

deliberately democratic : performing citizenship in a public speaking class

You know, it's funny, I teach public speaking—and I am very nervous, right now, about you, the public. I really have no idea what you're going to do. Look at these shaking hands. But thank you for being here.

In this talk I am about to say some things about politics, education, and performance. Some of these things might be reductive, contradictory, perhaps even uninformed. You might get annoyed.

I will start by saying some cynical AND idealistic things about politics, education, and performance.

Next I will say some things about what I am trying to do with politics, education and performance.

Then I will say some pessimistic AND optimistic things about performing education and politics.

I aim to finish with some realistic hopes for performing politics and education.

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First, some reductive cynicism and idealism about politics, education, and performance.

Cynically, in performance terms I am worried about politics and education when they are commodified as mimetic spectacles. I am cynical of politics when it is staged right in front of us as a spectacle produced for our consumption. Talking heads screaming at captive audiences is often what passes for our political commentary, making us consumers and regurgitators of a packaged neo-liberal politics which only asks us to vote every now and then. I am cynical of education when it is staged leftist in front of us as a spectacle produced for our consumption. Talking heads spouting knowledges at captive audiences is often what passes for our learning experience, making us consumers and regurgitators of a packaged neo-liberal education which only asks us to take an exam every now and then.

Ideally, I am inspired by a different performance of politics and education, involving the continual participation of spectators becoming spect-actors. I want us to become co-performers in the action of naming and re-making our own histories, working under and against material conditions that are not of our making. So I am clearly inspired by Brecht, Freire, and Boal and similar Marxist projects. I am also inspired by Schechner and Turner and their shift from mimesis to poesis, from faking to making. Dwight Conquergood moves me from poesis to kinesis, from making to breaking and re-making. I am idealistic about participatory education that is political, and about participatory politics that is educational, in breaking and re-making our material social worlds together.

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Second, some things I am trying to break and re-make within politics, education, and performance.

You know, it's funny, I teach public speaking—and I am nervous about my students. Public Speaking is one of those weird spaces where politics, education, and performance intersect perhaps so obviously and yet so unexpectedly. At the beginning of the semester, I ask my students about their expectations for the course. Many seem to expect a spectacle of presentation skills—a depoliticized, skills-focused, consumption and regurgitation of knowledge about speaking. They also expect to imitate those same depoliticized skills in staging their own spectacular presentations.

One of the first things I am trying to break and re-make is the spectacle of the college course being staged in the college classroom. On the first day of the semester, through kinetic performances that disrupt the neatly ordered classroom, we explicitly orient ourselves as students and teacher toward continually breaking the staged border in between performer and audience, inviting and encouraging students to become co-performers in the action of their own learning. For example, it is a public speaking class, but students in the class often expect to speak only on the four or five times during the semester when they HAVE to speak for an assignment. On the first day of class, the first section they skip to in the syllabus is the section on assignments, and the second question they ask is about due dates: "on what days are we speaking?" My answer to them is: "Every day." We as a class make sure that everyone in the class gets to speak for at least a minute in each class, through a variety of exercises that are designed to teach concepts of public speaking through learning-by-doing. In doing so, we as a class have begun shifting away from a vote-once model of participation to a participate-every-day model of democratic involvement.

Another thing I am trying to break and re-make is the spectacle of the talking head and the captive audience, which is not you today. For example, in a public speaking class, students often expect the focus to be exclusively on the speaking actor. So, beginning with the first day onward, we as a class orient ourselves to both speaking and listening, on the liveness of an acting and active public, through doing and learning exercises involving non-speaking participation while someone else is speaking.

The major thing I am trying to break and re-make is the spectacle of democracy as embodied in the deliberative speech assignment. Students often expect it to be just another neo-liberal educational assignment—individually constructed, spectacularly delivered, and objectively evaluated. They often want to know what topics they will speak about. However, following a learning-by-doing approach, we as a class explicitly orient ourselves to actually deliberating together on materially consequential decisions that impact us immediately. For example, we come up with specific actions we want to do together as a community, such as donating money for a cause. Then, we come up with two opposing choices. We then deliberate on those choices with the goal of actually doing whichever choice wins. That is, we are committed to participating in the community's choice even if we voted individually against that choice.

This is where things get tricky and interesting. Issues of mandated participation come up first, which leads to the demystification of the vote-once model of representative democracy. Someone always brings up the Iraq war and points out that we are participating in it, at least through our taxes, even if we didn't vote for it. So, things become urgent. There is a sense of consequence to the assignment, and the questions that students ask of each student-speaker reflect that sense of material import. Depending on the action being deliberated, there is often passionate and even heated performance, creative arguments invented on the fly for or against particular choices. Almost everyone attends, and everyone participates. Before the end of the semester, we as a class get together and actually do the actions that won our vote.

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Third, some pessimism and optimism in politics, education, and performance.

Pessimistically, I am in leftist despair about outcomes. The kinds of actions that matter most to me are the ones that students find boring, so they choose not to pick them as deliberative choices. Instead, the kinds of actions that seem to matter most to students involve food and out-of-class activities, with at least some element of alcoholic consumption involved. It is a constant struggle to break and re-make the overwhelming spectacle of college hedonism. When it comes to actions that have more significance, at least in my moralistic views, students display a dispiriting lack of critical depth in their arguments. It is a constant struggle to break and re-make the overwhelming spectacle of racist and homophobic soundbites. Pessimistically, I am convinced we are in for a Sarah Palin / Glenn Beck fascist state.

Optimistically, some spectacles have been broken and re-made without simply becoming new spectacles, mainly in the performance of education. Students have become powerful agents in forming their own education, toward specific learning goals. They have become participants even across deep divisions, forming communitarian relationships with each other that last beyond the end of the course. Material actions have been taken that have made some difference, especially in donating to causes. Learning happened in unexpected but powerful ways that students planned, performed, and reflected upon.

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Fourth, some realistic hopes for politics, education, and performance.

Breaking and re-making is a communitarian act, not a solo performance, but power is unequal. The first question students have is about grades. It is clear who has institutionally authorized power in the classroom. A kinetic performance of education and politics requires savvy ways of understanding and using power instead of simply claiming powerlessness. I am much inspired by the work of Tim Crouch, who brings mimesis/poesis/kinesis together in changing materiality through imagination, where the audience members become alive and powerful co-authors. Such work gives me a very concrete hope for performing education and politics with you, the public.

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