

Honors Thesis Proposal

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My research seeks to understand how we can better empower students to use their own voices and train educators to value and respect those voices.

Students have a wide variety of lived experiences, and they express themselves in various ways. They speak many different languages, and countless varieties of each of those languages. Often, English education devalues these various modes of expression and communication, viewing them as inferior to Standard or Standardized English. In this mindset, school is conducted in Standardized English, and one of its goals is to teach this Standardized variety. Teachers in this model claim authority over language (Lippi-Green, 2011) and the course material, and merely deposit their knowledge into students (Friere, 1968/1970). This course material and the way in which it is taught may be largely irrelevant to the lived experience of the students.

The Multicultural Education literature and the Literacy Studies literature challenge this “banking” mode of education. Under a Literacy work, students are encouraged to recontextualize course material in light of their lived experience, validating the students’ experiences and abilities and removing the educator as the sole epistemic authority. The Multicultural Education literature also challenges teaching Standardized English, instead pushing us to value students’ native language varieties, and the modes in which they are already adept at expressing themselves.

Debate as an educational practice has the potential to radically affirm the tenets of both of these literatures. Debate forces students to recontextualize topics and evidence in light of new ideas and experiences, and prompts them to express their ideas in novel contexts. A well designed debate curriculum could very easily affirm student’s language varieties, cultural modes of expression, rhetorics, and lived experience. Debate is antithetical to the banking model, as it prompts students to take ownership and authority over their ideas. However, in my experience, academic debate is less than welcoming of diverse students and language varieties. I argue that this is due in large part to un- or under-trained educators attempting to extend the banking model and their Standardization ideologies to their debate curricula. My work will seek to combat this problem by using insights from the Education and Literacy literatures to design curricula for both students and educators.

My primary methodologies will be literature review and curriculum design. I will begin my research this summer by taking a light load of education-relevant English classes, and delving

deeply into literature in journals targeted at Education, Literacy Studies, and Forensics. This will give me a broad understanding of what is being published in my topic area. Over this summer I will produce a functional literature review. I expect that much of the relevant Education literature and most of the Forensic literature will suffer from some of the problems discussed above, so I will focus on not only reporting the content of the literature, but critiquing it through a Critical Race Theory lens. My literature review will culminate in recommendations for culturally responsive curricular design utilizing debate as a tool to prompt students to recontextualize and value their lived experiences and modes of expression.

Starting in the Fall semester and continuing in the Spring, I will, using the recommendations I have gleaned from the literature, begin designing two distinct but interconnected curricula, students and educators, one for students and one for educators. These curricula will contain materials and plans not only to facilitate debate in the secondary English classroom, but also to train educators to judge debate in fair, culturally responsive ways that value students' experiences and modes of expression.

In high school, I was a debater, competing in Lincoln-Douglas, Public Forum and Policy Debate. These experiences were crucial to my development as a student and as a person, and they taught me about topics ranging from global economic politics to critical literary theory. More importantly, they taught me how to reason critically, to state and defend my position, and to research. However, in my experience, local debate is not particularly welcoming of diverse students or voices. Since high school, in an effort to help more and more diverse students benefit from debate like I did, I have frequently returned to my high school district, volunteering as a judge at various tournaments and teaching new debaters at several schools.

I have also worked with Prof. Anne Charity Hudley since my freshman year on ideas related to this topic. My freshman year, in her Language Attitudes course, I researched debate literature to understand norms around judging and assessment in debate tournaments. During my sophomore year, I took her African American Language course, in which I focused on attitudes toward racialized variations of English and the impacts that they might have on debaters and judges, and Community-Based Research Methods, where I began to design a project to tackle these subjects. This year, I have served as a Teaching Assistant for her classes, continuing planning to begin this project as an honors thesis and helping other students do the same with

their related projects. For the last year, I have also attended SURN events with Prof. Charity Hudley, and begun to discuss my ideas about debate curricula with current teachers of English.

I believe that my work is needed, because the English and Education literatures are fragmented. Due to their long histories as fields, they draw on separate theories and terminology. Literacy Studies stems from English literary criticism, and draws heavily on critical frameworks. The Education literature is pragmatic, and draws on its own body of theory. I do believe, however, that the “multicultural education” and “literacies” literatures are consistent in spirit, and that my project is poised to draw on both and meaningfully combine them. Further, I think that the majority of literacy work focuses almost the education of students, so my work will be unusual in that I want to create parallel educational curricula for both students and educators.

In order to pursue this project, I need coursework in English and Education, access to Education and Forensics journals, and to be free to work on this project. None of those come for free. An honors fellowship would allow me to pay for access to niche literature, visit relevant special collections, and travel to meet with faculty who do similar work at other institutions. It would also fund my starting to take English Education classes over this summer, and would keep me from having to work this summer to support myself, leaving me free to work on my honors thesis.

References

- Friere, P. (1970). *Pedagogia do oprimido* [The pedagogy of the oppressed] (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Continuum. (Original work published 1968)
- Lippi-Green, R. (2011). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. Routledge.