

# Introduction

---

## Stolen Moments in Critical Pedagogy and Communication

One of my research participants for my dissertation, Abel—a student worker in my department, broke into my office and stole two of my books: a tattered copy of Peter Elbow’s (1973) *Writing Without Teachers* and a writer’s reference. We knew it was him because he’d taken items from other people’s offices—pens, books, and other small, beloved items—and then disappeared. I don’t know whether anyone followed up on this, whether they called campus police or spoke with his advisor; all I know is my books were gone . . . but perhaps that was a small price to pay for an interesting interview for my dissertation.

The books themselves were nothing remarkable, and I’ve since replaced them. The writer’s reference was something I’d been sent by a publisher—an enticement to use a particular grammar and style text with my students (though I was still years from enjoying a teaching position where I could choose the books I’d ask my students to read). Elbow was in arrears—tattered, a bit stained, and split along the spine so it needed a rubber band to keep the pages together. I had liberated Elbow from the library of the writing center I’d worked in as an undergraduate, taking it home and reading it more than once. It followed me from my B.A. to my M.S., from my M.S. to my Ph.D., only to find a new home with Abel (and then perhaps with whomever or wherever after that).

So Abel stole my book—a book I’d stolen from someone else . . . a book that mattered very much to me at the time I’d taken it. There are a few other books in my collection, “borrowed” as well—books with the names of their original owners inside the covers or written on the spines. Each is problematic and precious; each marks a moment, a covetous urge satisfied in pages

## 2 Critical Communication Pedagogy

and promises and thoughts of what could be or should be. Who I am as a scholar has been built in these stolen books, these stolen moments full of possibility.

Just recently I noticed my own books are “disappearing.” I can’t find my old copy of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) anymore, the one with all the notes I made during my philosophy of communication course; I’ll have to wait for the publisher to send me another copy of Lindlof and Taylor’s (2002) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*; and I can’t even begin to know what’s happened to my office journal collection, passed on to me from a retired colleague. This would irk me were it not for the sneaking suspicion they’d moved on to better, more attentive homes; their new masters’ covetous interests satisfied by a promise, a piece of knowledge that represents a relationship, a connection, a stolen moment.

If we were to carefully examine our own prized personal libraries, I wonder how many of us would find names other than our own inscribed inside, names indicating the original, though not true, homes of these works. How many of us have built our lives around such stolen moments?

\* \* \*

So we missed the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—we never got to go and, even though that was the draw to Cleveland and the Central States Communication Association annual conference, we never even entered the door. We missed it.

\* \* \*

Conferences are overwhelming—you have to juggle reconnecting with friends, meeting new colleagues, attending panel sessions and learning more, and traveling to a new and often enticing city you’d like to explore. This says nothing of all the other, smaller associated stresses: eating too much or not enough or at the wrong times, delayed flights and lost luggage, grading papers and reading theses in the hotel room between sessions or after dinner, drinking too much, spending too much money, and reassuring your partner and friends and students at home that this is time well spent. I commonly tell graduate students to expect to feel alienated and uncomfortable at first; everyone’s busy, everyone’s juggling, everyone’s trying to make time.

So much of my conferences these days are spent carving out time, making a space for this person or that person in an otherwise frantic schedule.

Relatively new to me is the experience of reconnecting with past graduate students, who are now at other institutions, working with other advisors. I make time for these folks, but also my current students who don't know how to "read" a conference yet, and also my friends from grad school, whom I love and miss and don't get to see nearly as often as I would prefer.

I try to take time, to steal it wherever I can, to get away and talk with my friends, my coauthors, my informal, chosen mentors. With a finite number of days and an infinite number of friends, colleagues, students, advisors, and scenic attractions, we struggle to make time for each other. We steal time where we can find it, and often that means something else loses.

\* \* \*

Instead, we sat on our separate beds in the conference hotel, scratching ideas on cheap stationery. To do this, we had to meet in the middle. The middle, the space between and betwixt, the liminal, the stretch of ground between here and there but in no way ever here or there, is an uncomfortable place to be. Turner's (1982) discussion of the liminal as a space where things "seem to have been turned upside down" (p. 27) suggests the middle consists of a struggle, of being without firm ground, perched as it were between two lumpy conference beds.

\* \* \*

In our earliest conversations, the idea of this book sounded so simple—a matter of describing the state of the art in critical communication pedagogy (i.e., teaching and research addressed toward understanding how communication creates and may, therefore, challenge sociocultural oppressions—e.g., classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, etc.). But very few matters are easy for academics, and as we discussed the nature and scope of the book, we realized we'd happened on something complex.

On the one hand, the problem was that bringing together critical theory, educational studies, and communication (and the particular and often contradictory subdisciplines within it) was like merging very different bodies of literature together to make one story—the parts have to be smooth and build toward a narrative that we (and others) can believe. On the other hand, to us, communication has always been our lens for understanding both education and critical theory—for it is the careful analysis of the everyday that communication research affords, that we are even able to discern the nature of sociocultural oppressions at all. For us, the limitation of critical pedagogy

#### 4 Critical Communication Pedagogy

has always been its failures to examine communication's role in the persistence and maintenance of institutional power.

\* \* \*

A conference I enjoy is hosted by the American Educational Studies Association—a collective of education scholars who examine the philosophical, sociological, and cultural foundations of education. Their work is critical, vital, and timely. Critical pedagogy research is not only present in their conferences and journals but expected. Faced with the country's (misguided and dangerous) obsession with “standards” and “accountability,” each questioning the integrity and professionalism of the teachers in our classrooms, these scholars/activists work to examine and interrupt or reverse educational inequities, to promote justice and value in schools. It is a conference I love, but one that frustrates me. In a recent business meeting, the conversation turned to the latest standards exam. In these moments—these conversations about their everyday struggles—I realize I am only a guest here. While welcomed, I still must ask permission. This is not my home. Maybe that is why I have stopped going to that conference.

Two weeks later, at the National Communication Association annual conference; the frantic meeting of my tired body and the communication education/instructional communication/communication pedagogy panels, each featuring researchers of communication apprehension, communobiology, and other work steeped in positivism, reminded me that this is also not my home. And while I have the loving support of some critical scholars, the conversations we share are often limited to ourselves. Our impact is diminished, overwhelmed by statically positivist, socially irrelevant research that measures this factor against some other, never connecting that work to the lives and bodies of students and teachers in classrooms, research that is unable to find a home in my body. But I still choose to go.

\* \* \*

For humans, a perch isn't a particularly comfortable place to rest. It's a temporary respite, a place to gather one's resources before taking flight. But eventually, we have to build nests. This came to a point for us in, of all places, the conference hotel in Cleveland, Ohio. There began the birth of an idea—a labor of love—that marks the origin of this book, this effort to build a home, a place of comfort within the competing and contradictory forces that mark us. And that is why we missed the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Missing the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is missing an opportunity to escape—to leave the mix of conference panels and conference talk, to leave the bleachy smell of tightly tucked hotel sheets and stale smoke from the hotel bar, to leave the demands of scholarly obligation and find refuge in wonder.

\* \* \*

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is a space of comfort—or, at least I imagine it to be, to be one of the places where the stories, songs, images of my childhood are held up as significant . . . where I can gaze upon the instruments and sheet music of musicians who filled my childhood bedroom with warmth and security, with lullabies scratched from vinyl 45 records and whirring from cassette players. Songs do that—they cuddle you and hold you tight, reminding you of the simplicity of Matchbox cars, Cabbage Patch dolls, and the world of imagination. A certain Billy Joel song takes me back to packing my book bag for my first week of middle school; an Elton John song marks my first kiss.

Going to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, for me, was about going home. Yet, when push came to shove, we didn't go. We stayed put, holding ourselves accountable for our own decisions to stand on/in the middle. In our careers, in our researching and teaching lives, we made a choice about where to perch, where to mark our own location. To go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and stand in the illusion we had created was to neglect our own commitments. We chose to read and study the things we did. We chose to attend certain conferences, create alliances with certain people, and write the scholarship we wrote. We chose, in full knowledge that what we were doing was not the norm, to be the kind of education-focused communication scholars we became. Choosing the lullaby, a space of illusory comfort and peace, was never going to bring us a sense of real community. To do that—to create a home—was our own job, our own duty to the work we read, the scholarship we wrote, the commitments and promises we made. We did not go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame because there, in that hotel room in Cleveland, Ohio, we opted instead to make our work matter.

## Book Goals

We are both fortunate to work in departments that feature graduate programs. In this capacity, we often find ourselves talking about our research

## 6 Critical Communication Pedagogy

lives, suggesting possible texts to read, papers to write, questions to ask. It is a privilege to work with dedicated students who care deeply about issues of communication and social justice, communication and the links to classroom inequality, or communication and identity. The students we work with humble us with their critical minds and caring queries. We grow as a result of this kind of interaction.

Our desire here, in this book, is to steal away with them, with you, for a time.

\* \* \*

This book centers on commitments we have made: a collection of promises, of goals that interweave and provide vision for this book. To describe the book by goals (as opposed to some linear timeline or chapter outline) is to frame the book with political and social relevance; we make a commitment here to engender spaces of conversation and dialogue about the meeting of critical theory/pedagogy and communication. We write this book for two major reasons:

- First, we believe the field of communication studies is in desperate need of this conversation. There is no sustained or prominent investigation of the place of critical theory in communication pedagogy.
- Second, as communication studies scholars, we contend that the field of communication studies can significantly revise and extend work in critical pedagogy; the key to examining education in critical ways lies in communication studies-oriented methods, discourses, and perspectives.

A communication analysis illuminates not only the mechanisms of power's production but also hope for change, a hope made from the moment of articulate contact between (educational) subjects (Nainby, Warren, & Bollinger, 2003; Stewart, 1995). Our goals for this book are about a commitment and dedication to this work—a vision we hope to share with those who join us.

Our dedication stems from our personal experiences situated at the juncture of critique and hope:

- *Response to Injustice.* We were graduate students and teaching assistants once, struggling to understand how to better serve our students, students with vastly different backgrounds, experiences, advantages, and disadvantages than us. Assigned to teach students from inner cities, from homes we'd only read about in Kozol's (1991) *Savage Inequalities*, we

sought research that would help us survive, that would help them thrive. In this way, a central goal of this book is to articulate a language of critique that accounts for how communication creates and makes possible our ability to see and respond to such inequalities.

- *Epistemological Pluralism.* We developed our way of engaging in academic inquiry in a doctoral program where the majority of communication education faculty had, for various reasons, recently left the university. However, it wasn't as though we were left to fend for ourselves in a void; instead, rather than following a prescribed series of courses and readings, we made meaning for ourselves. Our remaining advisors, committed and caring faculty in educational administration, intercultural communication, performance studies, and philosophy of communication, encouraged us to take risks and build connections across areas of study, both within and outside our discipline. Without a "proper" orientation to the study of the intersections of communication and education, we were free to find our own ways, to pursue the connections that felt most meaningful to us, to see the process of knowledge construction for what it is: a collaborative, communicative, personally meaningful, visceral adventure. In this way, we saw educational phenomena through multiple lenses, making possible various readings and interpretations of what was happening in our classrooms. Thus, another central goal of this book is to put those diverse (and divergent) tools to use, building theory and context for communication study that embraces critique and seeks new ways of imagining educational activity.

- *Disciplinary Pluralism.* Because we lacked traditional communication education professors in our lives, we went to the literature that our trusted critical faculty used to develop their pedagogies: critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, performative pedagogy, queer theory, whiteness studies. Our literature reviews featured names like Freire, Dewey, Conquergood, Ellsworth, Butler, Kozol, Lather, hooks, McLaren, Giroux, Anzaldúa, Postman, and Sedgwick. These names and works made sense to us as we saw inherent, but often unrealized, communication-based thinking in them—we drew these authors into our ways of seeing, crafting arguments that were communication based, but influenced by lines of reasoning that were not common in our own journals. We moved from book to book, instead of article to article, from theory to criticism and back again, instead of through the pages of *Communication Education*. For a critical scholar, there can be no better preparation. Instead of learning the field as a linear, purposeful progression (of systematic study of traits and states), we experienced it as something Kuhnian: contradictory, emergent, personally invested, and relationally supported. When we finally came to our reviews

## 8 Critical Communication Pedagogy

of *Communication Education*, we could sense paradigmatic patterns, encampments, alliances. And we could also see where the fissures were forming, where new work could spill forth. In other words, one of the goals of this book is to create a book we ourselves could have used as we pursued our studies.

- *Advocacy inland Research.* When we look back across our published scholarship, each article is imbued with a sense of frustration of feeling unprepared, of not knowing what to expect. These moments emerge in descriptions of our work from mentors within and beyond our own graduate programs, in our assessment of how colleagues in our field define and describe the students who might benefit by our work, and in our sense of disciplinary cross-talk that fails to be accountable to the implications of each discipline's perspectives. For instance, scholars will advocate for the use of critical pedagogy (e.g., Sprague, 1992, 1993, 1994); however, such work calls for (long overdue and absolutely essential) paradigmatic inclusion but rarely helps make the connection concrete. This is to say, the call is there, but it is infrequently explored by scholars in concrete, particular instances that, in their specificity, raise the stakes for instructional communication theories and methods. In short, this book is about making those connections, those implications, more substantial and more specific. We move beyond the call for this scholarship and, instead, lay the groundwork for the field as we model one means to pursue it.

- *Research Is Pedagogy; Pedagogy Is Research.* We work with graduate students in a variety of capacities—as TA supervisors and graduate advisors, as chairs and members of thesis and dissertation committees, as professors and mentors. We struggle together with difficult questions, questions about how to live a more meaningful life, how to build research that is ethically sound and makes a real difference with real people, how to engage in scholarship as activism, as a means to challenge oppression. Many of our graduate students are teachers themselves; they encounter racism, sexism, and homophobia in their classrooms as students and as teachers. Critical communication pedagogy is about engaging the classroom as a site of social influence, as a space where people shape each other for better and for worse; it is about respecting teachers and students and the possible actions they can take, however small, to effect material change to the people and world around them. Many of these graduate students will engage in research as well. Our hope is that this text will serve as a model for how to consider and engage in meaningful interdisciplinary work, in work that builds from their own values and commitments. In other words, rather than continuing to pile-drive deep into the logical-positivist



instructional communication trench, probing particular traits or constructs as possible veins for scholarly gold, we demonstrate it is advisable to survey the philosophical topography first.

These goals aside, there are also some reasons *not* to write this book: First, there are many in the academy who view books and research on pedagogy, even pedagogy scholarship that is theoretically complex and carefully examined, to be teaching and not research. Since our goal here is to theorize pedagogy, our work may be misread and, as a result, continue to relegate pedagogy-related scholarship to the margins. Part of our commitment here is to make this work (and the work of other people who do this research) matter.

Second, we are not “experts” in the traditional sense. We continue to grapple and struggle and fight with ourselves and with the field. We do not fully know the end result we would like to see, and in that sense, we fall into a similar trap as those overly abstract and utopian critical educators (Ellsworth, 1989). We’re pushing toward something we’ve never known and don’t yet fully know how to achieve. But, as we will address in what follows, must critical work know its ends? Or might we address ourselves to the means, the process instead of the product? If the point of critical work is, in Freire’s terms, to reveal the process of knowledge construction, to make that process plain and accessible to all (and not just philosopher-kings and academics), then it is most important we reveal the grappling, that we reveal we don’t fully know where we’re headed. The better for all to participate, to help chart out how to make this work matter.

Finally, wouldn’t it seem as though writing a book about teaching is less important than actually teaching well? One of us usually teaches eight classes a year—graduate classes, classes for teachers, for all levels of students—in addition to supervising theses. The other is a director of graduate studies and active dissertation advisor. Would our time be better spent working on course preparation, on making sure each and every day is a meaningful learning experience for our students, on making possible the next generation of scholars/professors for the field? Is writing this book taking us away from our students? Our colleagues? Our advisees? This is one of those quandaries that *feels* true more than it *is* true. Time spent writing can sometimes feel like time away from students and topics. However, time spent writing also sharpens and clarifies the work of the classroom (in much the same way time in the classroom sharpens and clarifies the work of writing).

This book represents our attempt to bridge often conflicting, sometimes contradictory, and, in many other ways, complementary ways of seeing and thinking about educational practice, communication, and how each is

## 10 Critical Communication Pedagogy

influenced by power, culture, and the production of knowledge within institutional contexts. Our effort here is, in part, to craft a vision of what critical communication pedagogy is not—it is not exactly critical pedagogy, not exactly communication education, and not exactly instructional communication, but rather a mix of these methodological, pedagogical, and theoretical traditions. In describing what critical communication pedagogy is, we make possible a meaningful interdisciplinary framework, a potential home for our (and others') work. We aim here to create a context for scholarship and educational practice to flourish—to make “generative spaces” where we can make meaning together (Lather, 1991). We are excited about the potential of this work, excited to learn more about and from the students, teachers, and scholars who will join us.

### Organization of Our Book

We begin—in Chapter 1, “Critical Communication Pedagogy: Shifting Paradigms,” by narrating paradigmatic shifts in this area of study and addressing the changing nature of communication research within educational contexts. Our layered, unconventional review of the literature places critical communication pedagogy in context, by showing how it occupies a divergent and diverse position within various academic traditions and within our own scholarly experience. Our next move—in Chapter 2, “Naming Critical Communication Pedagogy,” is to identify the stakes and claims that one might make when adopting this stance. Our hope is that through a series of commitments, we address, in a fluid and contingent manner, the nature of critical communication pedagogy. From there—in Chapter 3, “Reading Critical Communication Pedagogy,” we move into three instructional contexts, reading those experiences through critically oriented theoretical perspectives (through the work of Foucault, Butler, and de Certeau) and exploring how these perspectives help us to understand how to make sense of academic and intellectual engagement. The shift to the site of the classroom is about locating critical communication pedagogy within the lives and bodies of educational participants, showing how this way of educating and conducting educational research may profoundly influence our lives. We then—in Chapter 4, “Writing, Researching, and Living: Critical Communication Pedagogy as Reflexivity,” shift focus from the classroom to an examination of critical communication pedagogy as research, by exploring our own relationship to autoethnography as tactical (in de Certeau's sense) scholarship. In particular, we are interested in identifying how this work is necessarily contextual, located, and fluid. Our next move in the

book—in Chapter 5, “Compromise and Commitment: Critical Communication Pedagogy as Praxis”—is to focus inward, to examine the politics, the ethics, and the demand for reflexivity and accountability in our research and classroom practice. In this, we attempt an unflinching exploration of our successes and failures to do this work in our own classrooms. In Chapter 6, “Nurturing Tension: Sustaining Hopeful Critical Communication Pedagogy,” we take seriously the importance of critical communication pedagogy as nourishment, as something that sustains us and propels us to create and celebrate our communities. We illustrate this through our own experiences with communities that sustain us, that keep us honest, that help us remember, that encourage us to care for one another. We conclude—in “Grappling with Contradictions: Mentoring, in and Through the Critical Turnoff”—with our consideration of the mentoring relationships in our lives, in what this work means for the people we nurture and who nurture us. Though we conclude there, our belief is that we are not ending a conversation, drawing to close the dialogue about the nature and purpose of this kind of project; rather, we hope our thoughts here will give rise to continued discussion.

## Stealing Away From Here

The idea of stealing time, stealing space, stealing away a moment to envision something new, is exactly what this book aims to do—to make it okay to take time, space, and effort to generate new ways of imagining our work in (and about) the classroom. Sometimes, in the act of stealing away, we might stumble, rouse the guards, find ourselves in confinement; however, we might just as well happen upon a moment, a gathering, a conversation we might join if only we listen carefully. Sometimes, the only way to get something new is to take it, to make it our own. But this sense of stealing is not illegal; it is in the stealing that we gather our resources, find partners in crime, “friends who bust friends out of jails” (Goodall, 2000, p. 193). In this sense, stealing is worth the risk.

