

## Episode 31: An Interview with Ira Shor—Part Two

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*Cue music: Broke for Free, "Night Owl"*

BK: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Okay everyone—this is part two of our interview with Ira Shor, well-known for his work in Composition and Rhetoric, and an important theorist and practitioner of critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

Go to This Rhetorical Life's website or to iTunes to find part one of our conversation, where Shor talks about growing up in the Bronx, his early experiments with critical pedagogy, and his relationship and collaborations with Paulo Freire.

Part two of the interview will focus on updates to critical pedagogy, including some of Shor's more recent experiments in the classroom. We also talk a lot about movement work, about the pedagogies of movements, about the role that educators play and might play, and about what Shor has been doing inside and outside of formal academic institutions.

Once again, we let the tape run and give you a largely unedited interview. We have in mind an audience who is familiar with Shor and critical pedagogy but who may be interested in some of the personal details and specific points that Shor raises here that may not be available elsewhere.

And once again, a tiny chorus of Zebra finches make up the background noise for our conversation.

We hope you enjoy it.

*Cue music: Broke for Free, "Night Owl"*

YR: I'll try, ok, I'll give it a try...

[music fades]

So, we've heard a bit about, sort of your entry into critical pedagogy and rather than it having a really strict definition, we see the definition sort of moving from

blundering through traditional curriculum to then experimenting with less traditional curriculum, to this idea of introducing self-reflection as an entry point; you spoke about diagrammatic history—this of problem-posing, using everyday life as a material; and, I guess, what I would ask now is how has that definition of critical pedagogy shifted over time, as it starts to intersect with third world feminisms, or black feminist theory—intersectionality and movement work. I'm thinking a lot about, when you mentioned the nurse, I'm thinking a lot about that moment in relation to bell hooks meeting Paulo Freire, and him identifying as sort of a white man, that's sort of at the face of critical pedagogy and *the two of you* as iconic in critical pedagogy as white men: how does that all, sort of—how has that shifted critical pedagogy for you in the present time?

IS: Yes, I think that there is—we now understand critical pedagogies. And this was presented to us and named by two Australian educators in the early 90s, who did a book-length treatment, and they made it plural. So there is no one way of doing critical pedagogy, there are multiple ways; and that matters, to be said.

The other key idea is ... my understanding of what Paulo Freire meant by situated pedagogy; that every pedagogy had to be adapted to the material conditions that we were offering it in. Whereas we can agree on some general orientations for a critical teacher, for a critical pedagogy class; for example, general orientations would be questioning the status quo, being very interested in social justice—and by social justice I mean: special orientation to democracy, equality, ecology, and peace; that's how I understand my commitments to social justice. So, for me, what lies behind my choices in teaching for social justice is to what extent can I make democracy concrete? To what extent can I push forward equality? And, to what extent can I raise awareness about the toxic threats to planet earth? So that's--I'm describing these as general orientations we can pose to everyone who wants to think about being a critical teacher. But then we all teach in very different situations, we teach at different levels: some are K-8, some are 9-12, some are in the public school system, some are in private school system, some are in community colleges like I started. Some are in 4-years liberal arts colleges, some are in graduate school. Some are in union programs that meet, what we call non-formal education; they're not formally set up by the state as an institution but community or, labor organizations set up these education programs. Sometimes they have to do with church—progressive churches setting up education programs.

In any event, first we have to make contact with is the situation that we are entering and what kind of context are we teaching in, and for. And we have to *then* educate ourselves into the context. Now, I followed this intuitively when I got to Staten Island in 1971, and that's how I drifted away from teaching grammar and started teaching about the everyday themes of the students, and using—developing different language grids that began with the way they spoke and so on—I intuited this. Over the years I understood more and more how important situated pedagogy is—really being very imbedded in the everyday-life of the

students; not just in the content, or the subject matter of the themes that you use and present to students, but also that—understanding from Paulo Freire why he was always skeptical about university intellectuals undertaking the job of critical pedagogy.

Paulo Freire said several times that he would rather begin with uneducated peasants and illiterates to be trained as the facilitators of the literacy classes than with university intellectuals because the university intellectuals brought so much baggage with them, that we already, we're so filled with official knowledge, and we were *taught* that to be a good teacher is to deliver that knowledge as comprehensively as possible to any group of students that's in front of us. And so that the tendency to lecture was so powerfully embedded in the university graduates that we had a lot of trouble overcoming that to become dialogic educators who learned how to pose problems, listen to the answers, and to work with the expressive beginnings that the students offered us as the way they saw the world, and pose questions to that. That's what I began to understand as a very important problem of doing critical pedagogy.

In addition, the other thing is, the political conditions not only change from place to place; that is, some places are more open to allowing teachers to experiment, some places are very rigid and very punitive and repressive—so that we had to adjust to the political climate or the political profile around us. But that political climate was not only a function of place of where we were teaching, it was a function of time. Because I've been doing this for so long now, that I actually began at a very insurgent and hopeful moment of mass movements on the rise in America, which greatly affected my ability to *practice* and *test*, and *learn* how to do this critical pedagogy—that was the early 70s when there so many movements in motion to transform society. So now I'm teaching in one of the most reactionary and conservative periods: we've had neoliberalism for over thirty years, we've had one conservative regime after another in the White House, and tea party eruptions in Congress, and so on; so I'm now teaching—40 years later—in one of the most restrictive environments. So, if I don't notice that and adjust my pedagogy, then I'm not a very good critical teacher, because my pedagogy can only accomplish what the situation allows, or what the possibilities of any situation present themselves.

So I have to keep up with *reading* a changing situation, a changing political climate, and then do what Paulo Freire explained—he called it untested feasibility: that given the variations in time and place that present different material conditions or different situations in which we design a concrete political practice for where we are, then how do we—we keep getting more and more familiar with what's possible and then continue to—how should I put it—enable ourselves to continue to take risks. That is, this is one chapter that we talked about in the book we did together: the fear of doing critical pedagogy, the fear of taking risks, or fear of punishment, or the fear of being illegible to the students that we were addressing. And that, from Paulo Freire's point of view, that the status quo

had a tremendous interest, convincing us that the amount of open space around us was maybe about three feet in a circle around us, and to make us see the space for experiment—the space for trying something different, the space in our situation for questioning the status quo, to appreciate it as smaller than it actually is. And it was his estimation that we can only figure out what space was *actually* available by taking a risk and doing an experiment, and pushing beyond the *apparent* limits of the space and time that we were in.

So this is what he called untested feasibility, that something more is feasible, or possible, than we can see, or that we're allowed to notice given the enormous representation of the dominant political climate to us, of what is possible, what is good, and what exists. And that we had to imagine ourselves beyond that limit, that borderline, and come up—*invent* practices that went beyond that limit, and then observe very honestly what the impact was. And I was doing that intuitively when I brought the project of the trial of the gay teacher to my class and working with Paulo over the next 10-15 years clarified what situated pedagogy faced given the long influences of the status quo in making us conservative, in making us fearful of questioning it.

TI: So, could you give us one example of critical pedagogy practice in your classroom today? And, also, how has your work with students changed or stayed the same?

IS: From the beginning, because I started teaching in a very insurgent moment in American life in 1971, for me the women's movement was very, very active then, and so was the black liberation movement—so from the beginning I kept bringing in themes about racism and about patriarchy and sexual equality from the beginning *because* of the political time. What I also experimented with was trying to notice how—the representations of the world to the students that were circulating dominantly in their lives.

I'll give you an example of what this means: I began to study the newspapers that the students read and figuring out how to pose the newspaper as a meaningful problem to them. So I began to zero in on that every newspaper had a business section that was called something different—the *New York Times* had a whole business section that I would bring in but so did the other major dailies around here, and so on. So I would bring in the newspapers and I would show the students the different sections, and then I would pose this kind of a problem: I said, "Ok, why does every newspaper have a business section but no newspaper has a labor news section? How would you explain that?" So, of course, no one had ever asked this question before to the students; I never asked that question to any class, so I began to pose that questions. And so, what evolved from that problem posed to students was a project where the students—I invited the students to write, or to design or invent or compose, a labor news section that would fit into their daily newspaper that didn't yet exist. The projects the classes came up with were very interesting, and I asked them if I could send it off to the

local daily newspaper: The Staten Island Advance, to the editor there to get a response. I did send it off and the editor was very slow in responding; class ended before—that semester before I could send it back, but eventually I got a letter. And the editor, of course, was very unimpressed, and he thought that this was the wrong question to ask about the way they cover news. I Xeroxed his letter to me, and then I had everyone's address and I sent around his answer so that even—this is another thing—that class might end—class doesn't end when the semester ends, that sometimes I found myself contacting the students afterwards because there was a trailing work.

Now, in my current critical writing classes I've been trying two experiments that interest me a lot and I'm trying to refine them and get them to work better. One is—because the dialogic pedagogy asks the teacher to pose problems and provoke inquiry, and not to deliver lectures that students receive passively, I'm trying to test how to use quantitative databases as problem-posing materials. And then have activities where the students develop visual representations of, like, line graphs and bar charts, and pie charts, and data charts of all kind, and then look at the way numbers, and figure out what I call the stories and the numbers; that is, to read a data chart and then to write a prose- rendition of what the data chart shows us in one singular image; how would you then write what we're being told there? This has been a very interesting project because it works from visual literacy to textual literacy so it's a whole new dimension of the critical pedagogy I'm practicing, but also, something else is going on. That's what I discovered in doing it is that I can say to the class that data never interprets itself. Data says, "Look out the window and here's something about what's going on in the world." There's no narrative involved in any chart about why is it like this, what does it mean? Where did it come from? Is it good or bad that we have this? How is it going to develop in the next few years? If we had to come up with a policy, that by defect is to develop it this way or that way, what would he say that needs to be done about it? And so I began to develop all these problem-posing questions based on the interpretation of data.

So the first problem was, is that, can you do careful observation and actually say what the data chart is telling us? Can we all agree on the story being told by this data base? So I did not start the class by interpreting the databases for the students and giving them one version of it. I hand out the data base and then I pose a problem about it, and then everybody works on it. And they produce a written text that represents their understanding of what this single page, this visual image, of the quantitative data means. Then they report to each other, they report out loud, and we begin to have a discussion: "whose writing about, whose observation seems to be the best take on the data base?" Then I always say: "That's step one, and now comes step two, which data will never do for you; that is, how do you interpret what it means? Why it's like this? Where it came from? How did it get like this? What needs to be done because of this? Is it good for us or bad for us? Who does it help? Who does it hurt?—all the value questions that databases never include in their numerical representation. This has been extremely interesting. So

it's posed a whole new direction for me to trace, and so that's what I've been working on the last bunch of years.

Then, the next thing is to figure out a problem that is located two ways: one inside their experience and one outside their experience. The one inside their experience has to do with what happens to working class young people who go through college and try to convert their educational achievements into economic gains; what happens? There are plenty of databases that tell us this, so now their fate and *their* conditions are all captured in databases of various kinds, and they don't have *this reading* in it, so I bring in a bunch of databases that talk about the fate of young people in the job market over the last thirty years. What's been happening in terms of how many college grads are being hired here for what? In difference regions of the country, what kind of starting salaries? What kind of career ladder they have? So all of this is deeply embedded in the difficult struggles they're having to pay for college, and also to get through college while working. This now represents to them, here is your relationship to where this is all going to lead and this class—just—that I'm teaching now, just wrote their first paper on it.

I can't help but tell you that it's of course making this kind of contact with what is going on in the economy. It shocks them to see the difficulty that young people are having in the job market. Some of them have been intuiting it and worrying about it but it has never been so concretely intimate to them as when all the numbers show exactly what's going—this gives me the opportunity then to say: "Okay, look, for the last 30-40 years the starting salary for young people graduating from college has been either flat or *declining*, and many jobs that once were done by high school grads are now being offered only to college grads even though the jobs haven't changed. *But*, all the unemployment means, the data shows us, that college students are available to do the jobs and high school grads only are the ones suffering." So I say, "How do you explain, that—bringing data about national wealth—how do you explain that we are far, far wealthier than we've ever been as a society? We've never had such vast wealth accumulating in our society. How do we explain that with the fact, the starting salary of grads has been flat or declining in the last 30 years at the same time that our economy or the work that folks are doing is producing an enormous increase in wealth? So you know I pose that question, I am not delivering a lecture on that question, I have plenty of ideas about why that's happening, but my job is to pose the question and draw the students out and to continue to provide background that enables them to understand this contradiction: that we've never been wealthier, and that the position of college grads has never been more precarious. So how does a society produce that contradiction? What's behind it?"

So part of this project now leads into a study of the billionaire Warren Buffet who made a very spectacular claim about 9-10 years ago where he announced that class warfare is underway in America and it's his class, the super-rich, who are making war on everybody else, and his class is winning. He made that declaration in 2006 in a column, an interview in the *New York Times*, which I have and I Xeroxed,



and I present it—I bring it in as a text for study in class. And Warren Buffet, the most successful capitalist in American history, is now announcing that class warfare, by his class against the rest of us is underway and his class is definitely winning. So I ask them, “Is he right? Is Warren Buffet right? That his class are waging war and he’s winning?” So some students, they raise their hand and they say, “Is Warren Buffet a communist?” and I say “No, no, he’s a capitalist. He’s the most successful capitalist that we know.” And it causes them a lot of confusion that a leading capitalist would draw such a high profile attention to a concept such as class warfare. I hope you folks know that I have *no lecture* that I deliver, on any of these topics—that I present these material and pose questions and then we examine the data that Warren Buffet presents through several items. I bring in a series of articles written by Buffett and other people about the data that Buffet uses to make that claim, and I asked the class to judge how *convincing* Buffet is in *making* his case *using* the data he chooses. And is there other data elsewhere that either can question Buffet or undermine his claim or support his claim? So then I bring in a bunch other data. Then we go on a research project to think about, could we think about gentrification as—I pose this question, “Is gentrification a form of class war?”

It has nothing to do with Buffet, because Buffet is only talking about the tax structure. So now I want to do what, this is what Paulo Freire 40, 50 years ago called the hinged theme, the hinge generative theme; that is, you begin in one area and you begin to fan out and try to apply it elsewhere and see what kind of inquiry or connections you can make of it. So while Buffet is only raising questions about the unequal tax structure, and how his class, the data he provides, he says, he earns 46 million dollars a year and pays 17% tax. His secretary who he pays \$60,000 a year, pays 33% tax. So he says, how can how this be fair that my secretary is paying twice the tax rate that I am, and so on. So that’s the data he provides.

So then I start bringing in other situations like gentrification, and the housing market. And the problem with the students in my class is none of them can afford their own apartments in New York City, they’re all young adults who are forced to continue living at home because the housing market has gone through the roof. Then I bring articles about that. Then I bring in articles about gentrification also displacing small business people like mom and pop stores and luncheonettes in gentrifying neighborhoods are evicted, because Starbucks wants to move into these very choice spaces where they can produce so much revenue. So then I move it to a different class, I say: “Well, how about these folks? So now the question is, folks who run small businesses they are not working class people, they are a different class than the folks that work for Warren Buffet, the secretary and so on. So then I invite them to study, like how do we name the different classes, and I present them with a four—a grid of four names where I ask them to develop the definitions of different social classes. I do not present them with a lecture on how to do it, but it’s a grid with four spaces it’s another visual diagram I use and I developed in last 10 years under this new test that I’m doing. And it

lists typical names of four classes, the poor, the working class, the middle class, the rich class, and so on, and then *they* develop their characterizations of how they understand each of these. We discuss it in class, we develop different characterizations, I combine them, I propose a synthesis to the class and we debate what kind of stuff, what kind of definitions make sense. Then I bring in articles about different people and I ask them which class would they characterize these people as given the way they developed their own categories. So then I ask them to go out into the world look at examples, and use their own structures to make sense of the world that's happening around them. So this is what I've been doing lately in critical pedagogy which I hadn't done like in the early decade or so, trying to use the databases in a different theme.

YR: Is there a distinction between critical pedagogy in the classroom versus a critical pedagogy on the streets? Or how does the relationship between critical pedagogy and movement building work? And we're thinking, in terms of movements, we're thinking about the Black Lives Matter movements and then the campus based movements that are happening. So, we're seeing the movements, sort of coming on to university campuses, but what about the classroom? What's possible in the classroom in terms of critical pedagogy and movement work, and is there a distinction between doing critical pedagogy in the classroom and the street?

IS: Yes, Paulo Freire wanted to impress on me that the most important place for critical pedagogy was outside of the classroom, in movements. And he—if you read the chapters in *Pedagogy for Liberation* we did together, you'll see he makes that statement, that, you know this was 30 years ago, so I was trying to emphasize classroom work because I travel around and I was doing workshops for teachers all around the country, so I wanted to keep the focus on what's possible inside what I call formal education—those are state regulated, educational institutions that have a lot bureaucratic machinery like transcripts, like final exams, like tests, like attendance records and so on, but that's formal education, state regulated. Then we have non-formal education, which I mentioned might be in church basements, community organizations, or living rooms of people, or labor organizations run classes. And then there are *movements* that begin to sponsor educational forums and educational seminars and we had many, many of these when I was a student radical in the 60s and early 70s. We started a free university at the University of Wisconsin, we started other forums. A bunch of people did. And what we did was we brought in people we knew that could talk about the topics that were really crucial to us that we couldn't get in the classroom. So this was happening all the time. And then, you know, all through the 70s: free schools, alternate schools, new learning alliance networks began to emerge that even [Ivan] Illich spoke about a lot in his book at that time that was very popular, *Deschooling Society*, and so on. So, there is no question that all of this critical literacy and critical pedagogy takes place outside, *in movements*, also in educational forms that are not state regulated. Paulo Freire thought this was the most important places for this pedagogy to be practiced.



*Inside* formal education, bureaucratic structures, institutions with all their machinery, many of us who are there find there are a lot of restrictions because we are expected to enforce a standard pedagogy, a dominate dialect, and a mandated textbook, an orthodox reading list and so on, and that when we don't we are considered renegades and not true citizens of our disciplines and departments and we get punished for that. So in a sense, it's like Galileo said in Bertolt Brecht's play, you know, when you cross the border you have to bring the documents in under your coat, you know you have to wear a big coat that you can hide the document under that the Vatican doesn't want you circulating and so on. That's Galileo in that play. So, you know, we, many of us sneak it in or do it. Now for me I don't have a problem because of my age, I'm tenured, I'm a white man, I'm tall. And, so everybody ignores me, because they figure there is nothing they can do about me. They tried to get rid of me in the first year when I started. There was an attempt to fire me in the first semester at the college and there was a pretty big battle and my job was saved by one vote in 1972, and after that—I—there wasn't a threat anymore of me getting fired and so on. At this age, of course you know, being so senior, I don't face the threats and punishment, that young women are extremely vulnerable because they don't carry authority into the classroom the way male bodies carry authority into the class. I walk into the classroom, I'm tall, I'm white, I'm male, I've got grey hair, everybody waits for me, everybody expects me to take charge. So owning authority is easiest for somebody like me, for a body like I carry around. It's very hard for women, young women, dark skinned folks, especially dark skinned women, their authority is constantly challenged. So I *understand*, that the ability to invite students into this pedagogy is very variable depending on all kinds of situations, including the body of the teacher who's trying to do it, as well as the institution the teacher is doing it in.

Now, once you leave formal education and you go into a labor union program there's different restrictions, you might have what you call a business union; that is, they're very preoccupied with not rocking the boat for the employers that they work and so they'll be hostile to raising critical questions in their labor program. Some will not be. So I have sometimes worked with labor educators and some of them—I heard, I got a letter that my books were being used in a Brown Lung Project, in the mining workers union, which I was very surprised. So, you know, some places are open, more open. This is the question, how—what's the opening? What's the possibilities in your time and place? Some places are very closed and you can't raise any questions. I was asked to come out to this community project in Michigan and give a couple days forums for folks, and there was a lot of different places, a lot of different organizations: they had the fire department, the police department, they were trying to come up with some kind of community project and I discovered that the restrictions were *so severe* that I couldn't really propose any critical—like I asked the fireman—they kept wanting to ask how to stop all the fires in poor people's houses. This was the problem the fireman put on the table those few days. So, they brought me in, the expert, to tell them how to stop poor people from burning down their own houses.

So, I looked at them, and I said: “Well, why are there fires? What’s causing the fires in the poor people houses?” And they said, “Well, ah, they got bad furnaces so what they do is they run these electric heaters and they put like eight plugs in one outlet and all the things go on fire.” Or they use their oven to heat up their house and it’s the only heat they’ve got for the winter. I said, okay, the answer is to have like a fuel fund, a heating fund where everybody is guaranteed heat all winter and the fires will stop. They wanted me to come up with an education program that would teach poor people not to plug eight things into one outlet--It’s like, forget about it. I mean, that’s the material conditions. They’ve got to do it. So after a couple of days I realized I was of no use out there.

So this is what I mean, you get into a time and place where the restrictions on the discourse of what can be said, what can be questions, are so narrow that you can’t function. This is what Paulo Freire understood, which makes a very important distinction of why critical pedagogy is different than standard pedagogy. Something like this: that while we have general orientations on how we think we can develop critical literacy, it’s not at all clear that this pedagogy can be practiced anywhere. Like if I go to graduate school and I get a PhD in Literature. I graduated and I’m certified that any university in America can hire me and I’ll arrive with all the bank of knowledge needed to distribute to all the students ‘cause I’ve collected it from some place far away and I’ve been certified with a PhD. So I’ll come and I’ll be asked to teach Shakespeare, or I’ll be asked to teach the modern novel or something like that, and I already got all that stuff in my head and I gotta go up there and start lecturing. This has nothing to do with critical pedagogy. That is, we all are expected to be extremely knowledgeable and very well informed and effective teachers, but what’s possible in any situation... We may end up in a place where critical inquiry and critical literacy are not allowed, where the political restrictions are so severe that we can’t operate openly and we may have to, what I call, create the conditions for pedagogy.

Creating the conditions for pedagogy means that the surveillance I am under as a regulated teacher in a bureaucratic institution are so severe that the syllabus is handed to me and I’m expected to enforce it. So I may have to sponsor a series of forums outside, as extracurricular, extramural forums that raise questions. I may have to decide to use the hallways of the campus as an art gallery where I make visual representations that raise questions as people walk to class and because it’s not for credit and because I don’t have to give a final exam on it, that what I’m doing is I’m looking at what is the flow of everyday life at this institution and how do I locate myself so that everybody has to cross paths with me and see something; I might have to take a video monitor and put it in a highly frequented place and have a loop, a video loop playing every three or four minutes raising critical questions about something. And it’s not a class, it’s not a credit, nobody has to pay tuition for it, and I’m not going to be judged on it because no one’s going to come observe me to see how well I teach the mandated syllabus and so on. This is the extra syllabus, the extra curriculum, and I invent it outside because

the inside is too policed for me to take it far enough. So I may reach that conclusion.

It may be that in movements, political movements like the Black Lives Matter that has the most freedom, like we had during the civil rights period when they had citizenship schools in the South for folks, and now when the Black Panthers had children's breakfast programs and so on, the freedom they had to pose critical questions was much greater than anybody in any formal institution could take advantage of. So that's the best place to do it, but here's the thing—that when you have a movement afoot outside there's, you're addressing several different constituencies simultaneously. That is, you say “alright we're going to have this forum on this topic,” probably you are going to attract people who are most interested in the campaign and they will come, and so you have to begin at their level. All of us who are interested in this campaign are already in motion to try and make something happen, what's the next step for us? So you have to be very careful that you begin at a higher level of purpose; that is, we all gathered first because we want to make a difference about this, so let's review how we've made a difference so far, let's review how where we have failed and what's left for us to do. So that answers the question that I think is at the foundation of critical pedagogy, which is, where does subject-matter come from and what do we do with it.

Now, suppose you want to go out to the community and say: look we've got this Black Lives Matter movement and for all the folks who haven't met us yet we want to have a public forum where we meet to discuss things over. So a lot of folks are going to come who are not yet devotees or participants in the movement, so the discourse now has to be appropriate for that different audience. So these types of distinctions are extremely important for a movement outside of institutions to be clear so that they don't have a singular discourse through which they continually address different audiences and that's when a movement becomes illegible and boring to audiences when it doesn't adjust its discourse to the audience in front of it and, also, it doesn't address the discourse to the way this particular audience understands the situation, and so on.

This is repeated also in schools in so far as, when you're teaching middle school, you work differently than if you teach high school. The difference is there are understood in the different levels of audience for the appropriate age levels of the students. When we're dealing with movements we may deal with age, like if we have a Black Panther children's breakfast program, we're addressing little kids, if we now have a community meeting for the parents, we're addressing adults, so the discourses have to be very carefully discussed.

The second thing is, whenever we do a public demonstration, the public demonstration must be understood as an educational activity. That is, what are the slogans that appear on the banners? This is not a casual discussion. They have to faithfully represent what we're after and they also have to be understandable to a

very wide audience who doesn't agree with us. That's what matters. Because now since it's in public we have to address in general how we textually represent ourselves in banners matters. And the other thing is, who is going to be the speaker and how the speaker is going to address the audience? Those are all pedagogical questions that a movement has to address that folks in schools don't get an opportunity to do.

YR: So then how does this, this idea of attentiveness to audience, how does that intersect with when people are trying to achieve what might seem like disruptive, a disruptive rhetoric, or a rhetoric that's going to disrupt the status quo, or disrupt catering to audience so that something can be made visible, which I think is very particular to the Black Lives Matter movement. Right? When they disrupted Bernie Sanders, there's a pedagogy that they're trying to get across or an educational process that they're trying to get across, but it comes off as disruptive rather than catering to audience. So how do you negotiate those tensions?

IS: Okay. Look, I—I think Bernie Sanders has responded to that interruption and he immediately added Black folks to his senior staff and had Black speakers at his events and so on. So he got the message, and he adjusted, so I think that's to his credit. The worry I have is this: All the folks who come out to hear Bernie Sanders will be looking for someone who is presenting an alternative point of view. That is, if they were happy with Hillary Clinton, they wouldn't be curious about Bernie Sanders. So now we have to not only consider how to change Bernie Sanders so that he adjusts and includes this theme in his presentations, but also how the large audiences he attacks becomes a place where we approach them as potential allies and friends, okay?

So, I watch these events and I was very concerned that folks who came out to these Bernie Sanders events that were interrupted would feel put upon when I think they were open to hear, open to hear the racial critique that Black Lives Matter wants to do. And Bernie neutralized the possible antagonism by moving quickly to adjust to it.

I've seen in the past a lot—how should I put it?—when you go to an event that's an established event or an official event and you interrupt it, that's different than going to a protest event and interrupting it and demanding a platform. They're not the same thing. They're two different political interventions. One, you have to treat as potential allies because I think that we are all moving in the same direction, though not at the same speed and not in the same way. And the other is the status quo trying to consolidate itself more effectively to stay in power, and so on.

So if somebody is on the road to raising questions about the status quo, we have to address them as potential allies and ask ourselves: Okay, they're not up to speed on this question and it's too important for them to ignore it, so now what are the avenues through which we strengthen the potential alliance between us

and these constituencies through which we will all become more powerful? And if I embarrass Bernie Sanders on stage and he's smart enough to know that rather than complaining, he should just alter his campaign structure, his campaign organization—that's good for him and that's smart for him. At the same time, there's a large crowd of thousands of people and I now have to consider: What are these potential allies thinking about the disruption? They're not Bernie Sanders. They're not running for office. They don't have to be generous and accommodating. They can just feel angry and alienated and think they've been put upon and they came for an event, which they are not allowed to witness and they are being hijacked in a way. That feeling is one that I think is a very high risk thing to entertain. And thinking of them as potential allies changes the way...

Now, I don't want to tell people how they should do it. When I witnessed this event I thought that Bernie, that the rhetorical situation involved Bernie at the platform addressing a large crowd of supporters and that Bernie was going to be differently affected than the audience was going to be affected and what counts for me most is the mass affect because we want to gain as many friends, allies as possible. So nothing counts more than the effect we have on large groups of people gathered to try to make a change.

- TI: So my question is from your perspective in higher education and specifically at CUNY for several decades: what social and political responsibility do faculty have at their institutions? So we've done actually a past program on contingent labor and we're thinking a lot about that particularly as graduate students and even for the future in terms of the job market, but we're curious also about your thoughts on the current state of higher education and the future of writing studies.
- IS: Contingent labor and the adjunct labor is a disgrace in higher education and the use of contingent labor anywhere in the American job market is a disgrace. It's one of the reasons that the 1%, the owning class, has been able to accumulate such vast wealth because they've put folks on such reduced wages and part time work and reduced the benefits and so on. So this is a terrible crisis. Now I've tried to address this crisis practically a few times.

CUNY, the City University of New York where I work, started what they considered a model, "new" community college. It was called The New Community College and it was supposed to be a "showcase institution" where only students who could go full time would be allowed to attend, they would be given certain economic benefits, they would be given more close mentoring and guidance counseling and so on and so on. In a sense like a bracketed privileged community college would be set up. So I was actually asked to develop the language curriculum, you know, for this new community college.

I was approached by one of the founding deans and so on. So, I knew that this was a very fraudulent operation because instead of improving higher education what CUNY is interested in doing is providing showcases that it can circulate as

like how wonderful we are. We have the Macaulay Honors College and it is producing elite showcases while it allows the mass experience to degenerate. So I had to think a lot about it, so I eventually sent a message to the dean. I said: Look, I'll do it if you promise that all the faculty will be full-time and we won't use any adjunct labor, and so on. And of course they wouldn't make that promise, so I didn't take part of it and I couldn't take part in anything that was going to produce more adjunct crisis and so on.

And also in the CCCC about twelve years ago I founded, well in the 90s, I founded this working-class group with some other folks and we did various projects along the way and then I asked folks to join me in circulating a petition that setup a special commission to investigate the adjunct crisis in the CCCC. And we spent a whole year collecting lots and lots of signatures and I called highly esteemed colleagues to join us in the push, and some wonderful people like Linda Flower and Peter Elbow both joined on and then we handed the petition in, and that was the year 2002 and both Peter Elbow and Linda Flower came to the business meeting on Saturday morning to speak in favor of this commission to investigate and to do something about the adjunct hiring and we caught basically the conservative executive committee off guard, by surprise, and because we demonstrated broad support among the high status folks, they had to acknowledge it. They agreed to this commission and they asked me to chair it. So I began chairing it and this table we're sitting at now was the space of our first meeting. And I could pick the people I wanted. Really wonderful people joined the commission, but the CCCC refused to budget even one dollar for our operation. So we got no budget, we got no clerical help, we got no institutional organizational help whatsoever so we financed the commission on our own. That is, I invited the whole commission to come to my house and I fed them for the weekend, here. Two or three of them slept in my house here, and then I got cheap motel rooms elsewhere and these folks were just wonderful. They paid their own transportation, they paid for their own hotel and motel here, and we met for two or three days to come up with a program for the adjunct crisis.

We came up with a program. We decided that we wanted to hold a conference on the adjunct crisis in the spring or early summer that would bring all the groups organizing labor together as well as representative groups from all the disciplines like the sociologists, the historians, all the disciplines that use a lot of adjuncts.

So I put this proposal to the CCCC, and they said absolutely not. They wouldn't give me a dollar to finance this. I had called up colleges, I had looked up where we might have low-cost sites, you know for colleges where we could rent the dorms or whatever. And they, eventually, they refused. And I know this will sound unbelievable to many people who hear it, but I eventually got the answer that the CCCC is afraid that fights will break out at this conference and they are not insured for any violence and injuries that occur.

YR: Oh my...



ALL: [Laughter]

IS: I'm still astonished when I say it out loud. And I could only answer and I says, "You're absolutely right, writing teachers are very violent people. We really have a lot to worry, and I think you're right not to support it." So they refused to give me any, and then I said: Well I'm going to have to take these people to court.

So I then started searching—we had no budget—for a lawyer to sue them. I went around and I was searching for pro-bono. Nobody would take this on pro-bono. So then I finally found a lawyer who said that for a \$3,000 retainer that she would initiate the lawsuit. So, look, that's a lot of money, and none of us had \$3,000 laying around, so I had to decide that I was just defeated.

And then when I came back the next year to the CCCC, the head of the CCCC program that year suddenly announces that she's established a special writing program commission that's going to reward the writing programs that have exemplary practices. So she announces that at a meeting of all the commission chairs where I had the right to be because I was the head of this commission. So I said, "Wait a minute," I said, "That's my commission! That's what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to investigate writing programs and decides who's what and who's what." And she said, "This is something different." And I said, "Absolutely not. You're financing a competitor and I disagree with it" and blah blah blah, and we got into an argument. It was embarrassing. And it was unresolved and I couldn't get an answer so I knew this was the end. I then wrote a letter of resignation and I left the commission because given our political resources in that organization at that moment, we couldn't get anywhere. So I was very sad and very unhappy because I loved the people I was working with and I knew this adjunct crisis had to be addressed and I was just going crazy figuring out: "How do you do it?" And it still isn't addressed.

So without a question, we are exploiting part-time teachers. We are abusing our graduate students and our adjuncts, and we are providing inferior teaching and learning to all the students who take their courses and finally that we are accepting that our field, Composition and Rhetoric, will be a colony of English Departments, Literary Departments, forever and that we will be sub-professional status. So the answer started at Duke and other places was: Oh, let's hire them as lecturers! They'll teach 4-4 on a full-time contract with no guaranteed renewal and we'll give them a minimum health plan. So they'll teach 4-4. They'll teach too much composition with class sizes too large and they'll never be given faculty status and they won't be given long term appointment or no chance for tenure. So they will be permanently an underclass in the university, and this is disgraceful. It's disgusting. I opposed it from the beginning and I'm just hoping something emerges.

What I did with this commission in 2002 follows on what Sharon Crowley did in

1987 with the Wyoming Resolution. So it's not the first time in the CCCC. The Conference on College Composition and Communication has a lot of experience in how to frustrate any attempt to change the labor conditions of the field, and I resent it.

BK: So when you talk about your experiences in that committee—and it makes me think about whether or not to work, or what does it mean to work within institutions and for and for institutional change? And I think that your story about what happened at CCCC makes a lot of sense to me in some of the, you know, trying to force institutional changes that I've been a part of or collectively at Syracuse University and other places. Where I think the phrase “inclusion delusions” is something that is important lately—of people creating meeting spaces and forums, but then the folks in power knowing that we're just going to waste time, frustrate people and burn them out and give them no resources for example, and, you know, people will be so frustrated that they just drop it or something. And I'm thinking about faculty members or graduate students who are writing teachers that are listening to this because they're interested in not just teaching an essay but also they're interested in social change. I guess some advice, you know, about encountering their institutions or do you do your political work on the side and not even get it involved in the work of your department and your university. So I guess some advice for that person that's listening because they want to do the work of social justice and they're a writing teacher.

IS: Look. I spent a lot of hours in at least two different situations trying to address the adjunct crisis, and I haven't figured it out yet. So, after the CCCC more or less expelled me in 2004, what I do is that I look around for what's called an opening to the left. Like I said before with Paulo Friere's notion of a situated pedagogy, there are times and places where you can do more and times and places when you can do less, so although we're all interested in questioning the status quo and propelling social justice, in some places we can get farther and in some places we won't get far at all. So we have to make an evaluation: what do we want to accomplish where? And, as Paulo Freire called it, the archaeology of the institution. That is, what are the forces that raid against us and what are the forces that we can mobilize for us? What are the openings and what are the closings? So, without question that has to be an undertaking of any one that's interested in social justice.

Okay, so I reached a really bad dead end and I was really unhappy for a long time. When I left that conference, I was just sad for days because I loved working with the people, and I thought that we really couldn't continue. So what I do is that you know I took some time, I recovered, and then I started looking around for a different opening to the left.

What I've been doing for the last ten years, I've been doing a lot of local work here. I advocate against the real estate developers in town, at the planning commission. So I go and speak when they're trying to convert our parks into

condos and so on. I go there and, I joined other people I'm not alone, I belong to a group called Friends of Anderson Park, which we started ten years ago about the park nearby where we are park advocates and park stewards and we also undertake going to the planning commission and the city council to talk against—whenever the developers what to build high rises on the park and so on. So that's an opening where we're able to have some effect.

In addition, I've been working with local public schools against standardized testing and so on. And we had forced on us here a graduate of the unaccredited Broad Foundation, what we called a Broady, who was secretly hired by our renegade board of education and it took us two and a half years of constant opposition at the local level to force her out. So, you know, it's not very visible outside of town but it sure is a lot of time locally to make that happen.

The other thing is that I got involved in helping at the margins of the Occupy Movement that emerged in 2011 and because I'm raising a little boy I can't sleep out there at night on the concrete. And also, because of my age, I'll sleep on the concrete I'll be as hard as the concrete in the morning [laughs]. So, you know I have to find what can someone my age, raising children, can do, so we had a fundraiser here in town, we raised money, and also I raised a carload.

Occupy used to publish online, they published so much online. They used to publish "What Do We Need?" at the site. And they published a list of things that they need. They need tents, they need tarpaulins, they need warm winter clothing, they need this and that. So, we had a fundraiser and I ferried a carload of equipment from their list to them. They had a depot there where we dropped it off. I took Paulo, my son with me, he was seven or eight then. Then we hung out there for the day.

I also did a couple of teach-ins on site. There were so many teach-ins happening at once and one or two groups that wanted something on the education crisis. I came there and did one on site. So I think that was a very important opening to the left. While I couldn't be involved every day, I thought that was a place worth being.

And, then, lately I've been spending a lot of time on the opt-out movement, which I think is a very important opening to the left. It's a very contradictory moment, it moves in several directions at once, but every morning I wake up and I keep in touch with the parent opt out movements in three states: in Colorado, New Mexico, and Florida, and sometimes upstate New York. And all these state groups, these parents and different [groups] have like—they're on weblogs—and they're all posting voraciously every morning.

So I wake up and there are 250 emails in my inbox in the morning, and I participate in their conversations with them. And because I'm an education scholar and I've read a lot—and these are all very smart people, parents who have

been to college where they have a talent and so on—questions come up and I'm able to post about the history of testing. So I'm able to have like an online pedagogy, an online critical pedagogy where I know about the history of testing, I know about public financing, I know about K-12, and I know who is behind who and so on, so I'm able to post, you know, long messages that address things that are coming up in all the conversations.

So it feels good to be of some use, to have like an intellectual role where I'm welcome and so on. Then, one of the groups, the New Mexico group actually, asked me to do a seminar—what'd they call it on Zoom, if you know what that technology is—where they did a statewide seminar for two hours. They asked me to give a brief introductory talk and then folks online there would ask questions and then we had a dialogue for about two hours. So I did that about two weeks ago, and then somebody who works on cable TV came here and they videotaped a segment on the education crisis which they are going to put on cable TV in Manhattan. So what, you know like, I'm looking for what they call the openings to the left, okay? And those are places that are more promising than the other... It means more or less that not all of the injustices in society are equally vulnerable to intervention.

It means that we have to look around that we are given the power we have. Paulo Freire used to say it this way. Paulo Freire said, "You cannot use a power you do not have." Okay? So the next question of course is "What power do we have?" And "Where do we get that power and deploy it? And that's what I mean by an opening to the left and those things are on my mind.

For young teachers now, I think it's—there are things that are valuable to do. For example, when protest movements emerge on campus like with the Black Lives Matter or the thing about Missouri lately, it's really important to have a local activist group able to sponsor a forum or a rally of some kind to put the local place on the map of this activity. In addition, making a community connection from the campus and this is where community literacy projects and publication projects inside of the community working with local groups really matters. I think it's really important because we can bring things to them, assets, that they might not be able to find on their own and there may be other kinds of campaigns through which campus folks can be very useful. For example, a kitchen, a soup kitchen and raising resources for that is very useful to establish as many contacts as possible off campus.

And one of the folks who wrote a really wonderful book on this was Linda Flower's book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* where she takes her students from Carnegie Mellon into the inner city of Pittsburgh and develops rhetorical projects based on the needs of the local community, which I think is just wonderful. And that's something we can do locally that doesn't require—I told Linda once, "the farther you are away from power, the more options you have." The closer you get to the center of power, the more

punishment and surveillance you're under. I was telling her that because I said when you're working in the community you're farther from power and so you're under less surveillance so your options to do things differently are more open. The closer you get to campus and to the institution, and the departments, and the Deans and so on, the more eyes are on you, and in a period like this that is so punitive and conservative, that's especially why moving out into the margins and to community literacy is a very sensible project.

YR: So is there anything that we haven't asked that you might want to add in terms of critical pedagogy, how do you use your background to inform the work, the potential of the classroom, or anything that we haven't asked?

IS: I think it's extremely important for teachers interested in social justice and critical teaching not to get isolated and work alone. Paulo Freire said this, he said, "You cannot confront the lion alone." If you're going to hunt lions and face very dangerous folks, that you must do it in a group. The first thing that's important to do is to find allies and colleagues with whom you can converse and collaborate on different projects. Do not get isolated as the radical crank who is always alone and raising questions. That's very important to do.

The next thing is that, try to get connected to the history of this work. A lot of folks have been, you know, asking the same questions for a lot of years. Some of us write about what works and what didn't work and so on, so it's very important to read about the long history so that we don't feel as if we have to invent the wheel. That's very disempowering to feel that you're alone and that you have to start from scratch. The other thing is that there are right now some very good social justice education conferences around the country. I know we have one in Chicago, we have one in the Pacific Northwest, we have one in San Francisco, I think there might be one in LA. I know there is one in New York City. Anyhow, you can travel. There are ones close enough to where you are. Go there and you will meet people that you're very happy to hang out with and you will go to sessions that are very, very useful. So that's another thing is to avoid isolation. The more alone we feel the less powerful we feel to make a difference, so connecting is actually job number one.

BK: Thank you. Thanks so much.

YR: Yeah, we did it!

ALL: [Laughter]

*Cue music: Broke for Free, "Night Owl"*

BK: Thanks so much for listening, and thank you to Ira Shor for letting us have this conversation.

Co-Executive producers for this Rhetorical Life are Karrieann Soto and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Kate Seigfried, Yanira Rodriguez, and Tamara Issak.