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From "Safe Spaces" to "Communicative Spaces": Semiotic Labor, Authentic Civility and the Basic Communication Course

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Difficult conversations and controversial topics are common in the basic communication classroom, raising difficult challenges for course directors, instructors, and students. In response to this problem, many in higher education promote the development of "safe spaces." Drawing from Eicher-Catt's work on civility, this essay suggests shifting the focus from safe spaces to the development and maintenance of what Eicher-Catt calls communicative spaces. The notion of communicative spaces, when extended into the classroom, reorients our understanding of classroom civility and suggests practices for course directors, instructors, and students that affirm the dignity of students by attending not to their emotional needs but to the project of learning.

Introductory communication courses reflect the complexity of contemporary higher education. As incoming college students report a greater interest and willingness to engage in political activism (Green, 2016), they and their instructors enter the classroom increasingly primed to protect and promote a variety of goods based on their unique cultural, ethnic, political, and religious standpoints (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009). But as MacIntyre (1981) observes, these positions are often *incommensurable*, in that they reflect fundamentally different premises and assumptions that can make common ground difficult to find. Within this learning context, conflicts and disagreements can readily arise: A student may give a speech that garners an unexpectedly hostile response, an instructor's question may be taken the wrong way, or a seemingly uncontroversial discussion topic may erupt into open controversy, hurtful words, and bruised emotions.

Conflict and civility in the classroom are fundamental to the administration of communication education and have been discussed frequently in the literature (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004; Hafen 2009; Langford, 2006; McMillan & Harriger, 2002; Miller, Katt, & Sico, 2014; Salazar, 2015). Within the current context of higher education, however, the focus is increasingly on the creation of *safe spaces*, an environment where the primary goal is to protect and respect the psychological and emotional needs of each individual student, especially those who may be traumatized by sexual assault or other forms of violence and discrimination (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015; Brown and Schulten, 2016; Blad, 2015). Yet, despite the good intentions behind safe spaces, questions have arisen as to whether the efforts to shield students from trauma may do higher education a disservice. Mutually shielded from discomfort, students may never learn how to listen or respond constructively to those with whom they disagree, while instructors lose opportunities to help students think through the complex issues that they will continue to face (Hafen, 2009).

In this essay, we look toward Deborah Eicher-Catt's (2013) work on civility to propose a different approach to acknowledging and engaging conflict in the classroom, with a particular eye toward the basic course, a course where it is likely that a multiplicity of standpoints will be present. Eicher-Catt argues that civility involves the maintenance not of safe spaces but of *communicative spaces* in which disagreement can occur without, as she puts it,

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destroying the "good of the *common*" (p. 3). We begin with the example of the introductory public speaking course to explore the tensions that emerge within basic communication courses in light of a current debate in higher education concerning "safe spaces" on university campuses. Next, we frame the basic communication classroom as what Eicher-Catt would call a communicative space maintained through the semiotic labor of authentic civility. Finally, we frame a set of practices for course directors, instructors, and students that help them to engage in conflict in ways that keep learning at the center. Though conflict is unavoidable, ambiguous, and at times impossible to resolve, seeing the classroom as a communicative space enables us to see these moments of tension as opening new possibilities for the learning environment.

The Basic Communication Course and "Safe Spaces"

In December 2015, Abusua, the Black student union at Oberlin College, issued a list of 50 demands to college president Marvin Krislov, trustees, and other senior leaders. The list voiced a variety of concerns regarding what the students took to be evidence of systemic racism on campus and made several specific demands, including changes to the curriculum, increases in students of African, African American and Caribbean descent, the immediate promotion of several faculty members, and the immediate firing of others (Urbanik, 2015). At the center of the document, however, students emphasized the importance of creating *safe spaces* conducive to their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. These spaces were designed to be exclusive, private areas where students could retreat from the hostilities they perceived to be surrounding them in their classes and the college campus as a whole.

On some levels, the Oberlin students were right in perceiving conflict around them, especially in the classroom. In fact, we should never be surprised to encounter conflict within basic communication courses, which teach fundamental communication skills and theories to undergraduate students as part of a college or university's core curriculum (National Communication Association, 2016). In courses ranging from public speaking to introductory interpersonal or intercultural communication, students represent different majors, levels of maturity, and abilities, as well as varied cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds. The potential for conflict creates an instructional tension: While the instructional goal is to encourage students to encounter differences that cause them to question and deepen their values and beliefs, instructors must simultaneously ensure that these differences of opinion will not "boil over" and harm the overall learning environment.

Increasingly, scholars, educators, and students, like those at Oberlin, are using the metaphor of *safe spaces* to describe a classroom environment that manages these tensions successfully (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Shulevitz, 2015). Rom (1998) characterizes the discussion surrounding this term as clustering around four guiding assumptions: "(1) we are all isolated, (2) our isolation is both physical and psychic, (3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed" (p. 398). In safe spaces, the focus of classroom attention shifts away from learning and to the physical and psychological needs of individual students, with the intent of ensuring that each student feels comfortable and safe and free from any stress, harassment, and criticism that can arise. While he sympathizes with these concerns and would most certainly condemn classrooms characterized by threats and intimidation, Rom worries that the metaphor "also unintentionally provides ammunition for those who charge that schools pamper children instead of challenging them" (p. 398). Rom's point is subtle but important: He does not deny the existence, significance, and severity of students'

concerns but rather calls us to think critically as to whether the metaphor of safe spaces is helpful in responding to these issues.

Rom (1998) is not alone in this critique. Writing about a debate on sexual assault that took place at Brown University, Shulevitz (2015) discusses efforts by students to create a "safe space" for those "who might find comments 'troubling' or 'triggering,' a place to recuperate" (para. 4). She continues:

> The room was equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma. Emma Hall, a junior, rape survivor and "sexual assault peer educator" who helped set up the room and worked in it during the debate, estimates that a couple of dozen people used it. At one point she went to the lecture hall—it was packed—but after a while, she had to return to the safe space. "I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs," Ms. Hall said. (para. 4)

Shulevitz writes with alarm that this trend is increasingly leading collegiate administrators and educators to cancel or censor speech and ideas that can present controversy and create discomfort. Tracing the roots of safe space activism into both juridic and psychotherapeutic discourses, she argues that the discourse used to demand safe spaces can quickly become more punitive than responsive, moving into coercion and intimidation for students and faculty who are deemed to be insufficiently sensitive to the emerging norms. Making the classroom "safe" in this sense ironically might make it "unsafe" for learning.

Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) observe that the demand for "safety" within the classroom emerges from a university culture that has become dominated by what they call *emotional reasoning*, in which the sole guide for decision making and truth comes from one's personal feelings and preferences. Emotional reasoning, they argue, is pernicious because it is both unpredictable and impossible to be proven wrong. MacIntyre (1981) refers to this perspective as *emotivism*, and he cites this perspective as central to the seemingly irreconcilable ethical differences that pervade contemporary society. Arnett, McManus, and McKendree (2014) carry MacIntyre's discussion of emotivism into the field of communication, arguing that emotivism lends itself to conflict as one's viewpoint overshadows the reality of difference. They make the point that emotivistic appeals, no matter how well they are couched in altruistic language, are ultimately an expression of self-interest. Within a classroom governed by emotional reasoning or emotivism, the good of the whole is ignored in the name of students' personal comfort.

In this current moment of higher education, the case of Oberlin College is not an exception. Rather, we are beginning to see variations of the debate at Oberlin College becoming a norm. These calls for "safe spaces" on campuses have become an increasingly frequent occurrence that university leaders have started to address the concern preemptively. For instance, prior to the start of the fall 2016 semester at the University of Chicago, Jay Ellison, dean of undergraduate students, issued a welcome letter to incoming students expressing a discontent for "safe spaces," declaring that the campus would be free from such initiatives in the name of free inquiry (Grieve 2016). While we agree with those who criticized the dean's letter as overly simplistic (Strauss, 2016), we do share his concern. This essay seeks to find an alternative approach that balances the need to accommodate difference while sustaining the equally important good of intellectual inquiry.

Communication scholars have explored alternatives to the legal-therapeutic discourse of safe classroom spaces. For instance, Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) and Novak and Bonine (2009) respond to conflict in the classroom via Foss and Griffin's (1995) construct of invitational rhetoric, advising instructional practices oriented toward building relationships "rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5). Likewise, communication pedagogies focused on preserving democracy (Duffy & Duffy, 1984; Hafen, 2009; Jarvis and Han, 2010) and civility in the classroom (Gayle, 2004; Han & Brazeal, 2015; Miller, Katt, Brown & Sico, 2014; Salazar, 2015) ask students to avoid or refrain from topics and approaches that would upset the classroom environment. Yet, the question remains as to whether this scholarship offers a response to the concerns raised against safe spaces. Though these approaches strive to allow all voices to be heard and to help all students feel welcomed, they can just as easily ensure that deeply held differences will never be debated or challenged in any substantive way. What is more, while these approaches can be motivated out of a desire to serve students, they can just as easily be motivated out of a desire to avoid what Hafen (2009) has described as *pedagogical discomfort*, in which instructors steer around uncomfortable topics to avoid the hassle. As Hafen reminds us, adopting such an approach, while easy in the short run, is an abdication of our pedagogical responsibilities.

In this essay, we suggest an alternative approach to the classroom tensions that the discourse on safe spaces strives to address, one that moves the discussion from the creation of safe spaces that facilitate the personal, physical, and psychological safety of students toward what Eicher-Catt (2013) calls *communicative spaces*. The following section will discuss Eicher-Catt's work in light of the challenge of instructional leadership.

From Safe Spaces to Communicative Spaces

In the previous section, we discussed the particular tensions of teaching a basic communication course within the contemporary collegiate environment. Within the context of such diversity, many instructors and students have emphasized the importance of creating and maintaining the classroom as a "safe" space. While this goal is admirable because it reflects honest concerns about student welfare, it raises inherent problems. As discussed above, "safe spaces" may ironically inhibit opportunities for learning as instructors gloss over or suppress divergent points of view in order to ensure that all students feel "comfortable." When what is "safe" is synonymous with what is "comfortable" and embedded in therapeutic assumptions, the instructor moves from being an instructional leader to become something less: A peacekeeper, a referee, or—as Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) argue—a babysitter.

Is there an alternative to the discourse of safe spaces? Perhaps we can begin to answer this question by looking at the response of the president of Oberlin, Marvin Krislov, to the list of demands presented by the college's Black Student Union. While he acknowledged the demands and the feelings of frustration that lay behind them, Krislov nevertheless sought to refocus the conversation onto Oberlin's educational mission and, in particular, "collaborative engagement" (para. 4) in addressing the concerns raised. In addition, he distinguished between the process of college governance and the people participating in it. "Many of its demands contravene principles of shared governance," he wrote. "And it contains personal attacks on a number of faculty and staff members who are dedicated and valued members of this community" (para. 4). Ultimately, he called upon the student activists and the university community "to encourage collaboration and frank

conversation" and to "welcome the challenging, difficult, and ultimately transformative work to achieve academic, artistic, and musical excellence" taking place on the campus (para. 9).

In many respects, we argue that Krislov was seeking to move the discussion away from the creation of a "safe space" and invite the creation of a "communicative space." This move is also important in thinking about our responses to tensions in diverse classrooms. Here, Eicher-Catt's (2013) recent work on civility is particularly generative. Her contribution is important for communication educators because she challenges us to look beyond the mere performance of civility—that is, "how" to be civil—to inquire into what civility "is" and what that could mean for the practice of communication education.

Eicher-Catt (2013) argues that civility has traditionally been understood in three ways: As a *social code* that establishes the types of behavior that allow social life to function, as a form of *public expression* that establishes manners and etiquette, and finally as a *social issue* arising from an increasing sense of confusion over the common good. Such traditional approaches to civility would see the classroom as a place with clearly defined rules governed by a clear set of expectations for both teachers and students. Whenever educators or students violate these expectations, the traditional approach appears justified in naming this conduct as uncivil and publicly shaming the actors until their misconduct subsides. Yet, within our current instructional climate, the boundaries and expectations delineated by these traditional approaches to civility seem either absent or inadequate, and we can more clearly see the ways in which these standards maintain a sense of privilege that marginalizes some, or even many, students for the sake of the "common good." Such a classroom, while nominally civil, is neither safe nor communicative but is instead oppressive, seeking order in place of inquiry.

Eicher-Catt (2013) suggests that these traditional understandings of civility fail because they focus attention on individual actions—and the consequences of those actions—instead of the boundaries that enable (or disable) persons to act in the first place. Authentic civility, she proposes, is a practice that negotiates the boundaries between the self and others, public and private, and intelligible and ineffable. This practice of authentic civility, as opposed to the traditional understandings of the term, allows us to engage and act alongside persons who can be quite different from us. What is lost in this discussion of the traditional modes of civility, she argues, is an awareness of "the good of the *common*" (p. 3)—what she describes as the shared *communicative space* that allows for public life to flourish—and the semiotic labor required to maintain the boundaries of this space. Semiotic labor is inherent to the practice of authentic civility and has clear implications for instructional leadership. The following sections frame civility in the classroom in light of these three coordinates: (1) the importance of the classroom as a communicative space, (2) the centrality of semiotic labor within the classroom, and (3) the importance of modeling authentic civility as an instructional practice.

Classroom as Communicative Space

Eicher-Catt (2013) grounds her discussion of civility in Arendt's (1998) *The Human Condition*, specifically Arendt's emphasis on the importance of maintaining clear boundaries between public and private life. Eicher-Catt writes that, for Arendt, the existence of such boundaries—between public and private selves, between the home and the workplace, between the classroom and the political sphere—gives people the freedom to act together in public life, while at the same time enabling them to retreat from the unwelcome scrutiny of others (p. 5). When the boundaries between our public and private lives are clear and well

established, both lives flourish: We can collaborate on common endeavors—co-authoring an essay, for instance—without being forced to volunteer what we did over the weekend or being forced to listen to details about private lives that we would rather not hear. At the same time, distinguishing our private lives from our public actions allows us a place of reflection that protects our personal lives from unwanted intrusion. Where these boundaries blur—a condition that Arendt describes as *the social*—our public endeavors become bogged down in private matters, and our private lives become subject to a tyranny of forced intimacy (Sennett, 1992).

Eicher-Catt (2013) argues that forced intimacy is problematic because it demands sameness in favor of false consensus. The impulse to embrace sameness is perhaps understandable: When confronted with radical difference and profound disagreement, we may be tempted to submerge those differences out of a call to protect "the common good" or the comfort of the status quo. But this "solution" is inherently oppressive. Even as some students and instructors lament the confusion that they experience or the fears that they feel when conflict seems to emerge at the slightest provocation, others express an experience of liberation that comes from allowing themselves to be heard. In these moments, some would like to express their views that, at times, may go against the classroom norms, but cannot given the tyranny of conformity. In these cases, the common good for Eicher-Catt becomes an agent of tyranny, in which everyone is forced to agree with each other and conform or refuse to participate at all.

In contrast to the false comforts of forced intimacy, Eicher-Catt (2013) frames communicative spaces as places where *difference* can emerge in light of a particular good that a group of people has decided to protect and promote (Arnett, Fritz, and Bell, 2009). Within a communicative space, the protection and promotion of this "good of the common" is a self-interested but not an individualistic practice. All have a stake in the particular good being protected and promoted because each benefits from it in different ways, but none ever asserts ownership or control over it. The good of the common thus becomes a site for ongoing public debate and conversation, in which the participants both deepen their understanding of the good and open avenues for inquiry that expand the boundaries of the communicative space itself.

We can witness the move toward a communicative space in President Krislov's (2016) response to Oberlin's Black Student Union. In his response, Krislov situates the students' concerns within the broader mission of the college "to provide our students with a broad-based, in-depth education which prepares them to flourish in their chosen fields of endeavor, to be engaged citizens, and to meet the challenges of living in our increasingly diverse, complex, and interconnected world" (para. 5). We can understand this mission as providing the focal point from which the college's communicative space draws its strength and purpose. Moreover, we can see that the students' demands do not represent a threat to this communicative space. In fact, they may actually reflect its strength. Oberlin's communicative space is big enough to allow for expressions of difference to arise.

When seen as a communicative space, the classroom becomes a place oriented toward the particular good of learning, a good from which all of the participants—instructor and students alike—benefit but which none of them ever "owns." In the context of an intercultural communication course, for instance, no one "owns" intercultural communication—its definition, schools of thought, horizons for application, and so on—because asserting ownership would end discussion of what it is or could be. Asserting ownership—an instructor, for instance, perfunctorily dictating the boundaries or limits of the field or a particular group of students declaring a certain set of topics as "offensive" or

"unacceptable"—would kill the ongoing conversation that allows the good of learning to flourish. Protecting and promoting the communicative space invites persons to challenge, disagree, and question in a way that does not attack or demean the private selves of others. The protection and promotion of the communicative space as a good for the common invites these challenges as welcomed invitations to further the agreed upon good of learning.

In considering Eicher-Catt's (2013) notion of communicative spaces, it is important to recognize that the communicative space is not static, and its boundaries are not walls. The boundaries of communicative space can shift and expand with new ideas and new entrants into the conversation. For example, in the classroom, a student may introduce new ideas or perspectives that can expand upon the conversation but may lead the class down a distracting path. In those instances, the instructor and the student are faced with a choice: Do we admit this unexpected comment and explore it, or do we negotiate it out of the communicative space by postponing it for later, declaring it as off-topic, or outright rejecting it as harmful to the space? Eicher-Catt refers to this process of negotiation as *semiotic labor*.

Semiotic Labor in the Classroom

For Eicher-Catt (2013), persons engaging in semiotic labor maintain and negotiate the boundaries of a particular communicative space to allow the good of the common to be protected and promoted. This negotiation is twofold. On the one hand, semiotic labor allows ideas—ideas that, at times, may conflict with or run counter to the ideas being discussed—to enter the communicative space. On the other hand, semiotic labor prohibits ideas that may overrun or damage the discussion occurring within the communicative space. Following Arendt's (1998) understanding of labor as an essential part of the active life, Eicher-Catt urges us to see semiotic labor as messy, constant, and absolutely necessary to allowing public life to flourish.

We can see semiotic labor in action in the Oberlin president's response to the Black Student Union on this campus. When he received the list of demands, Krislov (2016) could have responded by denying their legitimacy, thereby situating them outside of the communicative space of the Oberlin campus, or he could have accepted everything the students said as appropriate topics of discussion. However, Krislov responded between these two extremes, deciding that some of the students' demands represented important topics of discussion, while placing others outside the scope of consideration. In making these decisions—and, more importantly, giving reasons for these decisions—Krislov was engaging in the semiotic labor necessary to maintain the college's communicative space.

Similarly, semiotic labor in the classroom is simultaneously encouraging and disciplining: Instructors encourage students to question and expand ideas while continuously preventing students from overrunning the space with their personal preferences or off-topic subjects. For instance, it is not uncommon in basic communication courses for students to express disdain about a certain topic or assignment. At times, such expressions of disdain may be helpful in opening the conversation in new directions. At other times, students' negative reactions may risk overrunning the space by derailing the conversation altogether. In these instances, the instructor negotiates the challenge by recognizing the importance of students' comments while keeping them focused on the task at hand. This response reflects the essence of semiotic labor. Through this labor, the instructor models *authentic civility*.

Authentic Civility as Instructional Practice

For Eicher-Catt (2013), the difference between inauthentic and authentic civility pivots on the continued protection and promotion of public and private boundaries. She explains that inauthentic civility blurs the boundaries necessary for protecting the good of the common and manifests what Arendt (1998) sees as the creeping movement of "the social" into human life. When we move toward the social, Eicher-Catt writes:

> we engage with Others, not for the purpose of establishing real communion or communication with another . . . but in various forms of "babble," reflected in our narcissistic tendencies and/or our appeals to our rights to freedom of speech regardless of the consequences. (p. 8)

Eicher-Catt argues that in practice, such inauthentic civility can easily become little more than a practice of manipulation that benefits the interests of those in power while binding those in less privileged positions to the established norms that hold them in place.

At the same time, however, Eicher-Catt's (2013) critique of inauthentic civility does not ask us to do away with standards of public decency in favor of an anarchy of self-expression. Rather, she urges us to see civility as a practice of negotiation, in which areas of disagreement are acknowledged, understood, and engaged and the boundaries of the communicative space in which public life takes place are redefined. For Eicher-Catt (2013), authentic civility helps us to learn to live with the gaps that allow the public life of the "common" to flourish.

When looking at the Oberlin case, a response anchored in inauthentic civility would cheerfully accept the students' demands as an act of pure political theater—and then sweep them under the rug. But Krislov (2016) does not do this. Instead, he acknowledges the deficiencies that the students raise and frames them in light of the college's mission and educational goals. He writes:

> Achieving these goals will only be possible if we can marshal our community's intellectual, teaching, and creative skills to tackle the difficult challenges we face on our campus and in our nation. Throughout its history, Oberlin has evolved and grown stronger through a consensus-driven process that includes dialogue in which dissenting voices are heard. That process is central to our educational mission. (para. 8)

Krislov embraces the challenges and invites the students to engage in a process of "collaboration and frank conversation" (para. 9) that he hopes will strengthen, enrich, and ultimately expand the communicative space. The test of authentic civility, however, lies in whether and how he delivers on these promises.

The value of authentic civility in the classroom is that it establishes, maintains, and broadens the classroom as a communicative space, in which disagreements over course content, teaching styles, and academic standards, as well as controversial views, are welcomed while protecting and promoting the common good of learning. Authentic civility resists emotivism where public decisions are made solely based upon the protection and promotion of one's own emotional well-being. When authentic civility is not practiced, the classroom can become a space defined by a tyranny of "niceness," in which students and instructors alike can feel silenced, disrespected, or anonymous. Their participation in the classroom becomes static as the practice of learning is driven solely by the meeting of objectives and standards imposed by outsiders. The following section offers practices for

directors, instructors, and students to embody a new practice of learning defined by authentic civility.

Embodying Authentic Civility in the Basic Communication Course

This essay began with a discussion of the increasing emphasis on creating "safe spaces" on American college campuses and the influence of this discourse within the basic communication course. In response, we proposed replacing the "safe space" discourse with an emphasis on the creation and maintenance of what Eicher-Catt (2013) calls *communicative spaces* through the semiotic labor that embodies authentic civility. In this section, we draw from Eicher-Catt's work to discuss how authentic civility can be embodied in the basic communication course. As discussed in the previous section, semiotic labor cannot be *prescribed*. Rather, practices that embody semiotic labors allow persons to navigate tensions that arise in the university context. Because there is no code, we can offer simply practices that engage and embody semiotic labor in the classroom. Here, we describe a basic communication course as it would be typically structured at a medium or large college or university, in which a director oversees several instructors teaching a diverse body of students. Though not every communication department will structure its basic courses in this way, these roles of directing, teaching, and learning are endemic to the basic course and can take many forms.

Course Director

The course director designs the syllabus and the assignments, observes classes, meets regularly with instructors to support them in becoming better teachers, and provides the first point of contact for instructors dealing with student concerns or classroom conflicts. At a macro level, we can understand the course director as creating and maintaining the classroom as a communicative space in several ways. First, through the development of the syllabus and assignments, the course director can be seen as drawing the overall boundaries of the classroom context. But Eicher-Catt (2013) urges us to recognize that the course director does not "own" this space. Where inauthentic civility would focus on giving specific demands cloaked under the guise of "friendly advice" or "guidance" that strives to "force" or "manage" the instructors under their supervision into a particular pre-designed mold or rubric for effective teaching, authentic civility aims to meet instructors where they are and to facilitate their professional development. Thus, the semiotic labor of course directors negotiates between macro questions of educational leadership and micro questions of instructional growth and demands.

Second, by supporting instructors, the course director both invites teachers of varying skill levels to participate in the communicative space of the classroom and empowers them to take responsibility for it. Eicher-Catt (2013) reminds us of the importance of gaps between and among persons and that these gaps can be *managed*, but never eliminated. It can be tempting, especially with newer instructors, to "overrun the gaps" and try to prescribe procedures for handling virtually any conflict or issue that arises within the classroom, but doing so avoids the semiotic labor that attends to the particularities of each situation and is essential to the practice of authentic civility. Instead of a prescriptive approach, course directors following Eicher-Catt's understanding of civility support instructors by allowing them the freedom to negotiate the issues that they encounter, to learn to embody the

tensions that these issues bring, and to become stronger teachers through the practice of semiotic labor.

Throughout these tasks, the course directors' semiotic labor navigates between macro level questions of educational leadership (e.g., curriculum standards, content objectives, pedagogical principles, etc.) and the concrete particularity of each instructor's individual challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. The purpose—the "product" of this labor—is tied to the individual instructor's growth as a teacher.

Instructor

The instructor exercises instructional leadership within the classroom, explaining the syllabus to students, serving as their primary point of contact, and adapting course content to the unique needs of the classroom. Where the director designs the assignments, the instructor adapts the assignments and content in ways that serves the educational needs and limitations of the particular students within the particular classroom. The instructional needs of students can vary considerably, depending on their respective majors (e.g., business, liberal arts, engineering), their respective academic levels (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, as well as their individual abilities and experiences.

In a way, we can see the instructor as negotiating several boundaries simultaneously: The limits established by the course director and syllabus, the boundaries of the content being taught, and the boundaries set by students' interests, abilities, and backgrounds. When instructors enter the classroom, then, they are entering a preexisting communicative space that requires attentiveness and stewardship. Eicher-Catt (2013) urges us to realize that these boundaries are important, but they are not walls. They can and often do shift over the course of the semester: Assignments on the syllabus may need to be adjusted, new topics may alter the class's discussion and course content, and students' abilities and interests can and, indeed, should change as the semester progresses. But even as these boundaries can shift, the instructor needs to respect their importance. Without these boundaries, the classroom can devolve into a purely student-centered experience. The focus of the instructor's semiotic labor, then, is on a three-fold tension that exists among the needs of students, the content being taught, and the boundaries of the course, each of which requires appropriate respect and consideration.

The instructor's semiotic labor is different from pedagogical labor. That is, we are arguing that there is something more to classroom leadership than transferring knowledge. If the instructor's pedagogical labor involves enabling students to understand and use the content being conveyed, the instructor's semiotic labor focuses on maintaining the space in which those objectives can be met. The introduction of an unfamiliar concept in the classroom involves pedagogical labor, but this concept might prompt different reactions and shift the classroom discussion in different ways. A course unit focusing on Hitler's speeches, for instance, might generate a debate within the classroom on censorship on campus that takes the focus away from the initial instructional objectives. In those moments, the instructor needs to decide how far away from those initial objectives the conversation should stray and to know how to draw the classroom discussion back if it strays too far. In these unplanned moments, when the embodied experience of teaching is "felt," the instructor is engaging in semiotic labor. As suggested above, these tensions are embodied in moments of stress or uncertainty, and while it may be tempting for instructors to look for ways to avoid these experiences, working through these moments are key to their growth as educators.

In these tensions, the instructor has the opportunity to model authentic civility to students. Dwelling in good ambiguity (Lanigan, 1988), the instructor mediates between the public goods of the classroom and the private interests of students. There are times in which the instructor needs to protect the boundaries of the classroom by directing students' attention away from private interests that intrude on the classroom—comments that can derail the classroom discussion, interesting conversations that get the course off schedule, and so on—and toward the public good of the whole, learning. But there are no set rules for this practice. Each moment calls for a different response, and with each response the boundaries of the communicative space shift. Authentic civility in this case involves negotiating among multiple goods: The students' learning, the course's content, and the classroom as a communicative space.

Student

Students enter the communicative space of the classroom with a multiplicity of assumptions and perspectives. No two classrooms are the same: Each consists of different students with different backgrounds; each covers different types of content; and each has a unique historicity, occurring within a particular historical moment that changes how students approach and understand the content being discussed. Sometimes students come into the classroom with their own presuppositions about what the class's boundaries should be based on their own backgrounds, prior experiences, and educational expectations. Other times, the instructor sets those boundaries for the students through the syllabus and the instructor's own teaching style. But ultimately, these boundaries are not "set," but rather emerge over time, as the class unfolds and students interact with each other, the instructor, and the content.

Within this emergent space, numerous opportunities for conflict and controversy arise. For example, a student might make an unwise remark, or an instructor's response—which, to an outside observer, could appear completely legitimate—might be misinterpreted or attacked. Eicher-Catt's (2013) understanding of authentic civility challenges us to see these conflicts and tensions as natural occurrences, in which students, too, are engaged in semiotic labor in attempts to understand, negotiate, and establish the boundaries of the communicative space of the classroom, boundaries that are never clear within a postmodern moment. The anxiety, frustration, stress, and anger that students sometimes feel is the fruit of this struggle.

Within this context, students engaging in inauthentic civility might strive to avoid, suppress, or even attack expressions of disagreement so that the students around them feel safe. In the process, they are attending to the private selves of their classmates. However, when students engage in authentic civility, they strive to respond to these tensions in ways that do justice to the class around them—that is, the public space that they share together. This engagement enables them to differentiate controversial comments from the individual people who make them, placing attention, then, on the ideas themselves and the content of the course. This differentiation and distanciation allows for a different type of safety, a *derivative safety* that permits students the freedom to think aloud, make mistakes, and learn without fearing that they will be summarily rejected from the classroom and their peers.[3]

[3] We use the term derivative following Arnett's (2013) understanding of the difference between responsive "I" and derivative "I."

Even when a particular comment is rejected or line of discussion stopped, students still feel that they are part of the space and are willing to participate in the conversation.

The practice of authentic civility allows students to feel "safe" in the classroom, but this sense of safety is a public, not a private, experience. A private, therapeutic sense of safety emerges from catering to students' emotional needs or allowing their individual freedom of expression to dominate the classroom at the expense of learning. A public, derivative sense of safety emerges from focusing on ideas and content instead of their private selves. This sense of public safety keeps the communicative space open in a way that nourishes students' intellectual growth through the protection of good of the common: Learning.[4]

Conclusion

This essay has sought to think differently about how educators and students can approach conflict in the basic communication course. While we recognize the growing concern over the creation of "safe spaces" on college campuses—Oberlin, for example—we also raised concerns regarding how this discourse privileges private comfort at the expense of the public good of the classroom, learning. In response, we drew from the work of Eicher-Catt (2013) to shift the focus from safe spaces to what she calls communicative spaces maintained through the semiotic labor of authentic civility. Looking at tensions in the classroom through Eicher-Catt's work enables us to see civility in the classroom as a responsive and responsible practice of acknowledging, negotiating, and (re)defining the boundaries that allow learning to flourish. Course directors, instructors, and students all share in this labor, tending to a communicative space that nourishes them but that they will never "own."

Ultimately, Eicher-Catt's (2013) notion of communicative spaces, when extended into the classroom, reorients our understanding of classroom civility in a way that affirms the dignity of students by attending not to their emotional needs but to the project of learning. By attending to learning, in other words, we attend to students, and conversely, by attending to students too closely, we risk losing focus on the fundamental goal of furthering students' intellectual growth. Instead of seeking to avoid or eliminate conflict, authentic civility in the classroom actually welcomes conflict. In effect, the practice of authentic civility makes the classroom a public site for debate. In issuing this welcome, it awakens educators' and students' attention to the gaps, disagreements, and misunderstandings that are ever-present in a postmodern moment and asks them to acknowledge and learn how to dwell within them.

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[4] Arnett (1986) articulates the common center of learning using the work of Martin Buber.

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