

CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACIES, EDUCATIONAL REFORM, AND URBAN TEACHERS' RIGHT TO THE CITY

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Urban teachers are prime targets in school failure narratives, which underwrite the reorganization of public space through school closure and centralized control of teaching and assessment. This article analyzes teachers' online comments about education reform through the lens of the right to the city. We collected data using Internet searches linking urban teachers and educational reform. We asked how urban teachers' utterances function in the struggle over the reorganization of public space implicit in public education reform. Data were coded to identify trends in the arguments used by those who present themselves as urban teachers to respond to educational reform. We found that these arguments mitigated criticism of teacher effectiveness and critiqued reform narratives. The notion of everyday life reaching an oppressive breaking point gives special significance to these arguments and the digital environments in which they are being constructed. Teacher-authors used their location, relationships, and work in cities to reject narratives emanating from outside and above the communities in which they work and isolate the key factors alienating them from their work and workplaces. Public debate over high-stakes testing and national standards represents a watershed moment in the history of urban education in the United States that points to the significance of civic participation and action in and through digitally mediated environments.

The language describing educational policy and practice plays an important social role in what is happening in schools. Reforms begin and are justified by powerful narratives carefully chosen to reinforce crisis-and-rescue approaches to social improvement. Efforts to resist one-size-fits-all approaches represent complex sociolinguistic challenges. Public schooling, and urban schools especially, have

been framed as sites for solving social problems and protecting the state for millennia (Giroux, 2010). Reorganizing schools has been a tempting solution to complex social problems, but top-down execution of educational reform has embittered teachers. Teachers' responses to their interrupted agency as members of urban communities are the focus of this paper. The idea of a right to the city as "a cry

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and a demand” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158) of inhabitants for meaningful agency warrants a particular kind of listening to teachers’ online utterances. Lefebvre’s model of the oppressive restructuring of the modern city provides a listening device to focus on teachers as active agents in the most important political struggles of our day. In this paper we examine online published speech as acts of resistance to unwelcome changes in relations between teachers and the communities they serve (Mitchell, 2003).

In the model of the right to the city, oppression occurs as the everyday work, interactions, and social organization increasingly serve the economic interests of people other than a city’s inhabitants. The result for urban teachers has been a shift toward increasingly exploitive conditions as they are forced to execute simplistic solutions without being able to meaningfully participate in the dialogue about their consequences on the ground. Further, education reform narratives conceal the economic restructuring of urban schools (Lipman, 2011). Publicly blaming teachers for entrenched, complex social problems has underwritten large scale reorganizations of urban life and space in the past, as when children from urban areas were bused into the suburbs (Hanushek, 2008). Contemporary neoliberal reform agendas direct unparalleled blame at teachers (Goldstein, 2014; Ravitch, 2013), far exceeding the nonetheless astounding act of scapegoating encapsulated in the Kerner Report (1968/2013). Contemporary reform narratives fault teachers in order to clear the way for market based school improvement (Au, 2011), which almost inevitably result in degrading the relationship between teacher and student, and teacher and parent, and teacher and community. Unparalleled investment in educational startup corporations are one indication of the effectiveness of these narratives in opening schools as an economic frontier, yet these changes depend upon rendering teachers silent. Lefebvre (1996) argued that conditions like these continue to worsen until everyday life becomes unbearable.

We are attempting to understand the role of teachers as inhabitants of the modern city and their experiences of efforts to restructure social and material spaces. Education reform purports to justify sweeping changes in teachers’ working lives and spaces as necessary social improvements. However, these reforms directly interfere with teachers’ responsibility to use school spaces to meet students’ needs, leaving them feeling silenced and disillusioned (Stewart, 2012). The exploitation of teachers virtually always takes the form of rendering their professional judgment unnecessary, and therefore contributes to the degradation of their day-to-day professional routines. We find it useful to apply Lefebvre’s model here as we consider teachers’ public reactions to oppressive working conditions foisted upon them and the public as the saving grace of contemporary education. Examples of contested reforms include mandated pacing guides (Stewart, 2012) that make it impossible for teachers to tailor instruction to meet individual students’ needs, desires, and cultural contexts. Remedial reading software and credit recovery systems in place nationwide reflect the fundamental connection between education reform, teacher control, and the opening of U.S. public education as an economic market (Lipman, 2011). Teachers represent a working class stakeholder group expected to carry the burden of social and economic improvement through policies intended to govern what, how, and to whom they speak.

Reform rhetoric authorizes and sanitizes the exploitation of teachers by arguing that the production of standardized, quantitative data on student and teacher performance leads to improved instruction necessary for global competitiveness. Working against powerful narratives of educational reform are efforts to contest, mock, and expose the flaws of these exploitive rhetorics. We are trying to understand the revolutionary potential of resistant speech published for public consumption.

For instance, teachers’ published critiques of high-stakes, standardized testing harmonizes with broader criticism of neoliberal policies from bank bailouts to corporate personhood

(Marcuse, 2009). Their concerns take issue with the "seeming naturalness" (Mitchell, 2012, p. 20) of school takeover. In this article we attempt to hear teachers speaking out as inhabitants of the city engaged in struggles for self-determination. Private corporations profit immensely from the drastic restructuring of public space and professional lives of teachers. High-stakes testing is a manifestation of corporate efficiency models applied to curricular mandates (Au, 2011). Consonant with the right to the city literature, testing exemplifies the creation of "new social relations" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 25) that reorganize city life and intensify the oppressive conditions of everyday life for teachers. So as we listen to teachers pushing back online against testing and other reforms, we see that in spite of conditions seeking to limit their speech, teachers are using digital media to confront narratives that have presented reforms as panaceas. They are blogging about pacing guides, commenting about the flawed connection between testing and school improvement, and sharing memes intended to protest assessment-driven reform narratives. Critical, digital dissent about topics such as high-stakes testing occur across social and material spaces. As we interpret them through the model of everyday life as a system of oppression, teachers' utterances resonate with right to the city researchers' search for revolutionary spark (Mitchell, 2003).

Teachers comments published online appear across a wide variety of social media platforms. One popular online organizing site is dedicated to "every teacher who refuses to be blamed" (Badass Teachers' Association, 2015, n.p.) for what they see as a tide of negative changes in their workspaces and lives. Teachers' comments found online suggest their development and use of critical digital literacies, which we define as manipulation of content and formal elements in digital environments. In order to see how critical digital literacies function in relation to political struggles of the right to the city, we first explore reform rhetoric that reshaped urban schools before the these digital spaces developed. We examine

sophisticated, if troubling arguments in the Kerner Report (1968/2013) that shift blame onto urban schools. We then turn to contemporary reform debates in digital spaces to examine the way language is used by urban teachers to confront narratives that underwrite sweeping changes in schools. We consider, in the process, the relation between language and political struggle, in particular the strategic character of language production in assertions of the right to appropriate and use social and material spaces of the city.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lefebvre's (1996) radically democratic idea that all inhabitants of the city have a right to a role in the production and appropriation of urban space draws attention, for us as literacy researchers interested in social justice, to the relationship between the speech that reformers and teachers are producing and the right to the city. Reform efforts aimed at solving social problems have reorganized schooling and, with it, teachers' lives. Lefebvre's theory of everyday life presents the day-to-day routine that defines the working life of the masses as both the vehicle of oppression and means of large-scale democratic, social upheaval. With the unparalleled scrutiny leveled at teachers and efforts to change school on the account of their purported failure, paying attention to teachers' online dissenting comments related to their everyday lives becomes critically important. The idea of disruption of everyday life underscores the possibility that teachers may be repurposing digital spaces as sites of struggle over a right to the city. We approach action in digital spaces from the standpoint of Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of the utterance and heteroglossia, which present statements as strategically composed social actions.

For Bakhtin (1981), the utterance refers the most basic element of living communication—often similar in length to the sentence. Bakhtin saw utterances as situated within time, space, and speech genres. They are the shortest manifestations of speech plans, which means they

assume particular audiences and desired responses. Utterances are authored against the supersaturated backdrops of the social histories of word meaning and existing speech genres. Audiences interpret utterances against such backdrops. The multiple backdrops against which utterances can be produced and interpreted, Bakhtin called heteroglossia. This property of language creates opportunities for divergent meaning making (Collins, 1999) that underwrite dissent.

Utterances resisting dominant narratives of school reform mark important challenges to uneven distribution of power in the city. Lefebvre (1996) advocated for radical enfranchisement and participation in political struggle for all relevant stakeholders as the necessary alternative to unsustainable exclusion of masses of urban residents from the production and use of urban living and working space. Time, space, and social relations in schools have been transformed to subordinate teacher-generated curricula to high stakes tests with pacing guide metering out teacher speech inside the classroom on a moment-by-moment basis. Teachers face the combination of decreased agency in their work spaces and an increased burden to promote economic and institutional control of others. These oppressive conditions become resources for teachers who wish to challenge the direction of educational reform. The heteroglossic potential of language affords individuals, especially those developing facility with digital communication tools, to drag oppressive narratives and conditions into new speech situations, where new meanings can be wrested from them as they are ridiculed, reframed, and shared. Critical digital literacies thus afford resistance for urban teachers balancing the burden of challenging destructive reform with their obligations as employees.

EDUCATION REFORM DISCOURSE AND THE ASSAULT ON THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Historically, rhetoric of education reform, as exemplified by the Kerner Report, has

assaulted teachers' (as well others) right to the city. Looking back at the condemnation of urban schools following urban unrest of the early 1960s dramatizes contemporary opportunities for teachers to protest their position in the narrative as scapegoats for complex social problems.

The Kerner Report (1968/2013) crafts a narrative that weaves together fear of social crisis emanating from cities, schools' susceptibility to reorganization from above, and crisis rhetoric justifying such reorganization. The report has continued to play a role in subsequent inquiry into "Urban Civil Disorder" such as the rioting in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014-5 (JAC Consulting, 2014, p. 1). Tasked with understanding and making recommendations to stem the tide of urban unrest in the mid-1960s, the Kerner report was largely rejected by Lyndon Johnson in 1967 until rioting in 100 cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. prompted a closer look. Among other recommendations, the Kerner report argued that widespread antisocial behavior among vast and growing segments of the U.S. population was the result of disenfranchisement from economic sustainability and political representation. The solution recommended by the Kerner Commission was that schools, whether by further integrating, busing, or changing curricula should absorb cities' imagined and real explosive potential. The report was progressive in the sense that it demanded a stake for urban inhabitants in the American workplace. The report did not acknowledge teachers' right to make decisions about their work. It did rely on myths about the magical economic power of literacy (Graff, 2011) to condemn schools' failure and justify reorganization.

Consistently, the Supreme Court of the United States, the President, and others have spoken *for* teachers, providing crisis-and-rescue justifications for massive restructuring as a means of ordering the city. The Kerner Report (1968/2013) is an example of the authoritative voices authorizing major changes in schools that marginalize teachers as educational pro-

professionals: “[Urban] schools have failed to provide the educational experience which could overcome the effects of discrimination and deprivation” (p. 21). Thus the Kerner report lays civil unrest at the feet of urban schools:

The bleak record of public education for ghetto children is growing worse. In the critical skills—verbal and reading ability—Negro students are falling further behind Whites with each year of school completed. The high unemployment and underemployment rate for Negro youth is evidence, in part, of the growing educational crisis. (p. 22)

We recoil from the uncritical bundling of antiquated descriptions of urban life and race, and we think it is worth questioning the meaning assigned to those social constructs. The Kerner report presents entrenched social problems, such as violence, deprivation, and unemployment as a crisis of education. While clearly framing urban schools as the scapegoat for complex and social problems, the Kerner Report penned this indictment of urban schools and teachers with the conviction that “It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress” (p. 2). With recent memory and worldwide documentation by popular news media of bigotry and institutional racism at all levels of government, it is no wonder schools are called upon to shoulder the burden of “preserving civil peace” as “the first responsibility of government” (p. 15). However, teachers have largely been excluded from dialogue related to carrying out this mandate. Yet they are held responsible for engineering social change and constrained by reform policies that are being constructed in a monologic, top-down manner (Givan, 2014).

The Kerner Report acknowledged a widespread perception, in cities, of a failed mandate of governance. Paradoxically, even though urban schools were named as explicit sources of public scorn, reform efforts would rely on their unquestioning cooperation. In contemporary standards-era reform, urban teachers are

again in reformers' crosshairs. Achievement and literacy gaps, this time between the U.S. and international peers, again take center stage as the common root of all sorts of impending doom. Teachers are the number one factor of student achievement, the logic goes, therefore urban teachers must be the worst of all. Urban schools have been restructured, closed, and converted to charter schools throughout U.S. urban areas. As with ending child labor and integration, safeguarding long-term U.S. economic growth through educational reform means yet another playbook placed into teachers' hands as if from on high.

Reform movements past and present have imagined social improvement through reorganizing schools without respect for teachers' input on how to accomplish these goals. Reform that is characterized by top down, unidirectional discourse inhibits dialogue that can result in effective change. Practicing teachers are aware of the political weaknesses of top-down, unidirectional reform discourse; some described feeling “powerless and incapable of influencing the policies in their schools” (Stewart, 2012, p. 385). Teachers' feelings of powerlessness collide with the social expectation that they execute the prescribed changes marketed as the path to swift, measurable social improvement. We argue that meaningful reform is not possible without authentic cooperation. Teachers are crucial stakeholders who have been asked to carry out the mission of social improvement while being excluded prejudicially from decisions about how to engineer change.

The emergence of user generated content tools over that last decade has resulted in a shifting landscape for education reform debate. This landscape is no longer able to exclude individual voices. The advent of social media tools has created opportunities for teachers to craft utterances, publish them publicly, and diversify the once monologic narrative of school reform. Teachers who publish their views on educational policy issues may be seen as engaging in socially significant civic action beyond service inside the class-

room. Their voices are particularly important because blame has been placed on them in the narratives of school ineffectiveness on which contemporary reform, like the Kerner report of the 1960s, is based.

CURRENT REFORM NARRATIVES

Narratives of school ineffectiveness function to reorganize public space through school closure and centralized control of teaching and assessment. The Small Schools movement is one example of how holding urban education responsible for persistent social problems can result in major restructuring of public schools and the cities in which they are located. Further, such reform efforts act as a leverage point through which philanthropic agencies can assert disproportionate control over public institutions (Barkan, 2011; Kovacs & Christie, 2008). Recently, market dynamics and corporate models of organization and efficiency have been the rationale for privatization of urban schools (Au, 2011).

Reform messages are designed to promote reform appeal to common sense and the desire for simple answers. The phrase “single most important school-based factor” is one example of the reform drumbeat that positions teachers as the problem in failing schools. Dissent must therefore be designed carefully, as illustrated below:

In the past, we used to hear that the “single most important school-based factor” in student achievement was the quality of the teacher. Now even the “school-based” qualification is being left out. Instead, we’re hearing absurd claims about how super-teachers can eliminate achievement gaps in 2 or 3 years with scripted curricula handed down from above, and how the real problem in schools is not the country’s shameful 23% child poverty rate or underfunded schools, but bad teachers. (Karp, 2012, para. 3).

Teachers like Stan Karp are using social media communication resources to include themselves in education reform debates. They offer

alternative, plausible explanations for supposedly common sense claims, and they select language that reveals limitations in reform logic. Their critical digital literacies facilitate teachers’ participation, which alters the structure of educational reform discourse. The official political context of educational reform is scaled to privilege state and quasi-state organizations, so critical commentary constructed and published by teachers represents a political struggle over schooling. These kinds of utterances contextualize educational reform with teacher involvement as a struggle over the right of the inhabitants of the city to use and shape it (Lefebvre, 1996; Mitchell, 2003).

Language in Reform and Resistance

A historical look at reform narratives reveals the power of language to produce uneven urban arrangements as simplistic solutions to complex social problems. Urban teachers’ online utterances come into focus as generative responses to everyday life at its breaking point. Past narratives underwriting reorganization of public education have been publicly questioned all along, obviously in academic circles, especially in informal communication among teachers, and notably through teachers’ unions. However, digital media represents a quantum leap in terms of whose dissent may be registered, the number and variety of outlets for engaging in public debate, the scope of the debate itself, and the growing political importance of attending to the pulse of social media. Urban teachers’ online dissidence directed at myriad public audiences, in a political context where sensitivity to online trends is a must, sharply contrasts past assaults on the right to the city in which dissent had far greater opportunity costs. Protest was there, but contemporary efforts are saturating public discussion and gaining traction through the affordances of user generated digital media. These efforts depend upon language as a mediating tool. Rather than calling online protest direct, we must recognize that teachers’ utterances func-

tion as transactions in the struggle over the right to the city as they anticipate and seek to influence myriad audiences' response.

We therefore asked how contemporary urban teachers' utterances functioned as attempts to even out undemocratic social arrangements. We examined urban teachers' use of critical digital literacies as a means of claiming a *right to the city* using the following subquestions:

1. What goals are evident in speech plans found in online posts purporting to represent the perspectives of urban teachers on educational reform?
2. What arguments characterizing urban education appear in these speech plans?
3. How does the construction or presentation of these arguments seek to manage or evoke responses among potential addressees?

Subjectivities

As former high school teachers and teacher educators seeking to prepare teachers to succeed in diverse classrooms of the 21st century, we are dismayed as federal education policy, our respective states, and home institutions established systems of assessment for teachers and students that we thought robbed teachers of agency. Moreover, we saw these changes as disproportionately affecting urban (and rural) schools that have been traditionally framed as the weak link in efforts to alleviate poverty and racial tension. Prior work with teachers frustrated by a lack of opportunity to contribute locally to educational policy and a growing interest in direct action and dissent sparked our desire to listen carefully to teachers working in urban settings who had chosen to speak out publicly. Our concerns position us as admirers of the bravery and risk we have seen on the part of many teachers speaking out and organizing online. We seek to understand their critical digital literacies (Boggs & Stewart, 2014) as important features that have emerged to dis-

rupt neoliberal restructuring of cities through education reform.

METHOD

Context

Lefebvre's (1996) revolutionary vision was predicated on the idea that waves of economic and other exploitation tend to homogenize urban spaces and experiences. We designed an urban education-oriented research protocol that would allow us to collect teachers' user-generated content online as a possible feature of wide-ranging struggles over the right to the city. We sought data that transcended specific research sites such as Chicago, where critical digital literacies are integrated daily into struggles against school closure, while attending to generalized urban markers that often appear alongside discussions of poverty, race, overcrowding, and truancy (Delpit, 2006; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). In the United States, urban issues are linked in volatile ways to issues of race, gender, power, and class and entangled in perceptions of success and failure. We sought to listen to teachers in active and nonjudgmental ways because our goal was to understand teachers' resistance to education reform in relation to urban experience. Online data collection enabled us to gather a wide variety of urban teachers' public dissent crafted for a general audience in public digital spaces. Studies of teacher dissent confined to one city may offer localized depiction the political significance of online composition. Our research follows teachers' engagement in public discourses of urban education (Kincheloe, 2010) in order to understand their role in disrupting the homogenization of urban spaces by educational and political policies privileging large-scale economic growth.

Data Collection

We used focused search terms (i.e., urban teacher blog, blog on teacher evaluations, why

inner-city school teachers have it harder, teacher evaluations are not fair), to collect data from social media platforms using Internet searches linking urban teachers and educational reform. The first step in this process was to use search engines to gather urban teachers' online, public statements from a variety of online public discussion spaces. We restricted data collection to statements related to current issues in education reform. Once statements crafted by those who presented themselves as urban teachers were located, we followed the links to the larger utterances to read them in their original contexts (e.g., blog posts; popular media articles). After reading the utterances in their larger contexts, these statements were organized into tables, which catalogued the teachers' statements for our analysis.

Data Analysis

After the data collection phase of our project was complete, we reviewed the data individually and used an initial thematic analysis code the data and to identify trends in the way those who present themselves as urban teachers respond to educational reform. During this initial step, we sought to identify salient themes and organize the data into broad, theoretical categories for further analysis (Maxwell, 2005). After our initial, individual reading of the data, we compared the themes we generated and considered the implications of the initial codes we employed to sort the data.

This initial phase of data analysis included a focus on the ways our initial coding choices reflected differing clustered beliefs (Davies, 2002). For example, we examined how our individual social positions led us to make different choices about which school problems may be attributed to poverty. Trevor initially coded arguments citing lack of parent involvement under the category "poverty" because of seemingly linked teaching problems he experienced working in a Title 1 school. George coded arguments referring to lack of parent involvement as one possible explanation of

school ineffectiveness besides teacher adequacy. Teasing out issues related to challenges of working in high poverty areas is a complex process because it is fraught with the potential of framing students and teachers as flawed (Dworin & Bomer, 2008).

Understanding teachers' utterances required a coding category that enabled us to attend to rather than reify the power of language to shape reality. Coding choices highlighted the way teachers' speech plans were constructed to elicit desired responses and the way our experiences as well as linguistic and conceptual resources can color our understanding of their efforts (Bakhtin, 1981). Trevor's experiences led him to initial certainty that shared language indexed shared perception and membership in a community of teachers of poor children. In contrast, George's initial coding steps were mediated less by identification with a community of teaching practice, but instead by a different community, one for which replicability of research was an overriding concern. Therefore he broke down broad codes into subcategories that could be explicitly linked to utterances. Our discussion of these coding steps brought to the fore this theoretical premise that arguments constructed in the data *and about the data* propose value-laden ways of seeing the world. As individuals engage in dialogue, even with unknown addressees, their utterances offer compelling language for processing experience, especially language experience.

Critically examining our initial codes helped us see and attend to the problem of potential addressees. Because of our past experiences as high school teachers, we are culturally inclined to read these statements as being from peer teachers; however, our current context as researchers and teacher educators influenced our understanding of the data and our desire to study teachers in the first place. We balanced these multiple identities and erred on the side of explicit reference in order to respect teachers' right to speak for themselves. Revised inclusion criteria for some of the codes increased the validity of our coding pro-

cess and organize the data in a way that may be replicated by other researchers. The first of two overarching coding families contained the following categories: *Distinctly Urban*, *Diversity Issues*, *Testing*, *Labor Issues*, *Neoliberal Agenda*, and *Failed Mandate*.

Compiling teachers' utterances into groups based on the above categories accounted for the variety of conceptual and argumentative content of the utterances teachers used to enact their speech plans. Speech inevitably combines logical and conceptual content with specific rhetorical presentation as part of an utterance's function. The utterance, especially as it represents the enactment of a speech plan, shows speech to be a strategic production that integrates formal and content-oriented symbolic resources to elicit a desired response from an addressee (Bakhtin, 1981). Focusing on the content and form present in teachers' utterances required us to employ codes clustered around formal language choices. These codes signified the use of conspicuous rhetorical "moves" complementing arguments in the data. The following rhetorical move codes were integrated into the content-oriented coding tables: *Insider vs. Outsider Status*, *Intertextuality*, *Critiquing Narrative*, *Historicizing*, *Text Features*, *Personal Anecdote/Indirect Speech*, *Gesture to Authority*, and *Rhetorical Question*. This arrangement of coded data enabled us to analyze the form and content of teachers' utterances to understand their speech plans.

FINDINGS

It bears repeating that we deeply respect the work and voices of teachers, and we want to be considerate of them as we seek to understand their speech plans in light of the right to the city. Our model focuses on teachers' utterances as efforts to resist degradation of their working lives by attending to the argumentative content and formal rhetoric they deem valuable. In the following findings sections, we address each of our three research ques-

tions. The first seeks an overall orientation, if any, of teachers' online utterances in debates about education reform. The second probes the content of the teachers' utterances in conceptual subcategories. The third considers rhetorical moves made in the utterances that appear to support teachers' authentic participation in debate.

Goals Evident in Speech Plans Found in Online Posts

As we generated themes that supported our efforts to listen to teachers and analyze what we were hearing, we noted that utterances that exhibited speech plans that directly connected with the concept of a struggle over the right to the city. They protested the degrading effects of neoliberal education policies on the urban education environment. For example, one teacher decried reformers "overt disrespect for the person who is actually inside the room trying to get the job done. I've had it." A holistic reading of the data, however, places such utterances in a broader context of political struggle, which warrants an open-minded evaluation of arguments directly and indirectly related to the right to the city and teachers' struggle for self-determination. The conceptual themes in their compositions presented substantial defenses that undermined, challenged, or redirected personal and professional culpability for what is often characterized as the failure of urban education. Data sampled suggested a common concern that reform efforts illegitimately target teachers as the responsible party in alleged underperformance of U.S. public schools. The fact that such concern is articulated in open forums reflects the emergence of a dynamic environment for participation in public debate.

Their speech plans use reform logic to disrupt reform narratives intended to silence them. Reform narratives past and present operate through a crisis-and-rescue logic that authorizes restructuring of urban space. Teachers are blamed for social crises through top-down propaganda campaigns in which busing, Small Schools, 21st century skills, and value-

added measures of teaching have been presented as rescue. The advent of critical digital literacies has complicated the familiar trope of teacher as scapegoat. Teachers' online utterances argue that the blame appearing in such campaigns has missed its mark. Urban teachers' utterances explicitly and implicitly demand control over teachers' work environments. Critical digital literacies allow teachers to demand a say in work of the city that has been infringed upon, to take the offensive by pointing to significant social factors affecting what may translate narrowly as school ineffectiveness. Their digitally produced speech plans seek to break the spell of mob thinking by offering arguments that complicate easy answers. We discuss the variety of arguments below.

Multiple Arguments in Support of Teachers' Self-Determination

It is not possible to account for all elements of a speech plan, in part because of the plans' evanescent, emergent, and contingent nature. As we listened to the teachers, we focused on prominent elements of the speech plans—arguments and conspicuous rhetorical moves—with recognition of the limitations of fully capturing others' intent based on the words they have chosen. These arguments were grouped together based on common content demonstrate the materialization of raised consciousness, whether of destructive economic, political, institutional, or social conditions (Marcuse, 2009). Their arguments reflect ways of conceptualizing schooling that unravel the tight reform narratives.

Distinctly Urban. As we began our investigation of the argumentative content contained in these published utterances, Author A was not surprised to find utterances such as the one below invoking the city as a unique context in which to work and teach: "New teacher evaluation systems in New Haven, DC, Baltimore, NYC and plenty of other places across the country will make it exceedingly difficult for anyone in an urban school to keep a job for

longer than a few years." However, as we worked together to reconcile our coding choices, we found that many of the teachers' ways of describing the issues they were encountering in their work spaces required more nuanced acknowledgment beyond categorization as *Distinctly Urban*. Notions of what is and is not distinctly urban are fraught with assumptions colored by our experiences and subjectivities. As described in our methodology, we erred on the side of assigning codes that would be replicable among educational researchers. Our goal was not to collapse the meaning of the urban. Instead, we wanted to expand this concept and better attend to how teachers were making sense of the challenges they encounter in their work spaces. As a result many utterances that might have been coded *Distinctly Urban* were assigned, based on explicit references, to other categories.

Diversity Issues. Arguments designed to distinguish teachers' experiences from the dominant social paradigm of White, middle class culture were coded *Diversity Issues*. A separate coding, *Homogeneity*, was eventually subsumed by this code with recognition that the types of arguments represented two sides of the same coin. These arguments drew on the constraints of working in school districts teachers judged as needing but lacking appropriate differentiation based on culture, family configuration, wealth, and more. For example, one statement presented the argument: "The problem is, kids from the top of the social ladder grow up in an environment that's conducive to the development of academic knowledge, and kids from the bottom of it don't." In terms of content, such arguments have much in common with those published in the Kerner Commission report. In both the Kerner report and teachers' online statements, we saw references to race, class, and ability that gave us pause and led us to consider the role of the social position of each of these groups of authors and their speech plans, which could not be more different. To illustrate, the Kerner report authors hand down a judgment against schools for social unrest for

which schools and teachers could never *in actuality* be held responsible. In contrast, the teachers' utterances are designed to educate their addresses about differences that make a difference in education children.

Teachers constructed responses to educational reform around the relevant differentness of urban education. References to poverty, family structure, behavior, and attitudes toward institutional schooling place issues of diversity at the heart of urban teachers' work and their claim to meaningful status as members of communities of difference. Statements constructed under this category stressed the need to keep these conditions in view when evaluating schools.

Testing. With considerable data overlap between this category and *Diversity Issues*, *Testing* arguments indexed the ways in which standardization resulting from high-stakes testing was incompatible with the mission of teaching as seen by the teachers who used critical digital literacies to dissent. The following example shows how testing was positioned to bear responsibility for low performance: "school closures further penalize those students who most benefit from a broad curriculum but are saddled with testing mandates that jeopardize not only their own future but also the future of the schools they attend." Utterances under this category attacked the validity of evaluations of teachers based on students' test performance as measures of the success or failure of schools to educate children. In the example, testing serves a narrow set of interests, affording reorganization of aspects of local, urban life through "school closure" in contrast to the interests served by a "broad curriculum."

Labor Issues. These arguments articulated perceived challenges teachers encounter related to class size, teacher and administrator turnover, and policy and curricular mandates that reduce teachers' self-determination. For example one teacher claimed that:

Low-income schools experience drastic changes every year. This is especially true in the wake of NCLB [No Child Left Behind],

when every district is trying something new all the time in the hope of raising test scores. However, real solutions take time to work. And changes in staff, curriculum, instruction, and school leadership are harmful when they happen so regularly.

Teachers' online utterances resisted criticism on the basis of the assumption that employees require training appropriate to the task and thrive in stable work environments. In this category, teachers shifted the scale of the problem of school achievement from a narrow view of teaching to the institutional system supporting teachers. The quotation above indexes the common link teachers constructed between diversity, testing, and labor issues, as causes and effects of systemic human resource problems. In other words, these utterances decried the shift at the administrative and political levels toward testing to emphasize a rift between teachers and administrators' perceptions of the work of teaching.

Neoliberal agenda. These arguments articulated teachers' frustration with efforts to privatize and standardize schools, particularly in urban areas where charter schools have become an increasingly popular reform choice. Rather than viewing market dynamics as a path to quality, teachers characterize privatization and for-profit schooling as a manipulation of vulnerable populations based on greed. For example, one teacher argued, "what we have is a political and corporate power structure using federal dollars to gain access and control over our Black children and bring children from the time they enter school until they leave." Another teacher, argued that neoliberal reform:

Perspectives sound eerily familiar to the countless failed "urban renewal" projects done in cities over the past 50 years—technocrats wanting to demolish what exists and instill their unproven vision of what is best instead of engaging with the people already there.

This utterance indexes the frustration of teachers' whose voices are being left out of discus-

sions of how to improve schools and shoulder the burden of engineering positive social change.

Failed Mandate. References to systematic abuse of power in public education were coded as *Failed Mandate* because we saw these arguments as leveling accusations against individuals tasked with protecting inhabitants of creating oppressive conditions instead. For example, one teacher directly accused a politician of “scamming the middle- & upper-middle-class taxpayers with the promise of lowering their taxes by privatizing public education for the poor, while raking in campaign monies from for-profit education corporations.” Another teacher juxtaposed reform efforts in which “One serves the Reformers and the other serves the students and the community.” Reform should have the best interests of inhabitants in mind, but, as this teacher noted, “One gives more authority to the management and executive class without any accountability, the other empowers teachers and students.” Statements like these index teachers’ frustrations with conditions that reduce their ability to use and arrange their places of work. Using Lefebvre’s model, we hear in their utterances efforts to resist everyday life as it grows unbearable. Teachers are using and arranging digital media over which they can assert tremendous authorial control to construct dissenting arguments. The previous sections delineate themes suggested by teachers’ utterances. An important additional feature of their critical digital literacies is their use of a variety of rhetorical constructions that work in concert with argument content to elicit desired responses (Bakhtin, 1981).

Rhetorical Construction and Presentation of Arguments Managing Responses

Rhetorical constructions are important features of teachers’ utterances when one considers the power dynamics at work in an environment that has sought to limit teachers’ active participation in determining the makeup

of social and material educational spaces. Lefebvre’s model requires a connection between desired political struggle and inhabitants’ actions. Our analysis of teachers’ rhetorical moves links dissident online utterances to the struggle over the right to the city. In this section, we provide examples of the political-discursive function of rhetorical moves.

Insider vs. Outsider Status. Utterances invoked insider status with regularity. They leveraged personal commitment, responsibility, and experience in urban schools as grounds for discussing problems attributed to teacher effectiveness by outsiders. This rhetorical strategy calls attention to what Bunge and Borda (1975) called “foreign invaders.” The familiar rhetorical appeal based on extensive personal and professional experience carries considerable weight across genres, topics, and audiences. “Administration provides no direction, just directives,” writes one teacher, “Each year there is a new magic bullet that will answer our school’s problems.” This rhetorical move frames contemporary reform as outsiders’ meddling, characterizing reform directives as simplistic, distracting, and even damaging.

Insider status is a kind of trump card that can be used by those who engage in political struggle and activism. In the utterances we examined how insider status *exposed* paternalistic and chauvinistic unilateralism, *proposed* the right to self-determination, and *politicized* business as usual in schools (Marcuse, 2009). As one teacher put it, “Few people outside of schools understand exactly how destructive these changes are.” Sustained outcry by insiders is currently being cited as the sole reason for relaxing neoliberal reform rollout in the state of Florida (O’Connor, 2015). For more than a decade, Florida has been a frontrunner in the application of corporate management models in education. However, bills that seek to reverse trends created by standards-era reform are now being passed that restrict time on testing, amount of influence test scores can have on teacher evaluation, and processes of grading schools based on student test scores. The proposed bills are being trumpeted as evi-

dence that representatives have listened to the insiders. As we write, we are listening to interviews with Florida Senators and Representatives who are bursting with pride that they have listened to the voice of teachers, families, and school districts (Solocheke, 2015).

Intertextuality. An important affordance of language is its ability to drag onto the stage of a conversation past events, people, and meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). Teachers' utterances exploited this affordance of language digitally by citing research, mentioning important figures' names as shorthand references to ideologies, and contextualizing contemporary issues within a broader framework (i.e., historical, political, economic, or social). A series of critiques by one teacher illustrates the range of intertextual rhetorical moves. The utterance begins by evoking a politics of inside and out:

I know I'm just a teacher and I don't have millions in the bank, a bulging wallet or even a platinum credit card—but let me try to draw on my poor more-than-a-decade of experience in the classroom to explain.

Then this teacher imports the name of a controversial practice at the heart of neoliberal reform and presents a layered case against it:

Value-Added Measures, as these are often called, have been labeled junk science [hyperlinked to a blog post by Diane Ravitch, <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/07/16/why-vam-is-junk-science/>] by national statistical organizations. They violate a basic principle of the field that you cannot use a test designed to evaluate one factor as a way to evaluate an entirely different factor. Removing due process would make the teachers who serve the most at-risk students, themselves, unfairly at risk of losing their jobs.

Finally, intertextuality serves the author's goal of politicizing value-added measures by suggesting that they amount to a violation of "due process."

Critiquing Narrative. Many examples of intertextuality went beyond invoking former meanings, people, and events. Utterances

labeled as *critiquing narrative* specifically incorporated existing reform (and one antireform) narratives. An utterance coded as using diversity issues to shift blame away from teachers began:

It is a false idea that the teachers drive the students' learning based solely upon standardized test scores. I have been a Highly Effective teacher in several schools and a very Ineffective teacher in two high schools that have failed for years before I arrived and will continue to fail long after I depart.

As a political struggle over self-determination, narratives that tie teacher quality to student performance on standardized must be contested. The insider move combines here with critiquing narratives of teacher quality to do so.

Historicizing. In an example of the *failed mandate* argument, an utterance included a rhetorical move by which contemporary issues are read against past conflict:

We fought against this in the civil rights era because the people in charge of educating our kids, the same structure who wants total power now, abused their power back then and failed to properly and equally educate our children.

We have adopted a similar strategy in this paper, pointing the unilateralism of the Kerner Commission report and obvious fear of the city in the 1960s to support our claim that teachers' participation in public debate constitutes an important moment in political struggle over the right to the city.

Additional rhetorical move codes. We also noted the use of text features, personal anecdotes, gestures to authority, and rhetorical questions among teachers' utterances as evidence of their efforts to draw and control audience attention. However, these rhetorical moves did not significantly enrich our understanding of the data. Instead, these rhetorical move codes simply highlighted the ways language can serve the basic political and discursive function of strengthening an argument or

a speaker's position. These codes strengthened our sense of reaching a saturation point in the data. Most importantly they point to the richness of the digital communication context for speakers who wish to register their alternative views and contribute to public discourse about their working lives and work spaces.

DISCUSSION

By integrating an understanding of language as an action oriented tool with the model of the city as a contested space, we see that critical digital literacies are tools that inhabitants of urban spaces are using to block the restructuring of urban school spaces. The low opportunity cost of producing online content has attracted many voices to the struggle over the right city, certainly not only teachers. Teach for America, the Gates Foundation, and myriad neoliberal reform organs actively employ user generated content tools to move their agendas forward. In fact, traditional power structures give significant advantage to those with financial and technological means to make their voices heard. Teachers, whose voices have been traditionally underrepresented are appropriating these tools as means of civic action. This study examines human interaction and struggle *in rhetoric* in order to avoid a false binary between word and deed, which makes language significant only when accompanied by so-called action (cf. Alinsky, 1971/1989). Bakhtin (1981) explains that human struggle occurs in rhetoric through language choices as speakers seek to anticipate opposing arguments, strengthen their own positions, and elicit a desired response. In this paper, we have examined teachers' utterances from the perspective that words *are* deeds. In political struggles, moreover, words are, perhaps, the most important deeds as evidenced by the symbolic significance attributed to moments of action. In this case of schools and teachers, teachers' deeds have not been viewed as an active part of the political struggle. Instead, their actions have been positioned as

extensions of the political will of others. The cycle of blaming teachers for the failure of schools to accomplish others' missions dramatizes their contemporary online dissent.

Teachers' civic roles have historically been restricted to speaking and acting in schools and with children only. However, when they translate their work in the classroom into public words, they engage in politically important action. Using critical digital literacies, teachers present labor and diversity issues, among other conceptual arguments, as counternarratives to the long established blame game that authorizes takeovers of the city. Their rhetorical choices position them as inhabitants with an inalienable right to make use of spaces allegedly forfeited in a misdirected, if not manufactured crisis. Their utterances, situated in myriad online discussions of educational policy and reform, are deeds.

Those who are excluded from participation and use of public space (Marcuse, 2009) are the very ones whose words, deeds, and *words as deeds* deserve attention. We have listened both out of respect for their side of the story and in recognition that they are crying for and demanding change at a historical moment in which new ways of speaking out confront novel forms of oppression and economic enclosure (Lefebvre, 1996). Teachers' online utterances are facets of a movement comprised of a variety of tactics in which action and talk continually bring one another to life, perhaps as M. C. Escher's sketch of hands drawing a hand that has come to life.

We are drawn to some of the arguments that teachers are making more than others when we scan their utterances for comprehensive responses to education reform. The best indicator of teachers' critical consciousness, however, is not the apparent sophistication of particular arguments and rhetoric. We think urban teachers' online compositions amount to assertions of a right to the city because of what produced them and how they were produced: The increasing oppression of teachers' everyday lives, indexed by numerous laments such

as the those below, motivated decisive online action.

- After 5 years, those teachers who were good and helping students to make achievements and “pass the test” quit. Yes, they quit. They find work somewhere else—I’ve seen it happen time and again. And it will happen again this year. Nobody is listening to urban school teachers.”
- And I don’t care—the next school year will be my last, and I am so done. I’m tired of being made to feel like garbage.

Critical digital literacies made that action possible.

The point we are making about critical digital literacies and the right to the city is not that technological tools have evolved, or that people have evolved through their use, but that human beings are infinitely capable of working within the constraints of cultural, economic, spatial, and discursive worlds, without being “bound down” by them (Goody, 2010, p. 1). Critical digital literacies evident in teachers’ utterances enable them to wrest new meaning from reform rhetoric and conditions that marginalize them. The struggle over the right to the city projects a kind of chaos among various inhabitants as multiple viewpoints converge, complement, and contradict one another. The data evoke just this sort of productive divergence, which suggests fertile ground for evolution and revolution. What would a diachronic reading of the data suggest about the evolution of arguments? By the time the ink is dry, we suspect it would be worth asking that question of this rich, chaotic discursive environment again.

Other questions are raised as we consider the significance of critical digital literacies as tools familiar to inhabitants. What conditions are now in place as a result of teachers’ online action? Their use of critical digital literacies evokes the conditions of postrepresentational democracy, in which social media and other forms of direct action become everyday means of getting things done that once were entrusted

to public institutions. The more we listen to teachers the more we realize that teachers’ role in educational organizing depends on *their* ability to listen and observe the conditions under which students, colleagues, and others. Our research on teachers’ utterances underlines the need to listen to students’ efforts to register their dissent as well. These avenues for future inquiry present serious ethical considerations, such as the representation and possible cooptation of students’ voices and experiences.

Urban teachers’ ideas differ, as they write online, as to the most important challenges and arguments that should be voiced. Sociolinguistic properties of language, extended through critical digital literacies, facilitate the reversal of a long tradition of talking over teachers. The utterances we examined constitute a cry for self-determination in a collective set of online moves we have argued participates in a struggle over the right to the city. The interplay of voices, arguments, and rhetoric hastens the development of effective resistance, making it possible for teachers to challenge the social positions so often assigned to them in reform literature and take up dynamic roles in the production of urban space.

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