

**Review: *Classroom Talk for Social Change: Critical Conversations in English Language Arts* by Amy Vetter, Kahdeidra Monét Martin, and Melissa Schieble**

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Whether you are a pre-service teacher looking to start addressing critical issues in your future classroom or an experienced teacher looking to hone skills navigating difficult conversations on important issues, *Classroom Talk for Social Change: Critical Conversations in English Language Arts* (2020), is an instructional text for facilitating critical conversations in ELA classrooms. Authors Melissa Schieble, Amy Vetter, and Kahdeidra M. Martin have produced an essential installment on matters related to the intersections of critical literacy, dialogic teaching, and culturally sustaining teaching.

The authors have teaching experiences at the middle and secondary levels and are accomplished scholars in English Education (see e.g., Schieble, 2012; 2014; Vetter & Schieble, 2015; Vetter, Schieble, & Meachem, 2018). *Classroom Talk for Social Change* (CTSJ) draws on their experiences facilitating conversations with practicing teachers in two Teacher Inquiry Groups (TIGs) over the course of 3 years (in pseudonymous “Gate City” and “River City”).

In the backdrop of writing this book review, news about racial tensions in the U.S. and the 2020 election was ever-present in our classrooms, and we wanted to learn how to facilitate conversations with students in a time of turmoil. We wanted to be better prepared to manage resistance and prevent discursive violence. Veronica (she/her/hers) is a white, hetero, cis-gender, able-bodied, female who is a pre-service teacher studying to become a middle school ELA teacher. Jim (he/him/his) is a white,

hetero, cis-gender, able-bodied, male, who teaches courses including “Schools and Society” and “Multicultural Education.” This review of CTSJ is related to our commitments to refining practices for engaging students and colleagues in building knowledge about power, privilege, and oppression in schools and society.

### **Importance of Classroom Talk**

The research is very clear on the importance of classroom talk and discussion (Hattie, 2009; Nystrand, 1997; University of Michigan, n.d.; Zwiers, 2014). Unfortunately, due to a variety of pressures (including high-stakes testing and prescriptive lesson plans), students often do not have opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions with their peers in schools. Teachers avoid facilitating discussions on “political” or “controversial” topics for a variety of reasons. In the process, teachers and students miss out on opportunities to interrogate powerful discourses that circulate in texts and in society.

Schieble, Vetter, and Martin (2020) recognize that teachers and students need support and “tools to notice, analyze, and reflect on how ideologies about race, ability, and gender ... circulate in everyday life and how these messages are either oppressive or liberating” (p. 3). The authors contend that classrooms must be spaces for today’s diverse youth to participate in conversations about issues in their own communities, including navigating tensions and complexities related to topics such as income inequality, racial strife, gender identity, and environmental racism. Addressing such issues in discussion-based settings complements the grassroots activism many youths are partaking in. At the same time, a commitment to critical conversations has implications beyond formal schooling, as students who have less familiarity with critical issues gain valuable experiences in school that will help them develop beginning understandings about the enduring, complex, and dominant narratives in society and literature.

## Classroom Talk for Social Change

The book's first chapter sets the stage for the importance of centering students' voices in the classroom. The authors side with Hess and McAvoy (2015) who contend teachers are being political when they democratically make decisions while pursuing questions that ask, *How should we live together?* "The ideas we hold about race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion," the authors contend, "shape access to power and have psychological, and material consequences in people's lives" (pp. 2-3). The chapter introduces readers to TIGs as they define their work in an initial meeting. Connor, a white, able-bodied, trans person, and an LGBTQ+ activist and parent, defined critical conversations as "making space for conversation where students are able to see themselves as change agents, especially in education" (pp. 5-6). This early chapter tackles a key limitation for the book, an emphasis on race and racism, social class, and sexism with less attention to critical conversations around other key people and policies, including Indigenous peoples, trans persons, ability, religion, and sexuality.

In Chapter 2 ("What Do Critical Conversations Look Like in Schools?") the authors examine what critical conversations look like in schools and outline three theories informing their approach to critical conversations impacting life beyond the classroom. The chapter situates the role of critical conversations as *generative* in ELA classrooms, as the authors build on the notion that examining issues of power, oppression, and privilege through discussion in literature, "can help students 'entertain tensions in their own life'" (Beach, Parks, Thein, and Lesnsmire, 2007, p. 163, in Schieble, Vetter, & Martin, 2020, p. 15). The "three theories" conceptually framing the book, critical literacy, dialogic teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy are historicized and instructional. In brief, critical literacy shapes interpretive tasks to reflect questions of power. Dialogic teaching opens classroom conversations to meaningful, authentic

classroom talk. [And c]ulturally sustaining pedagogy asks educators to equitably develop and sustain the multiple languages and practices that are a part of students' ways of being in the world. (Schieble, Vetter, & Martin, 2020, p. 19) The chapter concludes with an invitation to "Write and Discuss" prompt, providing individuals with opportunities to reflect on prior experiences in heated discussions.

Chapter 3 ("Building Knowledge About Power and Privilege") outlines how to prepare students for critical conversations by building knowledge on power and privilege in our society. The authors draw on Singleton's (2014) mindset "I don't know what I don't know" as a habit of mind both students and teachers should have when confronting dominant narratives (e.g., "boys will be boys"; Individualism) and dealing with their own privilege(s). Singleton's reflexive idea is used to show the work of knowledge building as a developmental process, occurring throughout our lives. Acknowledging that we do not know everything and are speaking from a place of privilege allows us to "keep open the opportunities for continuous learning" (p. 23). The authors state that strong emotions are an indicator of internal work that needs to be done to understand privilege and different perspectives (e.g., white privilege). The purpose of critical conversations is to confront and work through problematic personal and societal viewpoints, and the authors provide opportunities for knowledge-building related to interrupting *discursive violence*, or dialogue that is rooted in and informed by racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression (linguistic oppression). The authors provide examples of critical conversations confronting dominant narratives (e.g., Masculinity; Heterosexism) through examples in their classrooms.

In Chapter 4 ("Engaging a Critical Learner Stance Through Racial Literacy"), the authors expand on the concept of engaging in the world as a critical learner. This chapter focuses on the integration of the key concepts of critical self-reflection and racial literacy as crucial (but not exclusive) to the adoption of a critical learner stance.

The chapter outlines the importance of illuminating systemic oppression from an intersectional viewpoint, and provides a reminder of key attributes necessary for engaging in this important work: empathy, reflectiveness, and flexibility. The authors stress that while *self-reflection* is important, *critical* self-reflection is more than just “in the head” reflection that goes on because only through critical self-reflection does one open the self up to the idea of “what they don’t know yet.” Drawing on Guinier (2004), the authors define racial literacy as related to (1) the development of language practices through which we discuss race (consistent talk about race and racism along with reflection on that talk); (2) recognition that race intersects with other identity markers (e.g., gender); and (3) awareness that racism is a current rather than historical issue. The chapter concludes with an alternative to the common “privilege walk” activity that occurs in many well-intentioned classrooms (Torres, 2016).

In Chapter 5 (“Preparing Students for Critical Conversations: Creating a Critical Space”), readers have opportunities to consider how to “read” their classroom and school spaces with a critical lens. The chapter focuses on messages embedded in the “classroom space” (discourses about race and gender represented in posters, classwork, and other materials). Readers will value the questions and resources for taking a critical inventory of your space along with instructions on how to conduct an equity audit (Groenke, 2010; Miller, 2015).

Can a classroom become a “safe space?” The authors spend time in Chapter 5 helping readers consider notions of “classroom community” and “safe spaces” with nuance and provide advice for readers eager to engage their students in critical spaces to first spend time questioning the assumption that a classroom will or can become a “safe space.” “When White teachers or students speak out against racial injustice ...,” the authors state, “they can walk out of a classroom ‘safe space’ and enjoy the psychological and physical protection afforded by a White racial identity in a White supremacist society”

(p. 57). White investment in racial justice, the authors note, is often “more intellectual than lived and embodied experience” (p. 57) which can lead to distorted notions about the classroom as a “safe space” where all students are positioned to speak up. Creating a *critical* space, then, is an acknowledgment “that students will participate in different ways with a shared goal: to build critical knowledge and skills to engage in difficult conversations with others around issues of equity and justice” (p. 57). The chapter provides a framework to draw upon for building relationships rooted in trust, and readers will appreciate the authors’ descriptions of critical listening, vulnerability, and modeling repair as action steps.

Inevitably, all teachers must negotiate tension and model repair in the classroom, calling someone out for their racism, sexism, ableism, or other forms of oppression. How will you move forward? The chapter outlines educative scenarios (e.g., a white male student refers to affirmative action policies as “reverse racism”) for practicing/rehearsing for the unavoidable disruption of dominant narratives. One suggestion for proceeding with a conversation following a “heated” or tense moment includes providing students with some uninterrupted time (5-6 minutes) to write, to process their emotions (sample sentence starters are provided) before moving into dyads/triads to partner share. Chapter 5 concludes with a challenge to plan a critical conversation and to develop and practice language that can be used in response to ideas that reveal prejudice (see Teaching Tolerance’s [Speak Up at School](#) guide).

Chapter 6 (“Making Meaning During Critical Conversations”) contains substantive conversation on the team’s findings about the stances or ways that students enter and sustain critical conversations: humanizing, problematizing, and resisting. Students take on a *humanizing* stance when they see characters in literature and people beyond identity constructs, objects, or numbers and instead respect the lived experiences, emotions, and stories of the characters. Students taking on a *problematizing* stance examine dominant storylines for linkages to institutional history/ies and policies that give shape to a particular discourse. Students taking on a *resisting* stance, the authors

contend, is related “either to the ways teachers or students position their identities and experiences, or to the ways critical conversations challenge status quo thinking and misinformed perspectives” (p. 73). The chapter provides practices for encouraging *humanizing* and *problematizing* stances, and delivers a robust account of facilitation skills for noticing, naming, managing and re-framing resistance, and for preventing discursive violence.

Building on the three stances students often take in student-centered critical conversations laid out in Chapter 6, in Chapter 7 (“Sustaining Critical Conversations Through Critical Talk Moves”), teacher “talk moves” for sustaining conversations are explored and situated. The authors define critical talk moves as “strategies that engage students in adopting a critical stance, disrupting status quo thinking, inviting multiple voices and leveraging talk for social change” (p. 90). Four families of critical talk moves are identified in the chapter, and these critical talk moves support teachers during moment-to-moment interactions. The authors caution that this is not a “how-to” set of steps for ensuring critical conversations, and we think readers will prize the rich description and depth of the four families of critical talk moves.

In the final chapter, the authors focus on helping readers who are interested in doing this hard and *heart* work. Chapter 8 (“Studying Critical Conversations in Teacher Inquiry Groups Using Transcripts”) outlines key ideas for organizing, developing, and sustaining critical friends in an inquiry group, and the chapter touches on key learnings expressed by teachers in the TIGs. Examining transcripts from classroom conversations provided teachers with opportunities to pinpoint classroom interactions that were culturally relevant or not (Rex, 2006), but teachers were not the only beneficiaries of closely examining transcripts from classroom discussions. Paula, one of the teachers in the Teacher Inquiry Groups, explained that when presented with a transcript of classroom talk, her students were able to realize areas for improving discussion. The chapter includes strategies and sample questions for analyzing classroom examples and

concludes with encouragement to readers to “engage in a habit of mind that disrupts assumptions and attempts to learn more about what you do not know” (p. 122).

## **Conclusion**

We believe CTSJ holds much potential for providing support and guidance to teachers dedicated to dialogic teaching and engaging in “thicker forms of democracy” (Apple, 2020, p. 3). The book is helpful in the beginning and sustaining important conversations around critical issues that help us to engage in answering the question: “How *should* we live?” We live together in inequitable ways, and this is not by accident. Public racism, hate crimes, antisemitism, transphobia, and homophobia continue to be real and viable threats to our democratic society. CTSJ is a necessary book for ELA teachers to prepare students for noticing and naming racism, classism, sexism, gender bias, and the roots of other forms of oppression that continue to flourish in our imperfect democracy. The book’s examples rooted in issues of race, class, and gender offer important entry points for experiencing the notion that our language is never neutral. The incorporation of interrogated dialogue around other social justice issues and policies, including perspectives on Indigenous populations and LGBTQ+ populations, would certainly be welcomed, but the overall strengths of this work far outweigh any weaknesses. The authors could not have predicted the COVID-19 crisis which is decimating the U.S. and many other nations, but examples on how to facilitate critical conversations in new and digital forums (e.g., Zoom) could provide additional support for readers engaged in synchronized and asynchronous virtual learning communities.

As teachers, our words matter (Johnston, 2004). We believe that many of the strategies outlined in this book will help teachers seeking to build relationally and emotionally healthy learning communities. The curricular and instructional choices that we make in our classrooms impact today’s society, and the future. Teachers have a responsibility to

their students to create an environment for these conversations to occur in order to take action in our society. *Classroom Talk for Social Change* is a must-have text for supporting individuals and learning communities to ensure an equitable society today and in the future.

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