

5-1-2018

CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE:
THEORIZING CRITICAL
COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY WITH/IN
THE CLASSROOM USING A LENS OF
RELATIONAL SAFETY

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CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: THEORIZING CRITICAL COMMUNICATION
PEDAGOGY WITH/IN THE CLASSROOM USING A LENS OF RELATIONAL SAFETY

by

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B.S., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1997
M.S., Ed., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2012

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2018

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Communication Studies

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March 23, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

DAVID W. WHITFIELD, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in COMMUNICATION STUDIES, presented on March 23, 2018, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: THEORIZING CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY WITH/IN THE CLASSROOM USING A LENS OF RELATIONAL SAFETY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway

Using the ten commitments of Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) as a grounding perspective, this research project investigates the teacher-student relational dynamic with an inquiry into the degree of safety students and teachers perceive in their shared relationship. Relational safety is a new term being introduced into the literature on reflexive and critical teaching practices. It is foregrounded in the belief that the classroom is a microcosm of the larger world and therefore can be a site of inquiry and interruption of mundane communication practices that may be oppressive and which might otherwise go unquestioned (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

A combination of three methods were utilized. Classroom observations were conducted in all four face-to-face summer sections of the introductory public speaking course from the university's core curriculum. These observations were used to inform the questions used to interview participants. The data collected were from three (student) focus groups, four graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) interviews, and 23 individual student interviews. Findings revealed five major themes that are salient for the emergence and development of a teaching practice which nurtures feelings of safety in the teacher-student relationship: 1) affirmation; 2) dialogic worldview; 3) attention to bodies in space; 4) a balanced approach to humor, self-disclosure, and feedback; 5) the class evolves into a community of care.

The dissertation concludes with a reminder that while social change is the ultimate goal of a critical, reflexive teaching practice that is future-oriented, teachers must always remain grounded in hope. Relational safety can emerge when critical educators embrace a belief that when teachers model reflexive communicative practices to/for their students, in turn they create a space for incremental shifts in language choices, critical discourse, and reflexive thinking that will evoke a desire in others to advocate for social change, communicate across cultural differences, and celebrate diversity.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all of my ancestors and relatives who understood the value of higher education but sadly, lacked the resources and mentorship to pursue their educational aspirations and dreams. Your sacrifices did not go unnoticed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This was easily the most challenging project I have undertaken in my life. I have several individuals that I would like to recognize at this time.

I must give special thanks to Dr. Cynthia L. Sims and Dr. Wendy M. Weinhold for your continued mentorship and belief in my ability to complete this project. Thank you for always having time to help me locate a source or think through an idea.

I thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Nilanjana Bardhan, Dr. Nathan Stucky, Dr. Jonathan M. Gray, and Dr. Karen B. Wolf. This was a long document! Your time, insight, and feedback have been invaluable!

I thank my dissertation advisor, Dr. Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway. Only you and I know how hard we worked to bring this project together. You never gave up on me, even when I was filled with my own self-doubt. It still amazes me how many sources and resources you shared with me to help me round out my ideas; it's as if you were waiting for me to show up and write this dissertation!

I thank several other individuals who have helped me to stay focused and remain steadfast in the pursuit of my goals: Dr. Tanja J. Burkhard, Dr. Thomas M. Campbell, Mr. Donnell Wilson, Mr. Kevin Hansen, Mrs. Earline R. Fechter, Mr. Steven V. Falcone, Dr. Gregory R. Maddox, Dr. Elyse L. Pineau, and Ms. Phyllis D. Jackson.

I am eternally indebted to Mr. Joshua J. Vossler for providing me a space to think more critically, learn smarter, and more efficiently gather resources as well as helping me to consider my how my experiences and education can help me to reach my future professional goals.

A collective thank you to all of the scholars, writers, and activists whose work helped influence and inform the theoretical and methodological perspectives I built upon to help me produce this research project and present my findings and conclusions.

I am sure I should include many more names here for a variety of reasons. One of the disadvantages that comes with the good fortune of being influenced (and assisted) by so many good people is working through the difficult process of remembering who should be thanked when the spotlight turns in my direction. I trust you will be kind and gracious (and rightfully assume I was tired and weary at the point in my process) if you should happen to read these acknowledgments and feel yours is one of the names that should have been specifically mentioned. I assure you my oversight was not intentional nor malicious. I thank you for your contribution in whatever form it materialized. Every experience presents a new opportunity to learn, grow, and become better versions of ourselves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
ABSTRACT.....	i
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1—Introduction.....	1
On Good Teaching.....	6
What Do Good Teachers of Communication Have in Common?.....	7
Not All Students Experience Hesitation the Same Way.....	9
Critical Incidents: Catalysts—or the Gestalt Effect?.....	11
Incident One: A Day of Regret.....	14
Incident Two: Celebrating Positive Feedback.....	18
Dissertation Layout.....	21
CHAPTER 2—Literature Review.....	25
The Teacher-Student Relationship.....	25
Critical Communication Pedagogy.....	30
Relational Safety.....	32
Why Safety?.....	34
Safe Space.....	35
Relationships Can Transcend Physical Space.....	37
Connecting with Students in the Classroom.....	38
Salient Concepts in Relational Safety.....	39
Invitational Style of Engagement.....	39
Audience Address and Teaching.....	40

Invitational Rhetoric Used in Teaching Practices.....	42
Reflexivity of Teacher Power.....	43
Operationalization of Terms.....	43
Reflexivity.....	43
Power.....	44
Teacher Power versus Oppressive Authority.....	46
Reflexivity of Power.....	48
Dialogic Worldview.....	49
Dialogue.....	49
Dialogue as Method and Metaphor.....	50
Creating Relationships with Students Using Dialogue.....	51
Conclusion.....	53
CHAPTER 3—Methods.....	55
The Significance of an Appropriate Research Method.....	58
Positivism, Naturalism, and Observation.....	58
Qualitative Research.....	60
Qualitative Observation.....	62
Interviews.....	65
Definition and Theoretical Assumptions.....	65
Principles of Conducting Interviews.....	67
Focus Groups.....	68
Definition and Theoretical Assumptions.....	68
Principles of Conducting Focus Groups.....	70
Opposing Models of Interaction.....	70
The Moderator.....	71

Guidelines for Conducting Focus Groups.....	72
The Benefit of Combining Multiple Methods.....	73
Triangulation.....	74
Intersubjectivity and Human Nature.....	76
Using the Methods in Tandem.....	78
Qualitative Observation.....	78
Interviews and Focus Groups.....	79
Data Collection.....	80
Classroom Observations.....	82
Focus Groups.....	83
Interviews.....	85
Reviewing and Evaluating my Data Collection Processes.....	85
Flawed Questions.....	86
Being Prepared for Complications.....	87
A Moment of Reflexivity.....	88
Conclusion.....	89
CHAPTER 4—What's Behind the Curtain?.....	92
When the Researcher Leaves the Scene.....	92
All Data is Good Data—To Someone.....	93
When a Tree Falls in the Forest and No One is Present...95	
Data Processing.....	98
Findings Confirmed by the Review of Literature.....	99
Affirmation.....	100
Recognition.....	101
Facial Recognition Outside Class.....	104

Recall of Small Details.....	106
Making Tasks Manageable.....	108
Flexibility.....	109
Humility.....	110
Understanding.....	111
Approachable.....	114
Analysis of Affirmation.....	116
Dialogic Worldview.....	117
Analysis of Dialogic Worldview.....	120
Beyond the Literature Review: Earnest Inquiry.....	120
Attention to Bodies in Space.....	123
Appearance of Age.....	125
Teacher's Observable Behaviors.....	127
Commemorating the Last Day of Class.....	128
Balance.....	131
Humor.....	132
Self-Disclosure: Professional vs approachable....	134
Feedback.....	136
Analysis of Balance.....	139
Community.....	140
Care.....	142
Students Caring for Teachers.....	142
Students Caring for Each Other.....	144
Teachers Caring for Students.....	146
Analysis of Community.....	147

Elaborations: Answers to Research Questions.....	148
Students.....	148
Teachers.....	151
Focus Groups.....	154
Participant Voices in Tandem.....	159
Final Thoughts.....	160
CHAPTER 5—Conclusion.....	164
Dissertation Review.....	165
Critical Reflections.....	173
From Data Collection to Themes.....	173
What Happens When Life happens—in Real Life?.....	174
Does Gratitude Imply Obligation?.....	175
Evaluating Participant Credibility.....	177
Limitations and Future Directions.....	179
Online Sections.....	179
Cyberspace Versus Physical Space.....	180
Teaching Other Subjects Critically and Reflexively.....	181
Appropriate Method.....	182
Coming Full Circle.....	183
Social Change and Social Justice.....	183
Modeling Behaviors.....	186
Hope.....	188
REFERENCES.....	193
Appendix A.....	206
Appendix B.....	214

Appendix C.....	216
Appendix D.....	220
Appendix E.....	223
Appendix F.....	229
VITA.....	244

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I began my adventure as a doctoral student in Communication Studies in 2012, I was assigned to teach two sections of the university's core curriculum introductory public speaking course. At first, I was not fazed by this news. I had been advised when I was inquiring about admission the previous year that most graduate students in this department teach. In fact, this department places a heavy emphasis on teaching. Our introductory course is a university core curriculum requirement and all students must pass this class (or its equivalent) to graduate. Second, I have a long history of teaching and training, both in the military and civilian sectors. While on active duty in the United States Air Force, I completed my undergraduate degree in vocational education. I interned with St. Louis Public Schools Department of Adult Basic Education and was hired immediately upon finishing my degree. Simultaneously, my day job in the military was in the role of staff development and orientation for new enlisted personnel in the base hospital.

It was my good fortune to be selected to serve in the base hospital's staff development office after years of patient care. Within a year of working in staff development, I was assigned to be the CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation) administrator for the hospital, responsible for making sure all hospital personnel were current and certified. I made lesson plans, I evaluated performances, I administered exams, and I maintained training records. I was also assigned to act as primary contact for all non-medical personnel on the base who were required to participate in annual refresher training sessions for basic first aid. Part of my duties included training, evaluating, coaching, and certifying first aid and CPR instructors. Teaching and training, it seemed, were in my blood—no matter how much I avoided them. I've taught several friends to

drive a car (with a manual transmission, mind you), and even a couple others to crochet and knit. (Full disclosure: even though I fancy myself to be a skilled and competent fiber artist, every single one of those people that I taught to crochet have mastered it far beyond any skill level that I ever aspired to!) Still, sharing knowledge that I have gained with others I encounter seems to be a natural practice for me.

While earning my master's degree in Workforce Education and Development, I was assigned to be a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) for the program's military outreach program—the same program from which I earned my undergraduate degree years before at Scott Air Force Base. In this position, all instruction and evaluation were done remotely, via email and other electronic means of delivery. Most of the instructional materials (complete with templates and instructions for students to access assignments electronically) had been created long before I started teaching; my role was simply to give feedback to the students and to provide the instructors of record with my recommendations for point deduction and scoring. At no time was I ever an instructor of record; my name never appeared on any student's transcript, and I had no input on curriculum development, or syllabus content.

This teaching assignment was remote, in every sense of the word. Still, I began to take notice of the ways that the email communication exchanges did allow for some development of relationships and rapport (hooks, 2003; Shor, 1996). Another big difference from this teaching experience and what I would eventually experience as a doctoral student was this: a classroom presence. I did not see these students several times a week. Most of them I never met in person. I did not hear their voices, see their facial expressions, or interpret their body language. I was simply providing feedback to faceless students via email and passing on my feedback to the instructor of record afterwards.

The week before classes began in my doctoral program in Communication Studies, my department held a week-long orientation for new GTAs. This orientation week was designed to introduce new students to each other and the faculty, present policy and procedures, acclimate new students to the department's informal expectations, and get section assignments for teaching. Much of the content in the orientation settings was designed to help the new (and returning) GTAs be prepared for teaching the courses and sections they would be assigned. By the second day of orientation week, I realized immediately that this teaching experience was going to be quite different than the previous teaching roles I had inhabited before. This felt REAL!

I learned I would be the instructor of record for 44 students; I even verified that my name appeared as the instructor of record via our campus network. Each new teaching assistant was provided with a template for a syllabus (along with guidelines to personalize it and create a course schedule). There were passages and attachments that were required by the university, certainly. But each GTA was encouraged to personalize the course content, bring in additional resources, share and exchange teaching ideas, and even to create our own examinations, quizzes, assignment prompts, and activities. In short, we were encouraged to bring ourselves to the classroom and to BE with our students (hooks, 1994). While initially daunted by this newfound responsibility and the weight of what it means to be the instructor of record, I felt I was up to the challenge. I followed the suggested template for the syllabus fairly closely, hoping that I would be able to make the material accessible and meaningful by connecting with the students, and by making the course content relevant to their lives and experiences.

As I was embracing my new teaching experience, I also began to learn about critical communication pedagogy (CCP), a philosophy about teaching communicatively that assumes that power differences between teachers and students are always in play in the

classroom. I learned that we create our reality through our communicative acts (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Warren, 2008). In my reading of *Critical Communication Pedagogy*, I discovered that the classroom can easily be a site of oppression, especially when students are in classrooms with teachers who do not take cultural differences and other markers of difference into account when encountering a diverse population of students (Delpit, 1995; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Simpson, 2010; Warren, 2003). The *Critical Communication Pedagogy* (Fassett & Warren, 2007) text also informed me about Paulo Freire and his liberatory pedagogy. I learned concepts like the banking method of education (Freire, 1970) and problem-posing, reflexivity, and praxis (Warren & Fassett, 2011). I began to hear names like Apple, Dewey, Ellsworth, Giroux, Kincheloe, hooks, McLaren, Sprague, and Wink. They were coming at me faster than I could read about them! I thought if I could read and learn everything about teaching from scholars who wrote about critical pedagogy, I would automatically become the teacher I had always hoped to encounter in the classroom when I was a student. But no. . . .

While Fassett & Warren (2007) certainly encourage a close reading of critical pedagogy literature for new GTAs, they aren't afraid to critique this scholarship for sometimes lacking practical application of idealistic theories. They write, "Critical pedagogy—at its deepest linguistic roots—is too modernist, abstract, and utopian for concrete situations, fleshed individuals, palpable conflicts" (p. 26). They continue to explain how it's difficult to critique power structures without re-centering dominant groups in the process. They finally concede that "critical pedagogy is a deeply flawed and yet profoundly moving way of seeing" (p. 26).

I continued reading and learning more about critical theory and critical pedagogy and began to realize (by reflecting on my own experiences as a student and teacher) how easily power plays out in the classroom (hooks, 1994, 2003; Shor, 1996; Too & Livingstone,

1998). Often students are silenced, are expected to comply with the expectations and demands of their teachers, and have their previous experiences completely disregarded by teachers who have different experiences and values (Alley-Young, 2005; hooks, 1994; Simpson, 2010; Warren, 2003). I became fascinated with the goal of making the curriculum accessible to the students in my sections while meeting rigorous standards of academic excellence—and inviting students to co-create the learning experience with me by sharing their voices and stories to help make complex concepts and theory relevant and understandable (hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996). I saw my teaching practice as a way to honor Bell's (1997) definition of social justice—so that all who desired to learn had access to resources that will assist them in meeting that goal. For if indeed, as Fassett and Warren (2007) claim, the classroom has the potential to be a site of social change, then I definitely hoped to use my presence in the classroom to work toward this ideal.

I began to recognize that the ways that I had initially thought of teaching and learning may have been antithetical to the creation of a classroom presence that invites dialogue, participation, and sharing (hooks, 1994; Warren, 2003). While I was learning about what scholars say about good teaching (Bain, 2004; Dill, 1990; Ericksen, 1984, Gill, 2009; Gottlieb, 2015; Watson, 1997) and especially good teaching of communication (Burton & Dimpleby, 1990; Daly, Friedrich, & Vangelisti, 1990; Duck & McMahan, 2009), I also was learning about the ways that students greatly impact the student-teacher dynamic (Manke, 1997; Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2005; Shor, 1996), that teaching can be an act of love (hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1998; Pensoneau-Conway, 2009; Toyosaki, 2013) and that teachers actually need students (Palmer, 1998). What I came to dread the most as a result of my reading was the realization that teaching communication critically cannot be reduced to a single method or be accomplished using a rigid classroom presence with no room for variation from the planned activities for the

day (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Oh yes, and this quote about critical pedagogy from Fassett & Warren (2007) didn't help: "Quite simply, critical pedagogy is a journey, not a destination" (p. 27). *Sigh*. . . so it seems that CCP is anything but a method; it's a set of commitments. "Commitments remind us that we have responsibilities, promises to keep. Promises are relational" (p. 38). And critical pedagogy is not a final destination, but a process—and although it is well meaning, still fails to provide useful application to its own theorizing. *Sigh*. . . Even though I'm a communication studies major, I'm speechless. What do the *experts* on teaching have to say?

On Good Teaching

The literature I located on good teaching has a plethora of suggestions, directives, and definitions for (and of) good teaching. I'll start with the basics. The responsibility for creating a conducive environment to enhance student learning begins with the teacher (Gottlieb, 2015; Morgan & Morris, 1999). *Sure*. Whenever possible, good teachers know each student by name (McKeachie, 1999; Rawlins, 2000). *Check*. College professors are charged with keeping their students interested in the subject material and not bore them to death (Ericksen, 1984; Watson, 1997). *Check! (One can hope!)* Bain (2004) weighs in with this simple criterion: good teachers are supposed to be knowledgeable in the subjects they teach. *Check?* Apparently good teachers are always prepared well in advance of the lectures they deliver (Bain, 2004; Gill, 2009) and make students want to learn with their enthusiastic presentation and delivery of the subject matter (Gill, 2009; Morgan & Morris, 1999). *I'll try!* Good teachers value learning (Gottlieb, 2015). *I completely agree!* Teachers are both role models and coaches (Dill, 1990). *I hadn't really considered myself to be either of those*. Good teachers always have a toolkit at the ready, chock full of learning activities and supplemental readings if discussions lag or the flow of

discussion loses momentum (Goodwin & Hubbel, 2013). *Gulp! Noted.* Fortunately, I teach in a department where everyone freely shares exciting, innovative (and tested) teaching ideas. Good teachers are skilled at conveying the knowledge they possess to others (Dannels, 2015; Dill, 1990). *Whew! Check! (I hope!).* And apparently, even though teachers don't have to entertain their students per se, having a sense of humor couldn't hurt (Watson, 1997). *That's a tall order! Oh, well.* I thought to myself that perhaps I should lower my aspirations and just try to be a decent teacher.

On the other hand, I learned that when teachers are not self-aware and reflexive of how their teaching practices can have far-reaching effects on the lives of their students, they can inflict emotional and psychological harm in the classroom (Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 1994; Too & Livingstone, 1998; Warren, 2003). Additionally, teachers should be mindful that students come from myriad educational backgrounds, cultures, and upbringings (Delpit, 1995; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). When teachers fail to embrace the vast range of students that make up an ever-diversifying population in the United States, they are positioned to oppress their students this way: by using their authority in the classroom to insist that students abandon all of their previous knowledge and experiences and conform to a rigid curriculum without pushback or being allowed to exercise any agency about how and what they learn (Halliday, 1996; hooks, 1989; Shor, 1996; Warren, 2003). *That's a lot of pressure!* What else don't I know about teaching that perhaps I should?

What Do Good Teachers of Communication Have in Common?

Teachers of communication (especially of public speaking) have a variety of skills to share and learning to assess. In addition to forensic skills such as diction, enunciation, and vocal intonation, they also teach their students the rhetorical and organizational skills they will need

for creating their speeches with well-crafted arguments (Daly, Friedrich, & Vangelisti, 1990). Teachers of communication must teach their students about audience analysis and demonstrate behaviors that reflect an engaged audience member simultaneously. Teachers of communication must also illuminate their students on the far-reaching effects of any communicative act (Burton & Dimbleby, 1990). Since language is constitutive in nature, it must be shared and reinforced to create meaning (Warren & Fassett, 2011). In turn, each new utterance of any word reinforces the meaning of the word, gives it new life, and deepens its place in the vernacular (Warren, 2008). Ideally, the classroom where communication is taught critically can be a space that empowers teachers and students to interrogate their language choices reflexively. In this space of reflexive awareness, otherwise mundane acts of communicative violence that often go unquestioned can be interrupted and challenged in a community that fosters authentic dialogue and affirms each person's importance to the group simultaneously. According to Fassett and Warren (2007), "If the classroom is a microcosm of worlds, a metonym of the cultures we'll encounter throughout our lives, then it is also a site of social change" (p. 63).

Communication Studies is a broad field, and teachers of communication must be prepared to discuss and demonstrate proper technique for public speaking (such as vocal projection, intonation, eye contact, and pitch) but also nonverbal concepts such as facial expressions, hand gestures, and using space (Duck & McMahan, 2009). Good teachers of communication do not fear silence in the classroom (Hao, 2011; Schultz, 2009), and do not limit themselves to only one method to assess learning and mastery of course materials (Dannels, 2015). The literature on teaching of communication is clear: good teachers of communication do not just teach their students how to speak well. They also teach the art of speaking mindfully,

confidently, and encourage their students to be open to opposing viewpoints and perspectives (Allen, 2011; Burton & Dimpleby, 1990).

Not all students experience hesitation the same way. Good teachers of communication must be prepared to recognize (and possibly intervene) when students seem to exhibit behaviors that indicate severe instances of reticence during class, some of which could be pathological and/or debilitating (Ayers & Hopf, 1993; Horowitz, 2002; Richmond & McCroskey, 1985; Wadleigh, 1997). According to Wadleigh (1997) who cites Buss (1984), **shyness** occurs when a person feels awkward around strangers. Continuing, Wadleigh cites Phillips from 1984 who says that **reticence** occurs when students find it safer to remain quiet than to talk. Some students can easily self-diagnose their own cases of simple **speech anxiety**, a condition where the student fears making speeches publicly (Ayers & Hopf, 1993). Citing McCroskey from 1977, Wadleigh continues to clarify these terms when he notes that often a person can experience fear and/or anxiety at the mere thought of communicating with another person. When this phenomenon occurs in class with students who exhibit signs of severe shyness or hesitation, the students may actually be coping with **communication apprehension**. Horowitz (2002) shares that:

the vast majority of people who suffer from communication apprehension have no complaints of speech, voice, or language disorders and are generally competent and articulate speakers when not under stress. However, in certain situations, or with specific people, they become frozen with fear, as if they were disabled speakers. (p. 16)

For clarity and parsimony, many of the constructs that describe a person's fear (or hesitation) to speak (either publicly or with another person) are often placed under the large umbrella of **communication avoidance** (Wadleigh, 1997), often known as communication apprehension. Students in our classes who experience communication apprehension (and are concerned about

having to give speeches or speak publicly) are quite justified to feel this way. According to Richmond and McCroskey (1985), not only are quiet students perceived by their teachers to be less intelligent than their more outgoing peers, these students often receive less (needed) attention from their teachers because they prefer to avoid bringing unflattering attention to their perceived shortcomings. Wadleigh (1997) muses that many Western scholars find communication avoidance to be "dysfunctional" (p. 12) by citing scholars who have claimed that "students with high communication apprehension are less motivated to study, earn lower grades, avoid social contact, and make limiting occupational choices" (p. 13). Richmond and McCroskey continue by asserting that students who are talkative in class (and who engage freely with teachers and other students) have more enhanced learning experiences than their reticent peers. Conversely, they note that "because many courses are graded at least partially on 'participation,' quiet people often receive lower grades than their more talkative peers" (p. 61). *Oh, wow! So what do I do if a student seems to be exhibiting extreme signs of reticence? Am I expected to diagnose speaking pathologies and then prescribe treatments too?*

The literature on interventions and techniques I located was both mind-blowing and confusing. Some scholars suggest that false beliefs about public speaking and communication with others should be identified and disproved by creating scenarios whereby the speaker experiences small successes at first, then is guided (incrementally) into speaking for longer periods and with larger audiences (Ayres & Hopf, 1993). Horowitz (2002) claims that placing anxious speakers in small groups for practice is optimal. Her reasons for this method include feeling a sense of community with other anxious speakers, a chance for speakers to desensitize their fears by having repeated practice in a positive environment, and her belief that working in small groups "enables acknowledgement and affirmation of everyone's personal growth over

time" (p. 140). Richmond & McCroskey (1985) on the other hand, assert that simple skills training is ineffective in the management of communication avoidance without paying close attention to the cognitive processes that manifest in physiological signs (such as sweaty palms and rapid breathing). They advocate for understanding the nature of the anxiety and its root causes, paying special attention to the way the body reacts in stressful situations (like public speaking), and THEN creating a program of positive, guided speaking exercises designed to model skillful speaking and invite participants to emulate these techniques until they become second nature. *Wow! Just, wow! <long, loud, sigh>*

Critical Incidents: Catalysts—or the Gestalt Effect?

Even though I had been given access to many ideas and techniques for effective teaching, I still felt extremely overwhelmed. Thankfully, our adopted textbook entitled *Communication: A critical/cultural introduction* by Warren and Fassett (2011) was written especially to assist teachers of communication in teaching the introductory communication course critically, yet I still felt like I was in way over my head. Who could blame me? In the end, I decided to give this unique teaching opportunity my full attention and energy, with varying results.

Once the semester began, I managed to squeak past the first few nerve-wracking days of class. On the first day I reviewed the syllabus with the students and we introduced ourselves briefly. During our second class meeting, we spent part of the class period engaging in ice-breaking activities. As I managed to stumble through the first few lectures and discussions of our textbook chapters, I was also working hard to connect with the students simultaneously. Sure enough, within two weeks, I had memorized the names and faces of student in both sections I taught. In the process of getting to know the students individually (and the class sections as a whole), it did not take long for me to see firsthand how much the relationship between a teacher

and the students in the classroom impacts the overall learning environment. I began to take note of the students in my classroom and how they behaved—with me and each other. It did not take long for me to realize that students will begin to police their own (and each other's) behaviors (Shor, 1996; Warren & Fassett, 2011). During my second semester, I noticed that the students in both sections had begun to anticipate the way that I would suggest we arrange the classroom for lecture discussion—after only two weeks of class! You see, with the exception of days that students presented speeches, we usually reviewed assigned readings of textbook chapters with everyone (including me) sitting in a circle formation where all of us could see each other. However, I never directed the class ahead of time that they should arrange the desks in the classroom in any certain way. This tendency to try to anticipate my expectations as I occupied the role of teacher emerged in other ways, too.

Many college students seem reluctant to engage in critical thinking (hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996; Warren, 2003). When I tried to grade holistically with more focus on kind (but thorough) feedback and less emphasis on points, students resisted. They wanted to know how they ranked against other students. If the prompts that I provided for assignments were not very specific, students asked for more direction. Many students I encountered were conditioned to find out what I (as teacher) believed to be the *right answer* and to model that ideal into the work they submitted (hooks, 1994, 2003). I tried to resist this by asking them to use a first-person authorial voice or to reflect upon their own experiences to engage the course material. But I also soon learned that I can never know if students are saying what I expect to hear, or if they really have come to understand critical concepts I have attempted to introduce during lectures and discussions such as whiteness, privilege, and oppression (Johnson, 2006; Warren, 2003), especially if I am unsure of how I am perceived in the role of teacher.

Freire (1970) proclaims that liberatory education emerges through dialogue. Dialogue requires interaction and exchange of ideas. Does my presence in the classroom invite students to actively and openly engage the course material? Is my desire to co-create an open classroom environment where students want to engage and participate hindered by my expectations and preconceptions of what engagement and participation entail? In my endeavor to remain reflexive of the power that comes with being a teacher, I ask myself a few questions. Do my students fear me a little? Do they feel safe sharing their authentic beliefs on difficult topics such as racial tensions, gender stereotypes, and socio-economic oppression in my presence? How do my students perceive my body? I am a man of color. I would describe my physique as a retired linebacker. Do I intimidate students with my physical presence? And with my presence, do I use *vigilante social justice* (my term) in the classroom when I endeavor to create space for voices to be heard from students whom I perceived to be from marginalized groups (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Simpson, 2010; Warren, 2003)? Do I silence students when they express their ideas on race or sexuality if they do not conform to my "enlightened views"? I think it is at least possible that I might be perceived this way, without my ever realizing it.

Even though my entire teaching experience has been an ongoing lesson in self-discovery and reflexivity, two specific incidents have helped to shape my interest in the relational aspect of teaching and the student-teacher relationship. One was regrettable, the other affirming and uplifting. What these very different experiences have in common is that both of them required another person's input to help me see my teaching practice from different perspectives other than my own. Conversely, these experiences also challenged me to reflect on my formative experiences as a student, and how those experiences have shaped my identity as both student and teacher (Delpit, 1995).

Incident one: A day of regret. The first incident occurred during my first semester teaching as a doctoral student. There was a student in one of my sections who was in the first semester of his first year. I really liked him; this student was a bit shy and reserved, but still friendly. He seemed to be struggling with adjusting to college life, and it showed. He often seemed disheveled and unorganized; once he missed class because he got his days mixed up! (I honestly believed him; I still do). I think one of the things that most endeared him to me was his smile and his positive attitude. Even when I had to mark off points for spelling error or typos, I tried to compliment his ideas and willingness to express his thoughts on paper. In short, I thought we had a good rapport developing.

A couple of weeks before midterms, I was updating attendance records and noticed that this student had not attended class for several class periods. I followed the normal protocol and guidelines suggested to me: I sent him multiple emails assuring him that he was missed and urging him to come to class or to my office hours to chat; I contacted the university offices that specialize in following up with students who have missed several classes. Since I tried to create a classroom environment where students interact with each other and know each other by name (Rawlins, 2000), I even asked the other students in that section if anyone had seen him around campus. Unfortunately, no one shared any useful information about his whereabouts.

I was pleasantly surprised when I finally saw him waiting in the classroom before class began one day. I told him how happy I was to see him and asked him to come outside so we could chat. I wanted to discuss assignments he had missed and to see if he would come to office hours so we could discuss his absences and grade in the class. "Hey, man. We've all missed you! Where have you been? Why haven't I seen you for so long?" The student cleared his throat, looked me directly in the eye and rocked my world. He reminded of me the last day he

attended. It was a speaking day and he was assigned to speak. "When I finished my last speech, it was only one minute and 27 seconds long." (The time requirement for this speech had been four minutes, with a 15-second grace period without point deduction).

He continued: "When I finished and went to sit down, someone laughed at me and you didn't say anything." I was stunned. I sputtered. I started to deny that it could have happened, until I remembered that someone's personal story should not be so quickly dismissed as invalid or untrue (Bochner, 2012; hooks, 1989). I apologized profusely, assuring him that such an offense could never happen in my classroom and that if I had been aware of it, I would have intervened. I tried to recreate that day in my memory. After all, I thought, it was my job to keep the classroom environment safe and accessible to all students (Bell, 1997), and to assure that each student had equal access to learning and could do so in a space without fear of failure, ridicule, or shaming. In what way had my oversight inadvertently hurt my chances to create moments where social change can take root in the classroom (Fassett & Warren, 2007) and inspire someone else to be a more reflexive communicator?

I remember the student's tone when he spoke to me. While holding my gaze, his voice was calm and rational, never wavering. I didn't feel like he was angry or bitter; I read his expression as disappointment. But even today when I dig deeply into my memories and try to revisit that exact moment in time, I cannot quite recreate the scenario that the student shared with me. One reason has to do with where I was located in the classroom during the speech round day that he mentioned. Many of my teaching colleagues and I often opt to sit as far from the speaker as possible during speech round days. This strategy serves at least two purposes. First, if I can hear the speaker all the way in the back of the classroom, I assume that the rest of the students could hear too since they are seated closer to the speaker than I. Second, it has been my

experience that many students get distracted when the teacher is sitting close to them during speeches. Rather than distributing eye contact evenly throughout the classroom space and to the entire audience, students often look at the teacher—and only the teacher. Thus, a seat in the back makes perfect sense—especially when I need so much room to spread out all of my evaluation tools like the scoring instrument, the speech prompt, the student's speaking outline, etc. I definitely would not want another student to be sitting close enough to me to see my notes and feedback to the speaker. However, the main shortcoming of this strategy is simple but important: when I am seated at the very back of the classroom, I cannot see the facial expressions of any student sitting in front of me with their backs facing me. Are they making faces at the speaker? Is anyone trying to cause the speaker to laugh? Do they roll their eyes with disgust? Do they nod encouragingly or look bored?

When I revisit that moment, I mostly see myself writing furiously on a scoring rubric, trying to get as many comments and observations on paper as possible before the next speaker approached the podium. Each speaking day had a designated amount of students scheduled to speak and I did not want to slow down the momentum of the speech round any more than necessary. We know that public speaking is a highly dreaded activity among students (Wood, 1996) and if it were not a required class to graduate, I am certain many students would opt never to take it. So I felt it was my duty to make the process of meeting the university's requirement of at least 15 minutes of speaking time as manageable and painless as possible. Yet, in spite of my efforts to remember what the student told me he heard (laughter), I can only recall the smallest sound from the area near the podium which I could (maybe) interpret (after the fact) as a snicker, a titter, or a sound that could be interpreted as the slightest giggle ever. What I do remember quite vividly is my hand scribbling away on a piece of paper and trying to get my feedback and

notes completed. Clearly the student heard something different, something that he interpreted as ridicule and shaming.

I must disclose right here that this episode forever shaped my teaching presence in the classroom. I try to be more sensitive to each student, more alert, more ready to intervene. I realize that I am fortunate to teach in sections with 20-22 students, so knowing each student by name is quite possible. I pride myself on having learned each student's name by the time the second week of class ends every semester (McKeachie, 1999; Rawlins, 2000). I rarely comment aloud on anyone's speech, keeping my feedback between the student and me. Even today, when I return written work, I fold the paper in half and hand it to the student discreetly so that the score (and my feedback) are not visible to anyone else who may be sitting nearby.

As I continue to try to make sense of what the student shared with me, I keep asking myself if I let the student down because of what he says happened in the classroom where I was in charge. When I have shared this incident with others, many have empathized, but others have pointed out that my impetus to intervene on this student's behalf may have been misguided and premature. After all, I only have his version of what happened to offset my own cloudy memory of that day's events. Could he be hypersensitive or paranoid that he was being mocked—or was I really just too distracted with my paperwork to notice quiet bits of laughter? If I had heard the sounds that he interpreted as laughter, what exactly do I think I would (or should) have done? Would I have accused a student of being disrespectful and confronted them? Would my attempts at intervention be interpreted as overkill or heavy-handedness? And yet, the question remains: if it is not the teacher's responsibility to maintain classroom decorum (by example), then whose is it?

In the process of moving on and learning from this incident, one thing resonates: in spite of feeling hurt and neglected by me, the student still returned to class. And without much prompting, he also shared his experience in the classroom with me. Had he not, I would never have known or guessed. While his message was clear, his tone was not abrupt or disrespectful in the least. He simply answered me matter-of-factly. I was reminded of bell hooks (1989) when she muses on the power of expression that is felt when a person who has experienced a micro-aggression or has been injured by oppressive language engages in the simple (but courageous) act of retelling. He was sharing his experience with me in his own voice. His attendance continued to be spotty for the rest of the semester; he had already made provisions to have his final examination proctored by an authorized campus resource agency, and did not show up for any other speaking days. But he still gave me an answer when I asked; he felt safe enough with me to do this. That has to count for something, right?

Incident two: Celebrating positive feedback. After a lot of self-reflection and finally (mostly) forgiving myself for not being able to control every aspect of the classroom and the behavior of the students therein (hooks, 1994; Manke, 1997; Mottet, et al., 2005), I really needed a win. Midway into the spring semester of my second year of teaching, I invited a faculty member to my classroom to observe a roundtable discussion. Each section was assigned a chapter from a text that was selected by the university as a common reader. My idea was to have each student present a short paper on the chapter with one paragraph presented for each of three assigned sections: summarize it, reflect upon it, and connect it to other concepts we have discussed in class already—such as communication, public advocacy, hegemony, and building community. The same day the papers were due, we would engage in a roundtable discussion based upon some questions I had created about the topic. Each student was given a chance to

respond to each question; some questions went to each student in turn. At any time a student could simply “opt out” from answering any question without penalty. To my memory, each student participated enthusiastically in the discussion.

After class ended, the faculty member and I met for debriefing and she shared her notes and observations with me. One particular observation still resonates with me. She informed me that she was impressed that all of the students in the class seemed eager to respond and participate in the roundtable discussion and that it was clear to her that all of the students had read the material and seemed to enjoy it. Then she pointed out that she had observed something a bit unusual: during the entire discussion period, the international students in the class (one in particular) raised their hands and asked to be recognized just as often as the U.S. American students in the classroom. There is plenty of literature to support this phenomenon as being unusual, and the reasons that international students may be reticent to verbally participate in class are many (Schultz, 2009). Reasons for international students in the U.S. choosing to remain silent in class range from being self-conscious about their fluency in English, to having been acculturated in an educational system where raising one's hand to speak during a professor's lecture is considered disrespectful and frowned upon (Alley-Young, 2005; Hao, 2010, 2011), and so on. Thus, she surmised, these students felt safe and invited to engage in the ongoing dialogue and that this was due (at least in part) because my students and I had co-created a classroom environment where students knew they were invited (and welcome) to verbally participate and felt safe to do so—without fear of punishment if they opted out or didn't talk.

While I was grateful for this feedback, I was also taken aback. Getting students to feel safe to contribute in class had never been a challenge to me—or so I had believed. I always tried to create discussion questions and activities that directly relate to the students' experiences. Like

bell hooks (1989; 1994) shares about her adventures in the process of learning to teach critically, I encouraged students to share their own stories that are relevant to the topic at hand. At the same time, I have always attempted to create activities and assignments that address multiple methods of learning and allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the course material. Shy students are often prolific and profound writers (Hao, 2010, 2011; Schultz, 2009). Some students may be quiet during discussions but give amazing speeches when called upon to do so. It would have never occurred to me that a classroom activity where all students (regardless of background) appear eager and willing to verbally participate was unusual or remarkable. I am almost always the only non-student in the room—the same as many other teachers. Only the insight and input from an outside observer could have made me aware.

* * *

These two events have made me realize just how much classroom teaching is a relational practice (DeVito, 1986; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Toyosaki, 2013). Without feedback from students (and when possible, outside observers), teachers cannot know how their students feel about them and their teaching practices. Humans need social interaction and feedback from others; this process is how we form our sense of identity and self-image (Mead, 1967; Weedon, 2004). And this is how I come to this research project. This is a study about teachers of communication and their students—and how the students and teachers perceive the relationship they share in those roles. More to the point, do students feel safe in their relationships with their respective teachers?

Dissertation Layout

I'm sure by now you have taken notice of my unique authorial voice and my textual presence on the page as I present my thoughts and ideas to you, the reader. This simply means that as I inhabit the dual roles of writer and scholar, I walk you through the processes that guided me as I conducted this study—both externally (methodologically) and internally (my thoughts). This reflexive (and very personal) style of narrating is my deliberate attempt to gain (and retain) the interest of the reader while making connections to the research and findings I present later in this study (Nash & Bradley, 2011). In my studies, I have come to recognize and appreciate the contributions to scholarship already made by several authors who employ their own distinct brands of authorial voice and tone in their work such as bell hooks, Ira Shor, Marcelo Diversi and Cláudio Moreira, as well as the late John T. Warren. I hope to write with the same effect in this dissertation.

In Chapter Two I present my literature review in order to establish and describe the concept of *relational safety*. I show how teaching is a relational practice and review the ways that scholars have theorized the student-teacher relationship. Next, I establish that teaching is a complex set of relational processes between students and teachers. I synthesize the literature on the student/teacher relationship, including a review of components I have located that scholars say help create a productive teacher/student relationship. Following, I ground the literature review by referencing an emerging perspective on teaching called critical communication pedagogy (CCP), which helps to examine the power inherent in the teacher-student relationship. At this juncture, I present concepts that I believe must be present in a CCP classroom where students experience feeling safe in the relationship with their teacher—*relational safety*. Thus, my research questions for this study are: "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational

safety amongst students and teachers? What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?"

In Chapter Three, I present the research methods I am proposing for this study. After a brief discussion on the importance of selecting the most appropriate method and the benefit of using multiple methods, I argue that since teaching is relational, data from both teachers and students is necessary to draw valid conclusions for this study. I discuss how triangulation, an often-utilized (and respected) way to collect data from a variety of possible perspectives and "lines of sight," informs my belief that multiple methods of data collection may not yield objective Truth (nor am I aiming to). Rather, these principles will be useful in uncovering the overlap (and gaps) in how teachers and students understand and perceive safety in their shared relationships. Finding these places where there is overlap in meaning is significant because human nature is relational and intersubjective; we can never fully know how others perceive us—nor can we ever fully perceive ourselves. This is especially true when analyzing the perception of the relationship between students and teachers.

After I define qualitative observation, focus groups, and interviews as my selected methods, I share in explicit detail the processes I utilized to recruit participants (teachers and students), as well as the steps I took in data collection. Then I share my experiences and observations in the process of refining the questions I included in the loose interview protocols. I show how I used the principles of a pilot study to review the questions I used in my interview protocol(s), evaluate the responses from the participants to see if the data I collected seemed to address my research questions efficiently, and made necessary revisions as indicated. This section also includes a reflexive account of any personal biases that I discovered that may have

influenced the questions I presented or the questioning techniques I utilized when interviewing participants (Davies, 1999).

Chapter Four contains an analysis of the data I have collected and shared. This is where I present themes that emerge and inform the concretization of relational safety as a pedagogical phenomenon. After thoroughly reviewing my field notes and the recordings I transcribed, I created categories for coding. I review the criteria I utilized to justify how I classified and grouped the data I collected. There are excerpts of conversation to support the codes and themes presented, and includes reflections on the data I shared and what thought processes guided my decisions on which data to include (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The themes are revealed in two sections: the first section is reserved for findings that support the review of literature (and my own hypothesizing). The second section reveals new concepts and ideas that enhance and deepen our understanding of what factors are needed to create relational safety as understood by the teacher and student participants I interviewed. Each major theme concludes with a brief analysis which includes my reflections on the coding processes and data excerpts that I used to help me define and support that theme. After I conclude the chapter with an updated summary definition of relational safety, I return to reflect upon the necessity of wanting to investigate the phenomenon of relational safety as part of a critical, reflexive teaching perspective.

Chapter Five is the conclusion of the dissertation. After a brief review of the major themes and findings I presented in Chapter 4, I share critical reflections about my own observations and discoveries about this research study, including disclosing some possible biases (Davies, 1999) I may be harboring that could have influenced my interpretation of data and the findings I present as I inhabit the role of researcher (who is also a student and teacher). I then include limitations that I encountered in the process of conducting this study and make

recommendations for future research inquiries in an ongoing pursuit to extend the conceptualization of relational safety in the classroom between teachers and students. After I pause to reflect upon the literature that informs my understanding of how incremental social change must inform social justice, I conclude this project with reflections on the importance of remaining hopeful in spite of the mounting oppression and systemic injustice that pervade our society (and appear to hinder our efforts) when doing social justice advocacy in the classroom.

Critical communication pedagogues certainly aspire to teach communication critically (Allen, 2011; Kahl, 2013). Yet, ALL teaching happens through some form of communication, regardless of field of study or discipline (Fassett & Warren, 2007). It is my sincere hope, then, that relational safety be accepted and included as a meaningful term in future scholarship for teachers of communication. This invitation to explore relational safety in the classroom is also extended to all teachers—regardless of discipline—who desire to teach their respective subjects critically and reflexively and who may wonder if (when/how) their students feel safe in their shared relationship.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, I introduce the following arguments in order to explicate the concept of *relational safety*. First I show how current literature in communication studies, higher education, instructional communication, and critical pedagogy frame teaching as relational, specifically between students and teachers. Next, I synthesize the literature that I located on the complex student/teacher relationship. This assists me in crafting a solid argument that in order for students to invest in the relational aspect of teaching, they must feel some degree of safety in the relationship they share with their teacher. Then I establish critical communication pedagogy (CCP) as a framework within which to investigate the phenomenon of relational safety in the classroom, particularly as it relates to power, reflexivity, and dialogue. Next I present a thorough discussion of safety and the elusive *safe space classroom*. In demonstrating how relationships transcend physical space, I argue that relational safety aims to transcend the ideals of a safe space. As relational safety includes ongoing awareness of (and investigation into) how teachers engage power within the teacher-student relationship, my primary research questions then become:

RQ1: What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers?

RQ2: What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?

The Teacher-Student Relationship

The teacher-student relationship is dynamic and complex. In the classroom, not only is the teacher interacting with each student (individually), but also with the class as a whole (Chen,

2000; Warren, 2003). It is true that in the traditional classroom the teacher is the primary authority figure, who decides what will be taught, and how the material will be presented. "The classroom becomes a place where the professor acts out while sharing knowledge in whatever manner he or she chooses" (hooks, 2003, p. 85). Manke (1997) theorizes that many in Western culture share a common misbelief that teachers alone have power in the teacher-student relationship. However, Mottet et al. (2005) claim that "power is rooted in the relationship. . . and relationships are rooted in the verbal and nonverbal messages that individuals create and exchange with each other" (p. 424). I interpret this statement to mean that power in the classroom is neither fixed nor static, but constantly shifting and evolving in each moment (Warren, 2003).

Manke (1997) notes that the teacher-student relationship is definitely not one-sided. She continues by asserting that it is unfair and unreasonable to hold the teacher responsible for every outcome that happens in the classroom. "Teachers are not the sole owners of classroom power" (p. 2). As mentioned earlier, power occurs relationally. Manke continues thusly, "How can one individual build relationships? They must be the work of all who participate—both teachers and students" (p. 2). Since teaching is relational, teacher behaviors affect their students just as student behaviors affect their teachers. Students may feel obligated or coerced to some degree to present the appearance of complying with the teacher's directives, but students possess a different type of power. Even subconsciously, students can resist teacher authority passively, by refusing to engage or participate in activities and discussions (Shor, 1996). "Power belongs to both teachers and students. Just as teachers have interactional resources that affect how students act, students use their own resources to shape teachers' behaviors" (Manke, 1997, p. 7). Students may appear to be disinterested, bored, or withdrawn. They often reveal no emotion whatsoever, including

skillfully masking any recognizable reaction to course content or lectures with stiff body language and stony facial expressions. When teachers aspire to form real connections with their students (and seek to enjoy the instant gratification that comes with feeling that students have grasped the content being taught), a classroom full of students who only respond with silence can feel torturous (Dannels, 2015; Shor, 1996; Wood, 1996).

The fact is, sometimes teachers like certain students more than others (hooks, 1993; Pensoneau-Conway, 2009). This could be for a number of reasons, including perceived similar backgrounds, assessment of the student's adherence to course policies, or simple personality differences. Unfortunately, teachers can easily form opinions about students based upon biases and prejudices, especially when it comes to how well students meet (or deviate from) expectations of student adherence to course policies (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994). Adding to this, DeVito (1986) shares his belief that the teacher-student relationship is completely essential to forming an effective teaching practice. He insists that "effective teaching, like effective relationships, cannot be developed or maintained without direct and concerted attention to the third self, the teacher-student relationship" (p. 54). Rawlins (2000) takes this belief to another level of connection by theorizing that friendships between teachers and students can be productive, enjoyable, and can greatly enhance the effectiveness of the overall learning experience.

Occasionally, teachers and students do have the good fortune to connect on a deeper level. In her analysis of the writing on her teaching experiences shared by bell hooks, Florence (1998) notes that hooks "advocates nurturing learning communities whereby teachers encourage active participation of students and recognition of each student's presence and contribution to a learning process" (p. 108). According to Teven (2001), "teaching is a personal relationship

involving the interaction between teacher and student personalities" (p. 159). Noddings (1988) takes the position that the act of caring for one's students is any teacher's moral duty.

Pensoneau-Conway (2009) shares her experience of having mixed feelings of joy and apprehension when she can sense that she and a student have developed a mutual fondness as a direct result of her relational teaching practice. Can teachers care too much? Is any teacher capable of caring for all students equally (hooks, 2003)? Yet, in spite of the obvious hesitation to cross ethical lines in the caring relationship between students and teachers, DeVito (1986), Docan-Morgan (2011), and Wood (2000) all reference relational development as an essential component to creating an effective teaching practice. DeVito shares a belief that "whatever the subject matter or instructional method, establishing a personal relationship with students is both feasible and necessary" (p. 51). Teven (2001) emphatically proclaims his belief that the way that students feel about their teacher directly impacts how they engage the subject matter being taught.

hooks (1993) cautions teachers not to deny their humanness when we enter the classroom and take on the role of teacher. Each person who enters the classroom does so in a very corporeal dimension, and as such, acknowledging each person's humanity is an exercise in recognizing the mind and body as interconnected. The classroom is the material space where teachers and students meet and engage in teaching and learning. Even subconsciously, teachers and students react to one another's bodies. This belief is in direct contradiction to earlier scholarship on teaching that fails to recognize how the body and mind are complimentary, not compartmentalized in such a way that the body is ignored (or not acknowledged) by teachers in the classroom (hooks, 1993). Florence (1998) praises bell hooks for her "engaged pedagogy," in which she consciously resists institutional hierarchy and oppressive structures with a teaching

practice that "promises greater teacher/student interaction and empowers students to assume responsibility for creating conducive learning environments in conjunction with teachers" (p. 77). Assuming that students enter the classroom with some knowledge can make the learning experience richer when a teacher "provides students with multiple perspectives that enable them to know themselves better and to live in the world more fully" (Florence, 1998, p. 77). This of course is in direct response to institutional practices that place the teacher as the all-knowing authority on the subject matter being presented with little or no regard for the students' life experiences, cultural practices, or any form of prior knowledge (Shor, 1996). When teachers include students in the process of teaching and learning, a relational teaching practice can emerge and flourish (Chen, 2000; Wood, 2000).

Yet, like any relationship, an authentic teacher-student relationship must emerge organically and incrementally. "Education is a developmental process, dependent upon effective communication skills" (DeVito, 1986, p. 58). Docan-Morgan (2011) posits that relationships between teachers and students have a specific lifecycle, and that "they are marked by relational turning points over their life course" (p. 21). Also framed as critical incidents (Woolsey, 1986) in the student-teacher relationship cycle, this scholarship points out specific times and occurrences that shape the development of the relationships between teachers and students. These include such categories as: 1) consultation, as the student turns to the teacher for information or advice; 2) discussions of course policies or career advancement; 3) intervention—the teacher approaches the students with concerns about grades or student engagement with material; and 4) transgression, where the student (and/or teacher) acts in a way that violates behavioral norms for classroom decorum. Dobransky and Frymier (2004) claim that when communication between teachers and students also occurs outside of class, the relationships

formed are deeper and more mutually satisfying. Myers (2004) chimes in with this observation: “instructors who are perceived as. . . demonstrating caring have a positive impact on student participation, both in- and out-of-the classroom” (p. 134).

Both O'Neill & Todd-Mancillas (1992) and Woolsey (1986) claim that when teachers exhibit contrition (or regret) for transgressive behaviors (such as shaming behaviors, outbursts, or dishonesty), the students' perception of the teacher is altered permanently, for better or for worse. Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) in turn note that the influence of teacher behaviors on student learning is so prevalent that they implore all teachers to create and take note of positive relational turning points with students whenever possible. These turning points need not be catastrophic or life-altering. Simple moments make a big difference, such as knowing students by name or finding out more about students through conversation (O'Neill & Todd-Mancillas, 1992). Conversely, negative behaviors such as rebuking students in front of their peers, or failing to present (and adhere to) clear standards for assessment and grading, can also have lasting effects on how students feel in relation to their teachers (O'Neill & Todd-Mancillas, 1992; Woolsey, 1986). Docan-Morgan & Manusov weigh in thusly: "As teachers, we should look for and capitalize on moments where we might be able to make a significant change in our relationships with our students" (p. 185). In keeping with the relational aspect of teaching, I now introduce a way of thinking about teaching and engaging with students known as critical communication pedagogy.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

In 2007, Fassett and Warren published what has become a germinal text for critical educators working with and within communication studies, *Critical Communication Pedagogy*. By drawing on the work of scholars in communication education, critical pedagogy, instructional

communication, and critical theory (Allen, 2011), critical communication pedagogy (CCP) holds that "the field of communication studies can significantly revise and extend the work in critical pedagogy" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 6). Thus, CCP takes note of scholarship that informs about successful communication practices in classrooms as well as how the discipline is evolving in theorizing about teaching (Allen, 2011). While CCP is not a blueprint to instruct educators about or how to do critical communication pedagogy, in this text Fassett and Warren introduce ten commitments as guiding principles for reflexive consideration and application. These commitments specifically highlight the constitutive role of communication within macro-structures, meso-relationships, and micro-practices. "Critical communication pedagogy (CCP) seeks to transform routine classroom communication practices, embedded in systems of power, in order to find new pedagogical possibilities" (De La Mare, 2014, p. 196). Allen (2011) theorizes that power relations are created by communicative acts; therefore we can also use communication to interrogate and interrupt these interactions that perpetuate and strengthen oppressive ideologies. In agreement, Kahl (2013) adds that CCP "focuses specifically on the study of language to understand how power functions and how people can work against its imbalance" (p. 2614). Brookfield (1991) believes that discussion is a way for teachers to demonstrate their commitment to collaborative learning and blurring the lines between teacher and learner, as much as the inherent power differential in the classroom could ever be ignored. A continuous goal of CCP should be deconstructing the oppressive power of language while empowering students with critical thinking skills and tools so they can "examine society's impact on their lives" (Kahl, 2013, p. 2614). In light of the fact that making space for moments where social change might occur is an ongoing goal for teachers who aspire to teach communication critically (Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 1994, 2003), perhaps a segue here to

operationalize my understanding of how relationships in the classroom can create moments of social change is in order.

Relationships between students and teachers are the cornerstone of a productive learning community. Those relationships are inherently born within a context of power differentials, given that the very system of education creates the context. "Critical communication educators bear the responsibility of exploring power and privilege, even—especially—if the process implicates our own work as teachers and researchers" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 42). Thus diligent attention to those inherent power differences between teachers and students in the classroom is essential when teachers desire for their students to feel invited to engage in dialogue and to experience relational safety. This complex dynamic is exactly why relational safety constitutes a conceptual anchor for my project. In the following section, I define and explore relational safety in the context of classroom presence.

Relational Safety

Classroom spaces are relational in nature. In the classroom, "we interact with, we encounter others" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 145). Scholars such as Hao (2011), hooks (1994), Warren (2011), and Toyosaki (2013) advocate for educators to embrace a critical teaching philosophy. This line of thinking champions teaching as an embodied practice that occurs in spaces where teacher power is always present (hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996). To wit, Fassett and Warren (2007) also emphasize that "we are always in the presence of others when we are teaching" (p. 145). hooks (1994) sees teaching as "a performative act" (p. 11), but also as an opportunity for us teachers to grow and learn more about ourselves by being fully present with our students. She shares that "long before a public ever recognized me as a thinker or writer, I was recognized in the classroom by students—seen by them as a teacher who worked hard to

create a dynamic learning experience for all of us” (p. 11). Ideally, relationships between teachers and students should foreground a critical teaching practice, and “Critical Communication Pedagogy is inherently collaborative” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 147). When teachers and students enter the classroom, every action (or inaction) from the teacher that students observe contributes to the students’ perception of the teacher and have a profound impact on how the students will engage and participate (Gorham & Christophel, 1992). Students are much more inclined to volunteer to speak up during lectures and discussions if they have observed a teacher reacting kindly and respectfully to responses from other students first. When the teacher models and demonstrates a collaborative, respectful environment where differences of opinion are not punished and students do not fear reprisal or ridicule, students are much more likely to respond to the invitation to engage in classroom discussions. hooks (1994) says that “to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries” (p. 130). A CCP classroom, then is likely to be a lively one, with teachers intellectually challenging students and simultaneously engaging them in critical, reflexive discussions about current events. In these classrooms, teachers and students do not need to pretend that the systems of power and oppression in the classroom and the world outside the classroom are not interdependent. The teacher and students who share space in a CCP classroom are uniquely positioned then, to collectively interrogate the ways that the institutions that govern the world outside the classroom inform (and are informed by) the power differences between teachers and students that currently pervade our educational system.

Brookfield (1991) wisely counsels that "teachers who use discussion need to be prepared for the emotional disarray it causes" (p. 113). In a CCP classroom, dialogue is how we examine our differences: in power, across cultures, in our ideologies, and through the multiple markers

by which we form our identities. Brookfield continues by reminding the reader that once a discussion in the classroom has opened, even "the most stoic participants may display strong emotions" (p. 113). However, for authentic dialogue to emerge and power imbalances in the classroom to be challenged, I argue that students must perceive some degree of safety in their evolving relationships with their teachers. I call this *relational safety*.

Why Safety?

I have already established that the classroom can be a site of oppression, as well as a site where moments of social change can occur (Fassett & Warren, 2007). And Bell's (1997) definition of social justice clearly marks safety as a necessary condition: "Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (p. 3). Safety is a generally accepted expectation in civil society today (though not necessarily practiced or allowed for equitably); safety is not only necessary to survival, it is a basic human need (Maslow, 1968), and even a human right.

From the days of hunting and gathering, safety has been a top priority for survival (Mohan, 2003). Before industrialization and the formation of large areas of urban dwellings, people were personally responsible for the safety of their families and communities. They strove for security by designing and building abodes that would withstand the elements and created weapons to fend off predators. Mohan (2003) continues, noting that in pre-industrialization society, the belief that being safe was one's own responsibility was so pervasive that people living in this time "blamed themselves if they suffered harm or injury from such arrangements" (p. 162-163). In modern times, the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 proclaimed in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that "Everyone has the right to life,

liberty, and security of person" (Mohan, 2003, p. 161). Moreover, safety is an expected condition in every contemporary workplace, and is even monitored and sanctioned by government agencies such as OSHA (Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration).

In his famous model of the hierarchy of needs, when Maslow (1968) proclaims safety to be a basic human need, he also adds that the need for safety is more urgent than our need for love, but not as pressing as the body's need for sustenance. And although his model has been critiqued for failing to include or mention "the spiritual aspect of human existence" (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016, p. 59), it has been used in our societal structures with heavy emphasis on law enforcement, national security, and a legal system that favors imprisonment over other forms of correction (Falk, 1999). At least in talk and in theory, then, personal safety is a main concern for today's citizen. In fact, "the demand for establishing a right to safety emerges in a society where people feel the need for a norm on which to base an actionable claim for protection from physical, social or emotional harm" (Mohan, 2003, p. 162). Even in spite of concerns about the value ranking and hierarchy of importance of human needs, safety is clearly a state of being that humans desire, seek, and are motivated to achieve.

Safe Space

Safe space is a highly contested term in pedagogy. Redmond (2010) notes that "most students anticipate that the classroom is not a space in which they should necessarily feel hurt, alienated, silence, or misunderstood" (p. 3). However, Boostrom (1998) and Fox (2013) extend their understanding of safe space to describe classrooms where, for example, students can feel free to express their sexual and gender identities without fear of ridicule or being ostracized. In the context of a space where students are encouraged to speak frankly and openly with their views on topics like oppression and privilege (Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Redmond,

2010), many suggest the concept of a safe space can never be realized as more than a hopeful euphemism, because the elusive *safe space* is like the mysterious unicorn: has anyone ever really seen one? (Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998). Boostrom pointedly informs us that the term *safe space* is not officially recognized in the vernacular of higher education, yet the term pervades discussions in critical pedagogy as if it is a tangible object, rather than an unrealized construct. To this, Holley and Steiner (2005) add, “while safe space has become an increasingly used metaphor for a desired classroom atmosphere, the utility of striving for safety is rarely questioned nor are possible drawbacks examined” (p. 49).

Barrett (2010) notes that many scholars critique safe space classrooms and teaching practices that embrace and employ humanist ideals. The concern is that these spaces have too much potential to create learning environments where students are made to feel good and emotionally healthy, but are not being thoroughly challenged intellectually. In the context of student participation in the classroom, Zimmerman (2009) sums up her definition of a safe space classroom eloquently:

Rather than force students to speak, I encouragement engagement in various ways. . . I tell students that if they are not comfortable speaking in class, they can write more detailed entries in their journals, which I will consider as a form of discussion. I prefer that students engage in class discussion, but I have decided I must allow students the choice of not participating as fully as I would like. I strive to create a safe space in the classroom where students are empowered to take risks, to speak if they choose or remain quiet if silence suits them for now. (p. 48)

Arao and Clemens (2013) point out that the term *safe space* has an implied promise that students will not be made to be uncomfortable if the conversation “moves from polite to provocative” (p

135). They warn teachers to take caution when they invite students to engage in dialogue around topics that could be controversial; for them, teachers should be careful not to inadvertently create “a conflation of safety with comfort” (p. 135). When they reflect on their own communication practices in groups where diversity and social justice are the topics of discussion, they ask themselves, “Were we adequately and honestly preparing students to be challenged this way? Were we in fact hindering our own efforts by relying on the traditional language of safe space?” (p. 135). Safe space seems to be one of those ideals that many aspire to and can imagine (like social justice), but only a few will attempt to define without hesitation. I find this phenomenon odd considering how pervasive the term has become in the vernacular of education and teaching. And Holley and Steiner (2005) have pointed out a gap in the literature on safe spaces whereby the concerns of the teacher are at the forefront, but “little is available that discusses students’ views of safety in the classroom” (p. 49).

Relationships Can Transcend Physical Space

Even though teachers are unable to reassure students that any particular space is truly safe (Boostrom, 1998; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Redmond, 2010), all is not lost. Since “promises are relational” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 38), teachers can remember that their commitment to the relationships they (as teachers) share with students should always be in the foreground of a critical, reflexive teaching practice. In any case, my intent for this literature review is not to endorse or reject the notion of *the classroom as safe space* as a realizable goal. I cannot imagine that any teacher who cares about students and learning and wants to forge relationships with their students would not aspire to co-creating a space with their students where all feel safe in the classroom space they share. To what degree such a space can be considered truly safe, I will not venture to speculate. Certainly, students know how they feel when they are in the classroom

(Holley & Steiner, 2005). Yet, these are the same students who were socialized to be polite in class, respect teacher authority, and try not to bring unwanted attention to themselves for fear of ridicule or shaming (Delpit, 1995; Shor, 1996). How else can feelings of safety between teachers and students be theorized?

Connecting with Students in the Classroom

Since the tenth commitment of CCP is about creating conditions where participants feel invited to engage in dialogue (Fassett & Warren, 2007), it is essential that students perceive some kind of reassurance that it is safe to be present (and to willingly engage the materials) in classrooms. As dialogue is relational in nature, where dialogue exists, relationships emerge and evolve (Cook-Sather, 2002; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Students perceiving themselves as safe in their relationships with their teachers is important as a step towards social change. Once again, Bell's (1997) definition of social justice places safety at its epicenter, and bears repeating: "social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (p. 3). In this space of collaboration and connection, there is a feeling of trust and human connection—*relational safety*. Since relational safety exists between individuals, it therefore can (and must) transcend physical space. The more safety students perceive in their relationships with their teachers, the greater the possibility for dialogue and building community (hooks, 2003; Shor, 1996). Moreover, when teachers begin to truly envision their classrooms as communities where students and teachers can create conditions for social change, hope can flourish (Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 2003; Shor, 1996).

Relational safety is the term that I believe best describes the ethereal space where teachers and students connect through dialogue. This perception of safety is not modeled after

(nor is in opposition to) the aforementioned contested *safe space* where the goal is for all students to feel good all the time. In some educational settings that carry the label of safe space, a concern of educators is that these students may not be having their beliefs challenged, as the primary focus is the emotional well-being of the students (Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998). I have already made the case that relationships can (and do) go beyond physical space. Instead, the ideal of relational safety is precipitated on the understanding that classrooms and the dynamics between teachers and students are relational. Additionally, this notion requires a vigilant self-awareness by the critical communication pedagogue with a position of authority (Fassett & Warren, 2007). There are implied power differences between the teacher and the students, and students have been socialized to recognize (even fear) the power the teacher holds over students (Delpit, 1995; Shor, 1996). What happens when students observe their teachers challenging traditional modes of teaching? I hope that when students perceive the relational connection between themselves and their teachers to be safe, there also exists a space where possibilities for social change can emerge and thrive (Shor, 1996).

Thus, I propose that the following concepts in combination present the possibility of students experiencing feelings of safety in their relationships with their teachers: 1) an invitational style of engagement with students, 2) reflexivity of teacher power in classroom spaces, and 3) a dialogic worldview. The list of concepts that I will feature is hardly exhaustive, and should be considered both in relationship to each other and in isolation.

Salient Concepts in Relational Safety

Invitational style of engagement. Audience address should naturally be a priority of any teacher of communication. Making their argument from feminist theory, Foss and Griffin (1995) identify the violent potential of a traditional style of rhetoric of audience address that favors

persuasive strategies. They write, “embedded in efforts to change others is a desire for control and domination, for the act of changing another establishes the power of the change agent over that other” (p. 3). They call for a style of rhetoric that endeavors to make meaningful connections when addressing audiences by affirming the shared experiences of the speaker and the listener. They ground their work in three feminist principles: equality, immanent value, and self-determination. Thus, they argue for a communication style that intentionally challenges and resists existing models of “dominance and elitism that characterizes most human relationships” (p. 4). Thus, where patriarchal styles of rhetoric from Western thought often attempt to change the minds of the audience, invitational rhetoric assumes that the nature of this form of address is so intersubjective, that both the speaker and audience could potentially experience a change in perspective. In fact, the relational nature of sharing one’s experiences with others fosters a space where the audience is invited to “enter the rhetor’s world and see it as the rhetor does” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5). Foss and Griffin share that “we developed the theory of invitational rhetoric to describe communicative experiences we had that could not be described as persuasion” (p. 209). Since the goal of forming an authentic connection between the speaker and listener is paramount to invitational rhetoric, one might say that this perspective on public address is audience-centered. Creating connections with the audience using a style of address that invites understanding of the speaker's experience is relational and dialogic at once.

Audience address and teaching. The principles from feminist theory that inform invitational rhetoric support several commitments and tenets of CCP, such as *a nuanced understanding of human subjectivity and agency*, and *reflexivity as essential for CCP*. Fassett and Warren (2007) assert that critical pedagogy at its core is not only useful to identify power imbalances, but also to create conditions for “change, hope, growth, and community” (p. 52).

Invitational rhetoric, in turn, “may contribute to the efforts of communication scholars who are working to develop models for cooperative, nonadversarial, and ethical communication” (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 15). Conversely, Fassett & Warren (2007) make a similar case for this type of reflexivity in one’s teaching practice when they describe the nature of CCP in terms of relationships in the tenth commitment of CCP, which states that “critical communication educators engage dialogue as both metaphor and method for our relationships with each other” (p. 54). They posit that reflexive teaching must be framed as an interactional process between students and teachers, because “we see ourselves as working in concert with others rather than lecturing to or studying others” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 54).

To help make invitational rhetoric more operational for teachers developing awareness of their style of address in the classroom, I turn to Littlejohn and Foss (2011) as they cite Foss and Griffin, who have listed a number of frequently utilized rhetorical conversational styles, each with distinct goals driving their strategies. Advisory rhetoric is a style of conversation that highlights one distinct feature salient for my argument: the information being shared by the rhetor was solicited by the audience. Even when students sign up for required courses, there is an implied expectation that students are to receive information, feedback, and even affirmation from teachers. Moreover, there is also an opportunity for connection and the possibility that some form of relationship will emerge.

When speaking of more traditional forms of audience address, Foss and Griffin (1995) warn that the thrilling sensations one can experience from having power over others can be appealing, even habit-forming. Citing Gearhart, they suggest that traditional forms of rhetoric are rooted in patriarchy and domination: “The reward gained from successful efforts to make others change is a ‘rush of power’—a feeling of self-worth that comes from controlling people

and situations” (p. 3). Power, then, would not be experienced as an effect of a larger (systemic) cause, but as mundane and just (Hearn, 2012). It’s our failure to question the power structures we function in daily (including those in our classrooms) that CCP encourages us to reconsider and critically examine (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Invitational rhetoric used in teaching practices. When Kirtley (2014) discusses her own successes with using invitational rhetoric in her teaching practice, she observes that the overall intent of invitational rhetoric is to illuminate others of our unique experiences and perspectives, but without abusing power or attempting to convert others to our own worldview. She claims that “invitational rhetoric in the classroom can help foster a noncompetitive environment that strives to include all student voices in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance” (p. 341). While I cringe at the use of the word “tolerance” (my preferred term would be “acceptance”), I still perform my due diligence in putting invitational rhetoric in conversation with relational safety. Fassett & Warren (2007) admonish readers that without reflexive consideration of the illusive nature of power, “we participate in the very intellectual violence we protest as critically informed teacher-scholars” (p. 131).

Allen (2011) describes her CCP classroom practice this way: “I invite willingness to create something new through being open-minded and by avoiding the tendency to debate one another, or to defend our side of a discussion” (p. 110). This matches up quite closely to Foss and Griffin’s (1995) desire to share experiences with the audience empathetically: “invitational rhetoric constitutes an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and see it as the rhetor does” (p. 5). Fassett and Warren (2007) muse on CCP “as a way of being in the world, ask[ing] us to encounter the world with open minds and open hearts” (p. 131). Littlejohn and Foss (2011) summarize invitational rhetoric quite neatly as a way to resist and challenge

traditional modes of address that are oppressive and obtrusive by considering alternative approaches to communication that “create an understanding rather than adversarial culture” (p. 210). Having now made the argument that there is substantial overlap between invitational rhetoric and CCP (and the ways that both perspectives illuminate the need for vigilant awareness of the teacher-student power imbalance in the classroom), I now turn to my next proposed component for relational safety in a classroom where communication is taught critically: reflexivity of power.

Reflexivity of teacher power.

Operationalization of terms. While Fassett and Warren (2007) explain that classrooms can be sites of social change, they also caution teachers to be reflexive about the power dynamics in classroom spaces between teachers and students. They warn that “power is so slippery that it makes it hard to pinpoint, hard to undermine” (p. 65). In this section, I will clarify reflexivity and power, which will help when I elaborate on power and oppressive authority; for a teacher who is reflexive of their institutional and systemic power will be diligent in reflecting on the ways that any teacher asserts authority—and in turn, how students react to the teacher’s presence in the classroom (Shor, 1996).

Reflexivity. Fassett & Warren (2007) state that “to do critical communication pedagogy is to do reflexivity, to imagine the role one plays within systems of power” (p. 86). This brand of awareness is in tension with the inherent ability so many human beings have to not see power structures at play, particularly when one is the person in the position of authority in any given context. Reflexivity, then, is more than merely reflecting upon and recalling experiences (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Reflexivity is a state of being such that one faces and accepts one’s own responsibility for perpetuating systemic oppression and inequality, even when the exact ways of

participating have become so mundane and repetitive that they are often cloaked and invisible (Freire, 1970). Reflexivity is not only a constant motion of reflecting on what has already transpired, but Fassett & Warren declare that “reflexivity refers to the interrogation of the self” (p. 50), and is an ongoing practice of self-examination about the parts one plays in systemic oppression with silence and complicity.

When Fassett and Warren (2007) use labels such as “at-risk” and “dropout” (p. 25) to show the insidious nature of discourses about students that teachers engage in so readily, it’s the perfect example of the dangers that can occur from a lack of reflexive thinking. Labeling students who may lack relevant cultural capital (Delpit, 1995) about acceptable classroom practices and canonical knowledge, or suggesting these students may possess inferior intellect or personhood, is a dehumanizing and highly objectionable act. This mindset has little chance of increasing student engagement with curriculum or meeting desired learning objectives. Fassett and Warren also proclaim that reflexive thinking is an essential process for every teacher who aspires to engage a critical teaching practice.

Power. Hearn (2012) asks us to consider how “power over” differs from and compliments “power to” (p. 4). “Power to” refers to ability, being empowered, equipped, capable—in other words, it implies some degree of agency. “Power over,” he theorizes, tends to be an issue that is salient to those who don’t perceive themselves to have the power. “But ‘power over’ constantly raises the question, who should have power, and how much, and over whom? Power over easily leads to social conflict...” (p. 6) Hearn suggests that these expressions of power do not exist separate from the other in binary opposition, but rather in tension. Today, the current vernacular seems to emphasize “power to” without the negative connotation normally reserved for domination and control that “power over” indicates.

Hearn (2012) explains how power manifests primarily in two ways: physical power and social power. He differentiates the two by describing physical power as “the kind of power human beings deploy when they act on the world” (p. 5). This expression of power includes competitive sports, physical violence, and even linguistics, through the use of metaphors (e.g., “He got the best of me”). There is some implicit understanding that there is a force being enacted upon a material artifact, human or otherwise. For purposes of teaching practice, I focus on social power. Social power, then, is more political than physical power. Social power implies majorities, and stems from common beliefs and behavioral norms—specifically norms that a significant part (or a powerful faction) of the population is believed to adhere to (Delpit, 1995). When power is stratified across a society in this way, majorities logically are privileged in ways that some minorities (or outliers) who may not fit the ideological norm in the social structure are not. Political power, however, is not always limited to majority numbers in the population. Marginalized populations (who are great in number) may yet find their voices lack real influence in the process of making political decisions because the wishes of certain groups are weighed differently than others lacking the same power. Groups with the most political power often have the greatest amount of social power and can thus dictate what behaviors are acceptable and appropriate (Holloway, 2002).

Fassett & Warren (2007) tell us that our current educational system is a clear-cut example of social control in action: those who will move through this system must do so by adhering to the policies and dictates of the institution. They continue, however, by reminding the reader that “power...is not simply assigned to the professor (the teacher, the researcher, or some other seemingly powerful someone). As each of us, as members of human society, is aware, anyone may attempt to deny someone else’s naming of the world” (p. 54). This is where I find Hearn’s

(2012) differentiation between “power to” and “power over” (p. 4) to be useful in illuminating why power in the classroom must never be dismissed or taken lightly. The current educational system we operate in that empowers teachers with “power to” influence, inspire, and challenge students, however, also bestows teachers with a degree of power “over” their students. And that (often) invisible space pervades our collective understanding of the role (and perception) of “teacher.” In this grey area, “power over” always exists in tension with “power to” and is exactly why a reflexive state of mind steeped in a realization that teachers also have the “power to” question, interrupt, interrogate, and resist moments of systemic oppression is needed most.

Teacher power versus oppressive authority. Hearn (2012) defines authority as “the power to make commands and have them obeyed, which is seen as legitimate by those subject to those commands” (p. 218). This line of reasoning then leads me to operationalize oppressive authority as the use of institutional power that may be perceived as personal (belonging to the teacher) but that may in fact be reflective of societal norms and expectations about student and teachers roles. Surely this is what Wood and Fassett (2003) mean as they remind us that power is constitutive in nature, and imply some sort of complicity between the powerful and the overpowered. Regarding teacher power and authority in the classroom, they criticize a tendency of critical educators to frame teacher power as one-sided and one-directional:

It is not sufficient to explore power as it occurs between teacher and student; we must also examine how power functions in overlapping circles, to consider the interstices between the teacher and the students, the teacher and the school, the teacher and the community, and the teacher and the larger socioeconomic structures. Similarly, we might consider the same as we explore students, or parents, or administrators. (p. 293)

Kahl (2013) suggests that power is often studied in critical theory, but “many students have not examined power in terms of instruction” (p. 99). He continues by theorizing that the hegemonic nature of traditional education is so embedded into our collective understanding of school and education that “students come to believe that any oppression that they experience constitutes normal experience” (p. 99). Discussing his own teaching experiences, Kahl claims that during discussions of classroom dynamics when power is mentioned, he can easily ascertain from the students’ lack of response and troubled facial expressions that “many have not considered the ways that power influences their pedagogical experiences” (p. 99).

Delpit (1995) claims that cultural differences help shape how individuals understand authority and power in the classroom. Some students are conditioned to accept the teacher’s authority by the mere fact that the teacher is embodying the role of a leader; others assume that authority is earned and thus should be respected by those who lack authority (Alley-Young, 2005). In agreement with several other scholars (hooks, 2003; Shor, 1996; Warren, 2008), Delpit also asserts that teachers can successfully establish their authority in the classroom without using overt power techniques, but at what cost? For her, this form of subtly establishing one’s position of authority in the classroom may result in a severe loss of credibility with students from cultural backgrounds where displays of power (to establish authority) are often used to dictate and enforce the behavioral norms within a social group (such as one’s immediately family). It must be noted, however, that the perception of the teacher’s power (that comes with the position of authority) may be read differently by the students in the classroom, often based upon the teacher’s physical appearance—especially the presence (or absence) or brute strength.

Reflexivity of power. Hearn (2012) proclaims that “all human experience is inextricably tied to feelings of power and control over one’s life” (p. 3). He continues by saying that the pursuit of power may not be our inherent nature, but asserts that due to humankind’s insistent pursuit of power over our history, it is a driving force that must be reckoned with if we are to understand our true nature as humans. Holloway (2002) muses that power over others is the only model of self-governance most humans have observed in their lifetimes (and often unwittingly mimic). He asks: “But how can we change the world without taking power? Merely to pose the question is to invite a snort of ridicule, a raised eyebrow, a shrug of condescension” (p. 21). In turn, Hearn suggests that the study of power and how it motivates action in those who pursue it is a study in humanness: “if our aim is a sympathetic understanding of others, then we must turn our attention on questions of power” (p. 4).

Back in the classroom, Shor (1996) wisely cautions that students will expect teachers to demonstrate some degree of authority in the classroom space, if only to establish trust in the teacher’s competency. The challenge he presents, then, is to seek and embody new ways to perform in the role of teacher so that teacher authority can be asserted in the classroom without abusing power. Is such a way of being even possible? Freire (1970) is adamant that teachers must strive for such a way of being when he offers, “What distinguishes revolutionary leaders from the dominant elite is not only their objectives, but their procedures. If they act in the same way, the objectives become identical” (p. 166).

Simpson (2010) writes that “critical communication pedagogy includes growing attention. . . to the ways in which power, often in the context of cultural identities, bears on communication practices” (p. 376). In the classroom, teachers can use their power to empower, or to oppress and dominate students (Warren, 2003). As Delpit (1995) points out, “issues of

power are enacted in classrooms” (p. 24) and more power is gained once the rules of the culture are realized. A reflexive stance towards teacher power in the classroom leads scholars such as hooks (1994), Freire (1970), and Shor (1996) to claim that when teachers and students engage in authentic dialogue, the institutional power imbalance in the classroom can be used to create meaningful teachable moments where teachers learn from their own abuses of power and become teacher/students. Kahl (2013) begins his essay on CCP and evaluating student learning contritely: “Instructors are not often cognizant of the negative impact that their pedagogical practices can have on their students” (p. 1927).

Although succinct, Shor (1996) makes the distinction clear for us quite profoundly: “The power that uses power to share and transform power is the power that I am seeking” (p. 20). As critical communication pedagogues, it is essential that we remain realistic about the role we play in the educational systems we work within. Fassett and Warren (2007) concur: “Moreover, we also take as our responsibility a careful analysis of, engagement with, and response to our own lives, our own experiences with teachers and students in educational settings” (p. 91). This mindset conveniently points this discussion towards the next component I propose for a CCP classroom where relational safety is present: a perspective that embraces dialogue.

Dialogic worldview.

Dialogue. The tenth commitment of CCP informs us that dialogue is a means by which teachers can humanize their students (and themselves in the process). This occurs when teachers embrace the exchange of ideas and experiences with students as essential to a critical teaching philosophy (Allen, 2011; Fassett & Warren, 2007). Freire (1970) calls dialogue a phenomenon that occurs between humans causing the exchange of thoughts and ideas. "Dialogue is the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 76). Freire

continues to illuminate the reciprocal and interdependent nature of dialogue when he claims that dialogue cannot exist between those who wish to communicate and those who refuse to engage:

Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other men [sic] the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. (p. 76)

This statement implicitly suggests that one's refusal to engage in dialogue is a blatant display of power abuse. Thus, a dialogic worldview is rooted in anticipation of hearing and being heard. "It is in speaking their word that men [sic], by naming the world, transform it. . ." (p. 77). The relational aspect of dialogue becomes clear: authentic dialogue cannot occur in a vacuum (Baxter, 2004; hooks, 1994; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013).

Dialogue as method and metaphor. The tenth commitment of CCP outlines that "critical communication educators engage dialogue as both metaphor and method for our relationships with each other" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 54). The very nature of the word *dialogue* implies duality; this is in direct opposition to the word *monologue*. Metaphorically speaking, a monologue sounds uncannily descriptive of the banking method of teaching (Freire, 1970), where the assumption is that the teacher has all knowledge and authority in the classroom (Allen, 2011; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Kahl, 2013), and the students should sit quietly and listen, never questioning the teacher's arguments or viewpoints. Freire (1970) says that dialogue is a combination of two interdependent components, "reflection and action" (p. 75), asserting that if either reflection or action is diminished, the other is also weakened. Kaufmann (2010) praises Freire's notion of dialogue because it yields transformative possibilities that can be utilized to change and liberate the world.

Methodologically speaking of dialogue, Fassett and Warren (2007) explain that acknowledging a person's reality need not be construed as endorsing that person's views; in fact, quite often the opposite is true (Cook-Sather, 2002; Foss & Griffin, 1995). However, when authentic dialogue is present, every person grows in the process of affirming another's right to express their views without judgment (Baxter, 1990; Freire, 1970). By doing so, we humanize ourselves and those with whom we engage in dialogue simultaneously.

Cook-Sather (2002) theorizes that the listening part of dialogue often gets lost in practice, because listening is not easy or convenient, and often compels one to action. She hastily adds that listening does not imply acceptance or belief, but simply an open state of mind, fused by the possibility of discovery through authentic connection. Kinloch and San Pedro (2013) highlight the importance of trust that is implied in true dialogue, arguing for a reflexive balance between speaking and listening. Teaching and learning are dialogic in essence and intricately connected; each person simultaneously teaches and learns daily—from birth to death (Ayers & Ayers 2011).

Creating relationships with students using dialogue. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2011), “relationships are made in dialogue” (p. 246). When Isgro and Deal (2013) challenge teachers to bring their beliefs about teaching and student engagement into practice, they theorize that dialogue is a cornerstone of a teaching practice. Participating in dialogue provides opportunities for students to reflect and learn about the world where myriad forms of injustice and oppression abound (Cooks & Simpson, 2007). A dialogic worldview, then, is a state of humility where “it is presumptuous to assume we hold authority over someone else's experience, that we know more about it than s/he does” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 55). hooks (1994) finds dialogue to be the most basic and essential step for teachers to consider in their endeavors to create relationships across differences among students in the classroom (and even between

students and the teacher). Littlejohn and Foss echo this sentiment thusly when they claim that “dialogue affords an opportunity to achieve a unity within diversity” (p. 246).

However, Isgro and Deal (2013) feel that more scholars need to discuss how they use dialogue in their teaching experiences. According to them, not nearly enough scholars “describe their practices for teaching students how to become agents of social change in their everyday lives through dialogic public discourse” (p. 3). Dialogue, then, not only creates conditions for healing (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005), but can also bridge the power imbalance between teachers and students (Cook-Sather, 2002; hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996), so that the rapport that emerges in the process of sharing fosters a shared sense of belonging in teacher/student relationships. Fassett and Warren (2007) assert that dialogue as a matter of practice lies at the core of any critical communication pedagogy, advocating for “dialogue that builds spaces for transforming the world as it is in favor of what could be” (p. 6). Relationships are based in dialogue; the more open and authentic the dialogue in the classroom, the greater the opportunity for connection between teachers and students.

In fact, the classroom is an excellent place for authentic dialogue about systemic oppression since the classroom itself is such a perfect example of institutional power that is always at play, especially when teachers utilize “a dialogic, reflexive approach to teaching and practices” (Allen, 2011, p. 110). Allen notes that dialogue bridges the gap between the university and the larger community, engages the students, and invites them into the discussion when the classroom is now treated as the “real world” (p. 110). Perhaps a new way of theorizing about dialogue and teaching is in order. What happens if we put relationships in conversation with the idea of safety in pursuit of social justice? In the pursuit of incremental social change, the classroom is one space where relationships steeped in feelings of safety can emerge through

being invited to engage in authentic dialogue about collective (and individual) complicity with oppressive power structures, both in the classroom and beyond (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

While this is hardly an exhaustive list, I have argued that an invitational style of engagement, reflexivity of teacher power, and a dialogic worldview, when taken as a whole, create some of the necessary conditions for relational safety to take root in the classroom. Each classroom is different. Each student is different. Each teacher is different. Teachers of communication who desire to teach critically should take to heart that CCP is not a set of instructions or a specific way of managing students (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Teachers are humbly reminded of their own humanness and the privilege they share to teach (Allen, 2011; Kahl, 2013). They each hope to engage with the students in classrooms in ways that make space for possibility. Social change is possible through increased connection with (and understanding of) those perceived as different (hooks, 1994). However, before teachers can expect students to experience feelings of safety in their relationships, there must be a richer understanding of safety, safe spaces, and how these concepts are implicitly influenced by the interpersonal nature of the teacher-student relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

Conclusion

As I presented literature on the student/teacher relationship, I have argued that in order for the classroom to be a site of social change, students must experience feeling safe with their teachers. While I reviewed the literature that frames teaching as relational, I also synthesized scholarship that helps me to flesh out the complex relationship between teachers and students. After I introduced CCP, I further examined and expounded upon the conceptual anchor of my study, *relational safety*, which I propose to describe the sensation (and degree) of safety students experience in their relationships with their teachers. Then I summarized several concepts that I

believe create the possibilities for relational safety in the critical communication pedagogy (CCP) classroom. In successfully making this argument I am able to highlight the need for this study—to see how students and teachers perceive their shared relationship and if they feel theirs is relationally safe. This literature review assisted me in selecting and informing the methods I utilize to answer the research questions:

- RQ1: What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers?
- RQ2: What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?

CHAPTER 3

Methods

In Chapter Two, I presented several concepts from my review of literature that I have argued are salient for a learning environment in which students might experience feelings of safety in their relationships with their teachers: 1) an invitational style of engagement with students, 2) reflexivity of teacher power in classroom spaces, and 3) a dialogic worldview. I have argued that these can be realized by using the commitments of Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) as guiding principles to move toward a critical reflexive teaching practice (Fassett & Warren, 2007). I defined CCP as it relates to the teacher-student relationship by questioning the teacher-student power dynamic always at play in any teaching space (Delpit, 1995; Shor, 1996). Additionally, Fassett and Warren (2007) explain that the relationships that are formed between teacher and student are always a focal point in a critical pedagogy. Fassett and Warren are wise to caution us as they share that "power in the classroom research has a foundational place in the study of communication in the classroom" (p. 41).

As CCP is not a method but rather a "field of study and a pedagogical practice" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 38), there is no blueprint or checklist for creating relational safety with students. Therefore, valid assessment of students' perceptions of relational safety or teachers' use (or abuse) of power in the classroom is complex, if not impossible (Delpit, 1995; Hearn, 2012). Most importantly, Fassett and Warren (2007) proclaim that "a critical communication pedagogy needs, relies, and benefits from research and analysis that begins in the site of our concrete, mundane communication practices, for it is in those moments that the social structure emerges" (p. 45).

Identifying possible factors that contribute to relational safety amongst students and teachers requires data that come from a variety of perspectives—including those of the teacher and the students. Fassett and Warren (2007) critique critical pedagogy scholarship for failing to address the role of communication “in the persistence and maintenance of institutional power” (p. 4). As such, they rally for a multi-methodological approach to such research. Therefore, I used a combination of methods in order to highlight a variety of factors influencing relational safety: qualitative observations (in classrooms), focus groups (with students), and one-on-one qualitative interviews (with students and teachers). I used qualitative observations to assist me in creating the questions and prompts I presented in the focus groups and interviews. According to Berg (2001), researchers often embrace (and use) a single form of research method. He theorizes that in doing so, they often fail to understand how the ongoing use of a single method limits the range of data that can be collected and analyzed from the study. He shares his perspective thusly:

Each method is a different line of sight directed towards the same point, observing social and symbolic reality. By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements. The use of multiple lines of sight is frequently called triangulation. (p. 4)

Although the teacher is traditionally the accepted authority figure and keeper of knowledge in the classroom, we know that students also have agency (power) in the dynamic of the teacher-student relationship (Manke, 1997; Shor, 1996). Teachers of communication who aim to teach critically must carefully consider which methods of inquiry best assist in ascertaining when (and if) students experience feelings of safety with teachers.

After a brief statement on the importance of selecting the appropriate research methods for the type of research being performed, I elaborate on each method in detail, including the theoretical assumptions that underlie each method as well as the practical considerations that influence how the methods are applied in my research. I discuss both methodological considerations (i.e., assumptions of the method, goals of the method, etc.) as well as practical considerations (i.e., how one engages in the method itself). The conclusion of this chapter reflects upon the utility of combining these specific methods to respond to the research questions: "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers? What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?"

In this chapter, I also include brief discussions on scholarship that helped me to build a solid argument for researchers to utilize multiple methods in their inquiry so that additional (and richer) data can be accessed that might have otherwise gone unobserved and not collected (Berg, 2001). This check-and-balance system in data collection is a process known as triangulation. I will show how the principles of triangulation can be used to compare findings (and discover the overlap) from multiple sources of data without implying that there is an objective reality waiting to be discovered. Immediately thereafter, I will synthesize literature that discusses the inherent intersubjective nature of humanity that limits any person's ability to perceive oneself wholly. Because of this inherent limitation in self-perception, teachers are automatically restricted in their ability to assess their own teaching practices and classroom presence without input from others. In combination with the descriptions of the methods I have proposed, these insights make a compelling argument that using multiple methods in qualitative research may not be

essential, but when conclusions from several methods are similar, the conclusions gain added credibility (Berg, 2001).

The data collection portion of this chapter describes the steps and processes I used to for collecting data. This includes describing the four classroom visits I conducted. It also includes an explanation of how the observations I made and the data I collected from these four visits were used to create some of the questions in the interview protocols I presented to participants in focus groups and interviews. I also include reflections on the processes of data collection; here I describe how came to I treat each instance of data collection as a teachable moment and an opportunity to reflexively consider how effective my methods were at getting me closer to answers to my research questions. I conclude this chapter with observations and suggestions about method selection, including the benefits of using more than one method in a research study.

The Significance of an Appropriate Research Method

Positivism, Naturalism, and Observation

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), the two most prevalent philosophies of social science research are positivism and naturalism. Positivism is based upon principles of scientific objectivity that function under the following four assumptions: 1) there is always an objective truth that can be observed in the physical world; 2) regardless of method, the goal is to observe and interpret the results when variables in the physical world are manipulated so that the researcher might discover the relationship(s) between them; 3) relevant findings are based upon relationships between variables that are quantifiable, observable, and generalizable to a larger population; and 4) research must be conducted (and documented) so that the study can be replicated and results can be verified. Naturalism, in turn, is a term used to describe a

philosophy of research that assumes that studying people in their natural settings is the most effective way to understand social phenomena. This perspective on studying social patterns of humans assumes that “human actions are based upon, or infused by social meanings: that is by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules and values” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 7). This model of scientific research automatically assumes a reflexive stance that interpretations of data are always influenced by personal biases and past experiences of the researcher. Researchers who share this perspective agree that relationships (and actions that occur) between people cannot be adequately observed and interpreted using quantitative methods to expose relationships between variables (Davies, 1999).

Berg (2001) advises the aspiring researcher that the purpose of research is not just data collection, but to “discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures” (p. 6). He finds that qualitative research is useful in obtaining specific information about people and how they interact in certain social settings. He continues, musing that “researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others” (p. 7). Berg also shares his belief that even though qualitative research methods have gained popularity and increased acceptance as valid forms of inquiry, using these methods can often be just as laborious and cumbersome as their quantitative counterparts. More importantly, personal experiences and stories cannot so be easily parsed down to a set of numbers and relationships between variables (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

Speaking in general terms about the nature of scientific observation, Holstein and Gubrium (2002) add their own thoughts about method selection. In addition to practical concerns (such as the types of research questions being posed or the level of access to the research setting), they suggest that selection of research methods can begin after the researcher

has accepted a few conditions. The first codicil states simply that due to a collective human tendency to form opinions based on previous experiences, the ability to understand the world and one's surroundings is flawed, biased, and inaccurate. Holstein and Gubrium's second postulate states that with practice and tenacity, it is possible to shed preconceived ideas about the world and "begin to see the world as it really is" (p. 3). This assumption leads me to speculate that these scholars were speaking from a quantitative research paradigm that presupposes that with any research inquiry, there is also an absolute objective truth in the physical universe just waiting to be discovered. And while I find these two ideas are useful for particular methodologies and approaches, the former is more relevant for the research approach I utilize in this project.

Qualitative Research

I turn to Berg (2001) as he describes the laborious processes that researchers undertake in data collection and interpretation when they utilize qualitative methods. He praises qualitative methods for their capacity to reveal complex relationships between people. In response to critics of the qualitative research perspective, he writes, "This is not to suggest that qualitative methods are without methodological rigor. In fact, good qualitative research can be very rigorous" (p. 7). He continues, sharing that "qualitative research takes much longer, requires greater clarity of goals during design stages, and cannot be analyzed by running computer programs" (p. 3). While he concurs that quantitative methods are still more frequently utilized in research, he insists that the contributions made by qualitative research to social science research should not be overlooked or diminished. Berg also holds the same standard for qualitative research that many quantitative researchers aspire to: when studying the same social setting, future researchers are able to replicate the research study. However, in a critical study such as this (where issues of power are always being considered in context), qualitative scholars might (understandably) take

issue with the idea of replicating studies that are necessarily influenced by constantly shifting socio-cultural conditions.

Berg (2001) suggests selecting research methods that are most appropriate for obtaining answers to research inquiries, but that also researchers consider extraneous circumstances such as access to the scene, the likelihood that the study could be replicated, and the researcher's pre-existing relationship to the participants being studied. He notes that the many forms of qualitative methods "fall along a continuum between totally uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) in natural settings to totally controlled techniques of natural observation" (p. 7). Baker (1999) also seems to empathize with the aspiring researcher who may become overwhelmed or paralyzed at the point of method selection for a research study. She shares:

How, you may wonder, do you pick a method to use? Your choice may depend on your particular stage in formulating and conceptualizing a problem. One or another method may be appropriate at a particular stage of a project, or one or another method may be appropriate to the theoretical assumptions on which a project is based. (p. 9)

Baker also writes that the selection of research method should always be guided by the theory that supports the study, adding that some researchers completely debunk certain methods; others praise methods that they believe empower the researcher with answers that explain certain social (and communicative) events. Yow (1994) suggests one guiding principle to help researchers decide upon the most effective and appropriate research method(s) is to ask a simple question: "Given my research question, what do I need to do to find the answer?" (p. 9). Meanwhile Davies (1999) claims that the theoretical beliefs of the researcher will drive the selection of the research setting, the questions asked by the researcher, and the findings that emerge out of data interpretation. Having shared how some scholars have described the importance of appropriate

research method selection, I now proceed to my methods: qualitative observation, one-on-one qualitative interviews, and focus groups. I also detail how I utilized qualitative observations to guide and inform the questions I presented in interviews and focus group sessions.

Qualitative Observation

When engaging in qualitative observations, a researcher enters the same physical proximity of the communication action being studied. The researcher observes and records communication practices in a social setting, organizes the collected data from the field notes, then seeks to identify recurring themes and patterns. From these emerging themes, the researcher draws conclusions, which are then shared with other colleagues in the discipline. Here, the researcher takes on the role of commentator and interpreter of cultural practices and rituals. In doing so, the observer “attempts to makes sense of the forms of communication employed by members of a community or culture” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 385-386). Though it’s possible that the researcher may not personally identify as a member of the group being studied, Davies (1999) cautions those who study *others* that “all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research” (p. 3).

Lofland and Lofland (1995) theorize that when a researcher witnesses a social phenomenon personally, a nuanced understanding of the cultural and social meanings emerge more readily, because “only through direct experience can one accurately know much about social life” (p. 3). When describing ethnography, Lofland and Lofland say that “the researcher strives to be a participant and a *witness* to the lives of others” (p. 3). The observer, then, becomes researcher and instrument, for the previous experiences and biases of the researcher will necessarily influence the types of research questions posed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), as well as the analysis and interpretation of the data (Davies, 1999).

Though my qualitative observations adhered to the principles of the method known as ethnography (and as such, may appropriately be called “ethnographic” in design and execution), I felt it appropriate to refrain from merely using the blanket term *ethnography* to describe this specific method of collecting data that I used for this part of the research study. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), an ethnography is the umbrella term for qualitative methods that presume that the researcher will be completely immersed in the social action of the setting being studied. This definition presupposes a daily presence in the research setting, “watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact—collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1). If anything, my entire journey and the sum of my experiences in the process of becoming a teacher, developing a teaching persona, and even writing this dissertation work in tandem with the data I collected in the formation of a *reflexive ethnography* (Davies, 1999). In this study, I was present in each stage of data collection, including recruiting participants and making claims based on my interpretation of the themes that emerged in the process of studying the information that participants disclosed. As shown in this research study, ethnography is performed in three specific stages: data collection, asking questions about the data, and making assumptions after analyzing the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

In light of the fact that this dissertation journey of inquiry and discovery can easily meet the criteria for an ethnographic study, I propose that this particular aspect of my data collection is most aptly named *qualitative observation*. Not only was the time that I (as researcher) spent in the classroom considerably shorter than a complete period of immersion (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2011; Becker & Geer, 1957), but also my role of the researcher was only to observe and report, not to participate. Moreover, as my role in this study was neither that of

teacher nor pupil, I did not solicit (nor expect) the teacher to acknowledge my presence in the classroom (after initial introductions and explaining my purpose in the research setting).

According to Davies (1999), “reflexivity expresses researchers’ awareness of their necessary connection to the research and hence their effects upon it” (p. 7). She lists a few approaches that researchers have undertaken to address this phenomena including attempts to “make themselves inconspicuous and hence reduce the dangers of reactivity” (p. 7), or to try a different approach that brings as little attention as possible to the processes that might signal to other participants that research is being conducted. Thus, even though I am fully aware that my presence in the classroom was noticed by the students and the teacher, I still endeavored to minimize any direct contact with students in the classroom, and I did not participate in lectures and discussions.

Additionally, even following the strictest adherence to the principles that inform full-blown ethnography or merely doing participant observations cannot fully eliminate researcher bias. In the process of providing detailed descriptions of the setting and participants and reporting on the actions observed, researchers must be vigilantly aware that any research is automatically compromised by the presence of the researcher (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2011; Becker & Geer, 1957). The most critical observation is prone to the inherent biases of the observer (Davies, 1999; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These biases will automatically influence the interpretation (and perhaps collection) of data and the formation of conclusions about the group being studied (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2011; Davies, 1999). In light of this inherent complexity, my inclusion of observation data was invaluable to informing questions that would serve as starting points for conducting interviews and focus groups (both described below). The data that I collected from the participants' own voices (in interviews and focus groups) could either confirm or dispute my interpretations of the teacher’s interactions with their students that I

observed during the short times I actually spent observing the classrooms. The answers I sought to address the research questions for this dissertation project were located in the spaces where the students (and teachers) who participated were invited to reflect on my observations in their own voices. I now introduce the second proposed method I used for this study: one-on-one qualitative interviews with students and teachers.

Interviews

Definition and Theoretical Assumptions

Flick (2007) states that interviews are used when the experiences of a participant are "seen as relevant for understanding the experiences of people in a similar situation" (p. 79). In this method of field research, the researcher goes directly to the research participant for the purpose of collecting data that reflect the experiences and viewpoints of that particular group member. Stewart and Cash (2014) define interviews thusly: "an interview, then, is an interactional communication process between two parties, at least one of whom has a predetermined and serious purpose, that involves the asking and answering of questions" (p. 2). They add that interviewing is always a dyadic process, but note that a *party* need not be limited to a single individual; in fact both parties to an interview can be made up of multiple persons. Seidman (2006) claims that his motivation to use interviewing as a research method is to find out information about people, how they live, and how they make sense of their lives and experiences. This, he notes, may be in opposition to some researchers who prefer to use numerical data to answer questions, test hypotheses, or make evaluations. So, even in spite of paradigmatic differences and debates concerning method selection, "interviews are one of the dominant methods in qualitative research" (Flick, 2007, p. 78).

According to Holstein and Gubrium (2002), “interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives” (p. 112). Noting the human connection in doing social research, Seidman (2006) shares that one reason he uses interviewing as a method is “because I am interested in other people’s stories” (p. 7). Baker (1999) suggests that interviewing is a natural human occurrence, and that “everyone has, in a number of situations, been an interviewer” (p. 220). According to Seidman, interviewing as a method presumes that people act in certain ways based upon the meaning they have come to associate with acting out those behaviors. Interviewing can create contextual understanding when a researcher is attempting to make sense of the many ways that people understand and explain their own actions. Interviewing is about creating conditions where participants will freely self-disclose.

Simply put, interviewing involves the researcher posing questions to a participant, and recording the responses provided by the participant. These questions are known as an *interview protocol* (Stewart & Cash, 2014). An *interview schedule* is a protocol with a loose set of questions the interviewer has prepared beforehand (and more akin to the type of protocol I used in this project). An *interview guide* is protocol with a much stricter set of questions, guidelines, and follow-up questions. These different styles of questioning are designed to elicit specific kinds of information and guide the flow of the exchange. When referencing the communicative aspect of asking questions and responding in turn, Holstein and Gubrium (2002) state that at its core, “interviewing is a special form of conversation” (p. 113), call the interview conversation “a pipeline for transmitting knowledge” (p. 113), and proclaim that “all interviews are interactional” (p. 112). The responses from the interviewee(s) then become qualitative data to be analyzed and thematized by the researcher. Using a well-prepared set of questions may encourage participants

to reveal perceptions and share experiences that may not be observable (or known) by any other individual. Additionally, Holstein and Gubrium advise that “if the interviewer asks questions properly, the respondent will give out the desired information” (p. 112).

Principles of Conducting Interviews

When conducting interviews, being prepared is paramount. Having the interview questions prepared in advance is essential, but effective interviewing that yields useful data also requires attention to detail and being in the moment (Stewart & Cash, 2014). According to Yow (1994), the researcher records the interview, makes notes, reminds the participant of their right to discontinue the interview at any time, and advises that responses are kept confidential if anonymity cannot be reassured. The interview should be conducted in a private space, and the participant must be informed when the recorder is activated. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) mark listening and paying attention as two essential skills necessary to establish a personal connection with the interview participant. They surmise that good listening solicits more participation from the participant, much the same way that appearing distracted and unengaged can cause the participant to feel frustrated and create a barrier that ultimately can result in less information being shared. While this method of data collection is widely accepted as valid, there are critics who caution the researcher that the data provided in this method must be taken as truth (to the participant’s best knowledge), and there is no practical (or ethical) way to fact-check a person’s summary and interpretation of past experiences (Becker & Geer, 1957).

Seidman (2006) muses that novice researchers often gravitate towards methods that seem user-friendly and fool-proof. He admonishes us to remember that “any method of inquiry worth anything takes time, thoughtfulness, energy, and money” (p. 12). He then continues on to share his belief that interviewing in research is especially laborious and cumbersome. The process of

transcribing recorded interviews alone can be time-consuming (if the researcher has to do it) and expensive (if this part of the research process is contracted out to professionals). Interviewing also requires that the researcher diplomatically maintain control of the conversation, and create and maintain an easy rapport with participants so that they might feel more comfortable sharing. Since the interview is very often the initial meeting between the researcher and the interviewee (Seidman, 2006), the burden of encouraging the participant to loosen up and feel welcome to share necessarily falls to the researcher. According to Flick (2007), interviews grounded in personal narratives often request participants to tell a story about themselves—as opposed to simply answering questions posed by the researcher. Although interviews can go on indefinitely, the qualitative interview usually lasts between one to two hours. The researcher often asks for permission to contact the participant for follow-up questions (Stewart & Cash, 2014), and concludes the interview after making sure that the participant has exhausted their answers and have indicated that there is no more additional information to add presently. At this point, the researcher gathers materials and notes, leaves the setting, and can begin the process of transcribing the interview, followed by coding and analyzing the data collected from the interview participants.

As I have already established, conducting qualitative research using interviews with individual participants can certainly yield rich data. Imagine then, the rich data that can be mined when multiple participants are interviewed simultaneously. That brings me to the last method I am proposing for this study: focus group interviews with students.

Focus Groups

Definition and Theoretical Assumptions

Focus groups (or focus group interviews) are one of several group interview methods where multiple participants are interviewed at the same time—as opposed to a more traditional qualitative interview model where each interview session features only one participant being interviewed at any time (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011)¹. Bader & Rossi (1999) add that posing questions to a group for discussion can produce relevant data that surveys alone may not uncover. Studying the interactions between participants will be more time-consuming than many quantitative methods, but the data will be deeper and richer for the effort. Focus groups can be used on their own or in tandem with other methods (Morgan, 1997). Participants are invited to express their feelings and opinions on a topic, and their participation requires little (or minimal) preparation beforehand (Bader & Rossi, 1999). This method is often used by commercial companies who are testing new products and brands, as well as by media companies who conduct research on various topics such as television programming, political candidates, or ways to improve services provided by agencies and businesses to their client bases. When companies are in their product development stages and want to test out pilots and prototypes, focus groups are often the preferred method to gather such data, due to the researcher's ability to gather opinions and feelings from several individuals simultaneously.

Early focus groups date back to the World War II era, when studies were conducted to assess public opinion about the war effort and response to political propaganda (Bader & Rossi, 1999; Morgan, 1997). In the 1950s, focus groups gained popularity for their ability to access the collective thought processes of the consumers of commercial products (Goebert & Rosenthal, 2002), such as when housewives were being polled about their preferences in food items such as cake mix. In the past decade, however, focus groups have become a highly respected method in

¹ For this dissertation, I will refer to one-on-one interviews as simply "interviews" and focus group interviews as "focus groups." I will distinguish between interviews with teachers and interviews with students as appropriate.

the social sciences because of the utility of "studying the diversity of opinion on a topic" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183), largely because there is rich data to be mined when the interactions between groups of individuals who share specific characteristics are studied and analyzed. Today, focus groups may be the preferred method when the researcher seeks to gather a wide array of information about how groups of people feel about issues such as agency policies, goods and services, or business practices (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Another useful benefit of doing focus groups is the "group effect" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). In the case of one-on-one interviews, if the interviewer has crafted well thought-out questions (and is prepared to listen and present follow-ups), more relevant information can emerge. However, in group discussions, there is a phenomenon—a synergy if you will—where participants often feed off each other's comments and observations. This kind of setting encourages the participants to interact with each other, and the resulting data is often richer, more fleshed out, and balanced in content and perspective. According to Lindlof and Taylor, "This dynamic seldom, if ever, arises in a one-on-one interview" (p. 183).

Principles of Conducting Focus Groups

Opposing models of interaction. According to Morrison (1998), "There is no set way to conduct focus groups" (p. 207). However, this method does depend on the use of two types of interactions. Complementary interactions find members coming to some sort of collective agreement on a topic or point and moving on to the next item for discussion. Very often in these settings, members find that they have similar experiences, forms of expressions, and reactions to similar phenomena. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that these discussions can often be "high spirited occasions—even at times noisy and rambunctious" (p. 183), although this is not always the case. Often the tone of such interactions can be "appropriately quiet and serious" (p. 183),

depending on the topic and the participants' reactions to the questions posed.

However, just as often, a skilled focus group moderator will present a group of questions that invite differences of opinions and a myriad of feelings to arise between the participants. This kind of "argumentative interaction" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183) encourages people to share their authentic opinions in a group setting that they might not otherwise voice, largely to avoid confrontation or conflict. A skilled moderator, in turn, can invite participants to engage in lively meaningful dialogue and avoid the after effects of lingering resentments, feeling attacked, or having one's opinion disregarded or criticized. When participants volunteer to share their opinions and beliefs, we are asking them to engage in a very personal (and possibly risky) venture. That is why the most important role in the focus group interview is the researcher—fulfilling the role of moderator (Kruger & Casey, 2015).

The moderator. The moderator is the glue that holds the success of the focus group interview (Greenbaum, 2000; Morrison, 1998). In this role, the researcher must provide instructions to the group, guide the discussion and keep the group on topic, intervene in the event of a true conflict emerging, and also to take advantage of the group dynamics in the room. Skilled moderators take notice of (and perhaps record) the interactions between the participants, including nonverbal behaviors. In this role, the researcher hopes to "evoke some reactions and interactions" (Greenbaum, 2000, p. 11). Often, limited resources call for the researcher to fulfill this role as well as recording the discussion and taking copious notes during the focus group. Most importantly, an effective moderator of focus groups must be a skilled listener (Goebert & Rosenthal, 2002).

Similar to interviews with a single participant, the moderator must also steer and guide the conversation, being ready to intervene if the discussion gets tangential or goes too far off-

topic (Goebert & Rosenthal, 2002; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Additionally, if the participants seem reticent to share or the flow of the discussion seems to wane, revealing personal information can often establish some rapport between the moderator and the discussion participants (Kruger & Casey, 2015). Successfully filling the role of the moderator requires a delicate touch, as it is this person who must keep the conversation on track without alienating the participants, simultaneously encourage participants to continue in dialogue about the topic at hand, and be prepared to manage any escalating tensions if there are especially heated differences in opinion between participants (Morgan, 1997).

Guidelines for conducting focus groups. The setting and location of the discussion should be easy to locate and reasonably comfortable. Environmental factors always have an impact on the participants of any research study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Climate control, lighting, external (and internal) noise factors, comfortable seating, and adequate space are all considerations that the researcher must be aware of and address prior to inviting participants to meet (Stewart & Cash, 2014). If the discussion session fails to yield usable data, one of the first things the researcher should consider is whether or not the space used to conduct the focus group sessions was comfortable, adequate, and conducive to open dialogues about a topic all of the participants are familiar with.

The optimal size of a focus group is between eight and twelve participants (Morrison, 1998) and the focus group sessions can last anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours (Greenbaum, 2000). The moderator makes brief introductions and welcomes the participants, often with some kind of activity designed to help participants feel more at ease (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The discussion is then led by the moderator who has previously created specific questions and follow-up questions when appropriate. When the participants in the focus group

are not already acquainted or share no significant history, the data will be richer if the topic is of a general nature, something that is public knowledge or common to all participants. Groups with participants who are already somewhat acquainted are often found to be easier to moderate, at least insofar as getting the discussion off the ground and getting the participants to interact (Morgan, 1997).

One of the main benefits of including *groups* of participants (as opposed to interviewing a participant in isolation) is the richness of data that can emerge out of the interactions that take place between group members (Morgan, 1997). When observing groups, the interactions between the participants become just as important as any particular contribution to the discussion by any single volunteer. In fact, the differences in opinions and perspectives become just as much a focal point of the data analysis as the ideas expressed. Moreover, the ways that the group comes to consensus or agrees to remain in dissent make the collected data more rich and nuanced, adding dimensions of meaning to the ideas by illuminating the means by which the group formed conclusions (Goebert & Rosenthal, 2002).

The Benefit of Combining Multiple Methods

In this section, I elaborate on the benefits of using multiple methods to answer my research questions: "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers? What do students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?" Here, I share what kinds of data I retrieved from each method and why I believe the methods I selected were the most appropriate to address the research questions at hand. Following, I discuss two benefits of using multiple methods in one study: the concept of triangulation of methods in scientific research, and the intersubjective nature of being a social (human) being. After briefly sharing how I reviewed and evaluated the interview and focus

group protocols I used, I conclude this chapter with my observations and suggestions for future research opportunities, especially related to utilizing multiple methods in a single study.

Seidman (2006) cites Schultz as he reflects that researchers should make peace in knowing that no one is able to fully understand our research participants or their experiences. If we could, it would mean that we had access to the person's inner thought life. He muses that "to do so would mean that we have entered into the other's stream of consciousness and experienced what he or she had. If we could do that, we would *be* that other person" (p. 9.). Merely observing the behavior of a research participant does not allow access into how the participant makes sense of their own behavior. Fassett and Warren (2007) weigh in on the limitations of any single method. They state quite succinctly that "no method can answer all questions" (p. 103).

Triangulation

Berg (2001) tells us that many researchers have a preferred research method. These particular methods may be used simply because they were successfully utilized in previous research, because using this method has become habitual, or simply due to the perspective the researcher takes on the nature of inquiry (Baker, 1999). One practice in scientific research, known as triangulation, is steeped in the belief that there are always multiple ways of seeing a phenomenon, and that one method is simply insufficient to fully address any research question. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) say triangulation "involves the comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest. If the data from two or more methods point towards the same conclusion, then validation is enhanced" (p. 274).

Fassett and Warren (2007) do not mention triangulation explicitly when they rally for the inclusion of personal narratives as an accepted method of inquiry. However, they do agree that using a single method limits the data that can be collected and, therefore, impacts the kind of

interpretations and generalizations made about the group and setting being studied. Berg (2001) opines that each method produces a different set of data, and the perspectives are known as “lines of sight” (p. 4), or different ways of observing the same scene and participants. Baker (1999) says that “in triangulation, the researcher gathers evidence from multiple sources to address the questions at hand from different points of view” (p. 255). She asserts that the opportunity for validating conclusions is likely the primary reason that researchers combine methods, but continues to point out additional benefits of using multiple methods including “to broaden the study,” as well as “to address possible contradictions in the evidence” (p. 256), and even to make the study more accessible for replication. However, at its core, triangulation is the researcher’s best tool to validate the findings from the study being conducted presently (Berg, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

As a qualitative critical researcher, I am less interested in the traditional notion of validity (Berg, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), as I am in the pursuit of different points of view and a broadened perspective on relational safety (Baker, 1999). I am using grounded theory to gather information that can assist me as I mine the impressions, ideas, and beliefs that students and teachers possess about notions of safety in the shared relationship between them. In this study, using multiple lines of sight is not a quest for one objective truth, but an inquiry to see what emerges when my classroom observations and heuristic discoveries (from the literature review) are put in conversation with input from teachers, individual students, and groups of students. There are a variety of benefits to using multiple perspectives about a phenomenon when collecting data.

First, using qualitative observation provided relevant data that guided me in creating questions for the interview and focus group protocols I presented to participants. More

conveniently, the themes that emerged from my inherently biased observations (Davies, 1999) from the days when I sat in on a class session were validated (or nulled) by the data I collected from the interviews and focus groups. Second, conducting interviews and focus groups allowed me to combine the voices of individuals (students and teachers) with the voices of several (groups of students). Third, focus groups had an added benefit of allowing me to study and report the dynamics of the "group effect" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183), where participants often kept the dialogue going (well past my question being posed) because one participant made an observation that caused someone else to chime in, and so forth. Lastly, the data collected from observation, interviews, and focus groups were placed in dialogue with the terms and concepts that I hypothesized might emerge from the collected data (see page 80), along with the heuristic discoveries I included from the review of literature. In a critical study such as this, where issues of power are highlighted and theorized, triangulation is not about discovering one specific (verifiable) truth, but about the overlap between different sets of data collected from multiple sources.

Intersubjectivity and Human Nature

As humans, we are inherently limited in our ability to observe ourselves objectively. Physically, no person can view the back of the head or the entire body (Mead, 1967), and even the face that we see in the mirror is only an image, reflecting a version of our faces that we assume others also see when they look at us. Weedon (2004) tells us that our ability to know ourselves can only be achieved through social interactions with others. Mead (1967) weighs in simply: "But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience" (p. 140). Weedon reminds us how as children, our sense of identity is created as we learn who we are—often by learning who (and what) we are not simultaneously. Mead continues: "The individual

experiences himself [sic] as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individuals in the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs” (p. 138). Whether the phenomenon is still having food in one’s teeth after a meal, or teachers displaying facial expressions in the classroom that might indicate frustration or disbelief, individuals simply cannot wholly perceive themselves in isolation. And since teaching and learning are intersubjective and collaborative processes (Fassett & Warren, 2007), teachers cannot possibly be fully aware of how their students perceive their presence in the classroom—or to what degree they feel safe in their relationships with their teachers, if at all. Goffman (1959) uses the analogy of a stage production to show how each of us possesses an inner secret life, and that humans can choose to disclose or hide parts of themselves (like thoughts and feelings) that would normally be located behind the stage curtain where the audience (meaning all others) cannot see. As children are socialized very early to respect teacher authority, it’s certainly understandable why students would opt to keep their personal feelings and observations about a teacher’s classroom presence hidden.

I argue then, that using research tools is methodologically appealing, when the researcher combines several methods of data collection as a sort of check-and-balance system, since any one method alone may fail to yield significant (or the fullest array) of findings (Berg, 2001; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Conversely, the intersubjective nature of human social interactions means that humans need feedback from others, especially when the classroom is traditionally a site of unquestioned teacher authority where students are not acclimated (or encouraged) to share their experiences and observations about their teacher’s presence in the classroom. In the following section I reflect upon the effects of using multiple methods in one study and the kinds of data that I discovered as a result.

Using the Methods in Tandem

Qualitative observation. This method was useful in helping me find answers to the research questions for a few reasons. According to Ollin (2008), “classroom observations are an important source of information about teaching and the practice of particular teachers” (p. 265). Although the presence of an observer will certainly have some effect on the research setting (the classroom), observations from a neutral party can be revealing. If the researcher is able to enlighten the teacher about how she/he moves through the space, where teacher attention is directed in the space, and how students seem to react to the teacher’s presence, these data are richer and more fleshed out than what could be ascertained using only the teacher’s recollection of experiencing the same phenomenon.

What the teachers shared in interviews about occupying the role of student and teacher was compelling, though interpreting this data set and making generalizations in isolation from any other data collected using other methods would have been quite challenging. Moreover, with no input from a non-participating observer, the validity of data from the responses the teacher provided would feel questionable when trying to ascertain how safe students feel in their relationships with their teacher. Even when the teacher is mindfully reflexive about how the classroom can be a site of empowerment and space for social change (Fassett & Warren, 2007), there is likely still a large knowledge gap when it comes to the perceptions of the students. When conducting research about how safe students and teachers feel about their shared relationship, who better to ask about the relational aspect of the teaching relationship than students and teachers themselves?

The data I collected via classroom observations formed the cornerstone for my interview and focus group protocols. The observations were a useful starting point to generate discussions

with students about their feelings of relational safety with their respective teachers. Ultimately, even if the data I collected from qualitative observations (in isolation) had not produced any findings that significantly corresponded to the data I collected from interviews and focus groups, I would argue that those data were still useful. The information and feedback I presented (in debriefing sessions) to the teachers whose classrooms I observed would have still been productive and meaningful as tools for them to consider implementing as they each continue to develop their own respective teaching practices. Observations from peers have the potential to provide serious heuristic value for pedagogues building an effective teaching practice (Becker & Geer, 1957).

Interviews and focus groups. Using group and individual interviews empowered me as researcher to question students as to how they feel about their relationships with their teachers. Additionally, interviews with teachers were useful tools in assessing how teachers understood their own roles and subject positions in the classroom. The protocol(s) I prepared for interviews and focus groups consisted of open-ended questions designed to empower participants to share their observations and experiences in the classroom. The questions required student participants to reflect on their experiences with the teacher (both in and outside the classroom), and solicit input about how the student experienced feeling safe in the classroom where the teacher is in charge. When interviewing students, data from interviews by single participants as well as focus group sessions not only shed light on students regarding their perceptions of relational safety with their teachers, but also helped me to tap into some group-think mentality that illuminates similarities and difference in opinions about their relationships with their teachers.

The questions I posed during the interviews and focus groups were designed with the intent of inviting participants to open up about how they perceived their relationship with their

teacher (or students) in (and outside of) the classroom space. I correctly anticipated that participating teachers would have stories and experiences that would yield rich data about their understandings of relational safety, since they continue to occupy the dual roles of teacher and student daily. Before I conducted the interview sessions (with teachers and students) and focus groups, I hypothesized that certain keywords that indicate feelings of safety would emerge in the data such as *relatable*, *dialogue*, *listening*, *inviting*, *relationship*, *warm*, and *share*, and in Chapter Four, I share how my findings both confirmed my hypotheses and expanded my ideas about relational safety that I had not anticipated at the start of the study.

Data Collection

In the process of completing this study, my original goal was to conduct two focus groups and two interviews each (with participating teachers and students). In reality, I observed four classroom sections, interviewed four teachers, conducted three focus groups (with ten, seven, and eight student participants, respectively), and interviewed 23 students individually. My target population for teachers for this study was GTAs who were teaching the introductory public speaking course in a face-to-face setting during the summer semester of 2017. One of the primary reasons I selected this population is because these students were taking the same course that I was teaching when I mentioned those critical incidents that occurred early in my teaching experience (that I shared in Chapter One). The four GTAs in this study have taught at least one full school year in our mid-sized university in the Midwest. All new GTAs in the Communication Studies Department take a seminar course during their first semester of teaching (CMST 539) which encourages new teachers to develop their teaching philosophies and classroom personas, while being exposed to critical pedagogy and foundational theories of education and learning. As a convenience sample then, I recruited students from the sections of

these GTAs for both interviews and focus groups. I obtained contact information for potential student participants from the rosters of the GTAs who volunteered to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were encouraged to choose their own pseudonyms. Having students and teachers from the same sections was paramount in the design of this study, since relational safety is grounded in the relational aspect of teaching and the student-teacher relationship. I solicited teacher volunteers to participate in this study by sending out notices via our department's email listserv (see Appendix E1). I also placed flyers in the mailboxes of all GTAs in the department (see Appendix E3). There were two online sections of CMST 101 being offered during the same summer semester. However, I decided to omit those sections from participation because this study focuses on the *in-person experiences* of classroom interactions between teachers and students. I successfully recruited all four GTAs from the Communication Studies department (as a convenience sample) who were teaching CMST 101 during the summer semester.

I performed all transcription and coding myself. Between the three focus groups, four teacher interviews, and 23 student interviews, there was nearly 26 hours of tape to transcribe and sort through. Listening to the recordings while I consulted my field notes helped me to revisit the scene(s) of the data collection. In this space, richer interpretations of data emerged, as I recalled how student participants interacted with each other (during focus groups), with me (during individual interviews) and with their teachers (during my qualitative classroom observations). While coding and thematizing data, I also remained alert for emerging themes and ideas that seemed to overlap between my own heuristics on the components that make up relational safety in a CCP classroom and the data I collected from teachers and students. In Chapter Four, I have included relevant passages of dialogue from the interviews (with teachers

and students), as well as the focus group sessions.

Classroom Observations

I observed four classrooms for an entire hour-long class period each. Recall that these observations were primarily for the purposes of informing the interview and focus group protocols. The observations I conducted were all completed in the regular meeting spaces in the Communications Building on campus. All four teachers received a cover letter and then completed a consent form (See Appendices F1 and F2) and a participant information sheet (see Appendix A5). Each student was given a copy of the "cover letter to students in classroom observations" (see Appendix F3). I always sat in the back with my laptop and did not interact with students at all. Each teacher briefly introduced me and explained that my presence in the classroom was for this research project and informed the students that there would be opportunities for them to participate later (in a focus group, interview, or both). I have provided the demographic breakdown of the students present during each classroom observation (see Tables B1 through B4 in the Appendices). These demographic descriptors are how my eyes read and interpreted the students' bodies in each section.

Appendix A1 shows the guide I used during classroom observation data collection, created based on the literature about student-teacher classroom relationships. Gorham and Christophel (1992) assert that teacher behaviors have a direct effect on their students' motivation to participate, learn, and excel in class. Teven and McCroskey (1996) share that "a teacher's classroom behavior is constantly under scrutiny by students" (p. 1) and that "a teacher's facial expression, gaze, posture, and other body movements provide the student with valuable information about her or his emotional state" (p. 1) as well as "attitude towards the students and familiarity or ease with the lecture format" (p. 1). Similarly, Frymier and Houser (2000) explain

that students engage in (or avoid) particular behaviors for fear of how they will be perceived. For example, they note that “students avoid asking questions because they fear being seen as stupid or foolish” (p. 217). As such, when I entered into a teacher’s classroom to observe their teaching practice and presence, my primary focus in this stage of data collection was to notice and record the teacher’s movements in the space, paying particular attention to the ways the teacher may have gravitated towards any student(s) more than others. I also observed the students and how they interacted with the teacher in the classroom. Were students smiling back at the teacher? Were students taking notes or did they appear distracted? Were students seated near the front, the back, or are they dispersed evenly throughout the space? Did students readily participate by raising their hands and answering questions? How did the teacher react to long periods of silence? Did the teacher invite students to share their thoughts in discussion and then appear to listen attentively? Did the teacher address students by name? Did students remain after class to ask additional questions? What was the (presumed) demographic makeup of the group?

Focus Groups

I conducted three focus group sessions; one had 10 students, the second had seven students, and the third had eight students. All three focus groups were conducted during the last week of class. The participating teachers informed their students that I would be conducting focus groups during their regular class session and that attendance and participation points would be given for the day, even if a student opted not to participate. Of all of the students who showed up (for all three sessions), only one student opted not to stay. This student had already met with me for a one-on-one interview and thus, still contributed to this research project.

Each focus group session began and concluded within the designated hour of regular class time allotted. I intentionally set aside ten minutes at the beginning of the hour to get the

students situated with placards (bearing their chosen pseudonyms) and review the "cover letter to students in focus groups" (See Appendix F4). The consent form (see Appendix F5) and the participant information sheet (See Appendix A5) were signed and returned to me. All students were presented with a \$5 Starbucks gift card. I made sure to conclude each focus group a few minutes before the hour was up so that students were not late leaving the classroom (and the next teacher would not be delayed in being able to enter the space). I recorded each focus group session onto three audio recording devices, including the application on my smartphone. I have included demographic information tables for each focus group section, which can be viewed in the Appendix C, Tables C1 through C3. During each focus group session, I provided a worksheet to help student participants to brainstorm about their notions of relational safety. (See Appendix A6.) I began each focus group session by asking students to provide one descriptor from their worksheet about relational safety to stimulate a productive dialogue and discussion.

When conducting focus groups (as well as during individual interviews with students and teachers), I mentioned a phenomenon (such as the way the teacher addressed students by name or the teacher's use of space) that I observed in their classrooms and asked the participants to elaborate or explain their perceptions in relation to what happened earlier during class. In Appendix A1, I have included a worksheet that details the kind of content that informed the observatory part of data collection that took place in the classroom. This worksheet is accompanied by a list of sample questions in Appendices A2-A4 to illustrate how the data from qualitative observations informed the questions presented in focus groups and interviews.

Interviews

All student interviews (and one teacher interview) were conducted in the campus library in a large group study room. Three of the four teacher interviews took place off-campus: one in the participant's residence, and the other two in my home. Each participant was given all the necessary disclosures and completed all required forms (see Appendix A5, and F6-F9). Each participant was offered a \$5 gift card from Starbucks as a token to compensate the participant for giving up their time. Student interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 50 minutes. Teacher interviews ranged from 65 minutes to two hours. Like in the focus groups, many interview questions were predicated upon observations that I made during the four class visits aforementioned. As with each of the three focus group sessions, each interview was recorded onto three separate devices then uploaded to the cloud and all backup storage immediately upon conclusion of the interview. I have included demographic information for all four participating teachers and all 23 participating students (see Tables D1 and D2).

Reviewing and Evaluating My Data Collection Processes

I included my intent to test out my interview protocols (and collection procedures) in my IRB paperwork so that any data that I collected in formative stages would be usable if the findings seemed relevant and compelling. Each time I observed a class or conducted an interview I reviewed the overall process and the data I collected. Then I added, revised, or eliminated questions from the interview protocol(s), addressed any necessary adjustments to the space(s) where the interviews were to be conducted, and noted these findings in my journal.

A careful (and ongoing) review of how I conducted my interviews and focus groups was quite beneficial to me as a novice researcher who had not moderated a group discussion or conducted formal interviews before. Rather than treat any specific observation day, focus group,

or interview as THE defining pilot study, once I began collecting data, I evaluated my processes after each session to ascertain how effective I was in my endeavors to gather information from the participants (Chenail, 2011; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Turner, 2010). This included listening to the recordings multiple times. After I finished transcribing all of the audio files, I listened again and read along with the transcripts. In fact, reviewing and evaluating my data collection processes helped me become more confident in discussion leading and presenting probing (and follow-up) questions when I treated each session of data collection as an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of my interviewing skills (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Stewart & Cash, 2014; Turner, 2010). Throughout this study, as I performed the role of researcher, I continued to anticipate challenges and complications while soliciting volunteers and making final selections for when and where to conduct the interviews and focus groups (Greenbaum, 2000). Many external factors can impact a study. Often when participants fail to show up (or on time), it may be that they did not receive clear directions to the interview setting. When participants are not familiar with research protocols, it is essential that the purpose of the study be revealed at the onset of the meeting (Greenbaum, 2000). Each time I conducted an interview or focus group, I evaluated how the questions in my interview protocol(s) could have been revised (or eliminated) to best invite participants to freely share their thoughts and feelings about the relationship they share with their teacher. I learned quickly that presenting the research questions at the beginning and end of each focus group session (and individual interview) was an important way to remind the participants of the purpose of the interview (or focus group) and to make sure that the flow of the dialogue was actually addressing the research questions of the study.

Flawed questions. Right away, I had to revise my initial questions for students in interviews (refer to Appendix A2). I believed that students would want to participate in the

interview solely because of being interested in relational safety or talking about their experiences with their teachers. While this may have been true, the range of answers I received from students about their decision to participate in this study ran from "you seem like a nice person and I wanted to assist you" to "my teacher seemed to be interested in your research and I thought I might get some extra credit." I decided to revise this leading question such that the desire to participate was framed by the student's value judgment on the importance of strong relationships between students and teachers. The first question posed was now phrased more like this: "How much value do you place on being able to form a relationship with your teachers?" With some questions on the protocol, I had to repeat a question (or state it differently) so that the participant could more readily understand and respond. This often was noticed in asking students to reflect upon past experiences that shaped their current perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Every participant has been shaped by their past; however not everyone has had the same experiences. Finding ways to present questions that encourage participants to share those experiences was a constant process of revision and restating my questions for clarity.

Being prepared for complications. I learned pretty quickly how important it is to review participants' paperwork before they leave the site of the interview. Several students failed to print and sign the consent form. I waited nearly three weeks to get one consent form corrected by the student participant. Even though I used three recording devices for all focus groups and interviews (and had extra batteries for all of them), I failed to check the battery status before beginning one interview and the recording stopped about 5 minutes before the interview concluded. Luckily, the backup recordings were intact and no data were lost. Since one of the ways that I recorded was with an application on my smartphone, I was unsure what to do if I received a text or phone call during the interview. The solution: put the phone in "do not

disturb" mode during the recording. After every interview concluded, I immediately loaded the sound file onto my laptop, made several digital copies (to external storage devices), and uploaded the file to the cloud. I attempted to listen to the audio file of each completed interview or focus group within 48 hours of the original recording.

In the focus groups, I used heavy stock paper to create placards so that participants could write their pseudonyms with a black marker. This was a way of preventing me from using the participants' real names. That doesn't mean that a participant didn't say their own name while sharing an experience. I had to edit out several names with pseudonyms during the transcription phase. Also, at the times I conducted the focus groups, only one of the participating teachers had selected their chosen pseudonym. Even so, in the span of one hour of classroom time, would I have been able to get the students to adhere to strictly referring to their teachers by their pseudonyms? I adapted to this challenge by censoring actual names (uttered in error during recording) and made appropriate substitutions with pseudonyms in-text.

A moment of reflexivity. When I was in the process of retracing my steps to retrieve signatures from (student) participants who did not complete the consent form (or other paperwork) correctly, I was faced with the possibility that I might be reinforcing some hegemonic beliefs about knowledge production and what is proper and what is not (Davies, 1999). When I asked some of the student participants to provide "proper" signatures, I got responses back that indicated that some international student participants may come from cultures where either a printed name or a cursive script could both be considered an acceptable signature. In my insistence that these students sign (or print) their names in the spaces provided, am I not inscribing some standard of "correctness" about how forms should be completed and implying that what the student (voluntarily) provided me was not sufficient? Additionally, I must

admit that the design of my consent forms could have been misleading. In fact, when I examined the consent forms more closely, I noticed that I did not create two separate lines marked clearly for the participants' to provide their printed names and signatures (refer to forms in Appendices: F2, F5, F7, and F9). Although I continued in my quest to obtain the signatures I believed I needed, I was left to think about the ramifications of how my rejection of someone's printed signature (alone) was simultaneously a rejection of the participant's previous education and cultural tradition of self-identification in a written form.

Conclusion

I have argued that teaching is an act that is both performed and observed (hooks, 1994). I have reiterated my belief that the classroom can be a way to create space for social change when we begin to question how we live and how mundane practices in our daily lives perpetuate systemic oppression (Fassett & Warren, 2007). I have argued that multiple methods can be useful (and may be necessary) in a research study with guiding questions like, "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers? What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?" Since no method alone can yield all possible data (Fassett & Warren, 2007), critical communication pedagogues (and all teachers who aim to teach reflexively and critically) should be open to exploring a variety of methods when pursuing inquiries about the teacher-student relationship and how students and teachers understand it. After defining and elaborating on the methodological assumptions and practical applications of the three methods I selected for this study (qualitative observation, interviews, and focus groups), I have argued that combining these specific methods can reveal a wealth of data and information about students' perception of relational safety with teachers as well as how the teachers who participated in this study

understand (and value) relational safety with students. Simultaneously, I have explained how one method (qualitative observation) helped to inform the questions that I presented to participants in focus groups and interviews.

I succinctly put the concepts that guide triangulation of methods in conversation with the intersubjective nature of human relationships to further illustrate the usefulness of combining multiple qualitative methods, especially in answering these specific research questions. After a brief review of the discoveries I made in the process of reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of the questions in the interview and focus group protocols, I reflected on how each method made valuable contributions to this study, and also how each method in isolation may not have been sufficient to answer the research questions I posed. It is my hope that this discussion of multiple qualitative methods, their strengths and weaknesses, and the results of each method being used in combination with other methods was helpful in creating a clear picture of how using multiple methods in this specific research site being studied was useful.

The literature I have reviewed and synthesized on the methods used in this study makes me certain that teachers of communication (and any teacher who aims to teach critically and reflexively) should be open to considering unfamiliar research methods (Berg, 2001), and to consider new combinations of methods, perhaps even across research paradigms (such as the way that I have adapted the principles of triangulation to guide me in discovering the overlap between different sets of data in an interpretive and critical research study). For those educators who diligently seek a new way of being in the classroom, where connecting with students and creating relationships is just as salient as possessing knowledge and evaluating learning, I offer this as a reminder: we can only locate the answers we seek when we ask the right questions. In turn, the best method (or combination of methods) adheres to the same principle: the data

collected is only as rich, useful, or relevant as the method(s) utilized to conduct the study (Baker, 1999).

In this chapter, I described the methods I selected for this study and why I chose those particular methods, both individually and in combination with each other. Additionally, I have disclosed (in painstaking detail) the processes I undertook in the solicitation and recruitment of volunteers, in collecting data, and finally evaluating and refining my techniques for questioning and engaging participants. In Chapter Four I share the concepts that emerged as salient for those dedicated to teaching communication critically in the transcribed data from my notes and recorded interview sessions.

CHAPTER 4

What's Behind the Curtain?

When the Researcher Leaves the Scene

After collecting all of these data and concluding my interviews and focus groups², I felt ready to crack the secret of teacher-student relationships. Surely the key to relational safety lay somewhere in these conversations I had recorded. I got started listening to the audio files right away. Almost immediately I had this odd sensation: it was like eavesdropping. I was listening to myself, but it was clear that I was trying to get information and insight about the relational dynamics that were present during the four in-person sections of CMST101 I observed. I didn't exactly feel like I was being invasive, but I was absolutely aware that I was trying to get a feel of how these groups interacted with and among each other when I was not present to observe.

I heard myself asking really pointed questions as I tried to get at the essence of relational safety. I asked students questions like: "I know you prefer a teacher who gets to know their students, but is it possible for a teacher to share too much?" "Does your teacher ever overshare?" "When your teacher is showing concern for you and your classmates, does it seem as if your teacher seems to get all up in everyone's business?" I asked the teacher participants very similar questions about themselves, their teaching practices, and past relationship with teachers. "Do you get uncomfortable when your students seem to get too comfortable with you and start to feel intrusive?" "How does that experience affect how you interact and relate with you own students today?" At other times, I was asking very open-ended questions, hoping that my participants would nail down the very slippery essence of relational safety, in their own words. After all, I had already produced an extensive review of literature and made my own estimations of

² I conducted three focus groups. Focus group 1 will be called FG1 (teacher: Wonder Woman); focus group 2 will be known as FG2 (teacher: Beth); and focus group 3 will be called FG3 (teacher: Brandon).

keywords. And wasn't the whole point of this research project to find what makes student and teachers feel safe in their shared relationship directly from teacher and students themselves? I had hoped so. . .but the data collection process started off rocky and I was nervous that I would end up with no usable data.³

All data is good data—to someone

My first student interview was one of the shortest of all of them. The student used the pseudonym Jon-Jon (like the late John F. Kennedy, Jr.). I concluded our conversation feeling mighty discouraged. I didn't feel like I gained any useful data from our chat. He almost seemed to be intentionally holding back information from me. Realizing that many students are shy or reticent (Wadleigh, 1997), or simply not aware of what I wanted from them for this interview (Seidman, 2006; Stewart & Cash, 2014), I expected to have to probe, follow-up, and push back to get at the REAL stories I suspected lay beyond my four classroom observations. Like Goffman (1959) theorizes, humans are equipped with an inherent ability to mask their thoughts and feelings. If I was going to get participants to open up and share anything juicy, I was going to have to be creative in my questioning techniques (Stewart & Cash, 2014). In this first student interview, my participant was revealing very little. According to Jon-Jon, in all his years of schooling (even before college), he has NEVER had a problem with a teacher. He ALWAYS got what he needed from a teacher. He adamantly and repeatedly denied ever feeling shamed or dismissed by a teacher. He even inferred that he understood that his position as a student made him a paying customer—and therefore entitled to demand attention from his teachers. Table Two in Appendix D shows that demographically, it was easy for me to yield to the temptation to label

³Because of the large number of participants in this study, for ease of reading (especially when it may be less obvious in context), sometimes I will place an "(s)" behind a participant's name when I refer to a student and place a "(t)" behind the participant's name to indicate that I am referring to a teacher.

this participant as privileged and entitled. After all, he is straight, white, male, U.S. American, and a native speaker of English. OF COURSE he feels it's his right to command attention from his teachers! Why would something like relational safety even matter to him? (I will return to Jon-Jon and reflect more on how his interview informed my findings and conclusions in Chapter Five).

He also said he was indifferent to the possibility of getting to know his teachers—even though he didn't mind getting acquainted if the classroom environment permitted. This was the same student participant who I mentioned in Chapter Three when I discussed evaluating each interview to assess the effectiveness of the questions in my interview protocol(s). When I asked Jon-Jon why he decided to participate in this study, he indicated that he decided to participate because I seemed like a nice person and his instructor seemed to think it was a good idea to help me. I immediately revised that question in my interview protocol to a more specifically worded tone as a result. This is also the student who opted not to stick around for the focus group session I conducted in his section (FG1) and I excused him without question. Frankly, I felt as if this participant did not really offer much useful data. I appreciated his willingness to participate and his candor when answering my questions; I just felt frustration because the answers he provided were not helpful or useful for my study.

I happened to mention this participant (and my frustration with our interview) to a faculty member in the department. To my surprise, he quickly reminded me that ALL data is useful data (Saldaña, 2009). He continued, clarifying for me that what really makes data useful (or worthless) is the researcher's perspective (Davies, 1999). Does the collected data actually address the research questions (Yow, 1994)? Was my question truly defective—or was I unwilling to hear the message that student was trying to convey? The faculty member was right;

I left our chat feeling sheepishly admonished. Was I intentionally overlooking (or devaluing) data that did not seem to provide the information that would address my research questions? More specifically, what does it mean when I accept (or reject) Jon-Jon's word that he decided to participate because he thought I was a nice person? What does it say about his relationship with his CMST101 teacher such that he valued his teacher's supportive attitude about this project and decided to volunteer—first? I realized right away that in the process of listening to my participants, perhaps I was only open to hearing what I wanted to hear. <HORRORS!>

When a Tree Falls in the Forest and No One is Present to Hear

As I stated earlier, I ended my data collection near the end of summer. If there were any students with whom I had made contact who still wanted to participate after classes resumed in the fall, I accommodated them. In the meantime, I went about the business of listening and transcribing the audio files from the interviews and focus groups with the determination and precision of the most celebrated conversation analysts. And yet, after having finished listening to the first few files, I felt frustrated. . . even dissatisfied. Transcribing a file from an interview that was recorded in 35 to 50 minutes was usually taking five to six hours to transcribe (to my fastidious standards). I had made notes and had identified a few codes, but I could not shake the nagging feeling that I had already missed something important and relevant—but what was it?

I was driving on the interstate thinking about the files that I had already reviewed and the copious notes that I had taken, still trying to squeeze some kind of logical, reasonable connection between the information I had gleaned from interview (and focus group) participants and the feeling that I was overlooking something so obvious that I couldn't recognize it as the phenomenon that it was. Then suddenly, I burst into uncontrollable laughter! It WAS that obvious. In fact, it was so obvious, that it was META!

Chris (s): What I like is when you, when they, or when anybody in the class will listen to HEAR rather than listen to respond. That's a big thing for me. Sometimes I feel like some professors will just hear what we're saying as a means to an end. They're ready to respond before you've even finished talking. . .and I don't like that as a sign. . .that kinda spaces me out.

The code that was eluding me so mercilessly was LISTENING! I was actually missing it *while I was listening* to the files! Naturally, I was so determined to listen meticulously, that I forgot to listen holistically and be open to hear what was said—and NOT said. After all, subtext and silences do communicate, even when no one receives their messages! Listening and hearing are often conflated as the same action, but they are not exactly the same. They certainly complement each other, and I would even argue that they can only be fully effective when they are done in conjunction with each other. The participants made this clear. I noted multiple ways that listening and hearing were mentioned. The messages ranged from simple mechanics like conversational turn-taking or as complex as making sure the shared meanings were the same for speaker and listener. On the talking/listening side I heard students mention being interrupted while speaking but also noting that sometimes people respond before they truly understand what the other person intended to utter. Other participants spoke of the frustration they experience during dialogue when others assume the worst possible meaning when they speak. Some participants indicated a desire to have been fully and completely understood especially before being responded to with criticism. Others stressed a desire for others to really try to be open-minded in the process of meaning-making and listen from the heart.

Once this theme emerged and “struck me” as it were, the idea of how to start coding and thematizing got easier. I truly began to let the data speak for themselves and to see my role of

researcher as a reporter to share what I observed and to try to make sense of it once I had a better sense of the messages (and intent) therein. Saldaña (2009) advises the researcher to be open to interpretations of data that may not be immediately obvious or easily coded. I found the courage to just let the data speak to me when I read Saldaña's admission: "the question I ask myself during all cycles of coding and data analysis: 'What strikes you?'" (p. 18). Well, listening certainly struck ME, didn't it? Later in this chapter, I reflect on the ways that this code (listening and hearing) compliments and falls neatly into several of the final themes that emerged. Now, I present a summary of other salient codes that collectively formed the larger themes that best summarize and synthesize my findings.⁴

In this chapter, I present and discuss the themes and codes that I used to mark and signify important findings, or data that seemed to be relevant and meaningful. Like Lindlof and Taylor (2011) counsel, "The first stage of the grounded theory model involves coding for as many categories as possible from the data" (p. 250). I do this in two distinct categories. After a review of my processes by which I began to study the data I had collected, I discuss the findings and conclusions that resonated with my expectations from the review of literature and my own anticipated keywords that I discussed in Chapter Three. Next, I move on to discuss the data that demonstrated ideals and concepts that expand the understanding of relational safety, and that were truly heuristic and new to me as a researcher who occupies the roles of student and teacher simultaneously. More importantly, this second set of themes and codes that I discovered when I listened to the interviews and focus groups help to expand the current definition and conceptualization of relational safety as a means of developing a critical, reflexive teaching

⁴ For purposes of readability, I have eliminated some filler words, insignificant syntax/grammar issues, and not indicated pauses in any direct quotations I include. Exceptions to this include quotations where the fillers and pauses significantly add to the meaning I'm interpreting from the participants' words.

practice. After each major theme is synthesized, I include an analysis to explore the significance of these themes including my process for interpreting and combining the data I collected from teachers, students, and groups of students. I then follow-up with a synthesis of how each group of participants (students, teachers, focus groups) addressed the RQs in order to illuminate how their voices overlap (or disagree, as the case may be) to paint a picture of how students and teachers view themselves and each other in the teacher/student relationship in (and outside of) the classroom.

Data Processing

Grounded theory means letting the data speak for themselves in addressing research questions; the researcher takes on the role of interpreter of meaning and reporter of significant facts and events. While transcribing the interview and focus group audio files, I followed the advice of Lindlof and Taylor (2011) and started an open coding system where everything that piqued my interest or sounded familiar got assigned a code. During transcription, I made detailed notes in my journal to indicate if something I heard sounded significant or if I heard a concept that I had already noticed (and coded) from a previous file. By the time I finished listening and reviewing all of the audio files of the focus groups and interviews I conducted, I had created over 200 codes. The first step in starting the next level of coding and thematizing seemed simple enough at first. I simply grouped same (or very similar) codes together and similarly eliminated codes that seemed not to recur throughout the file review process. In this stage, according to Lindlof and Taylor, “over time, as most of the incidents are coded and compared, the total number of categories usually begins to level out” (p. 251).

One of the biggest challenges with interpreting data and making claims, of course, is making peace with the inherently flawed process of analysis that is always affected by the

researcher's a priori values and biases (Davies, 1999). After I finished extracting as much data as possible (within the time constraints I made for myself to transcribe and code the data), I decided to really, really try allow the data to speak to me and see myself as an instrument to interpret the data and share the messages that emerged as I summarized my findings and critically analyzed them (Saldaña, 2009). As I shifted codes around into different patterns and grouped them based upon similarities, and began to eliminate based upon redundancies in occurrences, I just decided to just let the data lead me where it would....like characters in a story. After the first round of regrouping was completed, I started to more easily group codes together until I started to sense that the themes that were occurring to me seemed fairly comprehensive in describing the conversations that I had experienced this past summer with the students and teachers in CMST101 as they relate to relational safety. Here, I provide excerpts from the data to support and illustrate how each of this group of codes was selected to describe the phenomenon at hand. (For clarity's sake, I use the term *theme* to describe overarching ideas that emerged, and I use the term *code* to identify similar ideas that support each theme.)

Findings Confirmed by the Review of Literature

The next section highlights the codes I was anticipating based on what my literature review told me about relational safety. Later in this chapter, I will present data that expand the understanding and development of relational safety as a way of connecting with students in the service of creating conditions for social change and the pursuit of equality in the space where teachers have power: the classroom. Each major theme will also feature a brief analysis of that theme elucidating the thought processes (and combination of codes) which informed the creation of that theme.

I reveal the first major theme of this study (affirmation) which includes a review of several codes that combined into that one theme: recognition, recall of small details, making tasks manageable, being flexible, being humble, showing understanding, and being approachable. Then I follow up with a discussion and review of the second theme, a dialogic worldview. In this section, I also include additional excerpts from participants to demonstrate how they described their understanding of listening and why they value it in the teacher-student relationship.

Affirmation

Affirmation is how teachers and students validate the existence and value of each other within the classroom community. Students and teachers are human and, therefore, dependent upon others to help shape their sense of belonging (Mead, 1967) as well as to affirm each other in their respective roles (hooks, 1994). For instance, OT (s) is an international student from Saudi Arabia. When I asked him about his desire to participate in this study, he told me something surprising but very encouraging: he was moved by the fact that I had seen him around campus a few times since the day I observed his class and had found some way to let him know that I recognized him (slight head nod, smile, etc.). He said that these brief encounters and the ways that I acknowledged him made a big difference in his decision to participate. That revelation really stunned me. I can remember running across OT a couple of times between the observation day and the day I conducted the focus group in his section. I am sure I nodded and smiled but I didn't anticipate at all that doing so would influence his decision to participate—or become a piece of data to reflect upon in this section. At the same time, I am positive that at least a handful of the students who agreed to be interviewed by me did so because I took the time

to introduce myself personally, explain my research project, and ask directly for volunteers to participate.

This theme represents a combination of all the ways that people relate to people by simply recognizing them and acknowledging their existence, their basic humanity. DeVito (1994) says the human concept of self is a shifting, malleable combination of one's own view of themselves and how they imagine they are perceived by those around them. An affirmation of one's self is a relational act, one that signals to the student that their teacher is human and has taken notice of the student's person. hooks (2003) believes that "when teachers work to affirm the emotional well-being of students, we are doing the work of love" (p. 133). I found many codes were able to rest comfortably under this particular theme of affirmation. Students discussed the simple recognition of faces and remembering names, but also being attended to in such a way that remembering small details about students is practiced frequently. One student praised his teacher because she asked students how they would like to be addressed and then began addressing those students with a name preference (if other than what appeared on the roster) immediately. The idea of affirmation manifested in several ways throughout the students' responses, including: teachers recognizing and acknowledging their students, recalling small details, making tasks manageable, being flexible, being humble, being understanding, and being approachable.

Recognition. One of the recurring ideas that help me discover the code recognition was that several of the student participants felt that it's essential for teachers to know their students and to call them by name. Recall from Chapter One that name recognition is considered a practice of good teaching (McKeachie, 1999; Rawlings, 2000). In FG1, OT recalls a teacher who never seemed to remember him after having had him for multiple classes. I soon realized

why he was so impressed that I acknowledged him around campus after our initial contact during my observation of his section.

OT: I had a class with the same teacher. I had three classes with the same teacher. And, I was sure the teacher knows my name. But uh, the teacher acted like they didn't know my name, in the third class. And it was weird, cause, like, I am sure she knows my name.

Dave: You knew her name, right?

OT: Yeah! I feel disrespected at the time 'cause like, if I go to your office hours, and you call me in class by my name, and then, like the second day in the third class, the third year, you called me some other name not even anyway related to my name, it's so disrespectful.

Meanwhile, Layla (s) told me that she has had at least two teachers who did not remember her name or recognize her after having her in class twice before. She says this shows a lack of caring.

Layla: Well, like. I've had teachers where I've had them for two classes and they don't even know my name.

Dave: Does that insult you?

Layla: It doesn't insult me, it's just kinda like, okay, so you DON'T care about your students.

Dave: It really makes you draw that conclusion?

Layla: Yeah. I'm just like, okay, you only care about the students that actually come to you. . . ., 'Cause I don't always need to go to office hours. I've had a teacher where I've emailed them, and they're like, "oh, are you so-and-so?" and I'm like, "no", and they're like, "oh, OH! You're the OTHER person who emailed me." I'm like "yeah," and, it just

kinda is like, I get it. There are thousands of kids at this school. You teach a lot of people. But it's also like, a mutual respect. It's like, I know you; I would think you would TRY to know me a little bit, or at least remember my face.

In contrast, several students also expressed their reassurance that their teacher recognized them during email exchanges outside regular class times. KC, an international student from Taiwan, shares an anecdote of a recent event that proves his teacher knows him via electronic communication just as well as he does in person. He says he knows this because Brandon (t) mentioned part of the content from their email exchange (the night before) during lecture the following day.

KC: I sent my email before the class, I mean the last night. And next day, next day morning I go, I went to the classroom, and I asked him, "hey um, my professor! Did you, did you receive my email?" He say, "yes I know that's yours, but I just have no time to reply you yet, because it's just sent last night and I just check email this morning."

Dave: But he knew it was you that sent it, he said that to you?

KC: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dave: How did that make you feel, KC?

KC: Oh! That make me feel so, so nice. Because, which means, he remembered you are his student and also he care about everything that you have.

Relational safety in action occurs when the care and concern teachers show for students is returned to the teacher (and given to the other students in turn) so that the student begins to experience a sense of safety that the people who are in the classroom are part of the same community. Chris (s) tells about an experience that perfectly illustrates relational safety. Chris gave a performance speech that seemed to elude most of his classmates and left him feeling self-

conscious and discouraged—until he read his teacher’s feedback later. Apparently this teacher had encouraged the class to consider a wider variety of speech topics and modes of delivery than the usual range of speech types that we typically might expect from an introductory public speaking class. Since one of the options for speech types to consider doing was a performative one, he chose that genre. Chris then went on to tell me that he gave a well-prepared, heartfelt performative speech that many classmates didn't seem to understand and he finished the speech feeling frustrated and disconnected from his classmates. However, when he read the comments from his teacher about the speech later on, he loved Wonder Woman's feedback and found it knowledgeable and insightful. He continued to describe the feedback he received as very pointed and viable. He told me he was most impressed that his teacher commented on parts of his performance that Chris thought were hardly noticeable. When Wonder Woman gave Chris this pointed and specific feedback, she also reassured him that she recognized his intent and his effort to create an artful performance of his speech topic. As a result, the relational safety Chris experiences with this teacher is increased because he is confident that she was not just being politely attentive; to him, she understood the performance—and in turn, he feels that she got HIM.

Facial recognition outside of class. This code combined easily with name recall and acknowledgment of one’s shared history. However, students did not think that recognition of faces and name recall should be limited to the classroom. At the same time, not many students claimed to have bumped into their CMST101 teachers outside class very often, even less with opportunity to interact. However, Richard (s) told me a fascinating story about the day that his teacher surprised him during the first week of class. Shortly after the semester began, she

recognized him outside class and even called him by name, an action which Richard says made an immediate and lasting impression on him.

Richard: I saw her in the parking lot, we just passed each other. And I think, that was either the first or second week of class. She knew me by name, you know?

As Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) say, “The importance of teacher behaviors on student outcomes is undeniable” (p. 184). Richard still prefers to take a more quiet form of participation, but he also has warmed up to the idea of public speaking and talking in class in general as a result of his teacher’s recognition, even out of context. Hopefully, Richard will always associate this class with a teacher who called him by name outside of the classroom building just a few days into a new semester. She had earned his attention and his commitment to participate as a result.

Cody, a student in FG2 shared that the experience of affirmation that occurs when teachers recognize (and acknowledge) students outside class is contextual and situational. He shares his story of a former GTA who he didn't particularly care for (in the classroom space as his teacher). Like so many GTAs, this teacher was not much older than his students and frequented the same bars and drinking establishments that his students also patronized. According to Cody, he was NOT happy to see this teacher inhabiting the same social sphere and preferred to keep distance between them. This is how he described that “no thanks, I'll pass” feeling of running into that teacher and his reaction to the teacher's invitation to chat:

Cody: The dynamic is changed, 'cause then, we're both equals. So, you know, I didn't really HAVE to respect him, then, at that point. Like, I kind of made it clear I didn't want to talk to him, either.

Based upon Richard's and Cody's testimonies then, relational safety appears to deepen when students and teachers see each other outside class—but only if the beginnings of relational safety have emerged in the shared classroom space first. In that regard, teachers can make huge inroads toward connecting with students and developing relationships with them by making good use of the classroom space and letting their students know how closely they are observed by their teachers when they share the same space (hooks, 2003).

Recall of small details. Tevin (2001) claims that "it is essential for teachers to develop a good relationship with their students, because the rapport established between teachers and students, in part, determines the interest and performance level of students" (p. 156). Layla discusses the very specific details and pointed feedback her teacher (Brandon) made about her speeches. She praises him for being so attentive and comprehensive in his notes to her. This feedback made her fully aware of Brandon's commitment to paying attention closely. She says that Brandon gave specific feedback on items that she herself was completely unaware of until she read about it afterwards on the scoring instrument.

Layla: I'm pretty vocal, and I'm pretty comfortable with giving speeches to people and he noted that in my rubric, but then he said like "command the space more away from the podium"—which I never did because it scares me. <laughs> But he did note [that] I hit THESE sources, I made eye contact like, multiple times. I knew what I was doing, he liked my topic, he told me what to improve on. Like getting away from the podium, commanding my space, maybe don't look up at the wall as much, kinda. Don't use my hands as much, and less note cards. And just kind of that stuff, and it worked. I mean I felt like I improved by the end.

Dave: Do you think that the feedback had kind of a personal, personable tone to it? Like it was, “for you”?

Layla: Yeah. I felt, like it was more personal because he actually paid attention to what I was talking about, if that makes sense. Some teachers will just be like, “okay, good speech! Um, be louder or whatever.” But he was like—I'd talked about adoption—he was really like, “Oh, I like how you brought adoption into this and how you identify with that.” Our first speech was supposed to be something that is like our culture, and what social group we would be a part of. And I was like “I have no idea.” And our second speech was supposed to be something to do with our first speech and so I changed it to adoption of dogs. And he noted, “a good little twist on your first speech, but maybe for the next one get away from adoption because I feel like you've dabbled in all of it.”

Similarly, Mike recalls the way his relationship with his teacher shifted when his teacher Bruce pulled him aside after class one day and inquired about him because the speech that Mike had presented was not up to his normal standard of performance. By letting Mike know that he sees Mike's energy level as unusually low compared to most days in class, Bruce has continued to cement the bond between himself and Mike. Mike realizes in this moment exactly how closely Bruce has been observing him throughout the semester—and as a result, feels safer in their shared relationship. Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) would refer to this moment of realization that Mike describes about his experience with Bruce as a "relational turning point" (p.155). By this, they refer to any specific incident, which is said to have influenced the relationship in such a profound manner that a noticeable shift has transpired, be it positive or negative. Teacher Bruce weighs in as he shares his insights about letting his students know that he has noticed them somehow and how they react to him in that regard:

Bruce: I've had several students, you know, just sort of note that their other teachers don't do that, you know. That they don't, when a certain student hasn't been there, you know. Calling, emailing just to say like, "hey, noticed you weren't in class, wanna make sure you're doing alright. Um, if you need anything, or, you know, have any questions about stuff...let me know." Um, and just sort of that surprising attitude of like, my math teacher doesn't do this, you know. I can't talk to my English teacher, you know.

Bruce's declaration is strengthened by his testimony since multiple students have expressed how they value his demonstrations of concern as a result of having other teachers who do not seem to miss them or take note of their absences with the same intensity.

Making tasks manageable. Teachers Bruce and Wonder Woman talk about the ways that they try to challenge students but also endeavor to make their assignments and objectives manageable. This includes such accommodations as allowing students to give speeches in different locations or being lenient on time deductions for non-native speakers of English.

Bruce: I'm very accommodating when it comes to speech anxiety, so I don't have a problem meeting with another student outside and maybe getting two or three people to kind of be able to be there to watch that speech. So you know, I would see sort of that behavior and say "okay, well, I'm not going to expect you to necessarily talk up in class." But you know, I feel like there's always going to be the couple students that always WANT to respond because I think THEY don't like the silence, they don't like the uncomfortable. It's like I'm just gonna say something, 'cause it's quiet! <laughs>

I noticed when I observed Wonder Woman's section, she had provided three alternative activities for the students to choose from for the last few minutes of class: a video, a group project, or to use the last few minutes to discuss (and workshop) upcoming speech assignments. In her

interview later, she told me that she tries to make the process of delivering speeches more manageable by remembering that all students can succeed, if given the opportunity to do so at their own pace. After reminding her that when I was observing, I heard her express a belief to her class that everyone was capable of delivery quality speeches, she went on to share that whenever feasible, she allows the students as much input as possible about how they will conduct class and engage the material for the day's lesson. If relational safety can emerge when there is an invitation to dialogue, certainly this teacher's willingness to share her power about how class is conducted exemplifies relational safety on the ground. The teacher's open attitude about how certain days of class will be conducted certainly requires not only a desire to make tasks manageable, but also a degree of flexibility.

Flexibility. Sometimes life just happens: car trouble, inclement weather, family emergencies, and even bona fide sickness. This past summer, one student even had a motorcycle accident and broke his leg. Students have described flexibility as those times when their teacher not only acknowledges that student is a person, but a person with real life concerns and circumstances that they may or may not feel comfortable confiding in anyone else. Both Brandon and Wonder Woman note that their students inform them of impending absences with much more frequency since their teachers have eliminated the dread factor out of missing dates out of necessity. In FG1, MS (s) praises the way that Wonder Woman worked with him to keep up with assignments when he needed to miss a few classes unexpectedly; Kyle (s) explained how Bruce worked around his diminished classroom attendance after an accident so he could finish up on time.

Tiger, an international student from Saudi Arabia also in Bruce's class, recalls how Bruce made the task of talking or doing speeches manageable for international students by allowing

them to do their speeches in more controlled settings (e.g., with fewer audience members and/or in more private spaces).

Tiger: If you're not ready to give the speech, or you have a phobia, or anything, you can talk to him [in] person, like one-on-one. He can give you one day or two so that way he made it like more easier to all international [students], including me.

And even though she always stays after class for questions and responds to emails rapidly (which he says is more than a reasonable turnaround time), MS also notes that his teacher goes above and beyond by making it known to the entire class (during lectures) that she is available outside of regular class meeting times (late or early) if students need to reach her.

Humility. Of course teachers need to be humble, or at least appear that way to their students (Shor, 1996). Brandon (t) shares that he is not intimidated or threatened if a student fact-checks him or challenges his viewpoint during discussions, noting that it does not hurt him to admit if he is mistaken or uninformed at times:

Brandon: I think one of the things that I'm not afraid to do in class is admit if I don't know something. I'm okay with being transparent about that with my students—whether it's something that's more academic or theoretical, or whether it's just something in the current news cycle of that day. If a student says, “oh, yeah. . .we heard about this happening?” No! Inform me! Like, pull it up on google, let me know. What are people saying about this? That sort of thing. Um, I have no problem with that. I mean, you're learning something, they're learning something, I'm learning something, so it's really advantageous, I think.

A different student in Brandon's section verified this claim when we chatted. AJ (s) praised Brandon for his humility and willingness to engage if students challenge him—especially

since he expects the students to present arguments with sound logic and credible sources to support their views. Brandon continues, noting his belief that there is a glaring need for more humility in the teaching profession—and in life. Wonder Woman (t) says that she understands that sometimes teachers may hurt students unintentionally, be it from using humor that did not translate as intended (which I will discuss later in this chapter), or because of any number of possible misunderstandings. She feels the ability and willingness to apologize makes the difference with her students (hooks, 1994). Since students understand the institutional power distance between themselves and their teachers, when these same students sense the kind of reflexive awareness that is present when teachers voluntarily admit their mistakes (or shortcomings in knowledge) to their students, relational safety will flourish.

Understanding. I was beginning to get nervous. The student participant I was scheduled to interview on this particular afternoon was close to being late. By now I had amassed over 15 student interviews, plus all four teachers and the three focus groups. I was prepared to tell this student participant never mind and thank them for considering participating. And suddenly, the student showed up! She had been visiting a sick relative in the hospital and had lost track of time. After hearing this, I felt like a heel. Had life never happened to me? I remember once getting ready to drive to campus. When I got outside, I had a flat tire AND the battery was dead. What would have happened if MY teacher had written me off as quickly as I was about to dismiss this student from participating in my project? This code is steeped in the reality that students have struggles and lives outside of the classroom that directly impact performance, attendance, and engagement. In FG1, MS (s) talks about how their teacher made exceptions and accommodations when he had a personal emergency so that he could make up assignments and catch up.

MS: I let her know about why I missed my classes. She was pretty cool with it and she understood my problems and I was fine with it.

Dave: Do you think that you were able to maintain where you were in class as a result of that?

MS: Yes. Yeah.

In FG2, Nicole spoke of the need for teachers to understand how students' circumstances impact their ability to be present, attentive, or fully prepared. She continues by praising her teacher Beth for never bringing negative attention to her (frequent) tardiness.

Nicole: She understands that we have a separate life, other than this class. We have other classes, you know. Work, home, you know? And that's important, I think. 'Cause I show up late a lot <laughs nervously> unfortunately. And she's never made me feel terrible about it. She smiles, like she's glad I'm here, glad I showed up.

Me: Okay. You feel it's sincere?

Nicole: Yes. I do.

In FG3, Reggie (a student athlete) is painfully aware of the struggles of keeping up with his studies and traveling for his sports team.

Reggie: We travel a lot for basketball, so [the teacher is] understanding that I miss a lot of school days just because of that, and allowing that, so I can make up my work.

Brandon (t) notes that he understands very well what it feels like to be human: sick, sad, or even hungover. He builds amnesty days into his attendance policy so that the students do not have to explain their absences on these days (of their own choosing, when their circumstances merit a mental health day). He says that as a result, more students email him to announce their impending absences than before; he suspects that they do not hesitate nearly as much to tell him

honestly what circumstances demand their absences due to their now established relationship as teacher and student. This is relational safety in action: the relationship between them allows the students to reveal information that could seem risky in other circumstances. Relational safety is present because students feel they don't need to lie to their teachers about their absences for fear of punitive reactions without consideration of extenuating conditions first.

Similarly, Wonder Woman (t) allows for the students to have emergencies and does not necessarily assume they are trying to get away with something when they miss class occasionally. She says she does not question why the students missed class once they use up their free absence days. She believes this open state of mind about absences empowers students to be honest—and in turn, do better in class when they don't fear punitive reactions to their poor judgment and unexpected life circumstances.

Wonder Woman: My students communicate with me really well. Because of it, they email. I regularly get emails from everyone. 'Cause I also say, you know like. . . on an academic level, you may have to have certain restrictions of what qualifies as a “policied absence.” But it might just be part of my personal policy that I don't get that added absence, you know? Um, like someone, very sincerely was like, “You know, I had a friend who was in a tough spot last night. I could tell that they were—in their voice they seemed suicidal—so I just had to be with them. I didn't get to study.” And I was like, “well, let's, let's get a make-up time for you.” And you can tell, it wasn't like, you know, ‘cause this person has communicated with me every week, about whatever is going on in their life. And it would be no out-of-the-blue thing for them to communicate this. So, I believe them, you know? So I think that it creates a place that, where they feel safe to just say, “life happened.”

What Wonder Woman has revealed in this excerpt illustrates relational safety at its finest: the student anticipates that Wonder Woman will accept and believe their reason for missing class. Since this student communicates frequently (and presumably, honestly) with Wonder Woman as a matter of practice, the fear of suspicion is diminished. This glimpse of relational safety in action has a teacher being reflexive of her institutional power while regularly engaging in dialogue with students. The combined communicative efforts of the teacher and the student have created a space between them where truth is expected and trust is possible. A student who believes that a teacher will try to understand their circumstances is much more likely to reach out and make an attempt to communicate their needs.

Approachable. There is plenty of literature to support the need for teachers to present themselves to students in a way that makes students feel comfortable asking questions and seeking out their teachers for assistance. Shor (1996) shares in great detail how students who do not trust their teachers will distance themselves spatially (in the classroom) and relationally (by remaining aloof or avoiding interaction as much as possible). One teacher in this study, Bruce, told me that he dreads having to interact with figures of authority, and he is a teacher who is also a student at the graduate level! This idea also seemed to resonate with students in focus groups. In FG1, Chris (s) shares that he values having the opportunity to approach a teacher and ask questions after class ends. He wants a teacher to be approachable after class, and he finds it frustrating when he feels they are not. Students in the same focus group confirm that their CMST 101 teacher is available after class.

Chris: If I'm having an issue in class, or I'm not understanding something, and I wanna be able to get some clarification, sometimes the teacher, it seems like they're just there for the lecture, and then leave, you know.

Dave: So, is your [CMST101] teacher almost always the last person to leave the classroom?

<Several participants respond affirmatively>

Layla (s) recalls having a teacher in her major who was so unpleasant that she lived in fear the entire semester and was often so scared that she got sick before class. She cites his rigid policies (he didn't maintain regular office hours; students saw him by appointment only) and some unpleasant incidents she witnessed in class as motivators for this antagonizing relationship she experienced with this professor. Tiger (s) told me a true horror story about a teacher at a different university. He wanted to switch sections to be able to study and learn with a buddy. He filled out the necessary paperwork in the administrative office to make the transfer, then took a seat in the new classroom. Shortly thereafter, the first teacher came into the new classroom (where Tiger had been transferred) and openly accused his new teacher of poaching students—in front of everyone! She then pulled administrative rank and put Tiger back in her section without any discussion with him whatsoever! It was this action that motivated him to leave that school and enroll at SIU. Representing the teachers, Bruce says that the one thing he most fears any student would say about him (as a teacher) is that he could not be easily approached.

Bruce: I would hope [to be known as] approachable. You know I think, I think being seen as open and honest, you know. I mean, I certainly never want to be like, the super strict teacher. I mean, I um, I understand when it's necessary.

Bruce continues by telling me that he wants his classroom to be an inviting space—but he does not necessarily want to be known as an easy teacher. When teachers aspire to experience relational safety with their students, there is a tension that teachers will experience. Reflexive teaching requires teachers to attempt to honor and meet traditional institutional expectations for

teaching even as they combat the temptation to perpetuate oppressive teaching practices that plague the classrooms in our current educational system.

Bruce: Ultimately, I think I want it to be someplace that's inviting, and that, you know students aren't necessarily saying you should take it because that person's easy, but just because, it, you know, because I made it interesting. Or, at least, make them have questions, you know, to think in their heads, after they're gone. You know?

According to Bruce, then, relational safety does not require teachers to relax the academic standards of the institution, but rather to reflexively consider how to manage the tension between challenging students intellectually, but doing so in a way that does not diminish his capacity for making stronger connections with students.

Analysis of affirmation. Affirmation was not a word that I came upon lightly. But after Roger (s) said that he wanted his teacher's acknowledgment even if the attention was corrective, that really struck a nerve with me. These student participants seemed to value the idea that their teachers would notice and recognize them, inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, students expressed feelings ranging from disrespect to apathy when they felt that their (present and former) teachers either didn't seem to know them by name or recognize their faces.

Recognition of another person in space occurs at the most basic levels first and usually occurs in the first week class meetings of the semester: remembering names, knowing and remembering facts, and paying close attention all establish the need to acknowledge each student's personhood far beyond the administrative student identification number on the class roster. Specifically, student participants complimented Brandon for his humility during class discussions. Also, MS (s) told me that Wonder Woman (t) immediately began to address students by their identified name preferences. Later, as the semester progresses, the data points to a shift in emphasis around

the very tangible circumstances that students experience outside of the shared classroom space. In response, students expressed a need for teachers to understand when special circumstances occur that often cause unexpected absences or missed deadlines for assignments. In a future-oriented reflection about his reasons for attempting to affirm and connect with his students, Bruce expressed a hope that his approachable presence in the classroom might result in his teaching having a lasting impact on his students. When I put all of these ideals side-by-side on the page, there was no doubt that affirmation was the theme that best suited the simple I/thou recognition that students in this study said they desired from their teachers. I argue, then, that relational safety flourishes when students are confident that their teachers recognize them as busy and involved individuals, unique and worthy of notice and affirmation as integral members of the classroom community.

Dialogic Worldview

In a quick review to the ten commitments of critical communication pedagogy (CCP), the tenth commitment foregrounds a dialogic worldview within relational endeavors. Fassett and Warren (2007) champion dialogue because dialogue happens between people, and is therefore collaborative and communal. They say that "critical communication educators are drawn to the notion of dialogue as a metaphor for our interactions with others because of the collaboration it implies" (p. 54). Before I began collecting data, I made some guesses about keywords and concepts that I expected to emerge from the audio files. Dialogue was right at the top of that list. Obviously all of the talk about listening and hearing points towards dialogue. The participants seemed to agree that listening and hearing are both essential parts of a relational dialogue. It's quite possible to listen and the other person still not feel heard AND to hear (physically) without listening attentively.

AJ (s) recounts a time when he was trying to state his opinion during a class discussion and another student cut him off before he finished speaking. As the conversation continued, the student was not responding to what AJ actually intended to convey. This unfortunate misunderstanding occurred mainly because AJ was interrupted (and judged) without being allowed to finish speaking.

AJ: I mean, do I necessarily think that she BELIEVED that she was, like, interrupting me? Did she believe that she was doing that to me, when I was stating my opinion? No. You know it may just be me, realizing that. Like kind of like a one-way street here? Like, I know that she was interrupting me, but she may not have realized the same thing, kind of deal. So, I'm still gonna treat her as the same person.

He continues, reflecting thusly:

AJ: This is college and it's time to have an open mind. So listening to other opinions is key. So, because she interrupted me is still not gonna prevent me from listening to her opinion.

Bruce (t), in turn, shares his belief that classrooms are the perfect place for sharing experiences and connecting through hearing about the experiences others have had.

Bruce: I think making those students feel they're involved just as much of some of those teaching/lecture days, where, they may not be facilitating a discussion, but that, you know, if they want to openly share, or let their speeches reflect a lot of that. In my afternoon class last semester, I had several students that would openly do speeches, you know, sort of about like, being discriminated against or, you know, various things that I think are so important to that classroom space. Of just like, "oh, here's this person that

I've been in this classroom with. Oh, they're NOT any different.” So, you know, I think it just helps people understand each other, I think in some sense.

Other ideas and concepts that make this theme hold together are having an open mind to opposing views, being human, and humility. In this way, dialogue is an extension of (or complement to) affirmation; true dialogue is humanizing and humble in nature. So say Lindlof and Taylor (2011):

At its most basic level, listening means “paying attention.” Because words alone can come across as insincere, the act of paying attention to a speaker can be the purest sign of showing respect, of wanting to hear more. . . . Conversely, not paying attention—looking down, staring off to the side, fidgeting with a pencil—is one of the best ways to frustrate somebody and discourage him or her from talking. (p. 198)

Lindlof and Taylor also note the value of body language and facial cues in the listening process, but caution that these signs should be used purposefully, and not simply as prompts in long-ago memorized turn-taking rituals. They warn that “you must be careful about when, and how, to break in with a question” (p. 199) but add that “most of us recognize a sign of authentic interest from another person when we see it” (p. 199). As for the students in this study, they have stated emphatically that they desire to be listened to and to feel heard. Richard notes that even when he is silent, he participates by being engaged and attentive when others are talking. Ming says she knows the difference between listening attentively and waiting for one’s turn to talk in response. In turn, the overwhelming majority of student participants praised their CMST101 instructor’s listening (in turn). Students in all four sections praised their respective teachers for listening to opposing views and making space for differences of opinion without fear. Mike says that during student speeches, Bruce demonstrated all of the signs of attentive listening. Wonder Woman

takes pride in listening generously, especially to non-native speakers of English. Relational safety means having a worldview that aspires to create a sense of dialogue in every communicative interaction.

Analysis of dialogic worldview. Naturally the listening and hearing data would find a home in dialogue. After all, dialogue is one of the ten commitments in a CCP teaching practice. Fassett and Warren (2007) clearly value the power of dialogue to create bridges across difference. They explain, “when we must speak across what may feel like profound ideological difference, we look to dialogue—to loving inquiry and unflinching self-reflexivity—to render that difference meaningful and (re)act, in relation, to it” (p. 56). This theme was discussed at length in the literature review as I elaborated on a state of mind that is open to new ideas and differences of opinions, but also truly an exchange between humans at the most fundamental level (Fassett & Warren, 2007). When students like Chris and Greg from FG1 talk about their appreciation for Wonder Woman's open attitude about engaging in dialogue—even when the opinions expressed are in direct opposition to her own—they describe a dialogic worldview. And of course, I had my own "eureka" moment when I realized that I was hindering my ability to hear what the data were telling me because my method of listening was short-sighted and rigid. Dialogue implies hearing and sharing meaning with another—and perhaps asking clarifying questions before we assume we know what a partner in dialogue intends to communicate (Baxter, 1990).

Beyond the Literature: Earnest Inquiry Leads to Discovery

In the previous section, I reviewed and synthesized the data that confirmed my expectations based upon the review of literature. However, grounded theory means being open to findings and interpretations of the data that the researcher had not previously considered or

hypothesized about (Saldaña, 2009). This method of inquiry supposes that there are answers to our research questions that can be mined from extrapolating, grouping, and theorizing about similar (and different) phenomenon that the data illuminate for our inquiring minds. Here I discuss ideas that emerged from the data I collected that advance what I have already shared about relational safety, how it develops, what actions detract from it, and why it is important. These new themes and codes help me to further concretize and establish relational safety beyond what I have already located in the literature. The codes and data that I discovered in the following section are an expansion of the concepts I presented as salient for relational safety in Chapter Two (and my own expectations that I shared in Chapter Three). Of course, the interpretations are mine; yet the viewpoints in the following sections were truly not reflective of my expectations and experiences like the ones in the previous section. In this process of discovery, I learned that students and teachers understand the value of awareness to the other bodies sharing the same space. Students also made it clear that there is a special nuance to finding the perfect balance when using humor in the classroom, as well as in knowing what should be shared (and kept secret) when disclosing personal information as teachers are attempting to connect with students (and make new or abstract concepts more clear). Prudence is key when deciding what to self-disclose to students in the process of being a professional who is also approachable. Finally, I discuss the balance required to be effective in the process of giving (and receiving) feedback. Following feedback, I reveal a new theme (community) where students discussed their experiences in getting to know each other (and their teacher); students and teachers all discussed actions that I interpreted as demonstrations of care within the community that they have co-created.

In this section on new discoveries about relational safety (since Chapter Two), I present several codes and three major themes. First I discuss a theme that elaborates on the need for teachers to demonstrate attention to bodies in space. According to the participants in this study, age and physical stature do make a difference in how safe students will feel with their teachers (and vice versa). One of the codes that I will discuss under the theme of attention to bodies in space emerged when students across all four sections expressed that students always react to teacher behaviors in the classroom. Since teacher behaviors and attitudes are so significant to their students' motivation to perform well in class (Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Teven & McCroskey, 1996), I explore the roots of the teacher behavior code with a code that examines how teachers interact with students as the semester is concluding. Full disclosure: I learned during the last few student interviews that several participating teachers made a point to commemorate the last day of class and so I briefly discuss that phenomenon and my reaction to it. Following, I reveal the next major theme of this inquiry about relational safety (balance) and look at the codes that helped comprise this theme including: humor, finding the balance between being professional versus approachable with self-disclosure, and the process of feedback. Then I move on to the last major theme of this study (community) and discuss how care between students and teachers work in tandem to create a community in the classroom. After, I discuss how students expressed care for their teachers, and I show evidence of students caring for other students. I conclude the section on care with a look at teachers showing care for their students. As I did in the previous section, I conclude each major theme (attention to bodies in space, balance, community) with a brief analysis of that theme's significance to relational safety and how I came to select said theme based on the codes and data that informed it. Below, since the relational aspect of the teacher-student relationship does occur in a spatial and temporal dynamic,

I outline how the teachers' awareness of their own bodies and those of their students is paramount to the creation of relational safety with those students.

Attention to Bodies in Space

hooks (2003) says that teachers have been conditioned by institutional expectations to enter the classroom and address their students in a disembodied manner, ignoring the very tangible and material conditions that exist in the space. Additionally, she claims that failing to recognize and respect the bodily presence in the classroom (and teacher-student relationship) is misguided, dehumanizing, and ultimately detrimental to the process of developing and nurturing a reflexive teaching practice where the real-life conditions that exist outside classroom spaces are interrogated and examined in dialogue. She shares, "entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom" (p. 58). Several students spoke of the importance of the teacher being aware of oneself in the classroom space and the bodies of their students as well. Not only are there tangible differences like physical stature and other size differences to consider, each student carries visible (and often invisible) markers of difference by which they identify themselves (hooks, 1994) and are judged by others who encounter them. Such awareness should empower teachers in making judgment calls about issues that arise in class such as the tricky space of intervening with discussions of controversial topics like oppression and privilege (Shor, 1996) as well as simply seeing each student as a unique person in their own right (Fassett & Warren, 2007). This theme is comprised of the following codes: physical appearance (including youthfulness and physical stature), and teacher behaviors, which include teachers commemorating the last day of class with their students. Fassett and Warren (2007) say that a reflexive teaching practice keeps the systemic power

distance between teachers and students foregrounded at all times. Like Shor (1996) experienced with his students in an inner-city, working class, community college setting, this study confirmed that the students I interviewed are also aware of power distances—and that the physical distance between teachers and students often mirrors the systemic imbalance within the classroom. Layla (s) reflects upon Brandon (t) and his use of space and transparency about how power is affected spatially in a classroom:

Layla: [H]e definitely even said on the first day that he didn't like sitting up front, he didn't like that. He wanted to sit and be part of us because we were ALL in the class together and he was teaching us, but he was also letting us teach each other kind of. And so, he did end up sitting in the front a lot. But, I think by NOT standing at the podium and by sitting at the podium, and being pretty carefree with his body, and like, his movements, he was very inviting to the class. Where I feel like if there's a teacher and they're just standing there the whole time, like I HAVE to listen. Like I HAVE to, respect them. Like, they're like the TEACHER, and I'm the STUDENT. But where he was with, he was like we're one. We're learning as a group, in which I thought that was a little more inviting.

Another student, Richard, valued the teacher's willingness to recognize how all students are individuals who are sharing one space. He commented about the diversity of the class as a whole, and that it's important for teachers to be aware of this in order to have a "cohesive" class.

Richard: We're all different people, and we all have different things that make us tick.

And if a teacher's aware of that, it makes it more cohesive when you're together.

Although there is little that any of us can do about our age or physical stature, awareness of how our students might perceive us (bodily) can empower teachers to deepen their connections with their students by adapting their behaviors in the classroom in the presence of their students

(Gorham & Christophel, 1992). I elaborate on the code of bodily appearance (specifically age) next.

Appearance of age. Chadrick, a non-traditional student, was talking to me about how he loved to engage Brandon (t) in short political debates before class began. He shared that he enjoyed these informal chats with Brandon because Brandon was well-informed, witty, sharp, and fair-minded. Chadrick was extremely impressed that Brandon was up to speed on current events, and even popular culture. In our interview, he mentioned wondering how close in age he and Brandon were, considering how many historical and pop culture references they seemed to share. Of course I didn't tell Chadrick how old Brandon was; I did suggest that he do the math in his head. Chadrick himself is a non-traditional student and a military veteran and is only starting his college career nearly aged 30. Our chat, however got me to thinking about the fact that I never consider the ages of my students. When it comes to my own teaching practice, I suppose I have never really needed to give age (or size) much thought before.

After interviewing Chadrick and Brandon, I realized that this code would not have been one that I would have theorized about earlier in this process. It is undergirded by the knowledge that many GTAs (who are my teaching colleagues) often find themselves teaching students who are the same age as them (or older). This phenomenon is less likely to occur with me at my age, but I can empathize with younger teachers who must struggle with having to consider the professional boundaries that must be set with students that they would otherwise have a lot in common with. Nonetheless, as Chadrick noted before, he wants a teacher who is human, not a teacher to be a best friend.

Chadrick: I would say that [Brandon] very relatable to our age group. He is very organized. He grades proper—he grades reasonably. Yeah. He's just a great person to

talk to in class. And it seems like he would be a nice person to hang out with outside of class.

One afternoon, Beth (t) and I were chatting about her interactions with the high school students she taught back in China. In this line of conversation, she revealed that she suspects that students sometimes gravitate to her because she is small in stature and, therefore, appears youthful, more approachable, and less threatening:

Me: Did you ever have the chance to run into any of your students outside of the school setting? At the store, public transportation?

Beth: Mmm hmmm. Oh, yes! A lot!

Me: What was that like? You say they always showed a lot of respect

Beth: Uh, yeah. They, uh...some...some of them...<laughs>

Me: Did they acknowledge you?

Beth: It depends on the personality of the student. Some of them might be very shy, but lots of them, because I'm, um, I'm always kind of like a kind person and polite. And also, I'm a small person, and students feel more, kind of like connected with me so I, I, didn't really feel the students afraid of me, you know? They had lots to talk with me and some students even said, before when I was still, I mean several years ago. They said "okay, let me introduce boyfriend to you!" <laughs> . . . I had a very close relationship with my students.

I also discovered that relational safety is not limited to a teacher's awareness of their own bodies (and how they might be perceived by their students as a result); there are also specific behaviors which students observe as they experience relational safety by gauging the level (and quality) of

the teacher's interest and sincerity. That brings me right to the next code: teacher's observable behaviors.

Teacher's observable behaviors. Students have shared their beliefs that the teacher's presence itself sets the tone for how the course will go. Smiling, welcoming, inviting, and modeling desired behaviors were all mentioned. Teven and McCroskey (1996) say that "a teacher's facial expression, gaze, posture, and other body movements provide the student with valuable information about her or his emotional state, attitude towards the students, and familiarity or ease with the lecture format" (p. 1). Layla (t) reflects on Brandon's teaching style this way:

Layla: So he got rid of the whole power level. By doing that, he created a really big respect for him throughout the class. I mean, there were a few students who didn't like him, obviously, because they weren't doing well in the class. But, by him being personal to us and by giving us information about him and telling us about what we can and can't do in the class, he sat down pretty much a ground rule that we are here together, but in the end I [the teacher] have final say. And so like, we kind of just all had respect for him. And like none of us were like, really disrespectful people so we KNEW in our heads like, yes he's our teacher, but I'm also allowed to say more in THIS class. And I just really enjoyed the class.

OT (s) said he needs the teacher to make introductions on the first day of class and to let the students get to know them right away. In his class, he pointed to things his teacher did during the first two weeks as important for the class to establish a bond. This is precisely what his CMST 101 teacher did.

OT: Um, I think the first two weeks where she like, established that uh, bond. And she made us like do exercises in the class that like, we break the ice to each other. And, one of those exercises, you sit in a group and tell them where you're from and what you like to do in free time, and stuff like that.

He feels that it's the teacher's responsibility, especially for a communication class, to set this atmosphere. Generous (s) agrees that the teacher has the power to do this. He told me that a teacher's willingness to talk and share also makes him want to engage in turn. Brandon (t) makes it known (when the semester ends) that he would welcome the possibility for contact in the future, whether by offering students a chance to connect via social media or a simple reminder that he can be reached via email (or seen around campus) and hopes students will reach out. Several of Beth's students have commented on her welcoming presence and her way of inviting students into the classroom and into dialogue. While OT and Generous were focused on how the teacher sets the tone of the classroom environment from the first day of class, Nicole stressed again what a bittersweet experience it was for her to say good-bye to Beth (and her classmates) as the semester was concluding. That brings me to a sub-code of teacher behaviors that examines how teachers mark, experience, and celebrate the last day of class.

Commemorating the last day of class. What does it mean to mark the time that the teachers and students have shared over the course of a semester to show that the time spent was meaningful and significant in some way? Even in those instances where the teacher's attempts to connect are less successful, and the overall experience of the semester is far from fulfilling, there is still a shift in space and time that affects the teachers and students—even if they experience it differently. Whether the semester runs 16 weeks—or a more intensely scheduled term like in summer, once the semester ends and grades are uploaded—that shared experience only exists in

memory. However, memories of past experiences shape perceptions of new ones. And that, in part, is the goal of a CCP teaching practice: to have a lasting impact on students that ultimately encourages them to think, speak, and act reflexively and to live those values in and outside of the classroom. In short, commemorating the last day of class is a way for the teacher to expand their capacity for relational safety with the class. This is when a teacher will declare to the students in that shared space that together, they have co-created a learning and growing experience—and that marking that moment in time is important and necessary.

In my interviews with students and teachers, I learned that at least three of the four teachers in this study usually commemorate the last day of class and found some way to celebrate and acknowledge the journey that they had shared with the students. I remember doing this myself many semesters. I would bring in candy or treats. I am known for offering \$20 in seed money (for pizzas and beverages) and inviting the students to bring in additional snacks to supplement my contribution. It was a way for us to commemorate and celebrate the passing of another semester. However, CMST 101 teacher participants surprised me with how much effort and detail they put into marking their last day of class as a community. Wonder Woman plays a special song; Bruce's students told me he brought his guitar and sang for them. (I asked Bruce about this and he deflected shyly and demurred that it was just another way to connect with the class). Playing a song (whether from a mobile telephone application or an acoustic instrument) is a very real, tangible act that reveals much about the teacher's person: likes, preferences, talents, and skills. Bringing and sharing food items can have the same effect. Students love food, perhaps as much as they like hearing music in class. Another teacher, Brandon, told me that he (almost always) invites students to connect with him via social media after grades have posted.

Compared to them, I felt my end-of-term gestures seemed much less thought-out (and subsequently, much less impactful). Nicole, a student in Beth's section, comments:

Nicole: At the end of a semester, I always get this like, post-class sadness. <laughs> Because, I've already made really good friends with the teacher. Chances are I won't have them again. People in the class—I might've made friends with like three people [in previous classes]—THIS one's actually like an exception. I made friends with EVERYBODY, and I haven't felt that since high school. It was really refreshing. Um, so I'm more, I'm feeling kind of sad tomorrow's the last day. But whenever a teacher tells you that, "You have my email, you can email me anytime.. .if you need a reference, if you just need to talk, or whatever. I'm no longer your teacher, you can talk to me," I love that. I think that's really, that's human, you know? <laughs> Like, they acknowledge that they also enjoyed you in their class, you know. And if they can help you additionally, they're offering it.

I know what Nicole means. It took well over a year of teaching for me to finally identify (and admit out loud to myself) that there was a truly empty feeling I was experiencing after a semester ended. After all of the grading, scoring, reporting of grades, I usually experienced a 10-day hibernation. I thought it was merely the exhaustion of finishing a semester. However, it turns out that the void I was feeling was somewhat due to having to adjust to not being in frequent contact with the students I had taught the previous term. How humbling! But I haven't always missed every student, nor every section I've taught. Sometimes, I'm just as relieved to say good-bye as I am nostalgic. Sometimes I dread starting a new semester and putting in the work to get to know students again. Where is the sweet spot between being invested in the relationship and knowing

when to take a step back (or let go?) That brings me to the fourth major theme for this study: balance.

Balance

I wasn't sure if I was being reminded more of Goldilocks in *Goldilocks and The Three Bears* fairy tale or *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. In *The Three Bears* story, Goldilocks was always trying to locate the happy medium between extremes: too hot, too cold—and finally, just right! In the Dickens novel, the introduction is a clever allegory to describe the disparate socio-economic conditions between the classes in Great Britain (and France) during the French Revolution in the 17th century by telling the reader that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The students were giving me an almost back-and-forth feeling combined with a sense of a push-pull motion when I reviewed the data I collected to find out what students needed to feel safe in their teacher-student relationships. In turn, this tension quickly became the foundation for a very fascinating theme. Baxter (1990) discusses the dialectical perspective of dynamics in the space between extremes, where otherwise seemingly polar opposites exists in tension. She says that "to a dialectical thinker, the presence of paired opposites, or contradictions, is essential to change and growth; the struggle of opposites thus is not evaluated negatively by dialectical thinkers" (p. 70). In other words, dialectical thinking rides the wave between extremes and otherwise perceived polar opposites, opting for a worldview that is closer to expressions of "both/and" as opposed to "either/or." In the data I collected from the student participants, this ethereal space where two seemingly opposite notions exist in tandem was exposed when the student participants expressed the desire for the optimal sweet spot between extremes in the teacher-student relationship. Part of the business of social justice work and CCP in the classroom is predicated upon the belief that when we do reflexive inquiry about the taken-

for-granted binaries that humans accept as objective truth, this liminal space where the tensions lie are ripe with opportunities for growth and discovery (hooks, 1994; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Shor, 1996). Here I present and discuss several codes that, in tandem, reflect a need for balance to manage the very necessary tension between extremes that revealed themselves in the data: humor, professional versus approachable, feedback, and self-disclosure. An analysis of this theme (balance) immediately follows.

Humor. Morrison (2008) claims that “Humor is an oft-overlooked skill that has many benefits, including...increasing creativity, improving communication skills, and creating an environment of trust” (p. 19). During the classroom observation portion of data collection, I made notes about humor and laughter (when they occurred). I noticed that many times the laughter was occurring when the teacher made reference to something that had happened before the day I was visiting. I was quite aware that whatever the background and context were that made the comment humorous was something I had missed. Humor was one concept that came up several times—but it always seemed to come with a warning: know your audience; it's not funny if it hurts even ONE person. Jimbo (s) talks about the backfire effect of trying too hard to be funny and ending up either falling flat or coming off as sarcastic unintentionally.

Jimbo: In high school, I had some teachers that um, were just doing things that I didn't appreciate, and didn't like. Um, like, I remember one teacher was like just sassy, like, all the time trying to be funny. But at times it just came off as, like mean. Like, not that it hurt me personally, it's just that it's like, you're trying too hard to connect to students, and like, I don't know. I didn't like it.

Vossler and Sheidlower (2011) add that “avoiding humor that demeans students is probably the warning most often expressed in the literature” [on humor and education] (p. 19). They muse

that the ability to make others laugh is a skill can be learned, but to be effective must be developed over long periods of time. Bruce (t) told me that he believed a little humor between teachers and students could be positive and relieve some student's nervousness:

Bruce: Humor's important to me. Even if you aren't you know—my class isn't laugh out loud, my students aren't guffawing, you know, all, all times—but, um. I think, I certainly think them SEEING my attempts at humor—even if they're unsuccessful—helps take away some of that pressure on them, for speech days, you know?

Bruce continues, telling me that long before his students get to performing their speeches, he uses humor to keep the classroom atmosphere light—especially when teaching heavy topics, noting that "even though I'm lecturing, I'm not there to sermon to them." He continues, sharing his belief that a lighter tone will make it easier to present topics some students may not welcome.

Bruce: So many of these subjects are, are so hard for them to wrap their heads around—especially if they come from places of privilege, that, you know, I tend to think of. I think at one point—before I became a teacher—I said that I kind of wanted to teach like John Oliver hosts "Last Week Tonight." Where here are these serious things, but here are these humorous sort of anecdotes or comparison things to, you know, to make someone realize how absurd maybe something is. You know, I think that humor is important to sort of connections to how people remember things, and especially when it becomes, you know a, a tough subject to approach. That having that humor there, to know that they can laugh—at me—but they can laugh with themselves, is important, you know? I think it's very important for community.

Me: Do you think it humanizes everyone?

Bruce: I think so, um, you know. And um, you know, and understanding that those subjects [that] aren't humorous, we can approach them in a humorous way in order for them to understand WHY it's absurd to be racist, you know, and why it's more ethical to be human to another human, you know?

Bruce's insight about humor reveals his awareness that the classroom is a space where teachers of communication have a chance to interrupt oppressive teaching practices and unchecked language choices; if humor can help someone see the absurdity in discrimination, let the laughs begin (and continue).

Self-disclosure: Professional versus approachable. Here is yet another idea that revealed something I had not previously considered or hypothesized about regarding relational safety—balance between the professional and the personal, especially about the kinds of personal information and teachers share with their students. There is a fine line between being approachable and crossing over into an inappropriate zone of sharing. The students seemed to collectively express a desire for the optimal balance between competent, challenging, and rigorous with approachable, human, and personable. Chadrick (s) reflected on his desire for a teacher to be real, to be a person who remains aware of the power differences inherent in a teacher/student relationship, but not necessarily to be a best friend. I asked Chadrick about how he might keep in contact with Brandon once the semester ended. He told me how Brandon addresses students about future contact:

Chadrick: He gave us his social media, if you want to catch him on snapchat or instagram. He gave us that and he said, “if you ever need to talk to me—just email me”, you know? This was our last day.

Chadrick continued by sharing his belief that Brandon has set a good example for a teacher finding the optimal balance between being in relationship with students while also being competent and confident. He said he had no real critique for how Brandon handled himself in this regard. Conversely, Jimbo (s) believes there should be a careful balance between being overly assertive AND being considerate to the point of being too lenient. He reflects on his relationship with Beth (t):

Jimbo: I think there's a good balance between, you know, being a teacher and then, being friendly. Like, not TOO much of a friend, yeah.

Meredith (s) tells about Beth's reaction to tardiness and how lenient Beth seemed to be regarding students' late arrivals. Meredith supposed that their section could benefit from a stricter enforcement on late arrivals, but notes that she thinks this generous attitude is influenced by Beth's positionality as an international student who values students' approval and possibly fears students resenting her. In Meredith's opinion, this teacher is welcome to exercise more authority without any fear of appearing unkind or unapproachable. Of course, Meredith only sees that Beth does not openly shame students for tardiness; she has no idea how Beth assigns (or deducts) points for attendance and tardiness when such instances occur.

Nicole, another of Beth's students, says that she values it when a teacher is open and transparent, but that there should be some balance in degree and kinds of personal information sharing teachers should indulge in with the class. For her, topics to avoid include: dating/intimacy, religion, and any values and beliefs that could be viewed as oppressive.

Nicole: And I do appreciate when teachers sometimes [self-disclose], you know? If like something else brought it to that point where she could just say, "oh yeah, I have a cat named whatever?" <laughs> You know? Little things like that, are good! It's wholesome,

you know? People are gonna talk about their life outside. This isn't all that they have, you know, the school.

According to Cayanus and Martin (2008), "self-disclosure. . . allows for more personalization and direct relationships" (p. 326). Generous and Mike (two international students from Saudi Arabia in Bruce's section) both claimed that the first day of class always sets the tone of the semester for them. When they get a sense of who the teacher is by his biography and introduction, they feel more comfortable being in the class immediately. Mike tells me that he has developed a pretty keen sense of how the semester will go based upon first day introductions. He tells that he was excited to have Bruce for his instructor, based solely on how Bruce introduced himself and the course objectives on the first day of class. Cayanus and Martin (2008) cite a study from 1988 conducted by Downs et al., which claims that "teachers who used narratives and humor, along with self-disclosure, improved the clarity of the information presented for students." (p. 326). With this in mind, I took the opportunity to ask the student participants in FG3 how they felt about their teacher Brandon, who came out to the class during lecture on the day I observed his section. The participants all remembered the day in question and agreed unanimously that they respected Brandon more as their teacher for this selfless act of bravery, as he shared this narrative with them—and him sharing his story seemed to have landed nicely in the balance zone.

Feedback. A big part of teaching communication (and especially public speaking) is giving feedback. Even in an introductory public speaking course, the range of experience in public speaking goes from none to aspiring toastmasters. Yet, as teachers of communication, we are expected to react to and critique the speeches our students present by giving feedback

designed to help them improve their performances on future speaking engagements.

Additionally, we must grade and return written assignments and administer examinations.

Students noted that constructive feedback encourages more effort from students, especially when the feedback has a good balance of details and specifics, but delivered with care so as not to discourage students from attempting to improve. Here, Jimbo reflects upon the feedback he received from his teacher:

Jimbo: I feel like it was helpful. Um, but it wasn't in a way that seemed hurtful, like. It was constructive criticism, not just you know, I don't know an example. I think it made me um, realize the kind of mistakes—but again—not in a way that made me like, self-conscious about it.

Conversely, KC was one of several international students who expressed regret that the most critical and pointed feedback he sought was sometimes shrouded by praise that he appreciates but did not find completely valuable as he endeavors to improve his public speaking (especially in English).

KC: If he just want to give me, um, I think a suggestion. I won't be—I won't feel negative or something. Because if the suggestion is a negative thing? That means that would really help you. Yeah. But if it's just, uh, compliment the positive suggestions, I don't think that is very helpful.

Mike (s) told me that he appreciates that the teacher's feedback was always “private”; he “wouldn't like it if it's public.” Mike understands feedback to be “a way of self-improvement” and so he wants to receive tough feedback, and he communicated this to his teacher.

Mike: I remember I sent him an email saying, “hey, do not be nice.” I want to improve myself. Yes. Yes. And he gave me, I think, wonderful feedback. I feel it was very good feedback and I have learned from it and I think what he said is perfectly right.

Roger (s) shares his belief that even when the teacher is offering constructive criticism or even correction, that attention and acknowledgement are still worthwhile and he values the teacher’s feedback on his efforts. Another international student, MS, also expressed a desire for more critical feedback on speeches, even at the risk of the feedback causing him to experience feelings of self-consciousness at first. He feels the benefits of such feedback far outweigh the risks of hurting him, especially in light of the relational connection he already experiences with his teacher.

MS: Um, okay. The first speech, uh, we had. I got the feedback for that and it was pretty good feedback. Um, it could have been encouraging for me, the good feedback—but it wasn't. The thing is, that I know I'm not a good public speaker. I'm aware of that. It's not something that I have. But she gave me very good comments. And some of those comments were um, good confidence or something like that. Which I know is not true! Why? Because I know while I was giving that speech I wasn't confident. I was nervous, my hands were shaking. Um, I had a big—

Dave: But you don't know what she perceives.

MS: Yeah. So, that—that's what surprised me. Because I didn't do good on this particular area of the speech. The confidence, and, I don't know—one or two other things. But she gave me opposite comments. That's what made me think that [the feedback was suspect].

Thomas (s) announced in FG3 that the feedback he received on his speeches from Brandon (t) would have a lasting impact.

Thomas: Um, I feel that the feedback he gives, also can be like, used in future classes, or, also in the workplace? Like, part of my feedback is that I kind of, I do have a soft voice, and I need to speak more loudly. And so I said, the feedback he gave me told me to improve on those things, which I can use in other classes, and whenever I have a professional job.

Dave: That's really interesting. Did he SAY that, or is that just something that you understand is feedback that's transferable. Or did he say "this is life advice?"

Thomas: No, mainly just feedback from the two speeches that I've done so far.

Thomas understands that in the process of providing pointed, constructive feedback on his speech performance that Brandon has also gifted him with "cultural capital" (Delpit, 1995). In other words, this type of insight will be instrumental in helping Thomas when he has to meet standards of performance and behavioral expectations in other classes—as well as after graduation when he begins his future career. As a result, Thomas feels safer in his relationship with Brandon—because the feedback he received was both attentive and specific, and affirming and transferrable.

Analysis of balance. Balance was probably the most obvious theme that emerged organically. It appeared over wide range of codes. When I pooled a few of those codes together, I started to get a clearer idea of what students wanted from their teachers. They need someone approachable and relatable (FG1) but still not TOO lenient (policy, feedback, professionalism vs. being personable, etc.) This was the very essence of a dialectic perspective for me (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) where the tension between opposites transitions from either/or to both/and. When humor was mentioned, it came with a reminder that humor is contextual, subjective, and therefore depends on the speaker's (teacher) analysis of the audience and the pre-established

relationship with the students. Humor is tricky and should be used sparingly and wisely (Vossler & Steidlower, 2011). Jimbo (s) cautions of the impending disasters that can occur in the classroom when a teacher tries too hard to be funny and the students do not share that same sense of humor with the teacher. When I heard the students trying to express a sense that “enough is just enough” and “too much is a problem,” it frequently fell in codes like teacher’s self-disclosure and teacher friendliness. There was definitely a sense that students feel that teachers should fall back on professional judgment when setting those boundaries in the process of creating a relational context with their students in the classroom. Since relationships are dynamic and constantly evolving, so must the degree of safety that is experienced in those relationships. The drive for achieving balance in all aspects of the teacher-student relationship must be grounded in awareness that even when relational safety exists between individuals, the degree to which it is experienced in any given moment can change swiftly and intensely.

Community

In reference to an inclusive and welcoming teaching presence, Noddings (1988) notes that “the object is to develop a caring community through modeling, dialogue, and practice” (p. 223). A teaching community implies a cooperative learning environment, and a space where teachers and students will learn and grow together, not in isolation (hooks, 2003). This theme prevailed when I considered how teachers and students described their CMST101 sections as a cohesive unit. MS, an international student from Pakistan, says:

MS: The good thing about our lecturer in this class, which I liked was—this is probably the first class, since I've been to any college—not just this college, that I know all the names of my classmates. This is the first, yeah. And I guess everyone knows everyone in the classroom. That mostly because of our lecturer, because she did those ice-breaking

activities, which made us as students comfortable with the lecturer, and with, with each other. Because once you get over that fear of talking in front of some people, and doing something which you find awkward. When you do that, you, you get comfortable. You know them.

MS continues, telling me how Wonder Woman (t) moves freely about the classroom space, interacts with students, calls everyone by name, and as a result, all the students knew the other students by name within the first week. In response, Wonder Woman talks about her desire for students in her sections to get acquainted with each other. Not only does she actively try to encourage older students to mentor new students, she also experiences pride when students tell her they made a friend in her class or that they feel like their class is a community or their favorite class or the only class they have where all the students can know everyone else by name. Wonder Woman shares some of her own teaching philosophy in terms of building a community:

Wonder Woman: It has to go beyond the interpersonal relation between the student and the teacher, so I think creating a sense of community, where you can be open, even with a different standpoint of perspectives, but still be open and create conversations, rather than violent argument. So I think that we should be able to have conversations, to have a better understanding of culture, society, and also just patterns of communication.

Teresa (s) says that her CMST101 class is the first class she has had in college so far where she has known all of her classmates by name. She attributes this directly to Beth (t) helping create community by assigning group tasks, as well as engaging the students in dialogue during lectures. Layla (s) theorized that there are necessary incremental steps to building relationships in the classroom, starting with getting to know first the teacher, then one other student, then a small group, and eventually the entire class knows each other and becomes a community.

One of the greatest benefits of community, of course, is having others around that we can rely upon when we have unmet needs. Everyone needs someone sometimes. At our core, humans are social beings and we need a system of support to survive, much less self-actualize (Weedon, 2004). Even students like Jon-Jon (who deny needing a good relationship with their teachers), still admit to having a preference for the better relationship, all things being equal. The data indicate that care is a major component in the creation of community and, therefore, necessary to establish relational safety between students and teachers (as well as between students).

Care. This ideal resulted from the use of the word "care" combined with actions described by the participants that occurred in the classroom. For example, Layla told me that she feels that when a teacher fails to recognize students from previous teaching experiences, it shows a lack of care. When Noddings (1988) talks about care in the classroom, the objective is not one-directional (teacher to student), but dynamic in nature. She notes that “the caring teacher also wants students to have practice in caring” (p. 223). I found the idea of "care" to be mentioned dynamically: students caring for teachers, students caring for each other, and teachers caring for students. I elaborate on these combinations now.

Students caring for teachers. Noddings (1988) tells us that “teachers, too, need confirmation” (p. 228). As someone who obsessed over one student who thinks I let him be ridiculed in front of his classmates, I concur wholeheartedly. But that very issue is one of the objectives of this inquiry—how do other teachers feel about safety in relationships with students? Well, for starters, although he readily admits that Bruce (t) is not afraid of sustained periods of silence after he poses questions to the class, Generous (s) tells me that sometimes he

raises his hand after periods of silence as a way of honoring the teacher's effort so that Bruce doesn't feel bad because the students are not responding to him.

Generous: Well, the reason why I start to [participate by raising my hand is] because sometime when you stay in the class, and the teacher asks a question, you sitting there like, 30 seconds, no one answers, no one raising their hand. It's gonna like, awkward moment, sat in silence. So I feel like sometimes, I feel like, why not just raise your hand? You might answer wrong, but just be active in the class, so don't make the teacher look bad.

Kyle (s) agrees that Bruce is comfortable with letting a few seconds of silence pass after asking questions; Kyle sometimes answers to spare Bruce's feelings. This is indeed a student showing care for their teacher.

Kyle: Honestly, I was the one who answered the question a lot <laughs> when it would get kinda silent. So, I would, um, sometimes I would know the answer right off the bat. But I would wait to see if anybody was gonna try to do it. And then, I'd like, I didn't want the teacher to feel awkward. . . I don't know if that's. . . <laughs> That's how I would've felt.

Dave: So you care about his feelings?

Kyle: Yeah. I was like—I didn't want him to like, feel ignored, so I was like, aw. I'll just answer it.

John (s) tells me that he could skip a last assignment and still get an A. He plans to do the assignment anyway, out of respect for the teacher's effort in putting the assignment together.

KC shows care for Brandon (t) by engaging in several intentional behaviors to communicate respect.

KC: I always say "Mr." And I will prepare, I will prepare my questions ready. I mean, I won't, I won't think about my questions while I'm talking to him. I will prepare my questions and just um, how you say that? Just make sure he will understand my questions real quick and uh, simply. Yeah.

KC does this because he wants to be clear in his questions for Brandon, and also out of respect both for Brandon's time and the next class's space. He explains, "I don't want to waste my professor's time. Also, I know there's a next class. They will need this room." In this brief moment of reflection and consideration, KC has not only demonstrated care for Brandon, but for the next group of students coming into that same space. In the following section, students discuss their experiences with care that comes from their classmates.

Students caring for each other. I was not expecting students to speak of caring for each other. But care is never limited to our expectations or to any space or circumstance. Noddings (1998) observes that "in every human encounter, there arises a possibility of a caring occasion" (p. 222). Students are human and, therefore, capable of showing care to each other. For instance, Meredith (an international student) has experienced several U.S. American teachers who act very impatient when international students ask questions of them. I asked Meredith to share her coping mechanism when she feels she cannot approach an instructor. She has always found some U.S. American students who were willing to help her by explaining concepts and repeating things she missed in lecture. She stressed emphatically that these requests for assistance have been met every time. I first asked Meredith about her experiences with teachers in the U. S. and she shared that she had a teacher who was rude and abrupt with Chinese students. She admitted that all international students in this teacher's sections try not to bring attention to themselves or as she put it, "We just try not to piss him off." When I pressed her to

find out how she adapted in classes where approaching the instructor feels too risky to attempt, she told me that she has found a smaller support system in her U. S. American classmates. According to Meredith, “the students here are nice” and because she has had to depend on her classmates, she values relationships between students just as much as she does with her teachers. MS, another international student who hails from Pakistan, reflects on how being an international student has so many challenges; he wishes more U.S. American students would be so welcoming. Several students said they valued getting to know the other students in class this summer—even if they normally don’t value getting to know their classmates in most instances.

Although he was also a beneficiary of his teacher's generous spirit, KC asked Brandon for special consideration for ALL of the international students in their section. KC told me that after the first day of class, he explained to Brandon that he (and he suspected the other international students) might have questions for Brandon after class. KC did not only ask for himself; he advocated on behalf of the entire group of international students in this class. (I should note that KC was the only student from Taiwan in his section; all the others were from other countries). This form of care with students revealing special needs or requests for accommodations to the teacher (for oneself and for all others) is relational safety in action.

It was not only international students, though, who showed care for their classmates. The U.S. American students also engaged in similar notions of caring. For example, even though AJ admits that he was flustered when he was interrupted by another student during a discussion and essentially called out on a belief that he didn’t actually share, he says he still gets along with that classmate. When I pressed AJ for more details, he told me that he admires the other student’s passion for justice and her eloquence in making her argument. The fact that her argument was misguided (due to incomplete information) has not caused him to experience resentment towards

this classmate; he only regrets that their dialogue was incomplete and that the other student does not know what he was really hoping to convey in his (interrupted) comment.

Thomas expressed concern that his Caucasian friends might feel targeted during class discussions on systemic oppression in the form of racism. He expressed relief at the idea of Brandon facilitating such discussions during class because Brandon will intervene if he feels that tensions begin to escalate. His degree of safety with his classmates can be strengthened because of his faith in the teacher's ability to moderate discussions professionally and diplomatically. This is a perfect example of demonstrating care in a learning community (hooks, 2003); students begin to care for one another, as their teacher have demonstrated care for them, the students. That brings me directly to the topic for the next section—teachers caring for students.

Teachers caring for students. Noddings (1998) claims that "teaching is filled with caring occasions" (p. 222). In response, student participant John has wisely pointed out that teachers are still human, and therefore have a desire to be liked by their students. However, John does not see this desire for care as a weakness; John feels that when students sense that their teachers care about how their students react to them, the students will find value in this realization and the connection between the teacher and students will deepen.

John: And another thing that I guess makes me feel relationally safe between us, is, just how welcoming she is. The fact that she, she shows such a desire to want us to like her. That it makes us feel like she values us—which as a teacher, if you don't have some sort of desire to seek approval from the students—you're not going to be catering your teaching towards them. And so I think that's pretty significant.

Kyle (s) was adamant that he was able to successfully finish the course and meet the objectives because Bruce showed that he cared by his reassurance that Kyle could make up his assignments

but also by inquiring after him personally and reminding him to do self-care first. He comments on how Bruce's relaxed style has helped him in the process of presenting speeches:

Kyle: The presentations and stuff. It would make me feel a lot more safe if I was super nervous in front of a class and I went to him one-on-one and did it. That would make me feel invited, more safe to the classroom.

Like Kyle, many students value teachers who know that their students have other commitments, and that many of them have jobs, families, or long commutes. Teachers Brandon, Wonder Woman, and Bruce have all commented on their shared outlook that students will respond positively when they do not fear shaming, punitive actions, or rigid adherence to course policies (hooks, 1993; Shor, 1996).

Analysis of community. When I think about the fact that students have commented that their CMST101 class is the one where they know every other student by name (and often for the first time), this theme was right there with open arms awaiting. When the students expressed care and concern for the teacher's feelings, I am reminded of bell hooks (2003) when she says that "teaching mindfulness about the quality of life in the classroom—that it must be nurturing, life-sustaining—brings us into greater community with the classroom" (p. 173). Community implies the presence of others in a shared space. When students are in this space with their teachers (and each other), this is an opportunity for relational safety to grow as a direct result of witnessing (and receiving) care from others and for others. When I put this notion in conversation with international student Meredith's affirmative declaration of connection when she says that her U.S. American classmates have consistently been welcoming of her questions when she feels she cannot safely get her questions answered by the teacher—community is the most apt term I can think of to describe this ideal. Relational safety can thrive in a caring learning community.

Elaborations: Answers to Research Questions

My research questions for this study are: "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers? What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?" In Chapter Two during the review of literature I introduced CCP and then introduced the conceptual anchor of my study, *relational safety*, which I defined as the sensation (and degree) of safety students experience in their relationships with their teachers. In following up on my description of relational safety, I synthesized three concepts that I argue can work together to create the possibilities for relational safety in the critical communication pedagogy (CCP) classroom. My review of literature argued that salient concepts in relational safety would include (but not be limited to): *invitational style of engagement*, *reflexivity of teacher power*, and a *dialectic worldview*. And I hypothesized in the methods chapter that I would locate codes from the data that would correlate to keywords like *relatable*, *dialogue*, *listening*, *inviting*, *relationship*, *warm*, and *share*. As previewed in the methods chapter, I now return to the research questions and the responses given by teachers and students. Since teaching and relationships in the classroom are always shifting and contextual, there is no objective truth to be discovered about relational safety in the classroom. Relational safety will be described and experienced in a very personal way, for teachers and students alike. Rather than finding *the* answer(s), I utilize a critical approach to the principles of triangulation to discuss how the research questions were differently (and similarly) answered and addressed by the various participants who responded to them across the different sets of data I collected.

Students

After having interviewed 23 students this summer, I had a good sense of how they experienced their previous educational experiences compared to this summer taking CMST101.

Chris describes his reaction to teachers who he believes are not truly attentive (and, therefore, not actually engaging their students in true dialogue):

Chris: It's almost like, there's a disconnect, right? There's like a, a, they're trying to create, like, a separation between you and them. You know? Like a respect kind of thing.

This sentiment is echoed in the literature review when Freire (1970) calls out the refusal to engage another in dialogue as a demonstration of power—dialogue cannot occur in a vacuum. Chris continues, sharing his belief in the importance of teachers and students co-creating an intersubjective experience of understanding via their communication in the classroom:

Chris: You need to, you need to have that kind of communication, that connection between the students, so that you can have open communication. If you don't have that connection between the students, or people don't know each other, or don't like each other, then there's not going to be any dialogue in the class.

Teresa (s) talks about her experience with Beth (t) as a relaxed, welcoming teacher who understands that Teresa is a commuter student and sometimes arrives tardy.

Teresa: I'm gonna be honest; I live 30 minutes away. I'm usually a couple of minutes late to class. <laughs> She just, we just sat down. She doesn't even miss a beat—she just keeps talking.

Dave: If you knew that she was someone who brought attention to lateness, are there some days you probably wouldn't have come?

Teresa: Oh, I just wouldn't go to class. My anxiety, I take medicine for it. But when somebody calls me out, I can't handle it. So I just, even before in classes, if I'm running

just two minutes late, and I know the teacher's gonna call you out? I just don't even go. <laughs>

International students who struggled with doing their required speeches in English (as non-native English speakers) indicated an appreciation for teachers who were patient when they attempted to express themselves in front of the entire class. Several of them told me that some U. S. American teachers are overly critical and easily irritated with their questions. I asked some students to share their reasons for not asking questions or responding to the teacher during discussions. Generous, an international student from Saudi Arabia, notes:

Generous: Uh, like sometimes I have a lot of questions but because I didn't know the teacher really well, I stopped asking. Because I'm afraid of the response.

Tootsie, a student in Wonder Woman's section, shares the belief that her connection to the teacher directly impacts her engagement and motivation; she tells me that if she feels distant from the teacher, she will always try to avoid asking for assistance. Her solution? She tries to get outside help if she needs it, whenever such instances with teachers occur.

Tootsie: Um, I tend to do a little, well not quite as well in the class, grade-wise. And, um, just my motivation to do well in the class isn't there. I don't feel that I can really go and get help as easily.

Dave: So when you have those instances, how do you compensate for it so that you reach your own goal?

Tootsie: Um, I usually try and find, um, tutors or someone that's not in, uh, like an instructor in the class. Someone outside of it, that I can relate to better.

Thomas (s) feels that Brandon's classroom was a good place for open dialogue because it was a forum that was mediated by a professional who was prepared to intervene but encouraged

sharing honest opinions respectfully. He reflects on how he noticed a couple of the white males in his section appeared a bit uncomfortable when they discussed white privilege in class one day:

Thomas: I might not want to bring it up with any of my Caucasian friends—because it might make them feel uncomfortable and that's the last thing I'd want to do—but, it WAS a topic that needed to be discussed.

Thomas, then, feels safer sharing and participating when classroom discussions about controversial topics are mediated by their teacher—in the role of communication professional, and with the understanding that the teacher will intervene if the discussion gets too tense.

Given this, I believe that students feel true dialogue, a relaxed and welcoming presence, and patience contribute to the perception of relational safety between them and their teachers. Additionally, students expressed their belief that teachers should not avoid discussions of topics like systemic oppression and privilege. What these students expressed was their need for the teacher to assume the responsibility for moderating discussions and using their judgment to decide when (and how) to intervene. Rather than avoiding tough topics, students feel that frank, open discussions about our world are essential for students to feel safe/invited/invested in their relationships with their teacher.

Teachers

Of the four participating teachers in this study, there was one international student GTA (Beth) from China. Wonder Woman, Bruce, and Brandon all identified as U.S. American and are fluent speakers of English. Like I shared about my own evolving teaching practice in the introduction, Beth too notes how she was affected by her first readings about critical communication pedagogy. She informed me that the idea of relational safety immediately resonated with her and made her want to participate in this study. For her, being exposed to new

ideas about engaged teaching practices that foreground the systemic power differences between teachers and students made her want to challenge herself pedagogically to try to create the least oppressive teaching experience possible for her students:

Beth: Mmm hmm. Well uh, before I took this um, specific kind of a critical pedagogy class, and then I was not that aware, of relational safety. . . . I just felt if the teacher is very personable, or very kind of like smiling—or very inviting—and I would just feel safe. But from this critical uh, pedagogy class itself—especially the power relationship between teachers and students—and uh, very complex layers of relations underneath.

Wonder Woman, in turn, chimes in with her own thoughts about the importance of relational safety in a reflexive teaching practice:

Wonder Woman: I think relational safety is really important. Um, 'cause I think that, especially if you're coming from a more critical um, pedagogical standpoint. Uh, how can you make this an environment where even those who might have different perspectives, um, feel comfortable in sharing that with the class? And kind of just sharing their own cultural location and standpoint position.

Bruce weighs in on how much the teacher's presence has an impact on a student's willingness to approach or engage a teacher. His own experiences as a former student (and current graduate student) clearly influence his perspective:

Bruce: It's important to have sort of the um, I mean. You know, students being able to approach you. You know, I mean that's, the number one. I, as a student—that's my number one fear—is approaching the teacher. So, you know, what are ways that I can understand, so that I'm better with my students in that regard, but also as a student, better? <laughs> That's sort of doing that as well.

Brandon shares his thoughts on what it really means to embrace diversity in the classroom and how he works with students to co-create a classroom environment that welcomes everyone to engage without pressure or fear. He is worth quoting at length here:

Brandon: We typically fail at doing that a lot, when we say working with difference, what we're really saying is, we're willing to work with people who think like we do—or convert them to think like we do. But if someone has a fundamentally different opinion on something—they're wrong! And that, to me is just, it's hypocritical and counterintuitive. And so, one way to create that kind of safety is to—in a more complicated way—work through the things that they say, even if you don't agree with them. So, if someone says something like, “I don't think that any of the, people accusing [celebrities] of rape are really victims of it.” Instead of just saying, “you're sexist, you're misogynistic, you are rape culture, you are rape culture!” Like you have to work through and be committed to like, grappling with those things, which can like be hard at times and tedious. But I think that's a way to help people think in new ways, but also not make them feel like I'm imposing an agenda on them, or that I am saying they're stupid, you know? Um and so for me that's one way of going about that. Another is trying to be as *inclusive* as possible. With the examples that I give in class—when I survey the class, you know, saying [to myself] “How many people of color in here? How many people in here identify as LGBT (in some way, if they've made that known)? How many people in here are women? How many people are men? How many people are like, athletic-looking men, right? Or sorority-looking women?” Or not those things, and trying to use references and examples that kind of can apply to a wide array of people. I think that makes people feel that *safety*, in a sense.

Wonder Woman reflects on what she hopes students will/would say about her in regards to relational safety: she says relational safety must encompass the entire population of students in the section, and not be limited to only an interpersonal relationship with each student. Like hooks (1994, 2003) Wonder Woman notes that students need to sense support on a communal level: dialogue, discourse, space to make mistakes, and grace to learn from them (hooks, 1994, 2003). Thus, relational safety may be teacher-driven, but it is most easily achieved when it is presented as an invitation to connect that is reciprocal yet reflexive of the inherent power distances that undergird the traditional model of the teacher-student relationship. Since teachers in this study have said they prefer to embrace a sense of community with their students, I now examine the student-driven data that emerged when the students were grouped together—like they experience class in their respective sections. Here are the findings I garnered by studying the data from the three focus groups.

Focus Groups

I was inspired by Greenbaum (2000) to provide short worksheets with a guiding prompt to use as a point of discussion for each focus group session. The guiding prompt was adapted from the RQs and is as follows: *“Please list at least 6 (six) qualities that a teacher should possess in order for you (as a student) to feel safe, invited, and invested in the teacher-student relationship. These can be single words or short phrases.”*

The first focus group seemed to really drive home the themes that ended up making affirmation. This is when OT (s) told the group that he truly resented teachers who failed to recognize him from previous classes and that he took it quite personally when a teacher failed to recognize (or acknowledge) him after already having been his teacher in two previous classes. In FG1, other responses to the edited version of the RQs ranged from being open-minded to other

opposing viewpoints (Greg and Chris), to being allowed some input into how the course materials are delivered (David). FG2 seemed to zero in on the instructor's approach to the subject material as well as the relational aspects of teaching. Elizabeth cited the instructor's "enthusiasm of the subject" as an influence on how she orients to the classroom and to the teacher, and elaborates on what she identifies as a combination of two important qualities:

Elizabeth: . . .a combination of [no passion for the topic or for teaching]. Like I wouldn't like, necessarily like a professor, who like, just comes in, and is just like, repeating off information, like I want a professor who seems invested in teaching me the subject.

But the focus did shift back to the relational part of the classroom experience pretty quickly as Nicole (s) noted her need to feel welcomed by the teacher's demeanor towards students. She shared a belief that a teacher who displays a friendly demeanor helps to alleviate the stress and pressure students might experience when they have to make the decision to ask a question or keep silent.

Nicole. Yeah. Um, I just think that it's a lot more welcoming to feel, um, you know....comforting. And like when you go into the classroom you're not *scared* to ask a question because you know they're not gonna attack you or you know, make you feel bad for asking.

Several students in this focus group mentioned a desire for their teachers to be patient with their students. Al described patience as the teacher's willingness and ability to understand how diverse groups of students take in new information and learn differently.

Al: Some people like, learn at different times, it takes longer to understand the subject. So, just a teacher who understands that maybe it takes more time with the students individually.

Nicole talked about how she appreciates it when a teacher's bodily presence reflects an appreciation for a student's willingness to share thoughts in discussion, even if the response from the student was not quite what the teacher was expecting.

And FG3 really impressed upon me how they saw Brandon (t) as extremely well-informed and well-read, but humble and generous with the knowledge he tried to share with his class:

Lola: He's smart. He's real smart. <several group members murmur agreement> I mean

Dave: Is he smart in a way that's like "I'm smart and you're NOT AS SMART?". . . . or <group chimes in with a round of resounding responses to the negative>

Lola: He's just well-read, and he speaks similar to us. In a way that like, even though he CLEARLY knows more than we do, and is CLEARLY smarter than us. In like, especially communications, he doesn't like...it's not. He's not an ass about it at ALL. He's like, "I want you to learn from this stuff." It's very, it's very positive.

Here I located another nod to the literature review by recognizing one of the components of relational safety. This focus group (FG3) praised Brandon for his reflexivity of his power as the teacher and his transparency about his use of space and where he places himself in relation to the students in the classroom. One student, Michael laughed at the irony that Brandon reminds the students not to depend on the podium during speeches even though he is near it most of the time. In response, another student, Lola explained that Brandon was very transparent about the spatial

differences that are in place when he sits there and appears to be looking down at the students from a higher seated position:

Lola: He did say that he felt like he was gonna have to be over here <gestures toward the podium> more frequently because of the computer, and he is very media-based. So, like, I feel even though he's not at our level, he still, like approaches us at a level that's more relatable to us. And doesn't make, at least I don't feel inferior.

This style of teaching has clearly impressed upon the students in these sections, based upon their own testimonies of Brandon's reflexive teaching practices and policies.

These same students also praised Brandon for his bravery and unselfishness when he shared some the struggles he experienced in his coming out process but the issue of balance and good judgement in self-disclosure were also in play:

Lola: I think it's amazing. I think it's so important that we have people who are teaching us, like—to teaching us things, that like, these things, these things that we're learning, and we're talking about—will only prevail in the future. . . will only allow us to like, know more about what is happening politically. 'Cause it's like fuckery, but it's like, I think it's so important that a professor is telling us like, this is my experience.

Lola went on to share that another component that she feels is important for her to feel safe in the relationship with her teacher [that she wrote on the focus group worksheet]: a teacher who has relevant experiences to draw from when engaging the class in dialogue:

Lola: . . . professional experience outside of academia—as well as like, personal experience out of, outside of academia. Like, but, outside of this classroom, we all have different lives, and all have different experiences. . . . And I think it's SO important. . . . he's willing to express that to us. I mean, express his struggle on behalf. Because, if we

think that this man never struggled in any regard, then where are we gonna relate? Especially, if we're gonna, you know what I mean? How are we gonna relate to that? And I think it's SO important.

Dave: In your mind you need a teacher that's relatable, a teacher that's competent, a teacher that's excited, and a teacher that brings themselves to the classroom. We agreed, right?

<group indicates 'yes' in consensus>

Dave: So, like is there a TMI (too much information) line for you—with a teacher?

Another student, Michael shared his thoughts about Brandon coming out to the class during lecture on the day that I observed. His feeling was that Brandon's confession was appropriate and that he never felt uncomfortable because Brandon was not telling the class about his dating life, only how he situated himself positionally as a gay man. I felt a twinge when I realized how the students in FG3 were describing an invitational style of engagement. That is, one that finds the speaker sharing the space with the audience to create a shared experience with no motive except to invite the audience into the world of the speaker. Speakers who engage audiences in this manner know that persuasion is always a possible by-product of audience address, but the focus is placed on connection with the audience to create an experience unique to those present (Foss & Griffin, 1995). In this research project, a good example of this invitational presentation style being illustrated occurs when Brandon informed me in his interview that coming out during the lecture was completely unplanned and organic. He was adamant that he did NOT plan to come out to the class in his lesson plan. He simply shared his experience, invited the audience to understand how he was affected, and allowed them to imagine how he felt.

Since the interview protocol that was used to conduct focus groups was directed at the shared experiences of students with their teachers, the results from those sessions also reflects a shared reality about how their teachers interact with them as a section. As a result, the participants in the focus groups shared beliefs with strong connections to the components for relational safety found in the review of literature. They did this by telling me how their teachers invited them into their own experiences, engaged them in open, honest dialogue, and do so while demonstrating a reflexive perspective about the power differences between teachers and students that simply entering the classroom space implies.

Participant Voices in Tandem

One concept stands out to me immediately as having been expressed by students (individually and grouped) as well as by teachers. That idea is care and concern for others. Several students mentioned that they raised their hands during question-and-answer sessions simply because they wanted to appear responsive to the teacher, lest the teacher become discouraged (especially if there is an observer present). The other idea that ran across all groups was name recognition. Other students mentioned their joy in knowing all of their classmates by name (often for the first time ever in college). Wonder Woman was noted and praised for her attention to her students by immediately using the students' preferred names as soon as such preferences were made known to her. As mentioned previously, KC (s) says that he felt validated when Brandon (t) mentioned some content from their recent email communication the following day during lecture. Individual students, and groups of students, need to feel recognized and included—but also being valued as unique individuals. Teachers and students expressed a desire to give and receive care in a classroom community where dialogue is always possible. In

all aspects of relational safety, a balanced outlook is always foregrounded as a goal in the development of the teacher-student relationship.

Final Thoughts

For teachers and students to experience relational safety, students need to feel affirmed, have a dialogic relationship with their teachers, experience community (where students and teachers care for each other and themselves) and all with a “just enough” sense of balance. Additionally, students are aware of teacher behaviors in the classroom, but value simple demonstrations of recognition when they see teachers outside of classroom settings. These themes and codes are not exhaustive by any means, no more than the review of literature could be. As classrooms settings are defined contextually and relationships evolve dynamically (Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 1994, 2003), these entries I include here merely reflect some of the codes that I assigned to the data that were both poignant but also revealing. After creating over 200 codes, it was time to trim the fat, group codes together, and analyze my findings. Here is how a summary review of those findings helps me to deepen the meaning of relational safety.

In Chapter Two I defined relational safety as the ethereal space where teachers connect with students through dialogue, with a perspective grounded in the understanding that classrooms and the dynamics between teachers and students are relational, and that for authentic dialogue to emerge and power imbalances in the classroom to be challenged reflexively, students must perceive some degree of safety in their evolving relationships with their teachers. This perception is what I called *relational safety*. Relational safety, then, is not conceptually limited to an either/or binary, but should be considered in degrees or levels of existence. In my first RQ, I asked, "What factors contribute to perceptions of relational safety amongst students and teachers?" The participants in my study showed me that affirmation, dialogue, and a sense of

community all contribute to feelings of relational safety. My second RQ asks, "What do teachers and students need to feel safe/invited/invested in the teacher-student relationship?" Again, the participants in my study articulated that in order to feel safe/invited/invested, they need reassurance that the teacher affirms them through recognizing them (in and outside of the classroom space), prefers to conduct class from a dialogic perspective which includes awareness of all of the bodies in the shared space, seeing the classroom as a community, and interacting with students in a balanced, nuanced way that gives students and teachers enough of what they need—but not too much. I believe my original definition of relational safety can be expanded, then. *Thus, I argue that relational safety is an evolving sense of connection between teachers and students that is foregrounded in the awareness that acting in service of social change and equality must always recognize the inherent power differences between students and teachers and skillfully balances the elements of affirmation, dialogue, and awareness of bodies in space into a communal classroom experience that celebrates connection, diversity, and life.*

Even after all of the themes and codes that I extracted from the interviews and focus groups I conducted this past summer to create this expanded definition of relational safety, I still must give space to one sad reality: sometimes, no matter how hard teachers try to connect and get students to connect with them (and each other), the feeling, the magic, that special spark just isn't there (hooks, 2003). The classroom sessions become heavy and laborious (Shor, 1996). Teachers invite students to share their experience; students seem to rebuff those attempts to connect. Sometimes teachers dread a certain section. Unfortunately, a teacher can forget a student or call a student by the wrong name (or gender pronouns). It can be hard to come back from mistakes that students can perceive as dehumanizing (or at least inattentive). Dialogue goes stale in mid-air (Shor, 1996). The semester drags on forever. It happens. No matter how

hard a teacher tries to balance out their attempts at humor, professionalism, or comments when they give feedback, sometimes the communicative efforts teachers make are simply misunderstood (hooks, 1994). Teachers may aspire to co-create conditions for creating a teaching community (hooks, 2003) but students fail to demonstrate that they care (for the teacher and/or each other). The combination of students who show up in our classrooms is often just random. Sometimes a student or two can be disruptive and argumentative, making productive dialogues difficult for others (Shor, 1996) and creating a toxic vibe which undercuts the growth of relational safety at every turn. Sometimes the magic just does not spark with a group (hooks, 2003). Brandon (t) tells of the only section he has taught since becoming a GTA for whom he did not offer to connect via social media after the semester ended. In opposition, Ming (s) says that she felt lucky to have been placed in her CMST101 class with that exact group of students because she wouldn't have wanted her experience in this class to have been any different than it was. The takeaway? If you get a good section that gels and the students seems to get along well and genuinely like each other, count yourself lucky. That's not always the case; ask any experienced, world-weary member of any faculty. If you start to see the beginnings of care and community being demonstrated in the classroom under your guidance as you model desired behaviors, enjoy the experience while you have it and go with it!

However, the sections where our efforts to teach and connect seem to require the most labor (Toyosaki, 2013), may be where the components that make up relational safety are most significant. The classroom is a site where reflexive teachers can use their authority to create spaces where moments of social change can occur, but what about those times when relational safety is the LAST thing teachers can consider when the day-to-day practices of teaching and attempting to create communal learning experiences leave us frustrated, broken, and torn? Shor

(1996) describes the emotional climate in one teaching experience as "Siberia," meaning that the connection between him and those students was bitterly cold and remote. In those instances, what motivates a teacher to keep trying to create relational safety in the classroom when the students seem determined to reject those efforts we expend in good faith? Critical communication pedagogues (and all others teachers who desire to teach reflexively) must remember that efforts made today can make a difference tomorrow (Diversi & Moreira, 2009) and that the world need not remain as it is today (Fassett & Warren, 2008). A sense of hope must always be foregrounded when considering relational safety as a part of any reflexive teaching practice.

As I conclude this chapter and prepare to transition to the conclusion of this research project, I ask myself again about my motivation for all of this hard work in trying to pin down what students and teachers need to experience safety in their shared relationships (Fassett & Warren, 2007). And it is because I *hope* that starting a discussion about relational safety will help other teachers as they attempt to find language to help them describe and develop their reflexive teaching practices with the diverse groups of students they encounter with each passing term.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

In this chapter, I briefly synthesize the main ideas of the preceding chapters and review my findings and claims about relational safety and how the teachers, students, and groups of students who were in CMST101 this past summer feel about their shared relationships. After I highlight the main ideas of the project, I briefly discuss the implications of this research and the role I played as researcher. I reveal some of the biases I struggled with as I attempted to be a critically reflexive (and ethical) researcher (Davies, 1999) who shouldered the burden of making claims about the population of participants but was never fully free of my own preconceived notions about teaching and relationships based on my own experiences as a student and teacher-in-training. I then move on to the limitations I placed on the scope of this project and my rationale for excluding a part of the (possibly eligible) population from participating in this study. I then segue into a discussion of future possibilities for research; these two topics complement each other and, therefore, my discussion of them necessarily overlap.

Next, I discuss the importance of remembering that social justice is a goal that we strive for as we attempt to invoke small moments of social change by interrupting the status quo (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009). With critical inquiry about why we do and say the things we do and being reflexive about the impact of acting (and speaking) with no thought to how words and actions affect others we encounter, maybe these small moments can someday move us closer to our vision of a fair and just society (Fassett & Warren, 2007; hooks, 1993). Finally, I make good on my promise and articulate a connection to hope. At every stage in the research process, I tried to remember that my impetus for wanting to conduct this research in the first place was because I *hope* other teachers who desire to develop more reflexive

teaching practices will find the idea of relational safety worthy of consideration and further inquiry.

Dissertation Review

In Chapter One, I introduced myself and my history with teaching and learning, including my induction into critical communication pedagogy (CCP) and realizing how much teaching is a relational process. Nash and Bradley (2011) claim that "all researchers have some level of personal interest in the topic they have chosen to study. By performing research on that topic, the researcher begins the process of satisfying a personal curiosity regarding the subject matter under study" (p. 14). This has certainly been the case for me. And Davies (1999) supports Nash and Bradley's assertion with one of her own: "All researchers are to some degree connected to, a part of, the object of their research" (p. 3). The reader may remember that I reflected back upon my first year of teaching as a GTA in the Communication Studies program. This is when I underwent two pivotal experiences that have forever shaped my understanding of teacher-student relationships and the importance of critical inquiry into the ways that systemic power and taken-for-granted teaching practices inform our collective understanding of good teaching, bad teaching, good student, bad student, and even "at-risk student" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 24). I detoured to share a brief synopsis of the literature I had already studied on accepted teaching practices (categorized as teaching generally, teaching of communication, and teaching communication to those who may suffer from speech anxiety and/or communication apprehension). Similar to my own experience, Nieto (1992) muses that "educators frequently rely on their own experiences and common sense when they teach" (p. xxvi). Following, I shared my reasons for wanting to conduct this research and then I proceeded to conclude the introductory chapter with brief previews of the remaining chapters.

Since I had already woven a synthesis of the practices good teachers of communication have in common into the narratives I shared in the introduction, I used Chapter Two to draw heavily upon Fassett and Warren (2007) and their perspective that teaching is a relational practice. I also elaborated on an emergent teaching philosophy known as critical communication pedagogy (CCP). In this perspective, teaching practices and relational positionalities are always foregrounded with the awareness that we function in an educational system that is laden with inequities in power, knowledge production, and assessment of learning. Following, I introduced a new term into the conversation of teacher-student relationships I have coined as "*relational safety*," which I defined as the degree of safety or comfort that a student (or teacher) experiences at any moment in the teacher-student relationship. Relational safety can extend to occurrences outside the physical classroom (such as office hours), and may include phenomena as intense as disclosing personal information. Perhaps this feeling can be experienced during an occasion as simple as raising one's hand in class during discussions without fear of ridicule or retribution from sharing unpopular (or uninformed) opinions that could be controversial or possibly offensive to others. I concluded with three components that I feel contribute to perceptions of relational safety between students and teachers: *an invitational style of audience address, reflexivity of teacher power, and a worldview that is dialogic in nature.*

In Chapter Three, I discussed the methods I selected for this project, including my rationale for wanting to utilize multiple methods of data collection. Since teachers have relationships with each student (individually) as well as the entire section of students, I argued that collecting data from individual students, groups of students, and their teachers would reveal multiple layers of data that reflected the relational aspect of teaching and co-existing in a classroom space for an entire semester. After explaining my understanding of each method

(classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews) and their theoretical underpinnings, I elaborated on how each method would be used—first in isolation, then in combination with the other methods. I also discussed the intersubjective nature of human existence and the naturally inherent lack of self-awareness we all endure as we teachers attempt to inquire about how we relate to our students and vice versa.

Since we need feedback and affirmation from others to form our own self-images, it stands to reason that multiple methods of data collection and "multiple lines of sight" (Berg, 2001, p. 4) have potential to make the findings from these sources of information richer and more revealing. I explained that this process of comparison and contrast is known as "triangulation," a technique used by many scholars who conduct their research in traditions one might label more interpretive and quantitative in nature. Since relationships are contextual, dynamic, and ever-evolving, there could never be any objective truth in the answers we glean from our research inquiries into them. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), "triangulation can be done with *multiple methods*. Here, the researcher looks for convergent data in fieldnotes, interviews, documents, or other qualitative evidence" (p. 274). I explained how I was attempting to reveal how the findings from separate (but related) data sets reflected different (or similar) aspects of the teacher-student relationship, and how they complement and/or challenge each other (on the page). Lindlof and Taylor continue, citing Roth and Mehta's clarification of triangulation from 2002, noting that "generally, a quantitative measure is used for establishing an 'objective truth of factual events,' while the qualitative technique probes the 'multiple subjective views' of the people involved in the events" (p. 274).

In Chapter Four, I discussed the major findings and themes that emerged to help me get at the essence of relational safety after I transcribed and analyzed the data from each set of

participants, individually and in tandem. First I shared my fears, concerns, and frustrations with the interview I conducted with my first student participant (Jon-Jon). In this reflection I came to understand firsthand how the researcher's agency as reporter of events is power-laden because the editorial (and aesthetic) choices in coding and thematizing are inherently influenced by the researcher's history and personal biases (Davies, 1999). This would include the desire to pursue an inquiry of this nature, including the research questions I sought to answer. After all, my desire to conduct this study was grounded in a reflection of my own experiences as a new teacher and trying to make sense of that while I came to learn about a teaching perspective that challenges institutional power structures by foregrounding dialogue and reflexive thinking (CCP). I share additional reflections about Jon-Jon and how his presence was significant to this study later in this chapter when I muse about social change and what critical and reflexive teachers hope to accomplish in the classroom: creating conditions by which relational safety with their students can develop and flourish in the never-ending pursuit of a just society.

Following, I shared a story about how I was struggling with a feeling of missing something relevant from the data and how I was hindering my own progress in the transcription process. Even though I was transcribing as accurately as possible (and creating codes throughout), I was frustrated and annoyed. After several completed files, I still had little sense of anything significant or earth-shattering coming to light. Next, I revealed how I finally stumbled upon the missing idea—listening—while actually listening to the recorded data files. Listening, by extension, falls under the major theme of dialogue, which I discussed in detail later in that chapter. After sharing these anecdotes about my experiences in data interpretation, I broke down my findings into two sections.

First, I discussed codes and themes that emerged from the data that complimented and confirmed my review of literature. I discussed the first major theme of this study (affirmation) and several codes that together merged into that theme. Recognition of names, faces, and other significant details are a few ways that students begin to experience relational safety with their teachers. I then followed up with a discussion and review of the second theme, a dialogic worldview. In this section on dialogue, I included excerpts from students who discuss their experiences with listening and how their relationships with teachers are influenced when listening is present (or absent). Relational safety requires a dialogic worldview with an openness to other perspectives and opinions, and participants engage fully in listening as well as talking. Each section featuring a major theme included a brief analysis of that theme.

The second section continued my contribution to the existing literature on teacher-student relationships. This was where I revealed findings about relational safety that did not surface in my literature review nor was I anticipating, based upon my own expectations that were naturally informed by my experiences (as teacher and student). These findings are especially important to expanding the conceptualizing of relational safety, since they directly reflect the feelings and beliefs of the students and teachers who participated in this project. I synthesized several codes that spoke to the materiality of teaching and sharing space in a classroom into a third major theme for this project: bodies in space, which was a combination of codes which included the teacher's physical appearance, as well as observable teacher behaviors. One sub-code of observable teacher behaviors came to light that when students and teachers took into account the temporality of a shared teaching experience: commemorating the last day of class. Humans are sensing and perceiving beings and we all are aware of each other's bodies, no matter how much our traditional schooling may have convinced us to think of the classroom and each other in a

disembodied manner (hooks, 1994). Students watch how teachers interact with other students. Relational safety is steeped in the awareness that the classroom can be a site for social change—but only when teachers embrace the materiality and temporality of the space itself and the inhabitants therein.

I then progressed to discuss the fourth major theme for this study, balance. I used Baxter's (1990) relational dialectic perspective as my point of reference to help me describe the data about relational safety that seemed to cry out for balance and not extremes. As the adage goes, there can be too much of a good thing. In discussing balance, I shared several codes that formed the balance theme: humor, professional versus approachable, feedback, and self-disclosure. I added an analysis to this theme as well and I shared my reflections on how this theme emerged and what influenced me to present it in this study on relational safety. Relational safety is jeopardized when there is no consideration of how to gauge how and when to use humor, how much personal information to disclose (or keep hidden), and how to give feedback that is fair and constructive. Relational safety relies on tensions between extremes to achieve balance.

I then shared the final major theme for this study: community. When relational safety thrives, the classroom space functions like a community—everyone matters and no one is expendable. There is much research on care in the classroom and the benefits to student learning and development when students perceive that teachers genuinely care about their well-being and learning potential (Noddings, 1998; Teven & McCroskey, 1996). What I was not expecting to find was an expression of community where students demonstrate care for the teacher—and each other. Several students testified that they experienced feelings of safety with their teacher (and classmates) specifically due to having had the experience of their time together taking

CMST101. When students realize that someone will notice if they miss class, or even just extend an offer of assistance, these actions can have a profound impact on how students view the classroom space. When care is demonstrated (and received) in a communal settings, feelings of safety have a space to grow in all of the relational aspects of the classroom community.

Finally, I reviewed the research questions and proceeded to discuss the findings which best reflect the opinions and ideas expressed by teachers, students, and groups of students combined. In the section for student interviews, I featured several voices which rallied for concepts that they feel helps them experience relational safety with their teachers and other students: being able to communicate openly in class, welcoming presence in the classroom, connections to teachers motivate learning, and teachers actively mediating discussions between students, especially when discussing charged topics like privilege and oppression. Students who experience feelings of connection and safety with other students have praised teaching practices that encourage students to interact and connect. However, some students (domestic and international) have identified oppressive teaching practices (and behaviors) as the impetus for seeking out relationships with other students to help them sidestep these teachers and meet their own learning goals.

The combined voices of the participating teachers spoke of relational safety in terms of remaining diligent in being aware of power differences between themselves and their students. They collectively value fostering a classroom environment that is warm and welcoming, but also welcoming to opinions and perspectives that may not be popular or demonstrating reflexive thinking. The importance of being a person that students feel that they can approach came up again (as it did with students) but more specifically, embracing the knowledge that our student body is diverse and, therefore, the voices in our classrooms must also reflect a myriad of

experiences and worldviews. The definition of relational safety in Chapter Two was expanded to include the feeling of existing in caring community with a teacher who attempts to be aware of all of the bodies in the space with a reflexive desire to achieve balance when engaging humor, knowing how to disclose and remain professional, and offering feedback.

The participant voices in the three focus groups were adamant that relational safety starts at the most basic levels of affirmation: facial recognition and remembering students from previous teaching experiences. Additionally, they shared a desire to see the teacher's enthusiasm for the topic, noting that their motivation to embrace the material is impacted by the teacher's example. Focus group participants also expressed a desire for teachers to be friendly, and to address the students in the classroom in a welcoming, non-threatening manner. Lastly, the focus groups expressed feeling safe in a student-teacher relationship when the teacher is not only humble (relating to educational level and being well-informed), but when the teacher outright expresses an awareness of the inherent power differences in the teacher-student relationship. Students in the focus groups noted that relational safety is in constant tension with the struggles of balancing rigorous standards for academic achievement with pushing back against traditional teaching practices that are oppressive and dehumanizing. This is how students in groups described what they need to experience relational safety with their teachers.

I concluded Chapter Four with reflections about the frustrating lack of control teachers have when they desire to develop relational safety that is directly related to the sometimes difficult process of accepting and embracing their students. Sometimes communities form (hooks, 1994, 2003; Shor, 1996), but not always. Each semester presents a fresh opportunity to get acquainted with a new group of students. Each time a teacher reads that attendance roster for the first time, there is a new chance to create that special bond with students and co-create a

classroom environment where dialogue is ever-present and classroom teaching practices are grounded in the knowledge that our students are diverse and may not share our goals for their learning experience. As critical communication pedagogues and teachers who aspire to teach critically and reflexively, we *hope* that we can foster relational safety with our students. And we *hope* our classroom will become a space where we can challenge knowledge production, and engage our students in meaningful dialogue about injustice, equality, and social change. That segue leads this dissertation into a full circle and back to the heart of this project. Why does any of this matter and who should care about relational safety at all? In the following section, I address this question after I share insights about conducting this study and how I grew and evolved in the role of researcher (who is also student and teacher).

Critical Reflections

From Data Collection to Themes

After having observed four classroom sessions and then conducting 27 interviews and three focus groups, I was left with nearly 26 hours of tape to transcribe and form into something coherent and meaningful. I was excited to begin listening to the recordings and transcribing the conversations I had engaged in over the summer. Like the most skilled and enthusiastic court reporter I could imagine, I set about meticulously dissecting each recording and making sure I captured every pause, breath, stammer, and utterance that was made by me and the participants. As I began the process of extrapolating meaning from my recordings, a couple of interesting things surfaced pretty quickly and caught my attention.

First, I am proud to say that during all three focus groups and all interviews, the research questions (RQs) were always foregrounded. I used a version of the RQs to start off the dialogue during all three focus groups (see Appendix A6) with the following as a guiding prompt:

"Please list at least 6 (six) qualities that a teacher should possess in order for you (as a student) to feel safe, invited, and invested in the teacher-student relationship. These can be single words or short phrases." Each interview always concluded with a return to the RQs and final thoughts before ending the interview and signing off.

Second, I have come to realize that during this past summer semester (2017), I made contact with most (if not all) of the students who took CMST101 during that semester. I would not describe my degree of contact as full immersion by any means (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2011). I was neither student nor teacher in the research settings, but even as a silent observer, I know my presence was felt in the classrooms when I sat in to collect data for the interview protocols I would use later (Davies, 1999). Still, I do feel that I can claim having met (or at least interacted with) most of the students taking this class (in person) during the summer—even if it was only during my attempts to recruit volunteer participants for interviews. Having made contact with the bulk of the population I sampled makes me more confident that my findings are valid, since the data I collected and analyzed reflects the bulk of the population I studied for this project.

What Happens When Life Happens—In Real Life?

One of the most challenging parts of this project arose at the stage of deciding what to include and what to leave out of my account of this research. It was simple enough to include excerpts of data that easily supported my beliefs and hypotheses. I was overjoyed each time I heard a participant make a statement that I thought I would want to highlight and include later. The challenges I speak of now are related to inclusion of data that could be less than flattering to participating teachers. For instance, the students laud their teachers for displaying flexibility and making accommodations for those who struggled giving speeches. As a person who has been in

the workforce for years (military and civilian), I ask myself if we are doing a disservice to our students by showing them leniency. When we allow extra time, do we create false expectations for our students that they will get second chances or a do-over in their future endeavors? Or do our students learn better *because* their teacher gave them the space to need more time? To what degree should teachers sacrifice the safe part of their relationships with their students and say “no” in order to strictly adhere to academic rigor or institutional policies? Since relational safety between teachers and students is a shared experience that is always contextual and shifting, there cannot be a stock answer to these questions. Teachers must address each student and their specific needs and requests as they come—and remain hopeful that even if their attempts to engage, invite, and accommodate students appear to go unnoticed (or appreciated), all is not lost. As part of a social justice agenda, relational safety relies on good faith between humans, and hope for a future where justice and equality are in our sights.

Does Gratitude Imply Obligation?

My colleagues graciously invited me into their classrooms, allowed me to question their students about their teaching practices and interactions with their students. What kind of gratitude would I be demonstrating if I included excerpts that seemed critical or corrective in nature? No teacher can possibly know or see everything that goes in the classroom space. Humans are simply not wired that way; we can never truly know what another person thinks unless they tell us. Conversely, we can only guess at another person's true thoughts or feelings, should they decide not to disclose (Goffman, 1959). Yet, we must rely on our communicative interactions with others to help us as we form our sense of self (Mead, 1967). These self-images are not static or fixed; we continue to mold and reshape our self-images with each social interaction we experience. Earlier, I proclaimed that feedback from my observations in the

classroom could present heuristic value to the participating teachers; conversely, what kind of researcher do I become if/when I make the decision to exclude (or minimize) data that I label as "insignificant," "petty," "student has an axe to grind," or "not enough instances to merit its own code"—or other personal judgments that reflect my own preferences and biases?

Ultimately, I decided that I would make careful word choices if I decided to include any data that might paint one of the participating teachers in an unflattering light. Is it unethical to be selective with the data I include in my findings? If I make reference to an incident that only one student mentioned, should that be omitted in service making space for the voices of the larger (combined) classroom communities? I certainly did not unearth any data about the participating teachers (and their teaching practices) that I feel was harmful to their students. But I continue to question my role as reporter of facts and data (Davies, 1999). I had to remind myself many times throughout this project that having suspicions and guesses about what the data might reveal is normal and human; however grounded theory means asking questions and observing what the collected data tells me. Of course, my influence is ever present. As I shared in the introduction, my experiences and my reading are big factors that led me to want to conduct this level of inquiry about relational safety in the first place. I needed teachers and students to tell me what they believe; in isolation I certainly could not figure out how teachers and students come to feel safe in their shared relationships.

Also, I reflect upon the (new) knowledge that many of my GTA colleagues are very close in age to their students, a situation with its own set of unique possible complications. Personally, I rarely have had any students who are remotely close to my age during my entire PhD experience. As student participant Chadrick stated in Chapter Four, having teachers and students who share similar pop culture and historical references can be a starting point for connecting; in

turn, however, younger teachers may have challenges establishing credibility and confidence in their teaching authority. One teacher participant, Beth, briefly discussed the challenges of being a person who is not physically intimidating or capable of demonstrating brute strength.

Although I have taught my share of student athletes (and students in great physical shape generally), not once have I ever had to consider my own body strength, bulk, or stature in comparison to a student who I feared could have been challenging my authority. To be certain, a big part of the relational aspect of teaching reflects the diversity of personalities that have to try to form communities and relationships (hooks, 2003). I feel fortunate to have had the privilege of getting acquainted with all four participating teachers much more holistically: first by observing them interacting with their students, then hearing about those interactions from those same students, and finally through engaging these same teachers in dialogue as we reflected on how they relate to (and interact with) their students.

Evaluating Participant Credibility

I have already attempted to make contact with every research participants whose words I used in this chapter to offer them an opportunity to read my findings and make comments (or corrections) to the transcribed data I used in Chapter Four. At least two student participants have informed me that they are no longer enrolled here at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Additionally, I have already shared my concerns about the "correctness" I sought from participants who failed to produce a cursive signature on the consent form (along with a printed name). I can only hope that no one was badly insulted or made to feel diminished intellectually (especially the international student participants who are non-native speakers of English) as a result of my desire to produce paperwork for my files that was 100% accurate and free of all possible errors and oversights. Conducting research about relationships is a rich opportunity for

reflexive thinking and checking oneself for previously unidentified biases (Davies, 1999), but finding out about these biases because I imposed them onto the volunteers I recruited is not something I will forget anytime soon. I hope my learning opportunities did no permanent damage to those I learned about (and from), while going about the business of conducting "rigorous" research practices. Additionally, I must again admit that during my four classroom observations, I neatly categorized students as "U. S. American" or "international" but did not go any further in my inquiries of the countries of origin for those students my (uninformed) eyes read as "foreign." Yes, each interview and focus group participant was (later) encouraged to include all relevant identity markers on their own information sheet. Frankly, I cannot say with certainty that I violated any ethics in my rush to categorize the students demographically when I was observing; I cannot deny, however, that I made fast judgments and went with them. (Students I observed were labeled by how my eyes read their genders and domestic or non-domestic statuses exclusively—see the tables in Appendix B.)

One student participant, in particular, gave me pause with some of her claims and insights. First, she was a non-native speaker of English. Although I attempted to listen generously (through her heavy accent) and played back several snippets of her recorded interview to clarify what I thought I was hearing, sometimes I just couldn't be sure. I was painfully aware during the interview that I did not want to ask her to repeat herself multiple times—even though I instructed her to ask me to repeat (or restate) my questions as many times as she felt necessary to understand me. Sometimes, I got the feeling that she might enjoy shocking me ("Sometimes I think my teacher stares at my body too much!") or just the interaction of having a chat with me. In fact, she told me that she was more comfortable chatting casually with me than she was with her own CMST101 teacher. Since I had no basis to pursue

or verify these claims (and with limited confidence that I had heard and understood what the participant actually meant to communicate), I made the decision to note her questionable comments, but not to include anything I was unsure about in this report. As the summer concluded, I then reflected on what it felt like to have had so much contact with a majority of the students who took CMST101 during the summer. That leads me right into my biggest limitation for this research project. In fact, the limitations and future research opportunities for this project overlap and complement each other extremely well. And so, I combine them into one major section for discussion.

Limitations and Future Directions

Online Sections

Although I have not mentioned this before, it has remained in the back of my mind since I began to recruit teachers to participate in this study. For the first time (as least to my knowledge), there were two online sections of CMST101 offered this past summer. I did NOT attempt to include these sections or recruit the two instructors who taught them. My struggle was not because I have no belief in relationships between students and teachers when the mode of communication is mostly electronic. In fact, the opposite is true. Considering that I had my hands quite full with data from three focus groups, four teacher interviews and 23 interviews with students, the scope of this project simply was not conducive to including those two online sections. First, there are methodological concerns. How would I have observed them? (I certainly would not ask for access to electronic communication between those teachers and students!) Could I have successfully recruited enough of those distance learners to conduct a focus group? From my previously-stated experience teaching online in Chapter One, I do know

that continued communication via email does provide rich opportunities for connection, community and relational growth. I elaborate here.

Cyberspace versus physical space. Since the mid-1990s, technological advances have continued to catapult our planet into an age of information, and thus we now possess unlimited possibilities for building communities and networks brought together by the internet using media such as social networking, live streaming, chatrooms, and discussion boards. As a result, space can no longer be merely conceptualized as bound by the laws of physics. We know this to be true as evidenced by the myriad online communities that provide a space for support, networking, and idea sharing for individuals from all over the globe who claim similar interests. Cavallaro (2001) calls cyberspace “a medium rather than a location” (p. 177) claiming that online shared communities in essence defy physical laws. Unlike physical space, which exists on a material plane regardless of the presence of any organism, this author claims that shared spaces on the internet are constructed by the users who occupy them. In other words, the relationships between the internet users who frequent message boards and online forums bring about the “ability to forge a sense of cohesiveness in societies where people feel they do not belong anywhere” (p. 177).

Some critics do point out the lack of internet access to underprivileged individuals and those who live in poverty or remote locations; others claim that cyberspaces such as these (while not necessarily exclusive), may have the effect of encouraging individuals to graft more towards other internet users that they perceive to be more like them, based on their mutually shared interests. Cavallaro (2001), on the other hand finds this immediate access to previously unknown persons liberating. She claims that the ability to interact with others on a global scale makes these users “capable of promoting fresh forms of learning and knowledge and means of

communication unfettered by repressive divisions based on race, gender, age, and status” (p. 177). We see then, that relationships easily trump physical space and transcend our conceptualizations of height, volume, and depth.

With this perspective in mind (and my own experiences teaching students remotely as well), there is no way that I could proclaim that the two sections of remote students taking CMST101 had nothing to contribute to a study about relationships between students and teachers. However, the logistics of conducting such research were simply too complex to include at this time (methodology, recruitment, adapting interview protocols to the appropriate contexts, etc.). This leads me to consider other questions I ponder as I keep future research opportunities in mind.

Teaching Other Subjects Critically and Reflexively

I chose this specific population of teachers (GTAs) and students for my study because they reflect my own experiences (and expertise)—and because I had easiest access to them (as a convenience sample). However, in addition to conducting inquiry about teachers and students who do not (usually) meet in physical spaces, I am also interested in conducting research that asks how these findings might be useful for teachers in other disciplines (such as the STEM fields) and thus may find logistical and systemic challenges to developing engaged and relational teaching practices like the tenets of CCP suggest. Some of these limitations and challenges occur naturally due to large class sizes in auditorium settings; several students in this study have reflected upon the ways that they adapt (or fail to adapt) to taking classes in large lecture halls. A few students shared that they rely on classmates to help them; others try to sit near the front and (whenever possible) introduce themselves and engage the teacher briefly after class is dismissed. I am once again reminded of the claim made by Fassett and Warren (2007) that any research

about teaching is directly related to Communication Studies for two reasons: 1) as critical communication pedagogues, we desire to teach communication critically and reflexively; 2) all teaching (regardless of subject or discipline) is done through communicative acts and therefore is worthy of our inquiry and consideration. How can the findings and conclusions drawn from this study be adapted and reshaped to pedagogical practices and perspectives in fields that are not traditionally taught critically? As education continues to embrace technology and more classes are being taught remotely, critical educators will no doubt have plenty of opportunities to consider these concerns as they attempt to connect with students in the most meaningful way possible as they learn and interact from different spaces.

Appropriate Method

Another concern with this future research opportunity is related to methodology. When I conducted the focus groups, the students were given worksheets (see Appendix A6) and were instructed to free-write what they believed were essential components necessary for establishing relationships between teachers and students. Greenbaum (2009) made this suggestion to moderators of focus group sessions as a means to start the conversation and possibly encourage more reticent participants to share their thoughts and opinions more readily. While I did refer back to the sheets during all focus group sessions to re-direct the conversations back to the research questions (and to provide content for discussion when the flow of dialogue hit a lull), there is still plenty of data on these worksheets that was not included in this study. Perhaps I could have added an additional method (such as textual analysis) to include all of the data that were provided by the focus group participants in one thorough summary. Nash and Bradley (2011) remind us that "each research method serves a justifiable purpose in terms of an academic discipline's unique body of knowledge, respected scholarly traditions, field-tested standard of

inquiry, and intended outcomes" (p. 13). Additionally, Fassett and Warren (2007) encourage critical communication pedagogues to be open to considering a range of methods of inquiry, noting that the most effective research methods are those that keep the research questions at the foreground of the study. In any case, I have not yet counted how many times any one idea or concept was included on the focus group worksheets; I do not, however undervalue the additional meanings that could emerge if the words (or phrases) the students in the focus groups stated were tallied and categorized quantitatively. And of course, at all times, we must keep our desire to use research about the classroom space (and the relationships between the teachers and students who inhabit them) foregrounded throughout all stages of the project. This way, our teaching can be a means to move the world towards small moments of interruption and inquiry that can help usher in social change. And our critical communication pedagogy research should always reflect these values—not only in our methods and data collection, but in the interpretation of the data from which we make our claims.

Coming Full Circle

Social Change and Social Justice

Here I include a small (but necessary) tangent about the notion of the classroom as a space where critical and reflexive pedagogues can work in pursuit of social justice. Social justice is a concept that is hard to define, and harder still to imagine. There seems to be agreement among scholars when attempting to operationalize the term that one goal should be “fairness and equality for all people and respect for their basic human rights” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xvii). In addition to the conceptual and linguistic challenges to defining and naming oppression, institutional power and capitalist ambition have created conditions where great disparity in standards of living and unequal access to resources often go unnoticed and

unchallenged by the masses (Holloway, 2002). According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), “Understanding social justice means that an individual must be able to recognize how relations of unequal social power are constantly being negotiated at both the micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels” (p. 145). They continue, explaining the necessity of understanding how all teachers (and students) exist and operate in an educational system that is laden in power indifferences and inequities. However, they quickly inform the reader that recognition of inequality alone lacks substance, noting that “we must be able to *act* from this understanding, in service of a more just society” (p. 145). In *Critical Communication Pedagogy*, Fassett and Warren (2007) list a “Response to Injustice” as one of their primary reasons for developing CCP. In communication classrooms, CCP informs the potential to create a space where social change can occur. In this process, mundane ways of being are questioned and interrupted while the power dynamics between teachers and their students are investigated simultaneously.

When the students in FG3 told me how Brandon has addressed (and compensates for) the implied power distance between himself and the students (spatially) in the classroom, they also told me the dialogue was more important than the outcome. Lola and Layla have both testified about their admiration for Brandon and his willingness to check his own privilege as well as his humility about his positionality as an educated, English-speaking white man in the United States. In this example, the students forgive Brandon's seated position in the classroom because he demystified and deconstructed his authority in dialogue with the students in the class.

Social change, then, is not a mere by-product of CCP, but a goal that is always foregrounded, especially in the classroom. However, social change does not simply happen out of nowhere. Wonder Woman didn't just memorize the names of her students the first week. She absorbed them—with intent—including each student's expression of a preferred way of being

addressed. From the perspective of CCP, each moment in our classrooms yields another opportunity to question our teaching practices and core beliefs about the nature of knowledge (Allen, 2011; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Kahl, 2013). When these moments of reflexivity encourage us to take actions like questioning oppressive classroom practices or consciously choosing unoppressive language (Warren, 2008), these instances are what I call working towards social change. Social justice will be the sum total of all the movements towards social change; social change reflects the process, not the end product we hope to see one day. Remember from Chapter Two that an anchoring point for this dissertation has been the idea that creating conditions for social change undergirds the tenets of CCP (Fassett & Warren, 2007) and drives the motivation for establishing relational safety with our students. Teaching communication critically is a challenge, and may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar to many (Toyosaki, 2013). New teachers and seasoned professionals alike have had formative educational experiences that likely will have been reflective of a more traditional perspective of the teacher-student relationship, one based on absolute teacher power and little (or no) agency for students (Nieto, 1992). Teacher Beth has stated that she wants to be sure to break the chains of oppression that are laden in our educational system by starting small: her mere presence in the classroom. Allen (2011) shares that the "benefits of employing critical communication pedagogy to teach and learn...difference may be incremental...especially if we are proactive" (p. 121). I would argue that the results of a critical communication teaching practice will always be incremental, no matter how much enthusiasm and presence we bring with us to the classroom. Moreover, when students experience relational safety with their teachers, they are more likely to open up and share their beliefs and perspectives—and possibly be inspired to be more reflexive in their communication—if not outright social justice advocates. Remember, students do not only listen

to teachers in lecture; they observe and remember what they learn about us too. That brings me to teachers modeling desired behaviors as a means of interrupting a cycle of oppressive language and mocking others for their obvious differences.

Modeling Behaviors. Here is an example of modeling the kinds of behaviors we request from our students during class (and hope they emulate for their lifetimes). The following excerpt is from teacher Beth, who I observed in lecture telling her students that she would go to great lengths not to utter the word “slut” as an act of interruption for validating the meaning of the word and its demeaning connotation. She tells me that she is naturally sensitive to profanity and hurtful language, even in her native Chinese language, and takes pride in her deliberate choice to take this stand. She explains, “Even in, in Chinese, or in whatever other occasions I do not really want to say those.” She continues by saying that such utterances are worse, “especially in, public, in front of the students.” Beth notes that she intentionally refuses to give power to the word that is “a biased label for women.” She feels that maybe by enacting and modeling a “different choice,” then the students would probably also pay attention to their wording as well.

Later, Meredith (an international student in Beth’s class) recalls a conversation with Beth, an international student GTA from China, about Beth’s intentional strategy to interrupt hurtful behaviors she has endured from U.S. American students by not repeating those rude behaviors herself. Taking a page from Warren (2008), Beth told Meredith when they were chatting that she (Beth) once got “eye-rolls” from her students, so she intentionally avoids engaging in those hurtful behaviors herself. Relational safety is increased when people take responsibility for how their words and actions can impact others and purposefully avoid oppressive language and dismissive behaviors (especially from teachers to students).

Chris feels that teachers can be an inspiration to their students simply by modeling behaviors that students can aspire to and emulate. These moments of interruption in the classroom that challenge otherwise taken-for-granted moments that would otherwise go unquestioned lead students to feelings of relational safety. Social change comes about when multiple moments such as these are used as a way to connect across difference and strive towards a more just world. According to Fassett and Warren (2007), CCP is all about hope and a brighter future, yet they quickly counter by adding that “critical communication pedagogy offers no magical spells to ward off moments of frustration and hurt” (p. 125). Diversi and Moreira (2009) muse that very little that happens in our classrooms today will change the macro systems of oppression currently plaguing our society. We remain optimistic that humanity will someday value community and collaboration over power and domination. It is this hope that compels each of us to continue this difficult but rewarding work (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In the meantime, a sense of faith in humanity can keep us motivated when we understand that social justice has yet to be realized (Diversi & Moreira, 2009), can hardly be defined (Novak, 2000; Nurenberg, 2011), and must manifest itself in small steps during our daily lives as we challenge old ways of thinking and being in the world (Fassett & Warren, 2007). We want to enlighten our students about systemic oppression, but we fear resistance and pushback (Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Redmond, 2010; Warren, 2011). We must implore our students that they can change their world, yet do so without perpetuating feelings of defeat and complacency in them (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Johnson, 2006). This is essential for critical communication pedagogues who aspire to create conditions for social change in the classrooms we inhabit; in our passionate pursuit of equality, our voices can become overwhelming and blurred in our collective outcry against injustice (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Hope

As I have mentioned several times up to this point, I would be remiss to conclude this dissertation and omit the idea of hope. After all of this interaction and observation and sifting through piles of data, I'm still left wondering....does any of this matter in the long run? Can social justice truly be realized someday as the sum total of all of these interrupted moments in our daily communication and interactions? Have these four teachers actually had long-lasting effects on these students as they attempt to make their classroom spaces more inclusive, inviting, and just? Thomas said the feedback he got on his speeches will serve him well throughout life. Both AJ (s) and Lola (s) said that Brandon's (t) willingness to engage and listen makes it possible for their section to engage in genuine dialogue about inequality, privilege, and oppression. But is it enough? By what standards do we gauge our successes (or failures)? Will we ever know? Only this is certain: our efforts to make the world fair and equal for all *may* not yield the results we desire; doing nothing absolutely *ensures* it.

In this project, I have I attempted to describe and embody a teaching perspective which aspires to create conditions for social change. Hope is the element that propels the world toward actions that could potentially lead to social change (hooks, 2003; Warren, 2011). Freire (1970) says quite frankly, “Nor yet can dialogue exist without hope” (p. 80). In agreement, Fassett and Warren (2007) proclaim that hope should be a goal of the critical scholar, steeped in a belief that things need not be as they are currently, and can be changed. Without hope, we will surely become burned out, wary, and even experience a frustration that borders on fatalism (Andersen, 1995; hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998). In the absence of hope, our teaching loses purpose and we lose our commitment to creating spaces for dialogue through teaching (hooks, 1994; Warren, 2011). Giroux (2007) inspires me thusly:

Hence, hope is more than a politics; it is also a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents. Hope is the outcome of those pedagogical practices and struggles that tap into the memory of lived experiences, while at the same time linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social change. (p. xiii)

Bruce (t) told me that one of his greatest desires for his teaching practice is that his teachings aren't forgotten after the term ends. He hopes by being in his classroom, his students have learned more about how to be people with other people and even some time to consider the ethics of being human. Finally, he hopes that the connection he creates with students results in him being seen as a person who sees students as people—humanizing.

Hope, then, is an essential part of any critical teaching practice. Hope is sometimes all we have left to cling unto when we see capitalistic greed and political corruption have surely become the new world order, and building community means creating borders to exclude "others." No matter how we theorize and expose the unjust nature of domination and power (Hearn, 2012; Holloway 2002), there is always more work to be done. In a rapidly shifting global landscape, "cynicism replaces hope" (Giroux, 2007, p. viii), as oppression continues to reinvent itself while simultaneously becoming more obscure and difficult to recognize or name (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Simpson, 2010; Warren; 2011). Simpson (2010) muses, "How can those of us working in a discipline that engages in the process of making meaning turn our backs on questions of meaning that lead to justice: for whose benefit, for what gain, and at what cost to how people live?" (p. 381).

When we realize that our teaching and research cannot do much to immediately change the current conditions of oppression and inequality in our world today (Diversi & Moreira,

2009), we must not give in to feelings of despair. Rather, we must look ahead and hope that future generations will carry on the work we do. Possibly, some of those who do this work might be our students. Only when we see our work in the classroom in terms of creating possibilities for social change, will the difficulties that we experience in the forms of resistance (Johnson, 2006; Redmond, 2010), institutional bureaucracy (Shor, 1996; Palmer, 1998), and academic gatekeeping (Delpit, 1995; Diversi & Moreira, 2009), seem worthwhile. I wholeheartedly concur with Simpson (2010) when she asks us to consider why we do the work we do in the classroom. She declares that “the critical communication pedagogy at which I work seeks change that is realistic and hopeful” (p. 381); I am reminded again that hope must be a cornerstone to any critical communication teaching practice.

Teaching is a gift, to both the student and teacher (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998), and those who desire to teach communication critically have undertaken an honorable vocation (Warren, 2011). A critical communication teaching perspective is one where we ask hard questions because we are fully aware of the ways that each of us “struggle with doing this work, how we assume the stances we take, how we engage in politics in the classroom as we do, and how we try to position ourselves in relation to the others in our lives” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 102). However, teachers who aspire to teach critically and reflexively must still deal with the baggage and biases that they bring to the present moment—much like I have as researcher (Davies, 1999). In reflection, Nieto (1992) reminds us of the very exhausting reality that all of us who teach have histories and experiences with our former teachers that shape our ideas about relationships with our students noting that:

Teachers are also the products of educational systems that have a history of racism, exclusion, and debilitating pedagogy. As such, they put into practice what they

themselves have been subjected to and thus perpetuate systems that may be harmful to many of their students. (p. xxviii)

My aim in this research project was never to suggest that we can circumvent the “pedagogical labor” of teaching communication critically (Toyosaki, 2013, p. 411) or offer simple solutions to systemic oppression by suggesting we might realize social justice in our “critical” classrooms. I have simply attempted to contribute to the ongoing conversation between teachers of communication (and any teachers who desire to teach critically and reflexively) by sharing some of the more salient themes that emerged in my reading and interpretation of the primary CCP text (Fassett & Warren, 2007), putting them in conversation with *relational safety*, and engaging students and teachers in dialogue about their shared relationships and how they see themselves in relation to each other in the classroom space. In the process of combining these viewpoints, I have expanded the meaning of (and goals for) relational safety so that it is understood as coming directly from students and teachers in the classroom as well as scholarly literature on the relational aspects of the teacher-student dynamic.

Let's go back to Jon-Jon from the previous chapter: I read his body as straight, white, U. S. American, male—privileged, right? But is the aim of creating relational safety with our students limited to those bodies we (the teachers) view as marginalized? And even if students we deem as uninterested in social change and relationships between students and teachers are in fact, truly uninterested—what then? Why can't relational safety between students and teachers be the beginnings of creating advocates for social change and allies to marginalized groups? Bruce (t) said he most cherishes the idea of his teaching practice having lifelong impact on his students. Brandon (t) has said that we do lip service to embracing diversity—until someone disagrees with our perspective. In the process of cementing a relational bond with the students we encounter,

can our examples of language choices and unoppressive teaching practices impress upon our students that having power does not mean abusing power at the expense of others? Can the endeavor to achieve relational safety between teachers and students be done in the service of equality and justice for all? Should we not hope that when we teach we experience a relational turning point with our students that encourages them to become advocates for social change and allies to the oppressed? In order for the world to change into some place better than we know it to be today, I argue that we must remain hopeful and we must simply, remain.

When our students feel invited to participate in the classroom and feel safer in their relationships with their teachers, perhaps they will engage in earnest dialogue about serious (and often avoided) topics like privilege, oppression, hegemony, and social justice. Nieto (1992) reminds us that "oppressive forces that limit opportunities in the schools are a reflection of such forces at large" (p. xxviii). Through true dialogue we begin to better understand others that we perceive to be different from ourselves (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), and see that what we share far outweighs our (perceived) differences. This is the optimism we will need to sustain us as we develop, refine, and interrogate our critical and reflexive teaching practices. And we do this labor for one reason only: because we are pedagogues who love teaching, and who care about our students and the world we inhabit with them.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Appendix A1
Classroom Observation Worksheet

1. Description of scene
 - a. Number of participants in attendance
 - b. Description of students involved (age, gender, etc.).
Include physical description of teacher as well.
 - c. Description of setting (Are students relaxed or tense? How are people seated?
Who is participating?)
2. How often do students have the teacher explain a topic again? How often do students ask the teacher to repeat a question or explanation?
3. Types of behaviors observed? What kinds of languages are being used? What nonverbals can be observed?
4. How would you describe the climate of the classroom?
5. Are some students more vocal than others? Why might this be?
6. Do some students appear more attentive than others? By what criteria is this comparison made?
7. Do some students get more attention from the teacher than others?
8. Are students being called out for not participating verbally in the class?
9. Describe the level of comfort in the social setting exhibited by participants.
10. General information/areas of interest to be noted
11. Relevant comments/notes
12. Interpretations of information observed

Appendix A2

Loose Interview Protocol for Students in Interviews

Sample Questions:

1. Why did you decide to participate in this research study?
2. What does it mean for you to feel safe in class with your teacher? How much emphasis do you place upon feelings of safety before you will volunteer to verbally participate?
3. What has your teacher shown you that helps you to feel safe to participate in class and perhaps disclose personal information to the other students in discussions?
4. What has your teacher done or said in class that makes you hesitant to speak up and participate in class?
5. Can you think of a time when a teacher shamed you in front of other students? If so, how did that affect your willingness to participate verbally in class discussions?
6. How much does feeling safe in your relationship with your teacher impact your overall learning experience? In what ways do you engage more because you feel safe to do so?
7. In what ways do you feel like you can participate other than speaking?
8. How do you feel about visiting your instructor during office hours? How do you feel about contacting your instructor via email or by office phone?
9. Have you even encountered your instructor outside the classroom or off campus? If so, how do you feel about approaching them outside of a classroom setting?
10. How important is being invited to contact your instructor outside of class to you in regards to feeling safe in your relationship with your instructor?

Appendix A3

Loose Interview Protocol for Students in Focus Groups

Sample Questions:

1. I noticed that nearly every student in your class contributed to the discussion during class last week. What does your teacher do that makes the class engage and participate? **(NOTE: this question would be personalized based upon actual observations in the classroom)**

2. How does your teacher manage escalating conflict and differences of opinion that occur during class discussions on difficult topics such as oppression, racial tensions, gender stereotypes, and sexism?

3. Have any of you ever regretted openly sharing your thoughts and opinions during a class discussion? If so, can you elaborate?

4. Do you ever get the impression that your teacher is being overly critical or harsh with any student who voices a difference of opinion during class discussions?

5. Why do you feel is important for students to feel safe in their relationships with teachers?

6. How do you engage and verbally participate when you are not certain how your contribution will be received by the teacher and other students?

7. In the classroom, what kinds of teacher behaviors cause you shut down and refuse to engage?

- 8-9. Has any specific incident during the semester caused you to be more likely to talk during class discussions? Has any specific incident during the semester caused you to be less likely to talk?

10. How do you feel about visiting your instructor during office hours? How do you feel about contacting your instructor via email or by office phone?

11. Have you even encountered your instructor outside the classroom or off campus? If so, how do you feel about approaching them outside of a classroom setting?

12. How important is being invited to contact your instructor outside of class to you in regards to feeling safe in your relationship with your instructor?

Appendix A4

Loose Interview Protocol for Teachers

Sample Questions:

1. What made you interested in participating in a research study about relational safety between teachers and students?
2. Can you think of any prior experiences that make the concept of relational safety resonate with you?
3. How does the term relational safety resonate with you? What does it make you feel? Remember?
4. How important is it to you that your students feel safe and invited to participate in class discussions (or remain silent, should that be their choice)?

How do you understand relational safety? How do you define it? How do you value safety in relationships with your students? How do student actions (or lack thereof) affect your ability to experience safety in your role of teacher?

5. I noticed that during your lecture and discussion, you invited students to participate but did not suggest you would levy any penalty for not talking. Yet, I noticed that nearly every student contributed to the discussion at least twice. Can you explain this? (**NOTE: this question would be personalized based upon actual observations in the classroom**)
6. What do you hope students will say about your presence in the classroom and how you relate to them?
7. What do you fear students will say about your presence in the classroom and how you relate to them? How will you use this feedback as you continue to develop your teaching practice?
8. Have you ever encountered students (previous or current) outside the classroom or off campus? If so, how do you feel about them approaching you outside of a classroom setting?
9. How important do you feel it is that you make yourself available for students to contact you outside of class?

Appendix A5

Participant Information Sheet

Interview type (please circle appropriate response):	
One-on-one interview	Focus Group

Your name:	
Chosen pseudonym (optional):	

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your racial identification?

In what other ways do you identify that are significant to you?

Appendix A6

Focus Group Worksheet

WORKSHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Please list at least 6 (six) qualities that a teacher should possess in order for you (as a student) to feel safe, invited, and invested in the teacher-student relationship. These can be single words or short phrases.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Your pseudonym: _____

Appendix B

Classroom Observation Section 1 Table B-1

Teacher	observation date	location	class time
<i>"Bruce"</i>	<i>7-10-17</i>	Communications 1018	11:00 am-12:00 pm
Total #	M	F	
16	13	3	

Classroom Observation Section 2 Table B-2

Teacher	observation date	location	class time
<i>"Wonder Woman"</i>	<i>7-10-17</i>	Communications 1018	12:10-1:10 pm
Total #	M	F	
11	8	3	

Classroom Observation Section 3 Table B-3

Teacher	observation date	location	class time
<i>"Brandon"</i>	<i>7-12-17</i>	Communications 1018	9:50-10:50 am
Total #	M	F	
15	11	4	

Classroom Observation Section 4 Table B-4

Teacher	observation date	location	class time
<i>"Beth"</i>	<i>7-12-17</i>	Communications 1006	8:40 - 9:40 am
Total #	M	F	
7	4	3	

Appendix C

Focus Group Session 1

Table C-1

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Focus Group Date</i>	<i>location</i>	<i>class time</i>		
"Wonder Woman"	7/25/17	Communications 1018	12:10 - 1:10 pm		
Total #					
10	7	3			
US American					
total 5	4	1			
Int'l Students					
total 5	3	2			
White					
3 M	Black				
	1 M; 1 F				
Participant info					
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Racial ID(s)	Other ID markers?	
David	21	M	Black/White/Latino	Heterosexual	
Rosa	18	F	Asian	Indian	
Chris	20	M	White	Straight/low income	
Greg	27	M	White	American	
Haley	24	F	Black/Puerto Rican		
O.T.	24	M	Arab		
M.S.	23	M	Asian	Pakistani; brown; Int'l Student	
Danyell	21	F	Asian	Int'l Student	
Richard	23	M	White		
Roger	19	M	Asian	athlete	

Focus Group Session 2

Table C-2

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Focus Group date</i>	<i>location</i>	<i>class time</i>		
"Beth"	7-26-17	Communications 1006	8:40 - 9:40 am		
Total #					
	M	F			
7	4	3			
US American					
	M	F			
6 total	4	2			
Int'l Students					
	M	F			
1 total	0	1			
White					
4 M; 2 F					
			Participant Info		
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Racial ID(s)	Other ID markers?	
Meredith	21	F	Chinese	Accounting major	
Elizabeth	22	F	White	Catholic; Polish/German/Italian; American; Politically Independent	
Nicole	20	F	Mexican/Caucasian		
Cody	28	M	German/Irish American		
Allen	21	M	White	Student; pilot; Polish	
John	28	M	White		
Al	23	M	White; Hispanic	Catholic; student; heterosexual	

Focus Group Session 3

Table C-3

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Focus Group date</i>	<i>location</i>	<i>class time</i>		
"Brandon"	7-26-17	Communications 1018	9:50 - 10:50 am		
Total #					
	M	F			
8	7	1			
US American					
	M	F			
total 6	5	1			
Int'l Students					
	M	F			
total 2	2	0			
Latina					
	White	Black			
1 F	1 M	4 M			
			Participant info		
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Racial ID(s)	Other ID markers?	
Chadrick	30	M	Black	U.S. Army Veteran	
Reggie	18	M	Black	Student athlete	
Michael J	22	M	Black	Military service member	
Thomas	26	M	Black	Military/student	
A J	20	M	White	full-time student	
M. A.	28	M	undisclosed	(int'l student?) my read	
K. C.	29	M	Taiwanese		
Lola	21	F	Mexican/Latina	acting major; severe anxiety	

Appendix D

Teacher interview participant information

Table D1

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Interview date</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Racial identification</i>	<i>other identifying markers</i>
<i>"Brandon"</i>	8/15/17	M	28	White	LGBT/Gay
<i>"Beth"</i>	7/24/17	F	over 35	Chinese	Int'l Student; non-native English Speaker
<i>"Bruce"</i>	8/16/17	M	32	White	
<i>"Wonder Woman"</i>	8/19/17	F	37	White/Asian	First generation college student

Student interview participant information

Table D2

<i>Student</i>	<i>Interview date</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Racial identification</i>	<i>other identifying markers</i>
Meredith	8/23/17	F	Beth	21	Chinese	Transfer Student
Jimbo	8/13/17	M	Beth	19	Hispanic/Caucasian	
Nicole	8/3/17	F	Beth	20	Hispanic/White	
Teresa	8/4/17	F	Beth	20	White	
John	8/2/17	M	Beth	28	White	
Starbuck	7/31/17	M	Beth	19	Black	Normal student
Kyle	8/10/17	M	Bruce	23	White	veteran
Tiger	8/24/17	M	Bruce	22	Saudi Arabian	Int'l student
Mike	8/25/17	M	Bruce	22	Middle Eastern	Int'l student; non-native English speaker; parent, husband; interested in people and education
Generous	8/25/17	M	Bruce	22	Saudi	Int'l student; non-native English speaker
KC	8/15/17	M	Brandon	29	Taiwanese	Int'l student; non-native English speaker
Chadrick	8/8/17	M	Brandon	30	Black	U.S. Army Veteran
Thomas	8/7/17	M	Brandon	26	Black	military
A J	7/31/17	M	Brandon	20	White	
Layla	8/28/17	F	Brandon	21	White	Adopted; Mexican/Native American
O. T.	8/10/17	M	Wonder Woman	24	Arab	Int'l Student
M. S.	8/1/17	M	Wonder Woman	23	Asian	Pakistani; Int'l Student
Tootsie	8/2/17	F	Wonder Woman	20	White	
Roger	7/27/17	M	Wonder Woman	19	Asian	Athlete
Jon-Jon	7/19/17	M	Wonder Woman	21	Male	
Ming	7/23/17	F	Wonder Woman	21	Asian	Int'l Student
Richard	8/1/17	M	Wonder Woman	23	White	
Chris	8/25/17	M	Wonder Woman	20	White	Straight; Resident Advisor

Appendix E

Appendix E1

Email Recruitment Script

TO: Communication Studies GTA

From: David W. Whitfield, Doctoral Candidate

Re: Research Request

Hello!

My name is David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This email serves as an introduction about a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate. I obtained your name and email address from the roster of current GTAs in the Communication Studies Department.

The title of this study is: "*Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom Using a Lens of Relational Safety.*"

The primary purpose of this research study **is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.**

You are being offered the opportunity to participate because you are a GTA who is currently teaching CMST 101. I am requesting your participation in three ways:

- 1) observation of classroom interaction
- 2) one-on-one interview
- 3) recruiting students from your section for one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

Classroom interaction: I would like the opportunity to observe one or more class sessions that you teach. These observations will be useful in helping to shape questions for the interviews and focus groups, as well as allowing me to watch the teacher-student relationship in action. I will only take handwritten notes during classroom observations (not audio record).

One-on-one interview: I would like to interview you regarding your perception of teacher-student relationships.

Recruitment of students: I would appreciate the opportunity to recruit students from your class for one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to withdraw your participation at any point.

If you are interested in participating, or would simply like more information, please reply to this email.

If you prefer not to be contacted again regarding this project, please reply to this email with the words "opt out." If you do not respond to the email or return the opt-out message, you will be contacted again with this request 2 more times in the next 2 months.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

David W. Whitfield

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618 453 4533). Email:siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix E2

Classroom Recruitment Script

Hello class!

My name is David. I'm a PhD student in Communication studies! Your instructor is one of my colleagues.

I'm doing research about teachers and students. More to the point, I'm studying the relationships between teachers and their students – especially how they relate while together in the classroom space.

I want to find out what it takes for students to feel safe in the relationship they share with their teachers.

What are the elements necessary for students to feel invited or invested into a relationship with their teachers?

The only way I can find answers to my research questions is go straight to the source. And that's YOU! The students.

You are eligible to participate because you are currently taking CMST 101 – my target population for participants.

It would be very helpful to talk to a few students and see how you feel about this issue.

There are two ways to participate, and you can do one or both.

- 1) You could do an interview with me (one-on-one) which might take up to 60 minutes.
- 2) You can also join me in a focus group with 8-10 other students taking CMST 101 like you – and have an informal discussion about teachers, students, and how they relate to each other in the classroom – and how those relationships can be improved. That would probably take 60 minutes, perhaps 90.

Your insight is invaluable to this research.

If you would be interested in participating, please contact me by email at david.w.whitfield@siu.edu

Your contributions will be kept confidential at all times. If you decide to stop participating, you may do so at any time without any pushback or fear.

If you decide to participate in an interview, focus group (or both), you will be offered a \$5 Starbucks gift card as a token for your time and energy.

Thank you for your time.

David W. Whitfield,
Doctoral Candidate, Communication Studies Department

Appendix E3

Recruitment Flyer

What does pedagogy in action look like??!!!!

When you're in the classroom, how do your students feel about your presence? Are they nervous? Relaxed? Do they feel safe? Do they feel invited to join in the dialogue and participate?

How do we find out? We ask them!

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship

Who is eligible?

GTAs who are currently teaching CMST 101

What does participation entail?

- 1) I observe you in class teaching at least once and I take handwritten notes
- 2) Be interviewed by me
- 3) I recruit your students to participate in an interview and/or focus group

If you would like to volunteer, or would just like more information, please email me at david.w.whitfield@siu.edu



This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618 453 4533). Email:siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F

Appendix F1

Cover Letter to Teachers for Observations

Hello!

My name David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This letter serves to explain to you a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate by allowing me to observe your CMST 101 class.

The title of this study is: "Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety."

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.

You are being offered the opportunity to participate because you are currently teaching CMST 101.

If you decide to participate, please complete the consent form and information sheet. The consent form asks for you to agree or disagree to two things:

- A) allowing me to sit in on one of your scheduled classroom sessions to observe and make notes on my laptop for the entire class session.
- B) allowing me to use my observations to assist me in creating questions to be used during student focus groups and interviews (with teachers and students)
- C) providing a pseudonym (fake name) of your choosing, in my paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected.

The information sheet is for demographic information collection purposes only.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to withdraw your participation at any point. If, you decide to change the status of your consent on any of the above items, feel free to contact me and let me know.

I will only link the notes from my classroom observation to your demographic information using the pseudonym of your choosing. In other words, I will not be using your name. In any write up of this research that I do, and in any presentations I may make regarding this research, I will only identify you by your chosen pseudonym. I will only directly quote you if you give permission for that on the consent form. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that come from your participation. While there may be no direct or measureable benefit to you that comes from your participation, this research can potentially impact the ways that teachers and students understand the factors that influence student and teacher perceptions of safety in the teacher-student relationship. After I complete my research project, I will keep all of your responses in a digital format on my password protected laptop computer, and in a password protected online storage website (such as Google drive or Dropbox), to be used for future educational purposes. I am the only person who will have direct access to the notes I make while observing your classroom and your information sheet.

If you have general questions about the research, you may contact me using the following information:

David W. Whitfield
Doctoral Candidate, Principle Investigator
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2002K (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
david.w.whitfield@siu.edu
618-453-2291

Additional questions or concerns can be directed to my advisor:
Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway
Associate Professor, Project Advisor
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2246 (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
email: Sandypc@siu.edu
618-453-1886

David W. Whitfield

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F2

Consent Form Classroom Observations Teachers

CONSENT FORM:

Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety

I have read the material in the cover letter (previously handed to me) and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can keep the cover letter so as to have relevant study and contact information. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time. I agree to participate in this research according to the specific conditions as indicated below.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may observe my classroom and audio record the entire class session. I understand that he will not destroy his notes after his project is over. I understand that some of the questions in later interviews and focus groups may make reference to his observations.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may use his findings from observing my classroom, using a pseudonym of my choosing, in his paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the recorded audio data he collected in this project.

Date: _____

Chosen pseudonym: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F3

Cover Letter to Students in Classroom Observations

Hello!

My name David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This letter serves to explain to you a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate.

The title of this study is: "Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety." The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.

I intend to take notes of general classroom information regarding how the students and teacher in this classroom interact with one another. This may include how many times students raise their hands before they speak, whether or not teachers and students refer to one another by first names, how often students ask questions without being prompted to do so, the general sense of class discussion around topics that may be considered controversial, etc. Individual and private data will not be collected. The data I collect during classroom observations will NOT be used to assess course grades. In fact, your teacher will not have access to any notes I take.

Your teacher has consented for me to sit in the classroom during your section of CMST 101 to observe the teacher-student relationship in action. Later, there will be a chance for you to be more involved in this study if you choose.

I am here to observe the teacher and the teacher's interactions with the students in the class. I will not refer to any student by name. In any write up of this research that I do, and in any presentations I may make regarding this research, I will use a generic marker or pseudonym when discussing students. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that come from your participation. While there may be no direct or measureable benefit to you that comes from your participation, this research can potentially impact the ways that teachers and students understand the factors that influence student and teacher perceptions of safety in the teacher-student relationship. After I complete my research project, I will keep all of my notes from observing your classroom in a locked drawer in my office to be used for future research. My advisor, Dr. Pensoneau-Conway and I are the only persons who will have direct access to the notes I make while observing your classroom.

If you have general questions about the research, you may contact me or my advisor using the following information:

David W. Whitfield
Doctoral Candidate, Principle Investigator
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2002K (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
david.w.whitfield@siu.edu
618-453-2291

Additional questions or concerns can be directed to my advisor:

Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway
Associate Professor, Project Advisor
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2246 (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
email: Sandypc@siu.edu
618-453-1886

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

David W. Whitfield

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F4

Cover Letter to Students in Focus Groups

Hello!

My name David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This letter serves to explain to you a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate in a focus group.

The title of this study is: "Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety."

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.

You are being offered the opportunity to participate because you are currently enrolled in CMST 101.

If you decide to participate, please complete the consent form and information sheet. The consent form asks for you to agree or disagree to two things:

- A) allowing me to audio record you during a focus group discussion session and
- B) allowing me to directly quote from your participation in the focus group —using a pseudonym (fake name) of your choosing, in my paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected.

The information sheet is for demographic information collection purposes only.

Your decision whether or not to participate in no way affects your standing in class or with your instructor. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to withdraw your participation at any point. If, you decide to change the status of your consent on any of the above items, feel free to contact me and let me know. Focus group sessions typically last from 60-90 minutes.

I will only link the transcript of the focus group session to your demographic information using the pseudonym of your choosing. In other words, I will not be using your name. In any write up of this research that I do, and in any presentations I may make regarding this research, I will only identify you by your chosen pseudonym. I will only directly quote you if you give permission for that on the consent form. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported and no names will be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure

You will be offered a \$5 Starbucks gift card for your participation. There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that come from your participation. While there may be no direct or measureable benefit to you that comes from your participation, this research can potentially impact the ways that teachers and students understand the factors that influence student and teacher perceptions of safety in the teacher-student relationship. After I complete my research project, I will keep all of your responses in a digital format on my password protected laptop computer, and in a password protected online storage website (such as Google drive or Dropbox), to be used for future educational purposes. I am the only person who will have direct access to the audio file of your focus group session and your information sheet.

If you have general questions about the research, you may contact me using the following information:

David W. Whitfield
Doctoral Candidate, Principle Investigator
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2002K (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
david.w.whitfield@siu.edu
618-453-2291

Additional questions or concerns can be directed to my advisor:

Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway
Associate Professor, Project Advisor
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2246 (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
email: Sandypc@siu.edu
618-453-1886

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

David W. Whitfield

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F5

Consent form (For Students in) Focus Groups

CONSENT FORM:

Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety

I have read the material in the cover letter (previously handed to me) and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can keep the cover letter so as to have relevant study and contact information. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time. I agree to participate in this research according to the specific conditions as indicated below.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")
that David W. Whitfield may audiotape this focus group interview session. I understand that he will not destroy the digital audio file after his project is over.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")
that David W. Whitfield may quote my words from this focus group interview, using a pseudonym of my choosing, in his paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected in this project.

Chosen pseudonym: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F6

Cover Letter to Teachers in Interviews

Hello!

My name David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This letter serves to explain to you a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate by being interviewed.

The title of this study is: "Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety."

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.

You are being offered the opportunity to participate because you are currently teaching CMST 101.

If you decide to participate, please complete the consent form and information sheet. The consent form asks for you to agree or disagree to two things:

- A) allowing me to audio record you during an interview and
- B) allowing me to directly quote from your interview —using a pseudonym (fake name) of your choosing, in my paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected.

The information sheet is for demographic information collection purposes only.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You can decide to withdraw your participation at any point. If, you decide to change the status of your consent on any of the above items, feel free to contact me and let me know. Interviews typically last from 30-60 minutes.

I will only link the transcript of the interview to your demographic information using the pseudonym of your choosing. In other words, I will not be using your name. In any write up of this research that I do, and in any presentations I may make regarding this research, I will only identify you by your chosen pseudonym. I will only directly quote you if you give permission for that on the consent form. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity.

You will be offered a \$5 Starbucks gift card for your participation. There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that come from your participation. While there may be no direct or measureable benefit to you that comes from your participation, this research can potentially impact the ways

that teachers and students understand the factors that influence student and teacher perceptions of safety in the teacher-student relationship. After I complete my research project, I will keep all of your responses in a digital format on my password protected laptop computer, and in a password protected online storage website (such as Google drive or Dropbox), to be used for future educational purposes. I am the only person who will have direct access to the audio file of your interview and your information sheet.

If you have general questions about the research, you may contact me using the following information:

David W. Whitfield
Doctoral Candidate, Principle Investigator
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2002K (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
david.w.whitfield@siu.edu
618-453-2291

Additional questions or concerns can be directed to my advisor:

Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway
Associate Professor, Project Advisor
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2246 (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
email: Sandypc@siu.edu
618-453-1886

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

David W. Whitfield

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F7

Consent Form for Teachers in Interviews

CONSENT FORM:

Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety

I have read the material in the cover letter (previously handed to me) and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can keep the cover letter so as to have relevant study and contact information. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time. I agree to participate in this research according to the specific conditions as indicated below.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may audiotape my interview. I understand that he will not destroy the digital audio file after his project is over.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may quote from my interview, using a pseudonym of my choosing, in his paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected in this project.

Chosen pseudonym: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: sihsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F8

Cover Letter to Students in Interviews

Hello!

My name David Whitfield, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies here at SIUC. This letter serves to explain to you a research study I'm currently undertaking, and to provide you an opportunity to participate by being interviewed.

The title of this study is: "Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety."

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the relational aspect of interactions between students and teachers of communication and to inquire about components that makes students and teachers experience feelings of safety in their shared relationship.

You are being offered the opportunity to participate because you are currently enrolled in CMST 101.

If you decide to participate, please complete the consent form and information sheet. The consent form asks for you to agree or disagree to two things:

- A) allowing me to audio record you during an interview and
- B) allowing me to directly quote from your interview —using a pseudonym (fake name) of your choosing, in my paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected.

The information sheet is for demographic information collection purposes only.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate in no way affects your standing in class or with your instructor. You can decide to withdraw your participation at any point. If, you decide to change the status of your consent on any of the above items, feel free to contact me and let me know. Interviews typically last from 30-60 minutes.

I will only link the transcript of the interview to your demographic information using the pseudonym of your choosing. In other words, I will not be using your name. In any write up of this research that I do, and in any presentations I may make regarding this research, I will only identify you by your chosen pseudonym. I will only directly quote you if you give permission for that on the consent form. I will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity.

You will be offered a \$5 Starbucks gift card for your participation. There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort that come from your participation. While there may be no direct or measureable benefit to you that comes from your participation, this research can potentially impact the ways that teachers and students understand the factors that influence student and teacher perceptions of safety in the teacher-student relationship. After I complete my research project, I will keep all of your responses in a digital format on my password protected laptop computer, and in a password protected online storage website (such as Google drive or Dropbox), to be used for future educational purposes. I am the only person who will have direct access to the audio file of your interview and your information sheet.

If you have general questions about the research, you may contact me using the following information:

David W. Whitfield
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Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
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david.w.whitfield@siu.edu

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Additional questions or concerns can be directed to my advisor:

Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway
Associate Professor, Project Advisor
Dept. of Communication Studies
1100 Lincoln Drive
Mailcode 6605
Communications 2246 (office)
Carbondale, IL 62901
email: Sandypc@siu.edu
618-453-1886

Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

David W. Whitfield

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

Appendix F9

Consent Form for Students in Interviews

CONSENT FORM:

Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy with/in the Classroom using a Lens of Relational Safety

I have read the material in the cover letter (previously handed to me) and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can keep the cover letter so as to have relevant study and contact information. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time. I agree to participate in this research according to the specific conditions as indicated below.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may audiotape my interview. I understand that he will not destroy the digital audio file after his project is over.

I, _____, agree disagree
(Please print your name above your signature.) (Please circle "agree" or "disagree.")

that David W. Whitfield may quote from my interview, using a pseudonym of my choosing, in his paper(s)/report(s)/publication(s) that draw upon the audio data collected in this project.

Chosen pseudonym: _____

Date: _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

VITA

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Dissertation Title:

Conditions for Social Change: Theorizing Critical Communication Pedagogy With/in the
Classroom Using a Lens of Relational Safety

Major Professor: Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway