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## Repetition and Possibilities: Foundational Communication Course, Graduate Teaching Assistants, etc.

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## **Repetition and Possibilities: Foundational Communication Course, Graduate Teaching Assistants, etc.**

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*Chris McRae*

It is the week before the start of the fall semester, the beginning of a new academic school year, and the department's week-long orientation is in full swing. On Thursday morning, all graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who are assigned to teach sections of SPCM 101: Introduction to Oral Communication: Speech, Self and Society, are to meet with the new Core Curriculum Director for the Department of Speech Communication, John Warren. In his opening remarks, John argues that we as GTAs have the privilege of teaching the "foundational" or "introductory" course in communication to the undergraduate students at our university. As GTAs we have an important and significant responsibility. Fasset and Warren (2008) clearly articulate this position saying, "[C]ourses like public speaking or introduction to communication studies are not 'basic,' they are 'introductory' or 'foundational.' This is a distinction that matters" (p. 12). This distinction is not one I have ever considered before. I know I teach the "basic" course because I am still relatively new at teaching, the material is not complicated, and although it feels important to be teaching these concepts, it does not feel like this is the most important course . . . etc.

However, drawing attention to the significance of the name of the course and the discourse surrounding

the name causes me to reconsider my thoughts and feelings about the course. Teaching an introductory course or a foundational course suggests that what I am teaching as a GTA is considerable. If I am teaching the foundational course and not the basic course, then my role as a GTA in the narrative of the curriculum has a completely different discursive meaning. I am no longer teaching skills that are basic, or that should already be known, instead my role as a teacher is in laying the groundwork for possible future complicated ideas. Naming matters, and therefore, throughout this essay I refer to the foundational course in communication as the “foundational course” and not the “basic course” because I believe the course is “integral, significant, the bedrock upon which we build our curriculum” (p. 12). And this naming not only changes the way I think about the course discursively, it changes the way I physically enter the classroom.

Fassett and Warren (2008) emphasize the importance of teaching the foundational course as a form of critical communication pedagogy in which an educated citizenship can be cultivated and nurtured (pp. 14-15). Their article is energizing, and John’s orientation speech is motivating. The call for change is one that resonates with me and is relevant for all GTAs and instructors of the foundational course. The possibilities for change are endless, and recognizing these possibilities is a matter of critically considering repetition: repetition in naming, repetition in lesson plans, repetition in classroom interactions, etc. Repetition can be comfortable, dangerous, and it can be used to enact new ways of being in the classroom and in the world. A critical consideration of the impact of even the smallest repetition in

the foundational course by instructors and GTAs can lead to significant changes for students, teachers, and the course. I start the semester, and this essay with Fassett and Warren's message about the need for critical communication pedagogy in mind, and I look to my experiences as a GTA as examples of the ways repetition is a necessary and productive characteristic of teaching the foundational course.

During this week of orientation, I am the student preparing to become the teacher. Next week, I will enter the classroom, with attendance sheets, syllabi, and instructor's manuals in hand. Next week, I will also enter the classroom as a student where I will receive syllabi, calculate the cost of new books and be held accountable to my own printed name on the attendance sheet. Teachers are always learning, and students will inevitably teach in the classroom; but as a GTA I must negotiate the fully embodied roles of both teacher and student. This semester, with back-to-back classes, I will have exactly twenty minutes to transition from my teacher role to my student role. Like a superhero changing in a phone booth, I must make the switch from calling attendance to responding to the call. I feel I must try to bracket the conversations with students concerned about concepts and grades as I enter the classroom to discuss different concepts with my own grades at stake. I feel I must negotiate and juggle the various identities ascribed to me as a teacher by my students, as well as the various identities ascribed to me as a student by my teachers.

As a GTA, my role as an instructor is important for the foundational course, and improving my abilities as a teacher is and should be a primary disciplinary concern.

Staton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979) argue for the importance of programs for improving GTA teaching effectiveness that emphasizes individual needs and personal reflection. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) also indicate the need and importance of teaching instruction for all GTAs. In addition to teaching instruction and effectiveness training, a critical view of the experiences of GTAs would provide useful insights into how the foundational course is taught and thought about by students and instructors. If I can learn to critically examine my own practices in the classroom, not only for effectiveness but for implications of power, then I can truly begin to develop a critical communication pedagogy that works towards developing an educated citizenship.

My own experience teaching is layered with my experiences as a graduate student, and as I continue to learn, my pedagogy is constantly developing and changing. Making sense of this experience as teacher and student is challenging, and there is not a great deal written about or from the experiences of the GTA. Nyquist and Sprague (1998) look to contextualized GTA experiences in their creation of a model of GTA development. Alexander (1998) speaks from his experience as a GTA to discuss the implications of culture and identity in the classroom. Warren (2003) uses narratives from his graduate student experience as the Assistant Director of the Basic Course to make an argument for performative pedagogy. Fassett and Warren (2008) also briefly mention the experience and process of becoming teacher-scholars as GTAs (pp. 27-28). These essays all provide important insights about GTA experiences and they do not speak only to the concerns of GTAs. The GTA subject position offers important insights about

what it means to teach the foundational course in communication, and it also can reflect the constraints of the ways the foundational course is conceptualized. As orientation ends and the new school year begins, I start my third year teaching the foundational course, and I look critically at my specific practices in the classroom to understand how repetitions shape and create my pedagogy in order to make a broader call for instructors of the foundational course to consider the material and discursive consequences of their repetitions.

## WRITING POSSIBILITIES AND MEANINGS

### *Pattern*

In my first semester teaching public speaking as a Master's student I received a handbook with suggested activities, assignments, syllabi, and sample lecture notes for each chapter.

### *Repetition*

When I arrived at a new school for my doctoral program I was again assigned to teach public speaking, and my old handbook became my primary resource in preparing to teach the class.

### *Justification*

I relied on the same assignments and lectures because they were safe, and I knew they worked.

### ***Recognition***

It was not until a colleague asked me why I used the handbook, and did not create my own assignments and lectures, that I considered trying to develop my own teaching materials. The repetition of the handbook was familiar, the assignments were familiar, the lectures were familiar . . . etc.

The experience of preparing for class in the third year of teaching seems both familiar and different. It seems simultaneously new and commonplace. I catch myself reusing old documents and notes. I catch myself preparing what I have already prepared. I find myself writing the narrative of my class in certain ways before I ever even cross the threshold of the new semester. I put restrictions on myself and my students before we even meet. How do these decisions, these limitations, these repeated actions function? In these opening reflections before the semester begins, I see the room for possibility. This repetition functions performatively by enacting certain ideologies, and I can look critically at repeated actions to understand how these ideologies are being enacted. I can also use repetition to enact new and different ways of being and knowing.

The performative function of repetition is connected with the constitution and production of ideological and material realities. Butler (1988) discusses the function of repetition as performative in terms of gender identities which are constituted through a, “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519). It is through repeated actions that gender or identities are created and signified. Butler (2006) explains that repetition functions as an act of signification. She says, “In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’

then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (p. 198). Repetition and the possibilities for certain repetitions enable and constrain meaning making processes. Warren (2008) explains Butler’s work with repetition as primarily focusing on epistemological concerns, or with ways of coming to know one’s identities. He then looks to Deleuze, to make an argument for the ways repetition also has to do with ontology, or with the material consequences of being in the world (p. 294). Working from Deleuze, Warren goes on to explain repetition as always a new action, or new way of being (p. 297). Repetitions then are performative moments that have consequences both in terms of epistemology and ontology.

Warren (2003) creates a collage of experiences and observations about the foundational communication course in order to speak to the possibilities and limits of performative pedagogy (p. 86). He uses collage as a metaphor for performativity because both collage and theories of performativity create spaces for the possibilities of new meanings; and he argues the introductory communication course is a space where possibilities for meaning making exist (pp. 87-88). My performative approach to writing the experiences of teaching is an attempt to understand how meanings reproduce histories and ideologies through my own repetitions (p. 87). Similar to the arguments for referring to the basic course not as “basic,” but as “foundational” I am interested in how repetition functions in the ways I prepare for class, in the ways I interact with students, and in the ways I construct my narrative as a GTA.

I take an autoethnographic approach to writing my experiences because I am attempting to connect my in-

dividual stories to larger cultural questions and concerns (Holman Jones, 2005). My stories as a GTA are meant to connect with the experience of other GTAs, but also with other instructors of the foundational course. As Holman Jones says, “Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux, and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection, and change” (p. 764). An autoethnographic approach enables me to offer my personal stories of repetition as examples of how repetition functions specifically in the classroom. My experiences, therefore, are presented here to illustrate certain aspects of pedagogical practices that I feel should be analyzed. My analysis, my writing of repetitions, is an act of criticism. It is an act of looking at practices in motion. It is an act of looking for new meanings and possibilities.

New meanings and possibilities are about creating the spaces for change. The kind of change that reflecting on and analyzing repetition can lead to is a change that is fully embodied. Pineau (2002) argues, “Through deliberate, arduous, and consistent effort, bodies can acquire a new way of being” (p. 45). In other words, it is possible for bodies to learn to embody ideological positions, but it is also possible for bodies to learn and take up new (and I hope better) ideological positions. This new learning is an ontological as well as an epistemological shift. What sort of effort is necessary for this kind of shift? How do I begin to identify the kind of effort that will lead to this new acquisition? Repetition is a useful starting place, because not only does an analysis of repetition reveal *how* ways of being are produced,

but it is also through repetition that new ways of being *can* be produced.

Rethinking the ways names matter (for example, referring to the introductory course in communication as the foundational course instead of the basic course), and writing performatively about critical communication pedagogy are attempts at acquiring new ways of being or becoming. These are also attempts at what Warren (1999) calls a performative mode of engagement, or “a methodology of engaging in education that acknowledges bodies and the political nature of their presence in our classroom” (p. 258). By beginning to identify moments of repetition in my pedagogy, I am attempting to engage with the questions of how my actions as a teacher enable certain modes of being for my students or for myself. Even the use of “my” as I refer to “my students” is an acknowledgement of my accountability in the telling of and reflection on these stories. However, a performative mode of engagement does not only acknowledge bodies, it also works towards possibility and change.

This performative mode of engagement, and the idea of repetition as a site of possibility for change connect to Barad’s (2003) argument for a posthumanist notion of performativity, in which she specifically questions, “*how* discursive practices produce material bodies” (p. 808). Her argument makes a clear case for the ways ontology and epistemology are necessarily interconnected. In terms of repetition this means that if repetition produces ways of being, then it also produces ways of knowing. Barad’s argument provides an important framework for understanding how repetition plays a

critical role in pedagogy, and for understanding how repetition can be used to enact change.

Barad advocates for a move away from a representational view of ontology towards a *relational* approach to ontology (p. 814). For example, words do not simply represent things in the world; instead the world is always in the process of becoming through the relationships between the use of words and the material contexts in which discourse happens. This relational view of the world in which matter and discourse are not separate entities, but are instead always connected, marks an important shift in thinking about performativity. Barad explains:

Material conditions matter, not because they ‘support’ particular discourses that are the actual generative factors in the formation of bodies but rather because *matter comes to matter* through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming. The point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices. The fact that material and discursive constraints and exclusions are intertwined points to the limited validity of analyses that attempt to determine individual effects of material or discursive factors. (p. 823)

Material conditions and contexts are just as important as discursive conditions and contexts in the ways meanings and bodies are shaped. In terms of repetitions and pedagogy, repetitions are enactments of both discursive constraints and material constraints.

Looking towards repetition for change requires considerations of the various factors that enable those repe-

titions. For example, the repetitions I notice in my preparation work to produce a certain kind of classroom experience, but my repetitions are not separate from my position as a GTA. There are material factors (the time constraints of being a graduate student) and discursive factors (the narrative of my students I develop before entering the classroom) that shape my repetitions and that shape my pedagogy. Warren's (1999) call for performative modes of engagement, and Pineau's (2002) arguments for new ways of being, fit with Barad's notion of posthumanist performativity because they are concerned with the material consequences of actions. This concern with material consequences, engagement, and material and discursive factors leads me to think about the consequences of my own pedagogical practices, starting with those practices that I find safe, easy, and comfortable.

## COMFORT IN REPETITION

### *Repetition*

Each semester I hold a workshop for my students before they deliver their informative speeches in which half of the class meets and delivers the introductions of the speech to each other.

### *Justification*

The workshop gives students the opportunity to practice speaking to a smaller group, and it gives students the opportunity to provide each other with direct feedback about delivery, and about the topics of the

speeches. It gives me the opportunity to focus on the key components of an introduction, including attention getters, thesis statements, and previews.

### ***Interaction***

The students give each other feedback and then I add, “And don’t forget to include a clear preview of what you will cover in your speech.”

One student usually replies, “I thought I did that.”

I respond, “Well, it needs to be clearer. You may want to even try saying something like, ‘I will cover these three ideas,’ and then say what those main points will be.”

### ***Recognition***

Several students usually reply, “That’s boring,” or “That seems so redundant.”

“It may seem boring, but it’s important. It helps us all know what to listen for.”

“But . . .” etc.

The interactions I find myself having with students are familiar. I know how to have these conversations, because I have asked these questions before. I feel comfortable with these repetitions. I feel comfortable for the same reasons the author, Jaffe (2007), of the textbook I use in the foundational course explains students will feel comfortable after giving several speeches, I am habituated. My repetitions are habituations, and it is important to understand why and how these repetitions come to feel so comfortable.

Context plays an important role in the ways repetitions are shaped. Fassett and Warren (2007) make the

case for a critical communication pedagogy that combines the macro-structural concerns of critical pedagogy with the micro-practices of communication studies (pp. 26-27). For them, critical communication pedagogy asks questions about how contextual social structures, powers, ideologies, and institutions enable and constrain everyday communicative interactions. This critical communication pedagogy also asks questions about how everyday communicative interactions produce larger social structures. These questions are difficult to answer because the distinction between macro and micro is not always clearly identifiable. The act of looking for distinctions itself is an act that blurs the distinctions even more.

On a macro-level I am structured or constrained by my position as a GTA. I will both teach the foundational course, and take courses as part of my degree program. I will be a teacher and I will be a student. The macro-structural concerns of my position intersect at disciplinary, institutional, and historical levels. GTAs teach the foundational course. The disciplinary structures are related to the content of the course which is largely determined by the textbook and course description which are determined departmentally. The content in the textbook relies on a disciplinary history or conversation. Institutionally, there are constraints that shape the amount of students in a classroom, the classroom spaces themselves, and the kinds of students who find themselves at this university. Historically, my own identities (white, male, graduate student, middle class, etc.), as well as the identities of my students, are all socially and culturally structured and therefore have social and cultural implications. As Alexander (1998) notes, "The per-

sonal can not be hidden” (p. 175). On a micro-level I will produce the various structures that exist on a macro level through my daily interactions and communicative practices and repetitions.

Fassett and Warren (2007) remind me that power matters in trying to make sense of critical communication pedagogy. They turn to Foucault and argue that power is in fact a central concern for the critical study of communication. They state: “It is, of course, power’s repetitive nature that creates the disciplined subject—that body/person who conducts herself or himself in institutionally desired ways” (p. 60). Power disciplines identities and social positions. Power creates good teachers, good students, good workers, good Americans, etc. I am disciplined through the repetitive nature of power, but I am not separate from power. Power operates in and through my body as I try to function as a valuable institutional participant.

For me, being a valuable institutional participant, means being a good GTA. I turn in the documents on time, I prepare for class, and I cover the material from the textbook that I have been told I need to cover. I try to develop fair assignments and evaluations of my students. I follow departmental and university guidelines as I prepare my classes. I am constrained by certain macro social structures, but it is through my repetitions that I enact these structures. This means taking attendance, filling out grade reports, and requiring my students to read parts of the textbook that are required for the foundational course. These repetitive functions of teaching the foundational course, or any course, have consequences on the micro-level, but the implications of these repetitions are related to macro social structures.

Power also operates at the level of my body in the classroom. The histories of my identities are enacted in every interaction I have with my students. The privilege of my white male body in some ways precedes me, but it is through repetition that I maintain my privilege. For example, the kinds of acts of public speaking that I value are connected to the privilege of my experiences as a white man. I privilege certain ways of speaking, and this is informed by my own histories. My actions in the classroom, then work to create and recreate the very hierarchies and macro-structures that have afforded me the position of privilege from which I stand in ways that are both clear and unclear to me.

It is important then to understand and reflect upon the functions of my own teaching practices. How does the repetition of my communication practices enable and constrain larger social structures? What social structures and ideologies enable and constrain my everyday communicative interactions? As a GTA I find repetition useful, and necessary. My body is disciplined and trained in a way that enables me to move between the classes I take and the classes I teach. Because I am constrained by the limits of my body in time and space within the institution of the university, repetition is a way of attempting to control for these limits. I am tempted by the promise of prediction and certainty that efficiency seems to offer, but I wonder about the consequences of my practices. I find myself becoming repetitive, and I worry about the implications of my repetitions.

I want to be critical of my actions and I want to understand how I am participating in the recreation of certain discourses that may be dangerous or unproductive.

I feel implicated by Pelias (2004) when he uses the second person to narrate a day in the life of the 'critical academic.' I identify with the narrative he provides, but not because the specific details of the day match the specific details of my day. In many ways I cannot identify with the specifics because I am not a tenured faculty member, and I do not follow the same daily schedule or view the world in the same ways as the second person narration suggests. I identify with this narrative because I feel the impulse to be critical of my life as a GTA in a similar fashion (p. 121). This narrative of a day in the life of an academic works to show how the repetitions of certain practices can become mundane. The details are significant in that they belong to a specific person's experience of moving through the academic life. This specificity works to make the case for personal reflection as a necessary step in understanding how repetition functions.

Fassett and Warren (2007) argue that the reflexivity used by Pelias is useful because of its vulnerability. The value of vulnerability comes in the form of revealing the "mechanisms of power's production" (p. 93). Does repetition alone position me as reflexive? Do these repetitions reveal the ways power operates? Though the repetitions may not reveal my vulnerability they do provide access to the mundane ways power operates in my daily practices as a teacher. For example, I often find myself trying to create a classroom atmosphere that feels safe (at least to me), and this is often at the expense of a more critical discussion in the classroom about topics such as language, research, and culture. Sometimes my response or lack of a response to problematic statements made by my students is a result of my not knowing how

to encourage them to be more reflective, and in other times I am trying to keep things safe for myself. When in our discussion about diversity, one student proclaims that our class is not diverse because we are all *just* Americans; I am initially caught off guard. I change the subject, and I change the direction of the questioning because I do not know how to correct this overgeneralization in the moment. But I am also working in the service of a discourse that is allowed to exist as the norm, by not further questioning my student's assumptions. I can see in moments like this one, connections between my own micro-practices to macro-structures, especially when I start to unpack the reasons why I find repetition so appealing and safe.

The repetitions do not only work to reveal power, repetitions also constitute the power of my position as a GTA. Warren (2008) makes an important case for considering not only epistemological questions, but also considering ontological questions in thinking about repetition and difference (p. 294). This echoes Barad's call for an onto-epistemology, in that knowing and being are not mutually exclusive. Warren uses Deleuze to make the case for thinking of ontology in processual terms. Warren says:

As I summarize Deleuze, ontology is, essentially, a repetition of difference—that is, ontology is a transformative and fluid state, characterized by repetitive acts that are always unique, even if they are historically informed repetitions. Being is fluid, adaptive, and always anew; we are always generating anew, never “simply” repeating. (pp. 296-297)

This recognition of ontology as fluid and of repetition as always something new, means that repetition does

not only work to connect micro-practices and macro-structures. It means that repetition is an act of becoming, and therefore actually produces both micro-practices and macro-structures.

It is difficult for me to acknowledge the fact that I am not separate from power and that through my repeated teaching practices I continue to create the very social structures that constrain my role as a GTA because I want my teaching to disrupt these social structures. However, repetition feels safe because it provides the illusion of distance between my micro-practices as a teacher and macro-structures that inform my teaching. My practices appear to be mundane, and are easy to take for granted. However, it is important to recognize the ways repetition “is always an original act” (p. 297). Repetition feels safe in part because it provides me with the illusion of prediction and control. But in terms of teaching, this does not account for the ways contexts are always changing or for the ways my repetitions are never the same.

## DANGER IN REPETITION

### *Repetition*

Each semester, when I discuss the difference between informative speeches and persuasive speeches the conversation is always pretty much the same.

### *Naming*

I ask, “Are informative speeches persuasive? Are persuasive speeches informative?” And my students

usually can agree that the line between persuasive speaking and informative speaking is blurry at best. But I still assign separate speeches. One is informative and the other is persuasive.

### ***Justification***

This distinction bothers me. What does it mean to distinguish between informative speaking and persuasive speaking as if they are different? I worry that in some ways this reinforces the idea that there is such a thing as objective knowledge that is based in facts, or that bias can and should be eliminated.

### ***Recognition***

I try to highlight the ways information is always persuasive, and effective persuasion always works to inform, but the naming troubles me. Informative . . . persuasive . . . etc.

The appeal of repetition is the predictability of the familiar. There is comfort in knowing how a repeated action feels. Safe. There is comfort in control. There is comfort in being disciplined. But this comfort and this predictability are never guaranteed or certain. Repeated actions and practices in the classroom may work to recreate certain experiences, but the dynamic nature of the classroom always disrupts rigid plans. There is always something unexpected that can and will happen. The particular needs of students frequently cause me to change or adapt the syllabus or assignments I give. Sometimes external factors like the weather or current events disrupt planned discussions and lectures. Other times it is my own personal needs and responsibilities

that disrupt my own repeated actions like conferences that cause me to make adjustments to the schedule.

Fassett and Warren (2008) remind me that “each new classroom is a new horizon, a new beginning, a fresh start” (p. 131). Repetition may feel comfortable, but in reality my repeated actions never account for all of the potential changes that may occur in any given interaction. Repetition cannot account for the endless possibilities of communicative interaction. Repetition becomes dangerous when the repeated action is no longer flexible, and it becomes the only option, the only possibility.

The appeal of repetition is the predictability of the familiar. The problem with repetition is the predictability of the familiar. Repetition without reflexivity can be dangerous because power is always embedded in repetition. Without critical reflection, repeated actions can work to recreate structures and relationships that can work to harm and exclude students. The danger with prediction and control are the ways context can be ignored in the service of getting things “right.” I create templates for assignments that I can adjust and use again and again from semester to semester. This is a matter of practicality and efficiency. I am constrained by my position as graduate student and teaching assistant. My time is limited.

This is also a matter of what feels safe for me. I like to use assignments that I know are productive. I like to do things that I know will work. I am constrained by the institution. I see danger in this reliance on the familiar in that I begin to operate in the service of sedimented practices instead of in emergent possibilities. Fassett and Warren clearly state, “Education, if it is to be suc-

cessful, must begin in and emerge from a particular community of learners” (p. 131). Emergence seems to be very different from prediction and control. However, in some ways it is from the predictable that new possibilities can emerge. How do we begin to make the distinctions between those repeated disciplining practices that are useful, and those that are harmful?

Are these repetitions in my teaching bad? Are they dangerous? The moments of repetition I choose to represent in this paper do not seem to be particularly harmful; however, I am interested in the fact that it is easy for me to recognize so many mundane acts that I find myself repeating from semester to semester, week to week, and day to day. At this specific micro-level it is difficult to mark the specific repetitions as good or bad without locating these practices in larger contexts. Though it *is* important to mark these moments because: “Words do more than state fact, do more than engender meaning; words make experiences real” (Fassett & Warren 2007 p. 61). By repeating my repetitions throughout this paper I hope to draw attention to how these practices become mundane, and yet they still function to create certain real experiences.

Repetitions that are mundane are easy to overlook. It is easy for me to skim past each section of my own repeated actions in this very essay. The actions of re-using syllabi and lecture notes seem insignificant. I could easily add test questions, assignments, and handouts to the list of documents that I re-use each semester. I could argue that this is in part a function of the fact that I use the same textbook each semester. However, I have used two different textbooks as a GTA at two different universities, and yet many of my documents remain the

same. The impulse and urge to skim over the repeated actions as you read this essay is one place where I see danger in repetition. I am not advocating fear of every action that is repeated, but complacency deserves careful consideration.

How are these repetitions constrained by larger social structures, institutions and ideologies? How do these repetitions work to create/recreate social structures, institutions and ideologies? The disciplining that is evidenced by these repetitive communicative acts serve certain ideologies and my experience of these repetitions as comfortable seems to indicate my own position in a larger context. My repetitions also produce a certain kind of context or reality for myself and my students. How can I use these repetitions to inform my own pedagogy?

Just as repetitions can be easily overlooked, they can also become recognizable in their happening over and over again. By noticing the emergence of patterns, change becomes possible. Making changes to repetitions and patterns alters micro-practices and macro-structures. For example, the changing the repeated act of naming from the “basic course” to the “foundational course” is a change at the micro-level and at the macro-level. Similarly, recognizing and focusing on the “etc.” in my everyday teaching practices is an attempt to draw attention to the macro-structures I continue to create in my classroom. Drawing my students’ attention to the “etc.” of repetition is an argument for the recognition of our accountability in the production of larger systems and structures.

Trying to understand how the repeated and mundane acts of teaching function is important. I am wor-

ried by repetitions when they feel too safe. It feels comfortable doing the same kinds of activities each semester. There is warmth and security in being able to have a plan that I know works, or that I know has worked. The warmth and security lull me to sleep. The safety and comfort that I feel in knowing what to do and what works seems indicative of larger structures and ideologies at place. The repeated act is a sure sign of power disciplining my body. Power is not necessarily bad, and in many ways it is through repetition that I have learned to do some of the things I value most (writing, reading, playing music, etc.). However understanding how power works and what ideologies are being reproduced is important. In discussing her own struggle with critical pedagogy, Ellsworth states:

A preferable goal seemed to be to become capable of a sustained encounter with currently oppressive formations and power relations that refuse to be theorized away or fully transcended in a utopian resolution—and to enter into the encounter in a way that both acknowledged my own implications in those formations and was capable of changing my own relation to and investments in those formations. (p. 100)

My own questions about repetition are an attempt to understand my own relation and investment to the formations of power relations in my classroom and in my teaching practices. Even if the power relations are not necessarily oppressive it is important to understand how my words and actions produce certain realities, and how these realities are constrained by the contexts within which they are situated.

## POSSIBILITIES IN REPETITION

Berlak (2004) argues for exposure to trauma as a pedagogical strategy for getting students to engage with difficult concepts such as the impact of systemic racism. I am intrigued not by trauma as a pedagogical strategy, but by Berlak's claims about the impact of trauma and how they may inform my own thoughts on the significance of repetition. Berlak identifies two impacts of witnessing traumatic events, "First, the shattering of naturalized worldviews is profoundly disorienting and painful in itself. Second, witnessing experiences that had previously been filtered out is painful because what enters consciousness through the transformed frameworks is itself painful and terrifying" (p. 135). Trauma, for Berlak, is a matter of disruption, and disruption is painful because it necessarily results in change.

In terms of the comfort and dangers of repetition, disruption is a way of stopping repeated patterns from continuing to recur. This is especially important for those repetitions that are in the service of dangerous macro-structures. For example, when I use the same speech assignments over and over again, I am privileging certain ways of speaking as important. When I disrupt my use of assignments, and offer a greater variety of types of speech assignments I may be working towards changing assumptions about what counts as an appropriate type of public speaking. I could easily see the disruption of my own repeated actions as painful in a way because of the comfort repetition provides me. I am not suggesting this pain is like that of trauma, but there is a disruption that can cause discomfort. Berlak's

argument for disruption is most valuable for me because it is a reminder that naturalized worldviews can be changed. It also reminds me that there are always multiple worldviews that are possible.

When repetition is viewed as stable I feel like something should be changed. For example, changing the name of a course, changing assignments, or changing lecture notes. However, it is difficult to recognize these sedimented patterns because they do not exist only at the level of knowing, they also exist at the level of being. I want to emphasize the fact that these patterns and repetitions only appear to be sedimented, but they are in fact never the same. When I look to Warren's (2008) argument about repetition as always an original act, and apply this to Berlak's arguments about disruption, the challenge becomes simultaneously more difficult and easier to achieve.

If repetition is always an original act, then locating the problems or dangers in repetitions is complicated. The danger is not in a specific moment that gets repeated, but it is in the ways repetition becomes a pattern that can be recognized as a "repetition." A disruption then is a moment that keeps a repetition from becoming another repetition. Possibilities for change exist in every action. Every time I open the syllabus document on my computer, every time I introduce myself to my students, every repetition of the words "foundational course," I am engaging in new possibilities. Dolan (2005) speaking about writing, stresses the importance of optimism and possibility:

Writing, like performance, is always only an experiment, an audition, always only another place to practice what might be an unreachable goal that's impera-

tive to imagine nonetheless. Writing, like performance, lets me try on, try out, experiment with another site of anticipation, which is the moment of intersubjective relation between word and eye, between writer and reader, all based on the exchange of empathy, respect, and desire ( p. 168).

Dolan's argument about writing is applicable to teaching, and it is useful in terms of repetition because repetition is a site where possibilities can be realized. Repeated actions should be recognized as places where experimentation can take place. And when variations work, it is through the repeated action of these variations that changes can take place at both micro and macro levels.

What this means for me as a GTA and instructor of the foundational course is there is hope for change, but that I must not be complacent in my actions. I must continue to challenge my own practices in order to challenge the practices of my students. My students are not explicitly present in this essay for this very reason. If I cannot recognize how my own repetitions and micro-practices produce and re-produce macro-structures, then I do not think it is possible for me to truly be able to begin to disrupt the repetitions and actions of my students. This kind of careful consideration of and reflection on repetitions used in the classroom by instructors of the foundational course can also lead to material and discursive changes in their teaching.

Throughout the semester, I think of Fassett and Warren's call to refer to the basic course as the foundational course, and I know that it is the "little things" that matter the most. I notice some of the tendencies in my teaching that are repeated actions from previous

semesters. I use the same syllabus and many of the same assignments and activities. These repetitions may appear to be new for my students, but there are moments when I find myself reusing the same examples that I have used before and I do so without any enthusiasm. It may be safe, comfortable, and sometimes appropriate to use repetition in my teaching, but it is also important for me to come up with new activities and assignments so that *I* can approach the classroom with passion. I also know my critical impulse and my desire to make big changes to macro-structures that are oppressive and violent is important, but it is in the small details that these big material and discursive changes will be enacted. Changes to repetitions of names (foundational course instead of basic), changes to preparation (a variety of speech assignments instead of privileging only one format), and changes to interactions with students (new examples and disruptions instead of complacency and indifference) matter the most. The enactment of new ways of naming, preparing, and interacting is an enactment of possibility and change . . . etc.

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