

Affect, Embodiment, and Place in Critical Literacy

Assembling Theory and Practice

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8 Classroom Cosmopolitics

Worldbuilding for Mutual Flourishing

T. Philip Nichols and Brianne O'Sullivan

In this chapter, we explore literacy teaching as an act of worldbuilding—a coming-together of instructor, students, materials, and histories to shape and reshape a shared classroom world. Such a perspective reframes the work of schooling, from a transmission of information or an unfolding of activity to the collective negotiations among the humans and non-humans that constitute the classroom space. We begin by considering the classroom as a *cosmogram* (Tresch, 2007), a social world that materializes teachers' ideas and beliefs about students, literacy, and learning. We argue that these cosmograms are powerful but not uncontested: students, administrators, local and national policies each graft additional layered worlds onto those imagined by the teacher. What results, we suggest, is a kind of *cosmopolitical* (Stengers, 2010, 2011) friction, as teachers and students are made to reconcile the competing—and, at times, contradictory—worlds that circulate in their classrooms. In taking such a perspective, we suggest that literacy teaching and learning can be understood as a recursive process of shaping worlds for mutual flourishing—and that educators and students who engage in this work carry these worlds with them in their future trajectories of literacy instruction, learning, and practice.

We come to the subject of classroom worldbuilding from different perspectives and locations. Phil is a literacy researcher, teacher-educator, and former high school English teacher based in Texas, United States. Brianne is an educator in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, with a background in science who has worked in a variety of roles and contexts in public education. However, in what follows, we write from a joint perspective, weaving together our voices, stories, and experiences to consider how thinking-with-worlds reframes the teaching and learning of literacy as a patient and ethical act of collective creation. By braiding together theory and practice as such, it is our intention to show how the two are entangled. Educators may, at times, seek out external guidance from researchers to inform their instruction, or they may make in-the-moment decisions, rooted in experience. Neither of these is more or less theoretical than

the other—and both can serve as generative inspiration as teachers work with students to shape a classroom world worth sharing. To illustrate this, we have structured this chapter as a progression through a school year, interweaving classroom vignettes and theoretical explorations that gradually converge through the passing of seasons. In doing so, we consider how the work of worldbuilding positions the classroom as a space where theoretical knowledge is generated, enacted, and refined through the lived dynamics of teaching and learning.

Key Terms

Cosmogram: A materialized or spatialized social world. Where “world-views” are locked away in people’s heads, cosmograms bring these ideas and beliefs to life by representing them in physical space—for instance, in the configuration of a classroom.

Cosmopolitics: The political process of shaping a shared social world out of multiple competing ones. Teachers, students, and other stakeholders may understand the meaning and purpose of a classroom space differently; cosmopolitics names a means by which these points of friction might be reconciled through the collective work of instruction and practice.

Summer: Imagining Worlds for Learning

Reading Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), I find myself poring slowly over her words, savoring them. She describes a grove of pecan trees, detailing the ways it is less a cluster of individual trees than an interdependent collective. Its component parts do not thrive in isolation; its flourishing is mutual. She gives me language for my own experiences as a student of science, as a teacher of children, as a human being in this world. I have found a new mentor within the pages of this text.

I am grateful to have found this book in the summer. When time slows. As a teacher, summer brings the opportunity to pause, to reflect, to imagine new possibilities. I find myself returning to Kimmerer’s words. *Mutual flourishing*. I imagine my classroom and the children I will soon welcome there—the collective we, as teacher and students, will form. I wonder: what might it mean to build a learning community where flourishing is mutual? Where individuals feel not only that they belong but that they are also necessary to the thriving of the group? Where they see themselves in the learning space and in the content we take up together? How might we come together as a collective, to see and hear one another, to know and understand our differences, to strive for justice and equity in all that we do? I know the key to building a world of mutual flourishing lies in

building relationships. This is where we will begin. This will guide us. We will come to know one another.

To be a teacher is to be a builder of worlds. We are not just charged with developing learning communities in our schools but with cultivating the world of the classroom that will allow such communities to grow and thrive. The worlds we imagine and bring into being are as integral to instruction as the content we teach and the lessons we plan. It is for this reason that many scholars and practitioners have theorized space as a pedagogical resource (Leander & Sheehy, 2004). Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia preschool method, famously referred to the child's physical environment as—"the third teacher"—after adults, and other children—to denote its capacities to guide and instruct (Rinaldi, 2006). Paulo Freire, likewise, stressed the import of space for literacy learning. "Reading the word," he argued, was always preceded by "reading the world"—and, importantly, both of these were preceded first by acts of "writing or rewriting the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). Such perspectives suggest that teaching and learning are context-dependent: the classroom is less an empty container to hold students, desks, and books than it is a permeable presence that conditions what can be said and done and known (e.g., Lenters, 2014; Stornaiuolo, 2014).

In this way, the classroom-world is both physical and ideological—composed of objects, artifacts, and arrangements, as well as the substrate of assumptions and histories that animate these component parts. It is what Tresch (2007) calls a cosmogram—a material representation of an ordered universe. While a cosmogram can be a literal map of the universe—a mandala, for instance, or the Hebrew Tabernacle—more often it is an artifact that asserts a particular vision of the world, not as it is but as it might be. Ford's assembly line, for example, forged a social world that, for better or worse, celebrated mechanization and efficiency. Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook, likewise, shaped a social world where human connection is facilitated through an attention-economy of *likes* and *shares*. In the same way, our classroom cosmograms materialize our ideals and beliefs about teaching, learning, and literacy—and spatialize them into a social world that we and our students inhabit together. The cosmogram of a teacher who believes education is principally for preparing students for a job will be different than that of one who believes it is for cultivating civic engagement or social mobility. Such a perspective invites us to ask: what is the world of our classroom meant to produce? And how does its material configuration support or upset this ideal? Do our cosmograms privilege competition and personal achievement—or are they arranged in a way that can cultivate and sustain mutual flourishing?

Fall: Negotiating Shared Worlds

The first day of school has come to an end. Sitting in the stillness of the classroom, I take a moment to pause and reflect. I am in awe of how a group of children brings the classroom to life. Over the past months, I have been thinking about the kind of learning community I hope to build—and I have arranged furniture, organized materials, and planned lessons to create a space for sustaining that sort of community. But today, I was reminded that each child who walked into this space also plays a role in shaping this world we share. We each bring our own stories and histories. These are the tools we will use to negotiate this space together.

This morning, I asked students to draw lines and shapes and then invited them to turn these designs into monsters. I watched and listened as they joyfully completed their transformations. They captioned these monsters with things they were excited about and things they were nervous about for this school year. During a gallery walk, students placed stars on any monsters whose captions echoed their own sources of excitement and anxiety. And afterward, students voiced their relief to know they were not alone in their feelings. A sense of belonging was emerging—it was only our first hour together, but already, connections were being forged.

Now, sitting at my desk and looking back over the students' creations, I begin to see more than just monsters and captions and stars—these are pieces of each student's story. I know who is hesitant about math or writing. Who is worried about finding friends or being bullied? Who is nervous about report cards and standardized tests? I also know what they perceive to be their strengths. What their passions are. And now it is my responsibility to carry this knowledge forward, to ensure that each child's gifts and passions are nurtured and that they feel supported amid their fears. Perhaps this is the beginning of our work, together, of creating a world where flourishing is mutual.

The worlds we build are not ours alone. The cosmograms we shape with the refractory components of our classrooms have real consequences for all who are asked to inhabit them, to abide by their logics and rules. But neither are these worlds uncontested. As surely as teachers materialize their beliefs about learning and literacy, students do as well. In the space of a single classroom, there may be multiple cosmograms in circulation. Each student brings with them their own histories of identity and education, their fears and aspirations, their image of what a learning environment is or ought to be. Teachers, from this perspective, are not just responsible for designing an ideal classroom-world to impose, by fiat, on others; they are in a position to recognize how learning environments are "pluriversal"—a world in which many worlds coexist (Mignolo,

2018; Simon, Nichols, Edwards, & Campano, 2018) The work of the classroom, then, is the precarious negotiation of competing cosmograms: the collective, tentative efforts of teachers, students, objects, and unseen actors working with, for, and against one another to determine what sort of world they will share.

Importantly, such negotiations are never neutral. As Mignolo (2018) cautions, "A pluriverse is not a world of independent units . . . but a world entangled through and by the colonial matrix of power" (p. xi). It is for this reason that the philosopher Isabel Stengers (2010, 2011) refers to the work of worldbuilding as cosmopolitics, that is, a process of political deliberation within and across different worlds. In the context of the classroom, this means educators have an ethical responsibility to use their positions of power to learn about the worlds students bring with them into the community and to make room for these worlds as the pluriverse of the classroom is collectively shaped. And as rich traditions of teacher research remind us, the work of inquiring into our practice and allowing it to be shaped by the needs, concerns, identities, and histories of our students is always eminently *political* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Lytle, 2008). Engaging in this cosmopolitical process is how we shape the contours of the classroom-world to support equitable learning for all who share it.

Winter: Reconciling Contested Worlds

As a teacher, my goal is to inspire students to truly want to learn, to take risks and push boundaries for what they think might be possible. I know this only happens when they feel safe and respected. At this point in the year, I am proud of the learning community we have co-created. Joy lives here. Students are willing to take risks. They support each other. They are open to learning with and from one another. There are days when it feels like we have arrived at what teaching and learning could and should be.

And then there are days when I am reminded that teaching and learning are bigger than what exists within the four walls of this classroom. Bigger than myself and these children. After a string of sleepless nights when I've found myself waking in a panic and unable to quiet my busy brain, I have to acknowledge that the looming standardized tests are taking their toll. I'm worried about being too far behind with curriculum and not doing enough to ensure that each child will be successful.

The pressure finds its way into our classroom, as we make time for exam prep. Time that takes away from our authentic and joyful approach to learning. I work to overcome the urge to skip our read-aloud or independent reading time. I try to resist the temptation of replacing experiential, hands-on tasks with more direct forms of teaching. Students know the exams are nearly here. Many begin to voice concerns about not doing

well enough, asking questions about what to expect. A tension is mounting that did not exist in the first half of the year.

I am reminded that the learning community we are building is also shaped by factors beyond our control. And when those external pressures threaten to unravel what we have worked so hard to create, I do the best I can to remember what is important. So, on test day, I greet each child with a smile, leave notes of encouragement on each of their desks, read a timely picture book, and lead them through a mindful breathing exercise. I assure them that this is just one moment in time, a minor interruption of what we have come to know as teaching and learning. I remind them of my hope that they will become lifelong learners driven by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge, something that cannot be measured on any standardized test.

In the day-to-day-worldbuilding of the classroom, it is easy to forget that the cosmograms we mold into a shared learning environment are not just ours and our students': the pluriverse of the classroom is nested within and conditioned by the pressures of other, outside worlds. It would be comforting if this were not so—if the communities we cultivate could be shielded entirely from those forces that might undermine or upend them. But the walls of our classroom-worlds are porous, and the cosmograms of school and district policies, national mandates, and guidelines circulate widely, enabling and constraining how teaching, learning, and relating unfold. At times, these pressures are so subtle that they are almost invisible to us, but at other times, the friction between these worlds and our own make them all too apparent. During standardized testing, for example, we may feel the discomfort—perhaps even physically, affectively—as a cosmogram ordered by quantitative metrics for sorting and ranking students is grafted onto a world we have collectively structured to define worth otherwise and locate success elsewhere.

Such tensions show the importance of the *cosmos* in cosmopolitics: the political work of worldbuilding is not bounded by the walls of the classroom but extends outside as well. A true politics of the cosmos draws our attention to the ways we live environmentally, as the residues of distant policies and activities inflect the day-to-day, lived practices of teachers and students. In doing so, cosmopolitics provides a pathway for articulating a "poetics of space" (Glissant, 1989) that unearths from our transparent surroundings the artifacts, ideologies, and labour that give them shape and hold them stable. Just as Ellison's "invisible man" was not really invisible but was rendered as such by the landscape of his time, the perceived discernibility of our classroom worlds may, too, elide histories of inequity, domination, or neglect that should be attended to as we work, with our students, to shape a new, collective cosmogram.

This also means considering what worlds we invite into our classrooms alongside practices and artifacts that, likewise, appear to us as transparent. Forms of instruction, evaluation, and assessment that we take for granted as “best practices” may carry with them ideologies that sit in uneasy alignment with the classroom-worlds we are trying to build. A computerized learning management system, for example, may provide a means for more efficiently delivering feedback to students, but the interface and protocols of the platform may also change the fundamental character of that feedback in ways that work against our stated ideals for supporting student growth. Similarly, such devices also introduce to the classroom the cosmogram of educational technology companies whose profit motives may be at odds with the underlying principles of our own, and our students’, worldbuilding. In other words, while actors and techniques may serve as what Brandt (1998) calls “sponsors of literacy”—enabling artifacts that underwrite and support literacy learning—it is necessary to interrogate the conditions of this sponsorship because it may not be strictly benevolent and is certainly never neutral (Brandt, 2015).

How are we to navigate so many cosmograms, with so many competing aims? The answer will look different for different educators, in different contexts, and at different times. An early-career teacher in an under-resourced school may not have the same leeway to reshape outside pressures in the image of the world they envision with their students as a veteran teacher in a similar situation. However, for each of these educators, the process will involve a similar form of reflexive creativity—what Campano (2009) calls “systematic improvisation” (p. 112)—that carves out, from a cosmos of external demands and constraints, the space necessary for humanizing praxis. There are no innocent positions, free from the entanglements of near and distant worlds—and as such, it is crucial that we reflect on both where we are located in this pluriverse and what levers might be available to shape it into a common world worthy of our students.

Spring: The World We Have Made and the Worlds to Come

I’m reminded of David Eagleman’s (2009) vignette *Ineffable* as I walk through the classroom, surveying the empty walls and boxes of resources packed away for the summer. He describes soldiers whose paths diverge at the end of a war, actors who part ways after a finale performance—collectives, once part of something larger than themselves, now disbanded and travelling their separate ways. It is June, and the school year has come to an end. I have said goodbye to each of my students and watched as they exited, for the last time, the classroom we’ve shaped and shared together. In my years as a teacher, Eagleman puts words to the strange sense of loss that I feel at this time each spring, that I’ve never quite been able to name. The students and I have spent the past 10 months building

a world within these walls. We have brought our stories, our histories, our experiences together, allowing them to circulate and be braided into practices that have sustained our learning together over the year.

Of course, this world that we built does not really go away. In the months ahead, this world and the experience of building it will help me to imagine what sort of world my classroom might become next year. And the year after. My students, too, will carry this world with them as they enter spaces imagined and designed by other teachers. We may find that the worlds we carry with us into new environments align, or we may find our histories colliding with the new worlds we are asked to inhabit. The only certainty is that we will be changed in the process—which invites us to ask, always, how might the resources available to us aid in the building of more just and equitable worlds?

Conclusion

The process of worldbuilding reframes the classroom as a space of possibility, where humans and non-humans, materialities and immaterialities, work with and against one another to shape a shared world for learning. As Stornaiuolo (2014) suggests, such a stance offers teachers and students “new ways to imagine the relationships between and among worlds that [they] might create, inhabit, and transform” (p. 568). This is especially true for literacy educators, whose purview is not only the relationships between students and the classroom-world but also the worlds of text—written and read—that circulate in and beyond the walls of the school. From this perspective, Freire and Macedo’s (1987) observations about the interdependence of reading *the world* and *the word* take on new meaning: while these remain central to the practice of literacy education, teachers must also attend to the spaces where such relations are nurtured, negotiated, and at times, negated. It is here, in this layered, cosmopolitical labour, that educators and students collectively configure the sort of world they will share—one that reproduces power differentials and social hierarchies; one that reduces learning to test scores and numbers of school improvement charts; or, perhaps, one that provides a foundation for equitable education and mutual flourishing for all.

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