

The Double-Bind of "Double Duty"

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The central premise of Denise Egea-Kuehne's finely argued paper, "Neutrality in Education and Derrida's Call for 'Double Duty,'" is that genuine learning is dialogical in nature, a process of continual self-questioning and reinterpretation in which an individual struggles with "otherness," that is, the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities found both within and outside of oneself. In contrast, so-called "neutral" approaches to education, with their guises of depoliticization and rhetorics of "excellence" or "democratic universality," stagnate the learning process when they exclude controversial material from the curriculum. In their appeals to preserve the sameness of a "common culture" or "moral fabric," the curricular mandates of organizations such as Citizens for Excellence in Education and the Eagle Forum aim to form a frozen consensus of fixed meanings and unified identities. Egéa-Kuehne contends that these so-called apolitical positions prevent students from developing the necessary "intellectual competence" to deal with controversial ideas. When difference, multiplicity, contradiction, and even conflict are banished from the curriculum, she argues, authentic learning is made impossible.

There is much that I appreciate in Egéa-Kuehne's paper as well as many aspects of this dialogic approach which echo my own theoretical interests. I welcome such a heteroglossic perspective because it promises to legitimize voices which are currently marginalized or silenced, and gives hope that education *can* raise consciousness, that students *can* be taught to respect rather than fear difference. In addition, this dialogic perspective, in which otherness is not simply "tolerated" or "included," but is the very ground upon which self-identification rests, supports my own construction of a feminist aesthetic of reading grounded on mutual recognition and reciprocal or "shared otherness." Further, Egéa-Kuehne's commitment to readings which are reflexive and open-ended speaks to my own desire for reader-response strategies which engage with otherness while negotiating the tensions and self-contradictions within any particular reading position. I am persuaded by Egéa-Kuehne's arguments, convinced that heteroglossia is the educational approach necessary in order for students to acquire the cognitive skills required to deal with controversy.

And yet, I am simultaneously suspicious of these Enlightenment values, wary of my optimistic faith that the "right" sort of literature education, reader-response strategy, or multivocal or multicultural curriculum will lead to individual "growth" or "enrichment." Although I am unwilling to abandon completely my hope for a dialogic or heteroglossic methodology such as Egéa-Kuehne's, I also believe that any such normative approach is fraught with ambiguity when put into practice in the real world. Terms like "intellectual competence" and "authentic learning" set a troubling standard; even as they promise to teach a respect for difference, they threaten to censure students who deviate from their prescribed parameters of learning.

“Intellectual competence,” as defined by Egéa-Kuehne, sets a criterion for literacy which perpetuates the hierarchical dichotomy between critical and direct response, or reason and emotion, which is embedded within Western academic discourse. Unlike the “first-level readings” of censors which merely reiterate predisposed ideological positions, intellectual competence requires that the political and the personal be put on hold. Egéa-Kuehne maintains that these epistemological stances, or readings, are “critically detached,” the result of “‘distancing oneself from one’s thoughts,’ and taking an ironic stance toward the text.” Here, authentic learning depends on what Deanne Bogdan refers to as a “pedagogy of detachment,” where “controversial works are taught ‘critically.’”¹ These competent readings are thought but not felt, and I believe that such a “dissociation of sensibility” is counter-productive to the ethical stance implicit in Egéa-Kuehne’s account of dialogism. Passionate engagement, not just irony and detachment, is essential to readings which are richly complex in their reflexivity and ethically responsible in their willingness to struggle with tension and ambiguity.

In so prioritizing critical over direct response, intellectual competence equates the feelings, ideologies, and personal situatedness of each student with the subjective blinders of what James Moffett calls “*agnosis*,”² or the resistance to knowing. *Agnosis* is a sort of textual xenophobia; it is a defensive or resistant reading stance (like that of the censors stuck on the first-level) which distrusts and rejects otherness. Egéa-Kuehne suggests that the detachment of intellectually competent readings not only allows students to overcome *agnosis*, but is its only alternative. She writes that students “must not be prevented from encountering controversial expressions even though (or perhaps because) [they] might challenge the beliefs and values most central to their socio-cultural context and construed self-image.” She concurs with Moffett who writes that “[c]onflict occurs — and consciousness rises — when cultural pluralism forces acknowledgment of alternatives and exposes individuals to choice.”³ This is to say that the risks of dislocation and discomfort which accompany encounters with otherness are in fact what develop intellectual competence.

In assuming that all encounters with otherness necessarily result in some sort of pedagogical good, however, the heteroglossic perspective, or pluralist stance, diminishes the importance that differences in situatedness, what Deanne Bogdan has called the “feeling, power, and location problems,”⁴ make among students. The heteroglossic approach wrongly assumes that the multivocality of free speech, curricula which “teach the conflicts,”⁵ and pedagogies of detachment ensure a level playing field which would allow each student to leave his/her bundle of ideological filters, personal feelings, and political resistances at the classroom door. However, differences in power, privilege, and positionality are reproduced in classrooms, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes despite our best intentions. Thus, the ironic stance or critical detachment is a luxury that not all students can afford.⁶ When asked to assess critically the texts of their oppressors, students who have traditionally occupied the least privileged positions may experience psychological or pedagogical harm, harm more serious than the temporary confusion of dislocation or a slight blow to one’s ego. In addition, it could be argued that irony and detachment are reading stances, valued by the dominant discourse, which continue to oppress

marginalized people⁷ by devaluing felt-situated knowledges because they are "irrational."

Regardless, the refusal of marginalized students to "engage" with the "otherness of their otherers" must be distinguished from the "first-level readings" of censors which claim to be "clear, unambiguous, 'transparent, metalinguistic, and universal.'" In describing her feminist class' refusal to read a John Updike story, Deanne Bogdan argues that their actions were:

less an act of censorship than a hyperbolic sword of discrimination carving out for women a literature of their own, responses of their own, and knowledge of their own, including the right to refuse to engage what they are already too painfully aware.⁸

Claiming that the feminist consciousness of her students constituted a critical stance, Bogdan describes them as examples of the *connatae*, or those who already know.⁹ Here, marginalized students have epistemic privilege, that is, an insider's knowledge of oppression which makes their direct responses neither "first-level," incompetent, nor examples of *agnosis*. Nor does the subaltern's rejection of the "otherness of their otherers" necessarily entail a frozen consensus of fixed meaning and unified identities; rather, ideology, emotion, and critical awareness combine in the *connatae* to form a "divided consciousness" which realizes the constructed nature of text and the self-contradictions ever-present in subjectivity.¹⁰

What I have been trying to stress is that even though heteroglossic or dialogic approaches premised on critical detachment promise to teach students the skills necessary for negotiating otherness, it is possible that this goal is not appropriate for all students all of the time. Because the detachment and irony required of intellectual competence has the potential to cause pedagogical harm as well as pedagogical good, I feel I must temper my belief in the educational "effectiveness" or "success" of dialogism with what Kal Alston has referred to as the "pragmatic infusion of suspicion";¹¹ this is the practice of using the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those of the subaltern, to question the potentially totalizing meta-narratives of liberalism. Maintaining that "[t]he experience of the subaltern does not eliminate the importance of reason so much as it points to the absurdity of reliance on rationality as a guide to right and just behavior,"¹² Alston's "pragmatic infusion of suspicion" challenges philosophy of education's blind faith in abstractions such as reason, autonomy, fairness, and progress — those Enlightenment principles relied upon by the heteroglossic or non-neutral approach.

And so I find myself faced with the need to reconcile two contradictory impulses: First, my desire for a dialogic or heteroglossic stance which accepts that the risks and conflicts resulting from multivocality are the cost of raising consciousness. Second, there is my wariness of this same educational approach, my constant need to perform "reality checks" to recognize when particularities of situatedness and context might make such a normative goal inappropriate, even oppressive. In acknowledging the differences in power, privilege, and positionality among myself and my students, I am forced to interrogate even my best intentions.

In conclusion, I wish to suggest that my ambivalence toward this educational approach, my problematization of normative heteroglossia, is not incompatible with

the “double duties” outlined by Derrida and which Egéa-Kuehne discusses in the final pages of her paper. In an article entitled “Deconstruction Revisited and Derrida’s Call for Academic Responsibility,”¹³ Egéa-Kuehne maintains that the obligations of educators and educational theorists are double-edged, contradictory in their demands that the values of the past be simultaneously challenged and retained. For me, the philosophy of education exists within such a climate of ambiguity, and my responsibility is to negotiate the tensions embedded within my ideals, to mediate among the conflicts and contradictions which emerge when theory and practice inevitably clash in the tangible world of classrooms. I would add the following “double duty” to Derrida’s partial list — my obligation to encourage students to move beyond their current locations, to come to terms with the “otherness” within themselves as well as the conflicts, self-contradictions, and controversies presented to them by classroom curricula, balanced against my responsibility to recognize when the “feeling, power, and location problems” of my students make normative heteroglossia and its implied pedagogy of detachment an unethical and/or counter-productive educational approach.

1. Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers Heinemann, 1992), 163.

2. James Moffett, *Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 187.

3. *Ibid.*, 208.

4. Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination*, chap. 6.

5. This is the approach of Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992).

6. See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 18; on the ambiguity of irony and the idea that irony depends upon shared discursive communities which “provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony.”

7. For example, see B. Austin-Smith, “Into the Heart of Irony,” *Canadian Dimension* 27, no. 7 (1990): 51-52 and Hutcheon regarding the ironic stance expected of viewers attending the Royal Ontario Museum’s (ROM) 1989/1990 exhibit, *Into the Heart of Africa*. Hutcheon discusses how African-Canadians rejected the ROM’s intended post-colonial stance, claimed the exhibit racist, and picketed and boycotted it.

8. Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination*, 142.

9. *Ibid.*, 139.

10. *Ibid.*, 139-40.

11. Kal Alston, “Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1996), 151.

12. *Ibid.*, 150-51.

13. Denise Egéa-Kuehne, “Deconstruction Revisited and Derrida’s Call for Academic Responsibility,” *Educational Theory* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 293-309.