in addition to active listening matter greatly in community building. I will return to these points later. These questions serve as reminders that community building is a process that takes continual effort and commitment and requires interdependence.

Next I will explain why I think it is important to promote and engage in community building, unpack the definition of community, and describe what I mean by this term "critical communities."

Why We Need to Build Critical Communities

Kumashiro (2004), in his book titled *Against Common Sense: Teaching and*

Learning Toward Social Justice, argues that teaching toward social justice entails troubling knowledge in ways that might challenge the ways people have come to make sense of the world. This often leads to "frustration, confusion, and anxiety among so many of our students" (p. 27).

Social justice pedagogy, Kumashiro argues, frequently brings students to "crisis." In my teaching, I often use the metaphor of "sitting in the fire." Fire has the capacity to nurture us, through heat, but if we aren't careful we can also get burned by it. In discussions about privilege, power, and oppression, we are often asking students to "sit in the fire," to stay even when the heat might feel unbearable. I argue that if we are bringing students to crisis and asking them to sit in the fire, then building critical community—creating support networks—is also an essential component of social justice teaching.

Scholarship on social justice teaching (see Freire, 2003; Gay, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shor, 1992; Wink, 2007) often focuses on how teachers and students can grow together through the shared exchange of teaching and learning. Little discussion exists regarding building critical communities in the classroom among students.[7]

One might envision a classroom setting, which likely many of us have experienced, in which the teacher is continually developing individual relationships with each student through conversation in large groups wherein virtually all of the dialogue occurs between each individual student with the instructor and rarely among peers. Let's say for example that this is a classroom, and I am the teacher. Often a teacher would address individual students. I might ask a question, to which one student would answer, let's say George,[8] who would respond to me. As George is talking, that might spark an idea in another student, Kathy, who would then speak up and tell me her thoughts. The entire class could continue this way enhancing my relationship with each individual student but doing nothing to promote relationships between them.

Promoting community building among our students encourages them to practice interdependence. Bell (1997) argues, "Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as *a sense of social responsibility toward and with others*[9] and the society as a whole" (emphasis added, p. 3). Community building can be a way of enacting social responsibility towards others. Rather than individual, separate lines between the teacher and students, one can begin to conceive of a web that includes connections between the various students, as well as strands from students to teachers.

Thus, although Fendler (2006) argues that, within the field of education, community is "all the rage" (p. 303), within the social justice education literature in particular, often the concept of community is either only alluded to, assumed to be easy to foster, taken for granted, or non-existent.

In my research I found only a few examples of scholars discussing the link between community building and social justice education. Assertions, like this one by Adam Renner (2009), are rare. He states, "I argue that a focus on rekindling these concepts of community, connectedness, and the collective is central to the

thesis of social justice" (p. 59). He believes that this work of creating community "must begin in the universities, particularly schools of education" (p. 72).

Earlier Definitions of Community

In the education literature, community has been defined, deconstructed, critiqued, and redefined.

What I found as I researched the literature is that, in the early 1990s, strong critiques began to emerge about previous conceptions of community. Writers such as Young (1990), Stone (1992), and Phelan (1996) argued that the ideal of community was highly problematic given that it was based primarily on creating connection through unity and sameness, which ultimately excludes as much as it might include. These authors highlighted the ways in which sameness serves as the basis of inclusion, and difference as the basis of exclusion. Anyone doing social justice work can see that this is antithetical to the ideals of equity.

Lynda Stone, in 1992, in fact argued that "the time has come to disavow community because the concept itself carries the historical and ideological baggage of the failures of western liberal association" (section IV, para 1). She then proposed a "new, non-fixed postmodern 'ideal'" to replace community which she termed "heteromity," a "concept [that] must be understood in terms of its own fluidity, changing condition, and tendencies toward dispersed and deferred meaning" (section IV, para 2).

Despite Stone's request for the disavowal of community, several scholars have continued to call for it. However, many authors who advocate for community reconceptualize it in ways that align with Stone's postmodern concept of heteromity.

Abowitz (1999), Furman (1998), and Noddings (1996), for example, each argue against conceptions of community based on "sameness among members" (Furman, 1998, p. 302) and insist upon breaking down the binary that had formally been created between community and difference. I am drawn to Furman's description of a new postmodernist conception in which, "the metaphor for community becomes an interconnected web or network of persons who may differ but who are interdependent" (p. 307).

Thus, beginning in the 1990s, scholars began to redefine community within a postmodern context such that community not only could be, but should be, based on interdependence between diverse individuals and centralize appreciation of differences.

Fendler, in a 2006 review of the more recent literature on community (of about the past 20 years), that includes the work of Stone, Young, Abowitz, Furman, Noddings, and others, argues that even these more current conceptions of community "can be politically dangerous insofar as differences are appropriated, assimilated, or excluded" (p. 303). Fendler raises some valid critiques in which she explains that despite efforts to the contrary, community still has the potential to exclude. She states for example that community often "creates enemies" because people frequently join together on "the basis of what they oppose" (p. 319). She does

not propose a solution as much as she issues a warning that "it is dangerous to celebrate and promote community building as if it were unproblematic" (p. 315). Researchers should, she argues, "keep constant vigil and continually challenge the ways community constructs inclusions and exclusions simultaneously" (p. 315).

One assumption that I don't see being unpacked in the new conceptions of community is the idea of community as belonging. In the research, community as belonging is often centralized, even in some of the more critical and/or more recent works.

Peter Block's (2008) book, for example, is titled *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (emphasis added). Although the idea of *unity* is sometimes problematized in the literature, the concept of belonging is not. Block, in fact, centralizes belonging in his definition of community, as you can see in the title of his book. He writes, "Community as it is used here is about the experience of belonging. We are in community each time we find a place where we belong" (p. xii). Belonging, he argues, has two meanings. He states, "First and foremost, to belong is to be related to and a part of something" (p. xii). The second meaning relates to being an owner: "To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community" (p. xii). Furman (1998) similarly centralizes belonging in her work stating, "Community as it is used throughout the article will mean … the sense of *belonging*, trust of others, and safety…" (emphasis added, p. 300).

The question then becomes: What does belonging mean and what is useful or dangerous about centralizing this concept of belonging in the definition of community?

If we take Block's definition of belonging—(1) to be a part of something and (2) to be an owner—then the focus of community is self-centered. It is about what the individual gains for her or himself in the process of community. The motivation for entering into community is self-serving, with a focus on the individual rather than the whole.

It seems to me that community is about being a part of something bigger than yourself. Also, if we want to conceive of community in this new postmodern fluid way, then wouldn't a sense of belonging shift as the group itself changes?

I want to offer another image of community that moves beyond belonging.

Definition of Critical Community[10]

Pharr (2010) defines community as "people in any configuration (geographic, identity, etc.) bonded together over time through common interest and concern, through responsibility and accountability to one another, and at its best, through commitment, friendship and love" (p. 594). There is an emphasis on harmony, consensus, and agreement—a sense of belonging—in community that often proves to be overly optimistic. The implication is that community building is easy, but I would argue that community building is a complex process, particularly when issues of power are acknowledged. Furthermore, Pharr's definition might conjure up images of a fixed group of people. Hall (2007) disrupts such a notion in his definition

of academic communities as "overlapping and porously bordered conversational groups"(p. 15). He conceives of community as fluid and ever-changing with open and welcoming malleable boundaries that are continually recreated by those within the communities.

Thus, merging and adding to the definitions of Pharr and Hall, we can define community as continually shifting groups of people that dialogue with, actively listen to, and support each other, through reciprocal responsibility and accountability, regarding a common interest or concern. Community in this sense is both a process and a goal.

I argue that it is important for social justice educators to promote "critical" communities in particular. My use of the term critical is derived from progressive forms of critical theory. Critical theory creates the possibility to see what may have otherwise been unimaginable to us; it, as Hinchey (1998) argues, "calls our attention to places where choices have been made, and it clarifies whose goals those choices have served" (p. 15). Kincheloe (2007) explains that critical pedagogues strive to eliminate oppression, understand that all education is inherently political, and recognize that cultural and historical contexts affect individual agency. Taking a critical lens requires us to acknowledge that in any situation there are multiple socially constructed realities, historical contexts, and lived experiences that are continually impacted by issues of power and played out through complex interplays of structure and agency. Given this conception, in critical community building there must be, at a minimum, an attempt to question dominant norms and a goal to further one another's critical thinking, particularly around issues of power, oppression, and privilege. This requires a high degree of self-reflexivity.

Critical communities thus might be defined as interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critically thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege. Critical communities are not necessarily fixed in location or even in present time; they are dynamic, fluid, and shifting. Such critical communities, I argue, are essential to sustaining social justice efforts.

One can see, however, that this conception of community will not necessarily result in a feeling of being a part of something—a feeling of belonging. In fact asking and answering difficult questions requires a significant degree of risk. It is likely that any of my students here will tell you that my classes are generally highly charged, emotional, and at times might feel challenging to the point of "not belonging," yet also promote critical community as I have described it here.

Strategies for Building Critical Communities

So, if critical community building is warranted in social justice classrooms and beyond, how can we strive to create such communities with and among our students?

I want to highlight three main strategies and discuss some of the subcomponents of each.

(1) Maintaining an open, porously bordered web of connections.

(2) Active listening.

(3) Commitment coupled with accountability.

Open, Shifting, Porously Bordered Web of Connections

(1) Knowing that community can have "a dark side" (Noddings, 1996) of exclusion, especially when we become insular and factional, requires a conscientious effort to operate with an attitude of *openness and inclusivity* with our students, colleagues, and others with whom we interact in our efforts to promote social justice.

(2) Creating and maintaining this shifting web requires *attempting to build bridges*. In my mixed race book, I have an entire chapter dedicated to bridge building that emerged from the women I interviewed. They describe the difficulty of, and need for, building bridges, as well as the reward of such work.

(3) Keeping the borders truly porous requires *conscientious efforts to be welcoming and hospitable*. Block (2008) argues that "we need to be more thoughtful about the welcoming of strangers into our daily way of being together" (p. 145). I would add that we need to be equally as thoughtful about how we welcome those we know. Block provides some practical advice: greet people at the door; acknowledge late arrivals; state why you are there, name what might have led to the invitation; "use everyday language, speak from the heart;" and pose questions that invite connection before content (pp. 145-147). In fact, the questions he suggests include those I posed at the beginning of our time together (p. 227):

i. What led you to accept the invitation?

ii. What would it take for you to be fully present in this room?

iii. What is the price others paid for you to be here?

iv. If you could invite someone you respect to sit beside you and support you in making this time successful, whom would that be?

I would argue that although the importance of hospitality might be heightened at the beginning of community building as well as whenever new people enter the community, we can never stop with our efforts to be welcoming of others, particularly to welcome others to be themselves.

(4) The actions that we take to create an open, shifting, porously bordered web will of course be influenced by the size, location, and intent of the community we hope to establish. I maintain that critical communities can consist of two or more people, and be both formal and informal. Several of these suggestions I've named refer to larger intentional spaces of community building and may not apply. However, if we have two-person critical communities, those two people benefit from being open to making connections with other small critical communities.

Each group, or web, has the potential to fluidly morph into something smaller or bigger.

(5) I also recognize that *context matters*, making these descriptions of hospitable, shifting webs more complex than they seem. Historically there have been groups of critical communities that have been exclusive particularly for the purpose of combating oppression. I think of Gloria Anzaldúa's work here. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga edited a book in 1983 titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, in which women of color wrote about their personal stories and theoretical perspectives related to oppression; the editors emphasized the need for community with each other and the demand that White women listen to and hear their stories. That text was pivotal to understandings of issues of equity particularly within Women's Studies classrooms. I would argue that the exclusivity served an important purpose. Anzaldúa's last anthology, however, published in 2002 shifted to a more inclusive perspective as noticeable in the title, *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. Her co-editor is a White woman, AnaLouise Keating, and although writings by women of color remain prominent, the anthology includes pieces by and about a diversity of individuals from various marginalized and privileged races, ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexualities. As I critically reflect upon the mixed race research and my own life, I am increasingly suspect of exclusive spaces.

(6) Thus I return to this ideal of an open, shifting, porously bordered web of connections. However, participants in the web are not void of expectations. In particular they are called to engage in active listening, make a commitment, and be accountable.

Active Listening in a Dialogical Exchange

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, I believe this may be the most important component of creating critical communities. I want to elaborate more here on what I believe active listening entails, as it might be slightly distinct from general conceptions of the term.

Rusch and Horsford (2008) argue that "listening is an important strategy for moving beyond defensiveness and opening oneself to examining embedded perspectives" (p. 358). However, there are multiple forms of listening; some of which are more likely than others to lead to such openness and self-examination. Weissglass (1990) for example, defines distinctions between active, passive, inattentive, pretend, conversational, argumentative, and informational listening (p. 355). All those in her list, besides active listening, have the potential to be destructive to community because they don't centralize *reciprocal* engagement.

Most often descriptions of active listening emphasize *reflection* in which a listener reflects back her or his impression of the expression of the sender by paraphrasing or interpreting what the talker is communicating. My conception of

active listening for the creation and maintenance of critical communities includes but moves beyond simple reflecting.

Active listening in the critical community context also includes:

(1) Recognizing the importance of and *seeking out dialogues across lines of cultural difference*. If one of the goals of critical communities is increased critical consciousness, then we must interact with people who are different from us, who can think of questions to ask us that we might not think to ask ourselves. Burbules and Rice (1991) argue in their article about "Dialogue across Differences" that "sometimes an external perspective is helpful *precisely because* it is different from that of the group itself … Both as individuals and groups, we can broaden and enrich our self-understanding by considering our beliefs, values and actions from a fresh standpoint" (p. 405).

(2) Active listening is sometimes described as a tool in service primarily of the talker. In the rape crisis work that I used to do, we trained volunteers to listen actively in order to support the survivors with whom they interacted. The listening was clearly for the speaker and not the listener. Active listening for critical community building requires *reciprocity*; both the listener and the speaker can learn in the process of engagement. Think back to the example I used at the beginning of the talk about the exchange between Kathy, George, and me. In that situation, as each of them interacted with me, they each may individually have gotten something out of the situation, but the responses are more like popcorn than an interconnected thread; we are not necessarily accountable to each other and reciprocity may be absent. It is, in fact, likely that at some point in that situation Kathy stopped listening to George. Kathy is selfishly using George's ideas in this instance because their purpose becomes only to push her thinking, as opposed to creating a situation for her to truly engage *with* George.

(3) The possibility for such reciprocal exchanges that include active listening is *impacted by structure and physical space*. Virtually all the writings about community building emphasize the importance of small groups. Block (2008) argues that "the small group is the unit of transformation" and that intimacy is created "in groups of 3-12" (p. 95). This does not mean that community cannot be created in larger groups, in fact, Block asserts, "Small groups have the most leverage when they are part of a larger gathering" (p. 93). I asked a graduate student what occurred in my classes that helped her experience reciprocal dialogue with active listening and she stated that setting up the space in a circle where everyone can have eye contact makes a big difference. She also named small group work as helpful, and, in particular, group interaction in which students are encouraged to respond to each other's ideas and work rather than just the course texts. Other aspects of the physical space can have an impact, such as moveable chairs and desks, windows (which remind us that there is a larger world), and art.

(4) Active listening as conceived here also requires a conscious effort to con-

tinually engage in *critical self-reflexivity*. In contrast to listening that is solely for the service of the speaker, reciprocal active listening requires the listener to truly hear what the speaker has to say in a manner that is non-judgmental. Upon hearing what the speaker says, in order to promote increased critical consciousness, the listener must critically reflect on the meaning of what they have heard.

(5) These dialogues that encourage generosity, openness, reciprocity, critical self-reflexivity and active listening are dependent *upon asking critical questions*. Block (2008) argues that a great question is ambiguous, personal, and evokes anxiety (p. 106). The ambiguity requires the responder to bring personal meaning. The personal aspect can lead to commitment and encourages passion. And, the anxiety indicates that power is involved; it is meaningful, for it is when we are on the edge of our comfort zone that we have the greatest opportunity for growth. As mentioned earlier, "Powerful questions are those that in answering, evoke a choice for accountability and commitment" (Block, 2008, p. 106).

Commitment and Accountability

Block argues, "Commitment and accountability are forever paired, for they do not exist without each other. Accountability is the willingness to care for the well-being of the whole; commitment is the willingness to make a promise with no expectation in return" (p. 71). Block discusses accountability and commitment as the antithesis of entitlement (p. 72). Entitlement centralizes the question: "What's in it for me?" (p. 70). Commitment, however, is centered upon very different kinds of questions such as, "What promises am I willing to make?" and "What price am I willing to pay for the well being of the whole?" (Block, 2008, p. 138). Commitment, thus, can be viewed as "integrity" or "honoring your word" (p. 71).

It is important to keep in mind that commitment and accountability neither can nor should be forced. People must be free to choose whether or not they wish to commit and be accountable. Block (2008) asserts, "Refusing to make a promise is an act of integrity and supports community" (pp. 138-139). It must be acceptable for people to state, "I am willing to make no promise at this moment" (p. 138). Conversely, community is sabotaged when people do not stay true to their word or refuse to make a decision about their level of engagement. As Block states, "We can move forward with refusal; we cannot move forward with maybe" (p. 136).

In critical community building, valuable promises might include:

- "I promise to listen actively and create space for others to speak."
- "I promise to take risks to participate actively, even when it feels scary, for the sake of learning."
- "I promise to hear others and critically self-reflect on the thoughts and feelings shared."
- "I promise to do my best to take into account the larger context."

• "I promise to prepare well because I acknowledge that my preparation impacts what my peers could potentially gain (or lose)."

Belonging is Not the Goal: What Critical Community Building Rests upon

Thus, putting it all together, critical community building rests upon:

(1) Maintaining an open, porously bordered web of connections.

(2) Active listening.

(3) Commitment coupled with accountability.

These strategies lead to a view of community as both a process and a goal. One can see that in this conception the individualistic concept of belonging is neither the goal nor the primary motivation. Attention to others, coupled with critical reflection, is centralized in a way that maintains and encourages critical consciousness. Often, in efforts to belong, we hide parts of ourselves and let things go that hurt us. Thus, working to "belong" has the strong potential to hinder our efforts at critical community building because it impacts our participation and gets in the way of freeing us to ask critical questions that might challenge others, as well as ourselves.

Small Steps

Sometimes, those of us engaged in teaching for social justice become overwhelmed by the task ahead of us. Just two days ago, upon revealing that I work as an Assistant Professor, I was asked by someone what I teach. I replied, "I teach in the School of Education about issues of social justice." He laughed and said cynically, "How's that going for you?"

I didn't respond to his rhetorical question, but in my head flashed this phrase, "the little things matter and each step we take toward promoting equity makes a difference." I believe this, I have to believe this to stay in the process. Thankfully, I am not the only one. Johnson (2006), for example, argues,

> If all this sounds overwhelming, remember again that you don't have to deal with everything … So, rather than defeat yourself before you start, think small, humble, and doable, rather than large, heroic, and impossible. Don't paralyze yourself with impossible expectations. It takes very little to make a difference. Small acts can have radical implications. (p. 153)

Call to Action

Thus, I leave you with a story and a call to action. This story is about a recent experience of critical community building in my own life.

One of the places in which I have often experienced critical communities is at conferences. I regularly attend the American Educational Studies Association conference. It was at that conference that I first met some people in this room.

Yearly, I am committed to what I can learn and give in that space. One reason why I have continued to attend that conference is because of the possibility of critical community building. This past conference, in Denver, was no exception. Two things happened there that I want to highlight.

First, I gave a presentation on one of my mixed race book chapters about the politics of Whiteness. I was particularly anxious about this presentation both because I was presenting what I feel is the heart of my research (thus, if people didn't respond well much was on the line) and because I included a dialogue I had with a participant that revealed something deep that I grapple with to this day. This presentation was packed with people. When I finished presenting, I not only asked for questions and comments, but I posed a question as well. The dialogue was dynamic, the feedback flowed, and I was both validated and inspired to continue with my work. That night at the bar (we often continue our social gathering into the late night at bars) the dialogues continued. About 15 people talked with me about my presentation, some of them shared praise, but many of them had critical questions, both to further their learning and to help me think more deeply about my work. Often the dialogues included more than two of us and the conversations flowed in multiple directions. This was critical community building in action, complete with great questions, active listening, continued commitment, reciprocity and shifting boundaries!

However, simultaneously, the people in that space were literally primarily segregated by race. I noticed it that night, but given my multiple positionalities as a professor, a long time attendant of AESA, a former Chapel Hill student (many present were also connected to Chapel Hill), and a generally social person, I spent the evening bouncing between multiple spaces. The next day, however, I was talking with a friend who is mixed race and she told me that when she arrived at the bar and saw the striking segregation, she wanted to walk right back out. The segregation of the space excluded her. We had this conversation while having lunch at a restaurant with about 16 people. Ironically, we were at a long table in which the people were, perhaps coincidentally, seated on a continuum of color—White people at one end, mixed and/or light skinned people of color in the middle, and darker skinned people of color at the other end. As my friend talked, there were tears in her eyes from the angst of the feelings that sometimes come with being mixed race in segregated situations.

I share the two sides of this story because I feel like they exemplify the potential beauty and continual challenges of critical community building. Critical community building requires us to be patient and hopeful while trusting that engagement, rather than self-centeredness, indeed changes the world around us. Furthermore, it is always an imperfect process that requires consistent attentiveness and action; it calls us to be continually vigilant of the atmosphere, hospitable, and self-reflective.

Thus, I both invite and challenge you to consider making a commitment to be an active participant in critical community building, beginning at this conference and extending beyond to your lives as teachers and/or students and citizens of the world. Remember that critical community building can begin with just two people,

don't make promises you won't keep, listen actively, allow your web of connections to shift, critically self-reflect on what you hear, take into account the larger context, and know that you can say "no" now and still commit later.

Remember that community is both a process and a goal.

Closing Questions

In closing, I leave you with these questions:

(1) How will you make a conscientious effort to operate with an attitude of openness and inclusivity within your social justice work?

(2) What is the promise that you are willing to make regarding active listening?

(3) What is the promise that you are willing to make that constitutes a risk or major shift for you?

(4) What is the promise that you are postponing?

(5) Where and how might you continue conversations about community building?

(6) What does what you have learned today mean for the work that you do as an educator, activist, or simply a citizen of the world?

Thank You!

Notes

[1] This article text was originally an invited keynote address given on February 18, 2011, at the Southeastern Association of Educational Studies (SEAES) conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The keynote has been modified slightly for readability, for example, headings were inserted that were often the titles of background PowerPoint slides, but overall it is maintained in speech form. At the conference, a very personalized introduction was given of Silvia Bettez, based on information gathered from colleagues and students, during which she was identified as someone who lives out the practice of promoting community with and among those with whom she works.

[2] This topic and keynote also relates to the growing commitment within academia to community engagement. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, for example, was honored in 2008 as a Carnegie Classified Community Engagement University.

[3] See Bettez, S. C. (2008). Social justice activist teaching in the university classroom. In J. Diem & R. J. Helfenbein (Eds.), *Unsettling beliefs: Teaching theory to teachers* (pp. 273-296). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers.

[4] Given that I argue for the importance of interdependence, acknowledgement, and engagement, it felt necessary to include this. This is the original text: Thank you Amy Swain and the SEAES committee for the invitation. Thank you to those of you who knew nothing about me or my work and are taking the risk to give up your time for the next hour when you could be out enjoying the gorgeous weather in Chapel Hill. Thanks to my best friend, Mojgan, who has supported me since I began my Ph.D. many years ago. She's not an aca-

demic, but is here nonetheless and one of the wisest people I know. Of course I need to give a shout out to folks I've come to know from my Chapel Hill connection, both from my time here and beyond as I have networked at conferences. Those conference connections, by the way, happened in large part due to the active community building created by my fabulous dissertation chair, George Noblit. Then there are the students from my new home, University of North Carolina, Greensboro! I love my program and all those I work with; you are here in force! You continue to inspire, critically challenge, and sustain me in my academic work. Last but not least, I have to give a special mention to three people: Dana Stachowiak, who has generously shared her creative gifts by helping make this powerpoint; Kathy Hytten, who has been an integral part of my thinking on this topic and with whom I have recently written a co-authored piece about Critical Community Building (which is currently under review); and Kathleen Edwards, my current graduate assistant, who sat with me for literally hours helping me talk through my ideas for the keynote; her brilliant challenging questions and insights helped me think more deeply about this work.

[5] The book is titled *But Don't Call Me White: Mixed Race Women Exposing Privilege and Oppression Politics*. Currently under review, it is expected the book will be published by Summer or Fall 2011 by Sense Publishers.

[6] Participants had 15 minutes for this activity. I walked around as people talked with each other in small groups and observed engaged dialogue between participants. Given more time, I would have suggested that people switch groups and discuss other questions. Prior to the keynote, I also informed people I knew that there would be small group work and asked them to please look around and invite potential outliers into their groups; this connects to Block's point about the importance of hospitality. To close the activity, I encouraged people to continue thinking about these kinds of questions.

[7] This argument was originally made in my article: Bettez, S. C. (2011 February). Building critical communities amid the uncertainty of social justice pedagogy in the graduate classroom. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 33*, pp. 76-106. See page 77.

[8] I chose these names intentionally; George Noblit and Kathy Hytten are well-known people within the Educational Studies community, and I knew that several audience members present would know them. In addition, I stepped out from the podium and engaged with them directly in a sort of mini role play demonstration.

[9] Italics are used throughout this text to denote emphasis, except in one instance of an already italicized title, where underlining is then used for emphasis.

[10] Please note that most of this section on the definition of critical communities is excerpted verbatim from my article Bettez, S. C. (2011 February). Building critical communities amid the uncertainty of social justice pedagogy in the graduate classroom. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 33*, pp. 76-106. See page 78.

References

Abowitz, K. K. (1999). Reclaiming community. *Educational Theory, 49*(2), 143-159.

Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (Eds.). (2002). *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*. New York: Routledge.

Bell, L. A. (1997). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 1-15). New York & London: Routledge.

Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Burbules, N. C., & Rice, S. (1991). Dialogue across differences: Continuing the conversation.

Harvard Educational Review, 61(4), 393-416.
Fendler, L. (2006). Others and the problem of community. *Curriculum Inquiry, 36*(3), 303-326.
Freire, P. (2003). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.
Furman, G. (1998). Postmodernism and community in schools: Unraveling the paradox. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 34*(3), 298-328.
Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Hall, D. E. (2007). *The academic community: A manual for change*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
Hinchey, P. (1998). *Finding freedom in the classroom: A practical introduction to critical theory*. New York: Peter Lang.
hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. NewYork: Routledge.
Johnson, A. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
Kincheloe, J. (2007). *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* (2nd ed.). New York: Peter Lang.
Kumashiro, K. (2004). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). (1983). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (2nd ed.). New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.
Noddings, N. (1996). On community. *Educational Theory, 46*(3), 245-267.
Pharr, S. (2010). Reflections on liberation. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, C. Castañeda, H. W. Hackman, M. L. Peters, & X. Zúñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (2nd ed.) (pp. 591-598). New York: Routledge.
Phelan, S. (1996). All the comforts of home: The genealogy of community. In N. J. Hirschmanii & C. DiStefano (Eds.), *Revisioning the political: Feminist reconstructions of traditional concepts in western political theory* (pp. 235-250). Boulder, CO: Westview Press,
Renner, A. (2009). Teaching community, praxis, and courage: A foundations pedagogy of hope and humanization. *Educational Studies, 45*(1), 59-79.
Rusch, E. A., & Horsford, S. D. (2008). Unifying messy communities: Learning social justice in educational leadership classrooms. *Teacher Development, 12*(4), 353-367.
Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
Stone, L. (1992). Disavowing community. In H. Alexander & R. Arcilla (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education, 1992*. http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/eps/PES-Yearbook/92_docs/STONE.HTM (accessed January 20, 2011)
Weissglass, J. (1990). Constructivist listening for empowerment and change. *The Educational Forum, 54*(4), 351-370.
Wink, J. (2007). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.