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## *Towards Epistolary Dialogue*

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### **Abstract**

*In this essay, we investigate the potential of letters as a communicative genre that embodies dialogue, and thus, disrupts power relations. To do so, we first outline a theoretical framework that draws upon feminist and critical communication pedagogies. We specifically focus on two scholars—Nel Noddings and Paulo Freire—for the ways they utilize dialogue in developing their pedagogical positions. We then explain our epistolary method of letter writing, which stood as the central component of a semester-long project between us as student and teacher. We use excerpts from our letters to analyze the epistolary form as conducive to dialogic engagement—what we call epistolary dialogue. We argue that epistolary dialogue is made possible due to letters being invitational, temporal, personal, and constructive.*



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Dear Sandy,

*So, I really like the idea of letters as a form of dialogue. I am by no means saying that this is a form we have to keep; simply that it is one way I know to offer an invitation to dialogue. There is something personal about a letter. Yes, I know (and have received) form letters/junk mail more times than I care to count. But, when I receive a letter—an actual, in-the-mail letter (or a personal email)—I always feel special. To me, it signals that someone took time to consider thoughts to/of me. Letters may not always be kind, but there is still something personal about the exchange of them. For me, there is still a kind of care that must be taken when writing words you know another person will see.*

(excerpt from opening letter from Molly to Sandy, January 2012)

Dear Molly,

*I find that my own insecurities and vulnerabilities are, perhaps, serving as limitations to dialogue. I remember texting Satoshi [my colleague and grad school cohort] after our first class period, writing something like, “Were we this smart when we were in grad school?” And I’ve commented to several faculty members, “The grad students here are just so smart!” Y’all have just blown me away, and I have to sometimes step back and remember that I don’t have to have all the answers, but if I begin with questions, care, concern, love, critical thought and action, trust, and so on, then I will also reap those same things. This is the dialogic circle; these are all conditions for dialogue, and they are also effects of dialogue. I know that my vulnerability and my fear are productive; sometimes, though, I don’t want to resolve the teacher-student contradiction quite so literally!! :-)*

(excerpt from response letter from Sandy to Molly, January 2012)

### Introduction

In Spring of 2012, we found ourselves as classmates [formally known as “student” and “teacher,” or, in Freire’s (1970/2000) terms, as teacher-student and student-teacher] in a special topics course titled “Communication Pedagogy: Dialogue and Pedagogy.” The situation was both ideal and not.

**Molly:** As a department, we had not yet seen the one-year anniversary of the death of our teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend, Dr. John T. Warren. We were still raw in our mourning of him, and both excited and hesitant about a new pedagogue coming to teach us. We didn’t want to compare Sandy to John, but there was an aspect of “filling his shoes” I think Sandy may have felt. So, when a class on pedagogy was offered, especially a class on dialogue and pedagogy, I was excited by the possibility of both a new-to-me topic and professor. I was impressed by Sandy on the first day of class; she truly embodied her commitment to critical communication pedagogy. Entering that first day, she introduced herself, and began by offering us the chance to help create the class. With a general focus on dialogue in/and pedagogy, we offered suggestions, as a class, for readings, projects, and assignments. In this give-and-take class-building exercise, we eventually decided that each student (there were nine of us in the class) would work one-on-one with Sandy to develop our required assignments for the course.

**Sandy:** I had just joined the faculty in the department where Molly was a graduate student. I began in mid-year, not the most ideal. The previous April, faculty member John T. Warren passed away at 36 years-old from advanced esophageal cancer, having been diagnosed only 28 days before his passing. John was a scholar beyond his years, having authored multiple books, won awards at the university and regional level for his teaching and research, had more essays and articles published than many full professors, and indeed, had already been promoted to full professor. His metaphorical shoes weren't just big; they were enormous. Most notable for us, he and Deanna L. Fassett had carved a niche for themselves by developing critical communication pedagogy. Those of us in the fields of communication pedagogy and critical pedagogy owe much to Deanna and John for this crucial and fundamental contribution to our studies and practices. To join the faculty in the wake of such a significant loss not only to the departmental community, but to the academic community, can engender a less-than-solid level of self-confidence. Do I belong here? Will I live up to John's name? Do people *expect* me to live up to John's name? The conventional idea of teacher power certainly didn't feel applicable here. Less than ideal.

At the same time, teaching in this department is almost as close to ideal as I could imagine. This is my graduate alma mater, where my own sense of critical and engaged pedagogy developed. My best friend teaches here. My family lives close by. Nothing is *ideal*, but this is quite close.

**Molly:** The year prior to this, I had taken a class in which letter-writing-as-method became an important topic for a classmate/colleague and me to explore, and I immediately wondered what dialoguing through letters might look like. I made an appointment to meet with Sandy, to propose my semester assignment and project. I was concerned that she would find the project not "rigorous" enough to work for a graduate class. I was overjoyed that she not only allowed me to do the project, but was willing to work with me. For the class, I proposed that, working through Google documents, we could write letters back-and-forth to consider how dialogue happens in a written form. While I was excited that she had agreed to something that felt important to me, I could not have predicted how vital these letters would become for me in considering teacher-student power relations.

In this essay, we investigate the potential of letters as a communicative genre that embodies dialogue, and thus, disrupts power relations. To do so, we first outline a theoretical framework that draws upon feminist and critical communication pedagogies. We specifically focus on two scholars—Nel Noddings and Paulo Freire—for the ways they utilize dialogue in developing their pedagogical positions. We then explain our epistolary method of letter writing and provide the details of our semester-long engagement in this method. Taken together, these components provide the necessary foundation for our research. We use excerpts from our letters throughout the semester to demonstrate how letters may or may not be conducive to dialogic engagement—what we call *epistolary dialogue*. After explicating the implications of such epistolary dialogue for the educational enterprise, we acknowledge the limitations of this genre.

### **Theoretical Framework for Dialogue**

We locate ourselves, and this project, at the intersections of feminist and critical communication pedagogies. While certainly these are two unique strands of pedagogical praxis, they also speak to and with one another in productive ways. We take time, then, to provide a

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brief explication of each, before clarifying the specific elements that primarily inform our journey into pedagogical dialogue.

We start from a place of critical pedagogy, which McLaren (2002) claims “examines schools both in their historical context and as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the class-driven dominant society” (p. 185). For McLaren, critical pedagogy offers “a variety of important counterlogics to the positivistic, ahistorical, and depoliticized analysis employed by both liberal and conservative critics of schooling” (p. 185). At its core, critical pedagogy seeks to make visible those structures of power that mystify inequitable power relations at the micro and macro levels, and in particular, the implications of such relations on educational contexts, processes, and participants. After making such structures visible, critical pedagogues work with educational participants to develop the reflexive tools to resist these inequitable structures. In a move to center communication, Fassett and Warren (2007) identified *critical communication pedagogy* as the means to name communication as the fundamental phenomenon by which macro and micro power structures are created, maintained, and disrupted, specifically within pedagogical contexts (though not limited to formal schooling processes). Elements of these power structures include identity, language, actions, space, and so on. In other words, the ways power is created, maintained, and disrupted within educational contexts cannot be separated from educational participants’ identities, structures of language, spatial arrangements, etc. The primary contribution of critical communication pedagogy to our project is a focus on mundane instantiations of communication, and the ways those instantiations both create and reflect larger power structures.

Feminist pedagogy resonates with critical pedagogy in important ways, and specifically for us, also addresses the notion of power. Manicom (1992) defines feminist pedagogy:

Challenges to, and transformation of dominant power relations are central. Feminist pedagogy is, at its core, about the feminist critique (which challenges the basis of all knowledge and ways of knowing), and the feminist project (which aims to transform oppressive and interlocking power relations in pursuit of a world characterized by increased social justice). (p. 366-367)

Certainly feminism is at the heart of feminist pedagogy. Addressing (and working to dismantle) gender inequity is a central tenet of feminist theory, and as such, feminist pedagogy also works to make visible and resist gender inequity in the classroom. Further, feminist pedagogy values forms of power-sharing and centering of relationships, forms that are different from the traditional, masculinist ways of deploying power and (de)valuing relationships that are the norm in educational contexts. (Critical pedagogy is often subject to the critique that it perpetuates masculinist ways of knowing and being, even in its effort to deconstruct power relations. See Ellsworth, 1989.) Moreover, feminist pedagogy privileges feminine ways of knowing that rely less on rational, enlightenment logic (and that have subjugated women and minorities, creating and perpetuating inequity) and more on relational ways of knowing and being. Mayberry (1999) writes that feminist pedagogy “invites students to critique the unequal social relations embedded in contemporary society and to ask why these circumstances exist and what one can do about them” (p. 7). So, feminist pedagogy is dedicated to critiquing the world and acting on the world in ways that transform society toward more equity—a commitment to which we both aspire. The focus on affective ways of knowing and being, and how those ways function transformatively towards equitable relations, remains the greatest contribution of feminist pedagogy to our project.

A primary component of critical pedagogy, critical communication pedagogy, and feminist pedagogy is the phenomenon of dialogue. In outlining a notion of dialogue, we draw primarily from Noddings (within feminist pedagogy) and Freire (within critical pedagogy). We turn to these two theorists not because they believe dialogue to be an end in itself, but because they see dialogue as a means to a better world—a more caring world for Noddings and a more literate and just world for Freire. In this section, we discuss the contributions that each scholars' understandings of dialogue bring to our project in terms of the ways that dialogue disrupts power relations.

### *Nel Noddings: Dialogue and Interpersonal Power*

A primary mode through which a relational logic takes form within a feminist pedagogy is the communication of care. Nel Noddings is perhaps most widely known for her work in care. Care at the most basic level is about “how we should meet and treat others and ourselves” (Noddings, 2006, p. 228). Noddings describes care as having two parties: the one-caring (also called the carer) and the cared-for. As she defines it, care is only “completed” when it is fulfilled in both parties (1984, p. 68). Ideally, the one-caring “sees the best self in the cared-for and works with him [or her] to actualize that self” (p. 64). Caring for others is about helping them become the best possible version of themselves. Translating care to the classroom, Noddings identifies four components educators can use to teach (with) an ethic of care: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. We focus specifically on dialogue as an element of this ethic.

The classroom is a place where there are inherent power imbalances—teachers walk in with power (e.g., the power to give grades, the power to determine who speaks and when, the power to enact validated forms of punishment) that students do not have. This is not to say that students have no power. As Warren and Fassett (2015) remind us, “Power is never a zero-sum game or either/or dichotomy” (p. 8); we all have some kind of power to make choices in any given situation. Because there is a power imbalance heavily favoring the teacher, working toward more equitable stances within the classroom is not easy. Still, scholars like Noddings suggest that this is what we should do if we want to engage our students in dialogue. For Noddings (2005), dialogue is the “common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation” (p. 23). Thus, dialogue is about working together to find answers, not students deferring to a teacher’s knowledge. Noddings expects that teachers will work *with* students to find answers rather than merely providing them. Further, she believes that dialogue “connects us to each other” (p. 23) because dialogue is a delicate balance of listening and responding to one another. Indeed, teachers “must learn to listen as well as to talk” (Noddings, 1984, p. 186). If connections are to remain between teachers and students, a subject about which we do not often speak positively, it is vital that dialogue be a give-and-take instead of a (teacher) monologue with an audience. It’s important that we do not downplay these connections between teachers and students, as they may be transformational for teacher and student alike.

Thus, the interpersonal relationship between a teacher and a student is one that is steeped within a system of unequal power relations. *At the same time*, it is a relationship that can draw upon such relations to question and resist inequity. Noddings (1984) insists that dialogue must necessarily be about reciprocal recognition of the other as a person, as a human being—not simply as “student” or as “teacher.” “We have been talking about dialogue—about talking and listening and sharing and responding to each other,” writes Noddings (1984, p. 186). When teachers adopt a dialogical stance of listening, and when they embrace and encourage dialogue,

they invite learners to question power relations in the classroom. They welcome learners' questions of "why" (Noddings, 2005, p. 23). They use the requisite "openness, flexibility, and patience" to rest in the sometimes-uncomfortable space of being confronted with power (either as they enact it, or as it is enacted upon them) (Noddings, 2007, p. 56). Furthermore, they invite students into this same space in an effort to create a mutual and shared sense of learning with and responding to one another as partners in the caring, pedagogical relationship.

### *Paulo Freire: Dialogue in the Public Sphere*

Paulo Freire remains the most often-cited proponent of critical pedagogy, although he never identified himself as such. His educational philosophy is wide-spread, and his work is referenced in many fields including education, sociology, communication studies, and anthropology, among others. In communication specifically, scholars often draw from Freire when talking about education (Sprague, 1992). We see Freire most thoroughly tied with communication research in the work of critical scholars such as Cooks (2010), who focuses on the development of critical communication pedagogy as a field of study, and Simpson (2010), who focuses on the intersections of critical race theory and critical communication pedagogy. The connection between Freire (as critical pedagogue), communication, and dialogue is clear when we consider the field of critical communication pedagogy. In *Critical Communication Pedagogy*, Fassett and Warren (2007) outline ten commitments for critical communication pedagogy/pedagogues. Their tenth commitment serves as the foundational principle on which our essay is based, and indeed, in which we wanted to engage through our letter writing: "*Critical communication educators engage dialogue as both metaphor and method for our relationships with others*" (p. 54).

While we may find similarities between Noddings and Freire, their contextual focus for dialogue provides for us the important difference that allows their ideas to be unique yet compatible. Noddings's focus on dialogue involves a micro-level interpersonal relationship between the teacher and student, and how dialogue might disrupt power inequity within that relationship. Freire's focus involves a macro-level public sphere in which empowered Subjects name and work against inequitable structures in their lives. To clarify, Noddings takes as her point of departure a relationship, while Freire takes as his point of departure a context. For purposes of pedagogical application, Noddings's interpersonal relationship takes place in the classroom, which we understand as a public sphere. Thus, we acknowledge both their convergence and divergence. It would be useful, then, to outline how Freire understands dialogue functioning within the public sphere of the classroom—or, more appropriately for Freire, an educational context.<sup>1</sup>

For Freire, dialogue is a means for individuals to participate in the public sphere. He understood dialogue to be the mechanism through which human beings enact their fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Much of Freire's pedagogy was built from and meant to inform not the traditional space of education—the classroom—but any context of public pedagogy. This is especially true of his earlier work. For example, the pedagogical praxis he outlines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000) was contextualized within the communities of peasants he worked with, often in places akin to what we might commonly think of as community centers. In his later *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998a), he speaks much more directly to "teachers," and may resonate more with what we might consider a traditional classroom. That same year, he published *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* (1998b), in which he directly addressed classroom practices.

right to participate in the making of their own lives, a right often denied to those in positions of less power. He sought out educational processes that created the conditions by which all people can reflect upon, name, and act in their worlds. This is not to say that he didn't believe individual relationships to be important. Indeed, one of his most widely-known concepts—the resolution of the teacher-student contradiction—relies upon educational participants working against the traditionally polarizing roles of “teacher” and “student.” What this is to say—what we mean when we say that the micro-level relationship takes on meaning when in the context of the macro-level sphere—is that when educational participants work toward resolving the teacher-student contradiction, they foreground the fact of the resolution itself, rather than the necessity of the resolution *because of the individuals involved*. They work towards the resolution under any conditions, rather than because they have *first* become invested interpersonally in any given student/teacher. Dialogue is the way the resolution comes to pass, and in the process, “a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 80). Teachers and students become co-investigators of the world, critically and dialogically experiencing and constructing the world. Such a revision of this traditionally opposed relationship embodies the feminist tenet of power-sharing.

As an “existential necessity” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 88), dialogue is an indispensable component of humanity. This sounds exaggerated; on the contrary, however, Freire meant it quite literally. In order to move towards being more fully human—the task of an empowered Subject in the world—one must engage in dialogue, and engage the world dialogically. “Dialogue ... is a fundamental precondition for [people's] true humanization” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 137). Dialogue is the means by which oppressed peoples find liberation; it is the mechanism through which the oppressed create a space for themselves to intervene in creating the conditions within which they live (Freire, 1970/2000). It is the action one may take when one understands the self as an empowered, agentic Subject, one who acts in the world rather than one who is acted upon. When a Subject comes to this self-understanding—which doesn't take place *before* or *after* engaging in dialogue, but rather, takes place *within* dialogue—then the aim of dialogue becomes a possibility, that aim being “to create progressive social change and more egalitarian social relations” (Bartlett, 2005, p. 345). Freire (1970/2000) sees dialogue as “the encounter between men [and/or women], mediated by the world, in order to name” (p. 88) and “transform the world” (p. 167).

### **Epistolary Method**

We anchor our work in epistolary method as a form of feminist pedagogy (White, Wright-Soika, & Russell, 2007). Specifically, we invoke feminist pedagogues' concern with relationships among classrooms, people, and power (Manicom, 1992). This is the pivotal point into which we engage dialogue as feminist pedagogy. The dialogue we enter through our letters allows us to intricately dissect and examine some of these relationships—relationships situated in classroom spaces (that bleed out from those spaces) and rife with power dynamics that ebb and flow. Foss and Foss (1991) support this dialogue, explaining that letter writing can be particularly useful for analysis between women, as letters serve a therapeutic function akin to journaling. Letters become a place of empowerment where we engage in feminist, critical pedagogy dedicated to negotiating relationships in our world, including the relationship between us.

Letter writing as a method is a well-known and well-used form. In fact, epistolary fiction, or writing stories in the form of letters, is an established genre (Beebee, 1999; Day, 1966; Würzbach, 1969). While letter writing became a more middle class feminine act in later years, letters were once the domain of men, as well. One needs only to look at the Bible with the multiple epistles of Paul to see the weight men's words have historically carried. Still, women's letters and women's epistolary work have garnered much attention. For example, Kauffman (1986) argues that the female authors she studies in her book were "artists, taking control of the production of writing to challenge not just men's representation of them but—particularly as it relates to gender—the fundamental tenets of representation itself" (p. 22). Ray (2009) similarly notes in her study that women's letters in Renaissance Italy "expanded the parameters of conventional epistolary discourse by validating and publicizing new areas of female experience" (p. 219). Academically speaking, Sameshima (2007) created an entire dissertation in epistolary form. Thinking about letters and research, we look to Gale and Wyatt (2006) whose epistolary exchanges uphold letters as research. Similarly, in *This Bridge We Call Home* (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002), there are no less than six letters or email dialogues comprising research on race and borderland identity (see essays in that book by Abdelhadi & Abdulhadi; Carbajal; Miranda & Keating; Pham; Rodriguez & Vasquez; and Swan). We find letters in feminist work (Bondoc & Daly, 1999; Chesler, 1997), as well as in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1998b).

Our own field of Communication Studies, too, has seen its share of letters-as-scholarship (Aoki, 2008; Corey, 2004; Ono, 1997). Speaking from a more feminist pedagogical standpoint, Calafell (2007) recalls the words of encouragement she received through letters, which she identifies as acts of love. Bell, Golobmisky, Singh, and Hirschmann (2000) demonstrate the analysis Foss and Foss (1991) identify as they speak of letters as acts of mentorship, communicating love and care among this group of women.

Letters have two important functions: on an individual level, they often articulate the most personal aspects of their authors, and on a pedagogical level, they embrace a personal narrative epistemology. Given these functions, we champion epistolary methods for their potential to illuminate marginalized experiences and epistemologies. Such methods may be particularly resonant with persons who occupy subordinated cultural locations (including, but not limited to, women, sexual minorities, and racial minorities). Traditional methods of research tend to underscore a rationalist logic that privileges dominant modes of knowing. These modes perpetuate epistemological subordination, rendering all other modes of knowing as lesser-than. Further, by embracing a personal narrative epistemology, letter writing privileges personal experience as data, as well as the sharing of those experiences as way to understand how the personal and the cultural are co-constitutive. Moreover, letter writing makes visible those experiences that often go unarticulated, which oftentimes are experiences of oppression. For example, White, Wright-Soika, and Russell (2007) point to letter writing as a method of community-building amongst women, especially during times of geographical separation. As another example, Sowards (2012) engaged in a rhetorical analysis of the letters of Dolores Huerta (co-founder of the United Farm Workers, along with Cesar Chavez), and found that her letters to Chavez allowed her to better understand her role in the UFW, along with a deeper sense of self (identity consciousness).

So, we entered into our epistolary relationship without pretense. As two White women in the academy, we understood that we came to this project with particular privileges, allowing us to find safety in our communication. We didn't develop a framework for the content of our



letters, other than considering critical communication pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. We felt it important for our letters to be emergent, taking on a life of their own. We wanted the letter writing space to be organic, a space available for whatever we needed it to be at the time. Because our relationship began as an understood student-teacher relationship, we didn't worry much about the class content; we were confident that would be there in keeping with the project in which the class was situated. However, because our relationship began as an understood student-teacher relationship, we also knew that power worked in very influential ways. Power remained a fundamental component of our relationship *as* teacher-student. It did so despite whatever other frameworks we used to understand our relationship at the time, and functioned as a founding element of our relationship. (That is, we entered into a relationship due to our roles as student and teacher; therefore, a power script was part of our relationship from the beginning.) Even if that power was imbalanced, it still existed within both of those roles. Thus, our pedagogical practices are grounded in the commitment to disrupting power relations, and our engagement with letter writing in the course embodied this commitment from the beginning. In short, the requirement for the project was that, as part of the content of our letters, we would engage the concepts within and assumptions about dialogue and pedagogy through engaging in letter writing. Whatever else came of it was organic to the process.

In our initial conversations about the class project, we gave ourselves the structure of writing once every week or two. However, not long after, we realized that having this frequency guideline was both unnecessary and somewhat antithetical. Our letter writing frequency took on a generative life of its own as we began to watch dialogue, feminist pedagogy, and critical communication pedagogy unfold in our own lives outside of our specific dialogue seminar. Our letter writing became a place where we made our pedagogy visible to one another, and so it functioned as a place to explore our (pedagogical) identities. As such, we framed our experiences as teachers and students with the concepts explored in class. Those experiences weren't relegated to course readings and discussions. Rather, our course readings and discussions became the lenses through which we made sense of our experiences as teachers and students. Further, we don't understand our individual letter entries as being separate dialogues. We felt it important—and still do here, in this essay—to not limit *dialogue* with a beginning and an ending. It was only after the semester was over that we took a step back to reflect upon the process in a more holistic way.

**Molly:** I came to Sandy with the intention of inviting her—realizing the risk of the student “inviting” the teacher—into an epistolary dialogue.

**Sandy:** I appreciated Molly's invitation, and happily accepted.

We knew that letters engaged and resisted power in ways other modes of communication did not. We knew that we both came from a shared place of feminist and critical communication pedagogies. And so, together, using the frameworks of Noddings's dialogue in interpersonal relationships—couched in feminist pedagogy—and Freire's dialogue in the public sphere—couched in critical pedagogy—we wrote ourselves into an epistolary relationship.

## Representing our Dialogue

In what follows, we draw upon the qualities of dialogue as identified by Noddings and Freire. In sum, those qualities include an invitation to dialogue and relationship; a temporal component allowing us to reflect and respond; a mutual recognition of and appreciation for one

another's fundamental personhood; and a recognition of the constitutive nature of communication. With those in mind, we examine the characteristics of letter writing that allow such dialogue to happen. The difficulty of putting such an endeavor into a reflective essay is that, given constraints of page limits, we can't provide the entire transcript of our letters. Throughout what follows, the reader will encounter several voices (see Rambo's layered account, 1995). In some sections, we both—Molly and Sandy—write in a singular, theoretical voice. In other sections, we write individually *about* our letters, in the present space of this essay. To mark these individual voices, we use our names to identify the speaker/writer. Interspersed throughout, we then move into our own individual voices of subjective experience; these latter excerpts (italicized and set apart by three centered asterisks) are taken directly from our written dialogue with one another during the semester of the Dialogue and Pedagogy class. They are made possible *because* they take place within the form of a letter.

### **Epistolary Dialogue**

We identify four qualities found in the genre of letter writing that allowed dialogue to happen between us over the course of that semester (and beyond). Those qualities include:

- invitational
- temporal
- personal
- constructive

While we discuss each quality individually below, we also acknowledge that they are certainly interdependent.

#### *Invitational*

Epistolary dialogue invites participants into a relational space. For us, this space was primed as a space to be vulnerable. Such dialogue invites participants to express their humanity, with all of its flaws, uncertainties, and unknowns. It invites humility of self and grace towards the other.

\* \* \*

*Molly: There's vulnerability in sharing our work; it means we have to be open to critique/questions/judgment/accusations.*

\* \* \*

**Molly:** In my first letter to Sandy, I say that I think dialogue should start with an invitation. I quickly second-guess that, especially because I wonder what power imbalances might be in place that render an invitation coercive. What's more, I think about the fact that if we start in invitation, we have to be ready for the other party to rightfully refuse the invitation. This risk, though, makes sense in light of an invitation. My idea to invite Sandy to engage in epistolary dialogue risked my own vulnerability. I opened myself up to the possibility that Sandy might say no, and/or that our interactions might be limited. Luckily, she chose to engage the project with me, and we found more moments of vulnerability together.

Epistolary dialogue invites us to expose our differences or character flaws and face the potentially negative judgment that might result. Commenting on the apparent intelligence of two of my classmates, I admit to Sandy my own self-critique.

\* \* \*

*Molly: I often consider how I am not “good enough” or “smart enough” to be here. I rarely give myself credit for, well, anything.*

\* \* \*

Sandy could have assumed I was simply self-deprecating in order to garner encouragement from her. However, she doesn't respond by treating me differently in or out of class. She instead helps me understand that we all have important ideas to share with the class.

Sandy reciprocates that humility in her first letter to me when she admits that loving all others can be a challenge. We had discussed in class that, according to Freire, we should love our fellow humans by virtue of their humanity, even as we might find them difficult to like.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: I struggled with this for a long time, knowing that my desire to be a cultural worker in the classroom and to teach with a critical consciousness mandated a deep and profound love for students. As I mentioned [in class], it is quite difficult to love some people—not impossible, but difficult. I worry that oftentimes, I am performing love in a way that is akin to false generosity.*

\* \* \*

In this humble moment, Sandy admits that she is not always the person she aspires to be. As a teacher admitting this to a student, she risks my judgment and the potential that I could hold this against her when grades are posted at the end of the semester.

Perhaps it makes sense that I, as a student, trust Sandy enough to express uncertainties to her. Teachers are sometimes made privy to students' private lives when they emit trustworthiness in the classroom. In fact, I turned to Sandy after a particularly troubling moment in the class of a professor across campus. In my letter to Sandy, I describe in as much detail as I can the interaction I had with a professor over the proposal of a semester project in the class.

\* \* \*

*Molly: The following week in class, he decided to give us verbal, public feedback about our proposals (without asking our permission, and without our knowing what our classmates were writing about) .... When he got to my project, however, he made a confused face, and spent about 10 minutes explaining why my project was a disappointment.*

\* \* \*

I was mortified and thought that Sandy might be able to help me see the moment from a different perspective. I entered the space of our letters raw and vulnerable, trying to make sense of a terrible pedagogical moment. At one point in this long letter, I lamented to Sandy, “*I am angry, hurt, and feel very unsafe in this man's class.*” In response, Sandy graciously validated my feelings. She invited a reciprocal show of grace on my part by sharing her own frustrations with a situation in which a student in her class had earned a B but wanted an A. Sandy mulled over how to move through and address the situation with the student. She outlined in her letter all of the reasons her rational self should be at peace with the grade of B.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: At the same time, I can't figure out why I'm feeling like this is devastating! He's going to get a B in the course, and really, that's not a bad grade! I almost feel like I should write him a letter or something explaining this, and at the same time, my rational self asks me why I think I*

*should spend this much of my energy on him .... He's not been rude, he's not been angry (at least to my face), none of those things, but I don't want to see him [in class] knowing that all I had to do was to say "OK" for him to be satisfied.*

\* \* \*

Sandy chose to be vulnerable about her own frustrations with grades, as well as her personal feelings about the student. Through writing her struggle in this letter, it is clear the depth to which Sandy cares about her students and strives to balance “fairness” to the whole class and equity for each individual student. Sandy risked her credibility as a “professor” by openly admitting—to another student (even if a graduate student)—that she struggles over a common issue teachers face.

Mutual vulnerability is not often invited into traditional teacher-student relationships. In fact, some may see this as a detriment to the “functioning” of the relationship. It is sometimes difficult to express vulnerability in face-to-face situations, such as in many classrooms. However, writing vulnerability into a letter feels different to us than wearing vulnerability on the body. It feels safer; it feels more welcomed and invited; it feels like it will be met with grace and understanding.

Epistolary dialogue, in its element of invitation, embodies Noddings’s caring. In our letters to one another, we created space for each of us to take on, at different times, the roles of “one-caring” and “cared-for.” The invitation to enter into dialogue is a simultaneous invitation to engage in that “common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation” (Noddings, 2005, p. 23). Even if Sandy hadn’t necessarily responded to Molly by sharing similar feelings of frustration, the dialogic balance of listening and responding is key to the invitational component of epistolary dialogue and is given space to grow within epistolary dialogue. This becomes a pedagogical space in that we learn empathy, identification (sometimes in resolving difference, and sometimes within difference), relational investment, and mutuality.

In a way, the invitational element of epistolary dialogue can lead to feelings of destabilization. Certainly, anytime one finds herself in a vulnerable position, power (in part) is lost. *Mutual* vulnerability, however, embraces that risk in an effort to also embrace feminist power-sharing. In the context of Freire’s resolution of the teacher-student contradiction, we found ourselves both destabilized (our roles of “student” and “teacher” took on unconventional shapes), and simultaneously humanized (the mutual invitation into this epistolary dialogue allowed those shapes to be whatever they needed to be at any given time). Our epistolary dialogue allowed us to see one another for who we are, flaws and all. It invited us to be more fully human by being more authentically ourselves, risking that the other person will trust us just as we trust that the other person will hold us as our own. Taking this risk, writes Freire (1998a), allows “subjects in dialogue [to] learn and grow by confronting their differences” (p. 59).

### *Temporal*

The temporal aspect of epistolary dialogue is about acknowledging that we write with time on our side. Unlike face-to-face communication, in epistolary dialogue, we have the opportunity to sit with our words, to read them over, to edit them before we send them. So, we can compose our response, then reflect. We can take care with our words, being sure that we’ve

chosen what we want to say about ourselves and to the other. We craft our words with time-intensive delicacy.

**Molly:** In the previous section, I referenced a situation with another professor I worked through with Sandy within the context of our letters. Sandy offered a long, unhurried response that attempted to address each aspect about which I'd written with understanding, validation, and encouragement. Even in her response, this felt like a turning point in our dialogue. As a student in her class, I trusted Sandy, but she did not have to trust me. That she took the time to offer me a thoughtful, time-sensitive, and even time-intensive response spoke about her care for me and our dialogue. While the time she spent with my struggles isn't necessarily evident in the content, it is evident in the length of the letter. It reminds me of something I identified when the project began.

\* \* \*

*Molly: To me, it signals that someone took time to consider thoughts to/of me. Letters may not always be kind, but there is still something personal about the exchange of them. For me, there is still a kind of care that must be taken when writing words you know another person will see.*

\* \* \*

Epistolary dialogue allows us time to reflect on the letters written to us, and to acknowledge the questions asked, whether rhetorical or literal.

\* \* \*

*Molly: These conversations are hard to have, harder to start, and maybe impossible to end. How do we begin?*

\* \* \*

**Sandy:** In my response to Molly's letter detailing her hurtful experience as a student, it was important that I use the temporal advantage provided by a letter in order to extend to her a dialogical ear. To do this, I took the time to reflect on what I wrote, to read and reread sections for clarity, and to refresh myself on the story line. In a face-to-face conversation, I may have felt obligated to answer at the moment of her asking, rather than having the opportunity to take time and strive to understand to the best of my ability.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: I feel more equipped to not let love be a limit-situation, but rather, a limit-act, if I can understand love to be, as you write, "true love of students, learning, and teaching."*

\* \* \*

Because we wrote outside of the formal confines of our class time (the three times a week that we met as a class), we didn't have to center our own project within those of our classmates'. It also meant that the vulnerabilities and disclosures we exposed in our letters didn't become public during the class time.

Another take on the temporal aspect calls attention to the dialectic between *temporary* and *preserved*. Dialogue, in a more ephemeral sense, may be understood as transitory, a phenomenon that happens between people but is often not preserved—it is temporary. Letters, on the other hand, are characterized in format by preservation; we write a letter in order to have our words recorded for the reader. (Even in a personal journal, meant only to be read by the writer, the words are preserved for the self.) The temporal aspect of epistolary dialogue, then, draws upon these dialectical concepts in order to embrace the preserved moment. Our letters rendered

dialogue continually accessible (because we could go back to the words we said to one another) in the transient context of the moment of their writing and reading. And each subsequent reading brought forth new meaning because the enduring words were interpreted in a new—yet still transient—moment.

*Personal*

Letters are personal. They have the potential to document the innermost feelings we carry with us. They ask us to be wholly ourselves, to explore aspects of ourselves that we may not explore in other forms. They function as a mechanism by which we account for our self, for the very beings we consider ourselves to be. In that sense, they are also revelatory, revealing a self that seems to fit better on a page than anywhere else at that moment in time.

\* \* \*

*Molly: I want [my professor] to realize that our work (all work, arguably) is personal; it matters to us, or we wouldn't do it! So, I don't know what to do.*

*Sandy (in response): You have what it takes to ... make meaningful, productive use of your hurt, anger, and feelings of unsafety.*

\* \* \*

Expressing needs, desires, frustrations, ideas, and so on, creates conditions that welcome letter writers to reflect upon that which is personal, and that which affirms the self as whole people. For example, early on in our letter exchanges, we discussed the idea of letters themselves, and how communication specifically meant for us—as indicated by the use of our names at the start of each letter—gave us a sense of feeling special.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: I, too, really feel special when a letter comes addressed to my name. Even in the office, if someone has handwritten my name on some silly little announcement, the handwritten name carries something for me. I've always loved hearing people say my name. It's not so much about how my actual name sounds, though; rather, it's about the context of the saying. It's about who is doing the saying. It's about the history we have together, the present we are experiencing, and the future we are moving towards.*

\* \* \*

Engaging the personal within epistolary dialogue is evidenced in our letters by two intersecting patterns: self-disclosing to one another, and sharing our personal histories with one another.

**Disclosure.** Relational partners disclose themselves to one another within epistolary dialogue. They share personal information about themselves, information they feel some sense of protection over and that they only reveal to carefully chosen others. For example, we talked about struggles we sometimes have in discussing political differences with our families, to whom we are both very close. Our willingness to engage in disclosure about our close relational others demonstrated a sense of trust between us. We build on that trust by also exposing moments of potential self-righteousness as we work through our desire to share our passions with others and moments of reflexivity about how those passions may be perceived.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: I remember once sending a family member three of the papers I was writing, thinking that it was a way for him to know what I was studying and the things I was thinking about. It's not that he has never taken an interest; it's just not something we talk much about. So I took it upon myself to send him my papers. His only reaction regarded some words he didn't understand. That was it. I felt horrible. I realized that he possibly felt intimidated. The thought that I might have made someone I love feel dumb or stupid broke my heart.*

\* \* \*

*Molly: I understand the desire to share your passion for what you study with those closest to you .... I come from conservative, Christian stock, and a relatively small family at that. I try very hard not to say anything that might spark more family drama than is already happening (again, the conflict-avoidance in me). But, I want so badly to discuss these issues with them, too.*

\* \* \*

Self-disclosure says to the other, "I trust you enough to share that which I consider to be personal."

**Sharing personal histories.** By sharing personal histories, relational partners reveal themselves to one another as *more than* (e.g., more than "student" and "teacher"). As we remarked in our introduction, the semester in which we developed our dialogue was the one-year anniversary of John T. Warren's death, a beloved professor.

**Sandy:** Molly used the space of our letters to disclose that very frustrating and oppressive situation with the professor across campus. In the course of her disclosure, she wrote about how much she missed John.

\* \* \*

*Molly: I became very sad about John. I miss him so much sometimes, because I need him to tell me what I should do. I know that he'd support whatever decision I'd make, but he would help me decide it, too.*

\* \* \*

In my response, I reciprocated her sharing by describing an experience with a pastor of a church I used to attend. I detailed the way the pastor (a self-identified lesbian) narrated her reaction to a hateful, homophobic email she received. When, as a dialogic partner, I share my history, I willingly invite my relational other to access my past, even if it is a selective past of my choosing. I trust that my relational other will use that past to form a gracious and compassionate interpretation of who I am in the present moment. In these instances, sharing our pasts in a detailed way within the form of a letter *feels* safer. We potentially avoid the disappointment of our epistolary partner having to rush off, as could be the case in an impromptu face-to-face conversation. We avoid any nonverbal communication we may read as judgment, and we can trust that our partner will receive our offering of our personal history in ways that validate our experiences.

### *Constructive*

Our focus so far has largely been on the role of the *writer* in epistolary dialogue. The constructive element, then, highlights the function of the reader, and more specifically, of a tripartite relationship among the writer, reader, and text. Haas and Flower (1988) describe reading as a "discourse act": "when readers construct meaning, they do so in the context of a

discourse situation, which includes the writer of the original text, other readers, the rhetorical context for reading and the history of the discourse” (p. 167). The process of cognitive interpretation is a complex one, even if largely unnoticed. When reading a text, a reader might take into account her/his perception of what is known about the author, the form and structure of the writing itself, her/his intentions in reading, and so on (Haas & Flower, 1988). These factors, and a potential array of others, may converge in whole or in part in the active moment of reading/interpretation. Had Sandy foregrounded (even if subconsciously) her role as teacher, and read Molly’s letters as a class paper, Sandy may have chosen a more evaluative reading strategy. Had Molly foregrounded her role as student, and read Sandy’s letters as a way to gain personal information about her teacher, she may have chosen a more information-gathering reading strategy. However, we believe that the epistolary form itself called for a more empathic reading strategy; as such, when we each adopted the role of *reader*, the invitational, temporal, and personal emerged to construct an empathic relationship. Thus, the constructive element of epistolary dialogue calls attention to a relationship built among the reader, the writer, and the text.

Letters document a narrative self. By the very fact that there is a self who is authoring the letter, letters are narratives of that self. And as the autoethnographers tell us, such communicative forms construct a relationship between the author, the text, the reader, and the larger cultures in which all are situated. “[W]riting is constitutive of one another and our relationships,” write Pensoneau-Conway, Bolen, Toyosaki, Rudick, and Bolen (2014, p. 315). In collaborative writing projects—such as epistolary dialogue—the writer (and the writing), the reader (and the reading), and the text intersect within the relationship built (Pensoneau-Conway, et al., 2014, p. 315), creating what Pollock (1998) identifies as a “critical ‘intimacy’” (p. 86). Further, letters don’t stop at building interpersonal relationships; rather, the relationship amongst the reader, text, and author resonates outward into the communities and contexts in which the reader, text, and author interact (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). This allows letters to be a place where authors reflect upon, name, and act in their world, fulfilling Freire’s notion of naming the world through the word.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: Our discussions, and your letter above, have helped me to reframe my charge to love and be loving.*

\* \* \*

*Molly: So, I also see hope that that’s okay. I don’t mean that I should continue with the harshness on myself, but that it’s okay to feel that there is still learning to do.*

\* \* \*

*Sandy: I don’t always know how to love myself when I realize acts of oppression in which I engage. I also don’t always know how to love others when I identify their acts as oppressive, particularly when they feel oppressive towards me. I just know that somewhere, I have to figure out a way to still be loving in the world. A work in progress, for sure.*

### **Epistolary Dialogue and Disrupting Power**

In this essay, we aimed to champion letters as a form of communication that invites dialogue, and as such, disrupts power. In responding to this aim, we looked at letters we had written to one another over the course of the semester in a Dialogue and Pedagogy graduate



seminar. Our letters became about discovery of ourselves, one another, and our topics (Richardson, 2000). In our letters, we found that epistolary dialogue (or dialogue in the form of letters) has four interdependent qualities that converge to disrupt traditional and unequal distributions of (in this case pedagogical) power: letters are invitational, temporal, personal, and constructive.

The *invitational* quality of epistolary dialogue has the potential to disrupt power relations largely due to the trust of the relational other necessitated by taking risks. Inviting one another always carries with it the risk of that invitation being turned down. The epistolary form invites letter writers to share themselves, to highlight their humanity in all of its messiness. When this invitation is *truly* an invitation (and not a demand veiled as a request, which, arguably, is only distinguished by a personal judgment call), the letter writer is also inviting the epistolary partner to disrupt power within the relationship. This is compounded when the one-invited accepts that invitation to be reciprocally vulnerable. Power disruption comes when both parties are *willing to place themselves in vulnerable positions*. Furthermore, both parties have to be willing to carefully and compassionately respond to the other's vulnerability, consciously working to avoid taking advantage of the vulnerable other.

In our case, we avoided the trappings of interpersonal colonization because the "student" initiated the project. Such colonization describes the "insistent form of interpersonal interaction" that results in one relational partner colonizing the relationship, creating a relationship of demand rather than mutual investment (Arnett, Harden Fritz, & Bell, 2009, p. 129). Had the invitation for the project come from the "teacher," coercion may have altered the power-disrupting potential of epistolary dialogue. As it stood, we were relatively safe from this trapping.

The *temporal* quality of epistolary dialogue has the potential to disrupt power relations, especially in a technologically ever-advancing world. With the availability of immediate communication found via text messages, social networking sites, and messenger programs, the temporal quality of letters creates space for relational partners to devote time to one another. Because we lead busy lives, the temporal quality of epistolary dialogue allows for both partners to take time to respond to one another in care, building the relationship up as partners instead of supervisor-supervised.

The *personal* quality of epistolary dialogue potentially disrupts power relations in a way similar to the invitational quality. When we reveal our deep selves, we give power over to the receiver. We necessarily trust that our partner will treat our personal self with care and discretion. As an account of the personal that is in some sort of recorded form (because it is in a letter), our sharing of the personal is a simultaneous sharing of power.

The *constructive* quality of epistolary dialogue has the potential to disrupt power relations largely due to the process of relationship-building. When dialogic participants engage the narrative (and narrating) self, they also invoke the ways that self will resonate beyond the narrative. These resonances are often unknown, and uncontrollable. As such, a letter writer offers power to the relationship built within the act of writing/reading, a relationship that is bigger than the self alone.

The implications of engaging in epistolary dialogue are powerful, particularly in the feminist, critical classroom. The content of such dialogue exposes the workings of dominant power structures (such as gender structures) as they resonate on an individual level, thus bringing to life the intersections of the macro and micro. Being welcomed into a space of trust, honesty,

and care invites participants within unequal power relations to respond to one another in a spirit of mutuality, thus resisting those unequal power relations and creating a space of recognizing one another as whole people. Narrating experience employs communication to reflect upon and critique communication as a reflection and constituent of power structures. Using epistolary dialogue as a sort of workspace—a tentative space to try out ideas and thoughts—valorizes the relational and affective ways of being and knowing not usually validated within contexts where there is a large power imbalance (e.g., teacher-student; supervisor-supervised; parent-child), even as both parties have power within the relationship. Taken together, or even in component parts, epistolary dialogue inspires greater investment by participants in one another as relational partners, and in the shared endeavor itself.

### *Power, Agency, and Voice*

In our specific case, we argue that epistolary dialogue works to disrupt traditional notions of teacher-student power relations. This further connects with issues of voice. As White, Wright-Soika, and Russell (2007) note, letters encourage students and teachers to recognize that instructor voices aren't the only voices that count in the classroom. For these authors, "Letters can be used to create and develop both voice and agency by encouraging students to engage with different voices and perspectives in their writing" (p. 208). We want to recognize that both of us enjoyed a relatively safe space in which to explore and negotiate notions of voice and agency— notions that cannot be separated from power. Ray (2009) speaks to the element of choice within the epistolary form: "In publishing an *epistolario*, the letter writer [chooses] which aspects of her experience to present to readers and in what light to do so" (p. 216). Certainly the space of choice is an agentic space afforded to us in this project—we chose what to write to one another, and further, we chose what to share in this essay.

Also, while our letters may not have been verbal in the vocal sense, they still run the risk of employing a verbalist, vocal-centered and scriptocentric logic. Such a logic largely removes the body from focus; therefore, our bodies were not on the line in our epistolary dialogue. At the same time, while they might not be embodied in the performative sense, the physical distance between us and the temporal distance between our writings provided us the unique opportunity to sit with the words, to know them through our bodies. Interpersonal communication scholars clearly support the need for distance in a healthy interpersonal relationship. Our physical and temporal distance allowed us to feel the words in a way resonant with embodied knowing, and created space in which we could consciously and critically respond with care. Moreover, letter writing provided us with a sort of productive, protective distance necessitated by the power dynamics in a teacher-student relationship. Even if problematic, we felt as though we were at a "safe" distance from the Dialogue and Pedagogy class, and from one another.

Finally, we would be remiss to not acknowledge our shared privilege going into this project. We are two White women, both in the academy, both having grown up in relatively nuclear and middle-class families, both occupying multiple positions of privilege. In many contexts, our voices are loud—whether written, spoken, or embodied. We didn't have to do the work with one another to determine whether or not we would be safe (as individuals) enacting our voices.

## Continuing the Dialogue

Our goal in this essay was to understand the ways epistolary form is fertile ground for dialogue and as such, could disrupt power relations. The power relations specific to our relationship are largely encompassed by our roles of teacher and student. We found in our letters a safer space in which to critique the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of our teaching and learning lives, challenges and triumphs that construct our personal pedagogies. We learned, too, about dialogue in a form we hadn't considered before. Dialogue through letters allowed us time, a chance to sit with words and ideas in ways we cannot in face-to-face dialogue. Moreover, our letters follow the tradition of epistolary works in that they sit at the intersection of public and private. As a dialogue, then, they create a lasting record of our exchanges, even as we selectively choose what to share here. Where dialogue is traditionally considered ephemeral, our letters preserve the stories we shared during the course of this project. Still, our epistolary dialogue was organic, in much the same way traditional dialogues are. We didn't enter the space knowing we'd engage in a dialogue, only that we would write *about* dialogue. While not all theorists agree on whether dialogue happens only when the interlocutors are changed, we can say that our relationship and our individual selves were changed as a result of our epistolary dialogue.

We hope that readers of this essay will take seriously epistolary methods for the ways that such methods engage both content and form. We hope those serving in an educational context will feel the pull to risk tradition and instead engage dialogue and the epistolary form as a productive and generative respecification of what it might mean to fulfill (and deconstruct) educational roles.

\* \* \*

*Sandy: As I read this, I have goose bumps, my heart is pounding, my eyes are watering, and I wish we were here together, sitting on my couch over a cup of tea (or coffee or vodka or whatever would make us feel better—even if for the moment, even if unproductive in the long term).*

*Molly: I have no idea if any of this makes any sense, but just wanted to say, I know how you feel. :-)*

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