

Affect[ing] and Listening to the “Critical Spirit” in Communities of Inquiry

Erica Eva Colmenares

San José State University

Roy Danovitch

Teachers College, Columbia University

Just a few weeks ago, Russia launched a brazen attack on Ukraine. As we watched the violent and visceral imagery circulate across media platforms, we experienced the inchoate and inarticulate sensation that our world had, once again, become a life-threatening “contact zone,” a space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”¹ As we attempted to navigate the flurry of reporting and editorializing—on geopolitics, ideology, resistance, freedom, propaganda, and diplomacy—we were again confronted with the limits of reason and dialogue in staving off the drumbeats of war and reconciling seemingly incommensurable realities. It is against this backdrop that we engaged with Trent Davis’ “The World Well Found.”

In “The World Well Found,” Davis argues for the cultivation of critical thinking as one of the “pedagogical arts” of teaching and learning. Drawing from Harvey Seigel’s work, Davis defines critical thinking as the ability to evaluate arguments and develop a “critical spirit,” or a commitment to “certain attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits.”² According to Davis, one way to foster such thinking is through Donald Davidson’s notion of triangulation, where knowledge construction is viewed as a triangular interaction between an individual, the wider community, and the world. These three components of the triangle work together simultaneously to “produce a proposition that is ‘meaningful’ and therefore counts as knowledge.”³ To meet the demands of such triangulation and to foster Siegel’s version of critical thinking, Davis argues for the cultivation of communities of inquiry (COIs) where individuals can “take seriously the pedagogical goal of enhancing their capacity to be ‘critical thinkers’ . . . [and] dedicated to finding and sharing the best of reasons with others.”⁴

There is much to appreciate in Davis’ argument. The cultivation of

COIs as a practice that enhances critical thinking and fosters shared understanding has been well documented and highly praised for its ethical, social, and pedagogical benefits.⁵ As educators who have routinely used COIs, we agree with the possibilities afforded with(in) these communities and wish to amplify Siegel’s “critical spirit” and traditional conceptualizations of COIs. As we will explain, because communities of inquiries are often rooted in frameworks that privilege reason and dialogue, we urge COIs to embrace—and give equal footing to—*affect* and *radical listening*.⁶ We define affect in the Deleuzoguattarian sense, as “‘bodily’ impulses and sensations” that move individuals in unexpected ways.⁷ Given the recent geopolitical events, when normative truths are manipulated and when dialogue seems to be an empty “talking cure,” we urge for COIs to center both reason *and* affect, as well as dialogue *and* radical listening.⁸ We argue that these practices can expand and enrich the practice of critical thinking in the contact zone while surfacing a richer and more diverse field of meanings among participants negotiating distinct and frequently clashing world views.

RATIONALISM AND AFFECT IN COIs

Communities of inquiry are frequently predicated on a logocentric (that is, rationalist) paradigm that focuses on the centrality of the human self and reason as the foundation of all “truth” and knowledge. This framework, which derives from the Enlightenment, works from a particular set of epistemological and ontological assumptions. They include language as transparent and able to reflect reality; the human self as autonomous, unified, and stable; and the existence of hierarchical binaries (for example, where the mind or reason is seen as superior to the body and emotion).⁹ Typically, these assumptions work to privilege epistemological structures of truth and knowledge, while ignoring the affective dimension of our encounters, along with their ontological, embodied, and material qualities.

We would like to clarify, however, that our understanding of affect is qualitatively distinct from emotion or feeling. Drawing from the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, we view affect as a “force,” “capacity,” or “intensity” that is felt in the body and can change or affect what a body can do.¹⁰ Affect, for example, was that inexplicable gut-wrenching sensation that gripped us as we watched the televised images from Ukraine and moved

our bodies in myriad ways: nudging us to pace back and forth in front of the television, doom scroll through Twitter at 3:00 a.m., and viscerally respond to scenes of panic, despair, and anguish.

We want to propose that missing from Davidson's notion of triangulation, Siegel's "critical spirit," and COIs rooted in rationalist frameworks, is the role that affect plays in the relational process of knowledge construction. This absence is not surprising, of course. As Megan Boler articulates in her book, *Feeling Power*, Western philosophy has historically devalued the affective realm, often pitting it against reason and relegating it to the private, female sphere.¹¹ For Boler, however, the affective shapes "how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see."¹² If affect does indeed shape what one "sees," names, and subsequently constructs as knowledge, it follows that affect might actually precede *and* enable the practice of reason. As such, we want to suggest that to be "*appropriately moved by reasons*," as Harvey Siegel urges, is much more than a causal interaction between three sides of a triangle.¹³ *It is primordially an affective one*. Affect—not reason—is what *appropriately moves* us. Consequently, we need to be(come) more sensitive to the affective forces that swirl across individuals and communities of inquiry. By being "on the lookout" for the bubbling up of intensities (that is, affect)—whether it is a palpably changing atmosphere, a burst of tears, or a charged silence—we can better support students' "critical spirit" in communities of inquiry.¹⁴

NEED FOR RADICAL LISTENING

What practice might allow us to attend to the affective dimensions of COIs, and transcend the limits of language, speech, and reason? How do we better attend to the quality and complexity of our engagements within the conflict zone? What benefits might such a practice provide? Drawing from Bronwyn Davies, we propose moving beyond a "talking cure" and centering the practice of "radical listening."¹⁵ This approach goes beyond "listening for meaning, or listening to judge the correctness of the others' understanding, or even listening to know the identity of the other."¹⁶ Radical listening calls for us to understand the self as an emergent, relational being that opens itself up to continual difference within the space of interlocution. In the process, David Kennedy argues, "self-other boundaries become mutually transgressive and

thereby negotiable between persons.”¹⁷ In the same vein, Davies notes that:

In the radical pedagogy I am exploring here, in which primary is given to the self in process, and to differentiation as evolution, listening involves stretching the ears, and all the senses. It requires focused attention, an intensification of attention to the other and the happening-in-between . . .

. . . listening involves much more than the decoding of sound for meaning.

When one truly listens, the whole body is oriented towards the other.¹⁸

Certainly, radical listening of this kind poses a challenge to traditional forms of democratic dialogue which depend on active reflection, discussion, and consensus-building. In centering concepts like affect, emergence, relationality, and “multiplicity,” radical listening makes it harder—not easier—to secure the normative vocabulary for discourse to be meaningful, or to fulfill all sides of the Davidsonian triangle. Yet if the goal within the contact zone is to deepen and enrich understanding among participants with different (and differing) desires, perspectives, and modes of communicating, we stand to benefit from centering the shape of our listening just as much as the shape of our thinking. This practice may allow us to help students better “appreciate the vastness and complexity of the world we share.”¹⁹ This is a praiseworthy and vital pedagogical goal—and one that is insufficiently represented in contemporary political discourse.

CONCLUSION

As we continue to creep into this “post-truth” era—where commonsensical ways of understanding the world have fallen apart—we call for a critical spirit and community of inquiry that is not solely predicated on reason or dialogue, but also welcomes affect *and* radical listening.²⁰ To be clear, our intention is not to promote another set of binaries: affect vs. reason or talking vs. listening. Rather, we urge for the cultivation of COIs that recognize the limitations of a rationalist “either/or” framework, and embrace the “ands”: reason *and* affect, dialogue *and* radical listening, *and, and . . .* After all, it is the *ands* which help us expand unforeseen possibilities, including imagining more expansive communities of inquiries and a more capacious “critical spirit.”²¹

1 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991), 34.

2 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New

York: Routledge, 1988), 8.

3 Trent Davis, “‘The World *Well Found*’: Critical Thinking in the Contact Zone,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

4 Davis, “‘The World *Well Found*,’” (same issue).

5 Maughn Rollins Gregory, and Megan Jane Lavery, eds. *In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

6 Bronwyn Davies, “Listening: A Radical Pedagogy,” in *Challenging Gender: Normalization and Beyond* (Forum for Genusvetenskap: Mid-Sweden University, Sundsvall, 2011).

7 Bessie P. Dernikos, Nancy Lesko, Stephanie D. McCall, and Alyssa D. Niccolini, *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education: Theory, Research, and Pedagogies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

8 Bronwyn Davies, “Listening: A Radical Pedagogy,” *Challenging Gender: Normalization and Beyond* (2011): 107-120.

9 Bessie P. Dernikos, Nancy Lesko, Stephanie D. McCall, and Alyssa D. Niccolini, *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education: Theory, Research, and Pedagogies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

10 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988); Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 83-109.

11 Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

12 Boler, *Feeling Power*, 177.

13 Trent Davis, “‘The World *Well Found*’: Critical Thinking in the Contact Zone,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3, (emphasis in original).

14 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

15 Bronwyn Davies, “Listening: A Radical Pedagogy,” *Challenging Gender: Normalization and Beyond* (2011); Alison Jones, “Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue,” *Counterpoints* 240 (2004): 57-67.

16 Bronwyn Davies, “Listening: A Radical Pedagogy,” *Challenging Gender: Normalization and Beyond* (2011), 11.

17 David Kennedy, *The Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education* (New York: Suny Press, 2012), 164.

18 Bronwyn Davies, “Listening: A Radical Pedagogy,” *Challenging Gender: Normalization and Beyond* (2011), 1.

19 Trent Davis, ““The World *Well Found*”: Critical Thinking in the Contact Zone,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 3 (same issue).

20 Kathryn J. Strom and Adrian D. Martin, “Thinking with Theory in an Era of Trump,” *Issues in Teacher Education* 26, no. 3 (2017): 3-22.

21 Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge), 2.