

Location, Location, Locution: Why it Matters Where We Say What We Say

Claudia W. Ruitenberg

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Résumé de l'article

This paper addresses educators' responsibility for the discourse (including their own and others') that circulates in educational settings. This issue tends to arise especially with hurtful language and other discursive acts that have negative effects, and that require an apology, correction, or some other kind of remedial discourse. The paper frames this "discursive responsibility" as particularly contingent on location, arguing that when educators address their own or others' discourse, the response needs to be at a level of publicity that is the same as, or as similar as possible to, the discursive act it responds to.

*Location, Location, Locution: Why it Matters Where We Say What We Say*¹

CLAUDIA W. RUITENBERG

University of British Columbia

Abstract: This paper addresses educators' responsibility for the discourse (including their own and others') that circulates in educational settings. This issue tends to arise especially with hurtful language and other discursive acts that have negative effects, and that require an apology, correction, or some other kind of remedial discourse. The paper frames this "discursive responsibility" as particularly contingent on location, arguing that when educators address their own or others' discourse, the response needs to be at a level of publicity that is the same as, or as similar as possible to, the discursive act it responds to.

Introduction

A few years ago, I gave some introductory lectures on professional conduct to students starting their teacher education program.² In addition to more obvious topics such as dress codes in schools (and the contestation of their class and gender specificity) and the union's code of ethics, I also discussed the idea that teachers ought to take responsibility for the language that circulates in their classroom and their school. In discussing this, I told the incoming student teachers, "If language is launched in public, it should be addressed in public."³ In this paper I elaborate on this claim, expand it into a more general principle I call "discursive responsibility," and explain why I believe this principle is especially important for educators.

In its basic form, discursive responsibility is not a uniquely educational principle. Competent adults can, in general, be expected to take responsibility for the discourse they "launch," in both public and private spaces. More care is expected from those whose words carry greater weight; a politician who utters hurtful words is expected to correct or apologize for these promptly; a journalist who describes a person or group in terms deemed offensive is likewise expected to correct or otherwise remedy the discourse that has been sent into the world. In this paper, I will describe and analyze educational instances of this more general principle of discursive responsibility. However, I will also argue that the scope of discursive responsibility is greater for educators than it is for most other adults in that they are responsible not only for the discourse they themselves circulate in educational spaces such as

¹ The title borrows both from the real estate mantra "location, location, location," and from the rhythm of Gert Biesta's (2010) title, "Learner, Student, Speaker: Why It Matters How We Call Those We Teach."

² Critical questions can and, I believe, should be raised about the subsumption in teacher education of the discourse of ethics under the discourse of professionalism, but I will bracket that discussion here.

³ I use "student teachers" as shorthand for students in pre-service teacher education programs, with the acknowledgement that some programs use other terms, such as "teacher candidates."

classrooms, but also for the discourse others circulate in the spaces for which they have educational responsibility.

In part, I will take my cue from Bryan Warnick's (2013) discussion of what distinguishes schools from other contexts. Using Warnick's language, I could say that teachers have a heightened discursive responsibility because of the "special characteristics of schools." Warnick sums up these special characteristics:

(1) the age of students, (2) mandatory attendance laws and the semi-captive nature of school populations, (3) the focus on safety considerations in schools, (4) the public accountability considerations surrounding schools, (5), the school-associated nature of much student actions, (6) the multiple constituencies that schools serve, and (7), the school responsibility to promote learning and accomplish educational goals. (p. 25)

However, I say I take my cue "in part" from Warnick because his "special characteristics" pertain particularly to his discussion of student rights, and in particular "liberty rights," including free speech rights. My discussion will focus not on what students should or should not have the right to say or do in schools, but rather on educators' responsibility to respond educationally to discourse that is circulated in educational spaces. Moreover, Warnick's characteristics of schools that "mediate student rights" (p. 25) have also been shaped by the US legal context, which is different in some respects from the legal contexts in Canada and elsewhere, not least in relation to free speech. Finally, while the impetus for my argument comes from conversations with student teachers and teacher educators, discursive responsibility as I will discuss it has special significance for everyone in an educational role, not only teachers in K–12 schools. Some of my examples are from university classrooms and from scholarly conferences, where interlocutors may not be in the formal role of teacher, but where their discursive actions nonetheless teach their graduate students. In these spaces, the audience may be less captive than in a K–12 classroom, as attendance may not be mandatory and demands for public accountability may be lessened or absent altogether. Nonetheless, if someone in the role of educator is present in a space marked as having an educational purpose, that person still has a heightened responsibility for the discourse that circulates in that space.

Speech Acts and Discursive Events

I approach the question of responsibility for the language we use—and in this paper more specifically, the responsibility educators carry for the language both they and others use in their educational settings—from the perspective of the "total speech act" as introduced by J. L. Austin (1962). Austin uses the phrase "total speech act" in his investigation of a particular set of utterances he calls "performatives," a term that "indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (p. 7). Oft-cited examples include "I promise," "I bet you," and "I name this ship X." Austin is making the point that in order to understand whether or not a performative utterance is effective, that is, whether it succeeds in performing its action, we have to consider not just the words themselves but the larger context in which they are uttered. He writes: "We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech-act—if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each

can go wrong” (p. 52). Toward the end of the book, and having made a number of steps in his analysis, he states even more strongly: “The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (p. 148, emphasis in original). The total speech act includes the location of the utterance, which can play an important role in determining the success or lack thereof of a performative utterance. For instance, if a certain jurisdiction stipulates that only those marriages are valid which are performed on land, then uttering the words “I pronounce you husband and wife” while in a hot air balloon with a bride and groom will fail because the location of this total speech act renders the performative null and void.

In this paper, my particular interest is the significance of location in speech acts that have negative effects on people, such as annoying, upsetting, offending, or harming them. While I understand that there are differences between, say, annoying someone and harming someone, I will not focus on those differences here. Rather, I want to include in my discussion all speech acts in educational settings that have negative effects on others in that setting and that, because of the educational purpose associated with the context, should be addressed in some way. This includes speech that is perceived as racist, sexist, homophobic, or in any other way demeaning, as well as insults, accusations, and insinuations. The claim I make in this paper is that it matters both where such speech is uttered and where it is addressed. This includes instances where the original speaker addresses their own words, for example by apologizing for them, as well as instances where someone addresses the words uttered by another person, such as when a teacher addresses a racist comment made by a student. The “total speech act” and “total speech situation,” and in particular the aspect of place, matter in understanding both the negative effects speech may have in educational settings, and the apologetic, explanatory, rectifying or otherwise remedial speech that is uttered in response.

I use the term “discursive responsibility” and not “linguistic responsibility,” so a brief explanation of the reference to “discourse” is in order. Like Austin, my main interest is not in what words *mean*, but rather in what they *do*, that is to say, in the effects they have. For that focus, Foucault’s (1969/2002) definition of discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 54) is particularly helpful. Discourse is not a set of words, sentences, sounds, black marks on the page, meanings, referents, and so forth, but rather a practice. While Austin discusses spoken language, discourse includes not only speech acts but also other acts, such as writing, drawing, and gesturing. For that reason, Derrida (1972/1988) refers to the “discursive event” (p. 19) rather than the “speech act” and in previous work I have used the term “total discursive act” (Ruitenberg, 2015, p. 41).

Others have used the phrase “discursive responsibility” in ways that are different from, yet broadly aligned with, my focus on educators’ responsibility for addressing hurtful discourse that circulates in their educational contexts. Zelia Gregoriou (2001), for example, argues that discursive responsibility in education involves not only speaking and writing responsibly—particularly in contexts where one might be speaking or writing about, with, and even for marginalized others—but also receiving others’ speech and writing responsibly. Discursive responsibility takes place “when in hosting others we change, hybridize our discourses and identities, and let others teach us, from the beginning, how we are multiple and different *within ourselves*” (p. 146). In the different context of news media and satire, Carlson and Peifer (2013) discuss the particular discursive responsibility of journalists and media commentators in light of their epistemic authority. They write that Jon Stewart’s shift from humour to seriousness, from objectivity and detachment to advocacy, and from being a political outsider to being a political insider raises questions about “what is acceptable and responsible behavior” for someone like

him (p. 347). While the particular focus of these two texts is different from mine, I share with them an understanding of discursive responsibility in relation to the role and position of the discursive participant. It is the particular position of the educator in educational contexts, then, that gives them a heightened responsibility for not only their own discourse but also the discourse others circulate in spaces marked as educational.

Launching Language

When making the claim, in the lectures about professional conduct, that language “launched” in public should be addressed in public, I showed an old black and white photo of a classroom in which a boy in one of the back rows is about to catapult a wad of paper in the direction of one of his classmates. I explained that, just as the wad of paper may miss its target and create a disruption beyond what its launcher may have imagined, neither students nor teachers should overestimate the precision in the aim of their (our) words. When speaking in a (semi-)public place like a classroom, words never affect just one person, even if the speaker believes they are addressing one person in particular.⁴ This goes for a student making a comment to another student or to the teacher, as much as it goes for a teacher addressing a particular student.

One of the reasons I address this topic explicitly is that student teachers and teacher educators have asked me how to respond to, for example, sexist, racist or homophobic comments made in class. Some have wondered whether it would be better to meet privately with a student who has made such comment because addressing it in public involves the risk that the student feels berated and humiliated in front of their peers. Of course it is important to remain mindful of the power difference between teacher and student, and not to fall back on outdated tactics—always a popular theme in films about old English boarding schools—of clever public put-downs of students who are considered too big for their britches. The reason I advocate publicly addressing comments made in public is not about retaliation or punishment but about *education*. One of the things students should learn, whether in elementary or secondary schools, teacher education programs, or other educational contexts, is that the words they use in speech and writing have effects on people, and that they carry responsibility for these effects, even if they do not carry that responsibility alone. I will return to the question of shared responsibility later.

In studies in which he asks college students to respond to hypothetical scenarios of a professor responding in different ways to a biased comment made by a student, psychologist Guy Boyesen (2012) addresses the (in)appropriateness of a private meeting with a student in response to a harmful comment made in class. Boyesen is interested in “students’ perceptions of teachers’ responses to bias in the classroom” (p. 507), as well as in their assessment of how their own comfort in the class, likelihood of using the professor’s office hours, and so forth would be affected by different responses. He acknowledges that a teacher’s confrontation of expressed bias in the classroom can have different goals, including “preventing future bias,” “modeling unbiased behavior” and “teaching a lesson” (p. 524) and that the most effective response depends on the goal. His studies found:

⁴ For a justification of the use of “they” in the first person, singular, see <http://theyismypronoun.com/>

Unsurprisingly, when bias occurred in private, students perceived a private response as particularly effective for maintaining the comfort of the entire class. Even more interesting was that private confrontation was perceived as more effective at teaching a lesson when the target of bias was not present than when the target of bias was present. Presumably, this trend is a result of students believing that the target of bias should be able to witness the teacher's response after a public expression of bias. (p. 528)

This finding shows a consideration of not only the student who made the offending comment but also the student about or to whom the offending comment was made ("target of bias"). However, it is interesting that the other students in the class, or the larger space in which the comment was made, are not considered. As I stated earlier, students need not be targeted by a comment to be affected by it. Boysen does not discuss whether he finds it acceptable to respond privately to a comment made in public in the absence of "the target of bias," and does not go as far as to recommend that a public expression of bias should be addressed in public for the benefit of *all students* in the space.

One of Boysen's (2012) main hypotheses is that "response intensity should rise with bias intensity." By this he means that "a highly offensive comment might warrant a swift and forceful admonishment, while a slightly inappropriate remark might best be dealt with using a response of low intensity" (p. 528). With the exception of his discussion of the limited cases in which a private discussion with a student might be an appropriate response to a comment made in class, Boysen does not mention the location of the expression of bias as a relevant consideration. Expanding Boysen's argument and echoing his language, I might say that this paper makes the argument that response location should match bias location or, stated more broadly, that the location of the response should match the location of the harmful discourse. In the next section, I will elaborate on this idea.

The Place and Time of Language

In a previous article (Ruitenberg, 2009), I gave an example of giving a lecture to a large group of student teachers on queer issues in education, in which one of the student teachers raised the challenge that teachers may not "agree with that lifestyle." Rather than give the student teacher a straightforward answer about how teachers' professional responsibilities include the equally respectful treatment of all students and parents regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth, I played out the exchange by focusing on the language the student teacher used in the question: (dis)agreement and lifestyle. One of the reasons I did so is the context in which the challenge had been launched: a lecture hall with many other students and instructors present:

In the case of my exchange with the student-teacher, it matters that this exchange took place in an auditorium with another hundred or so student-teachers as well as several instructors. ... Having accepted the invitation to give a lecture, I had accepted responsibility for addressing not just this one student but also everyone else in the auditorium. In analyzing my interlocutory misbehaviour, I must therefore consider the effects both on my interlocutor and on those who witnessed the exchange. (p. 532)

I considered myself responsible not just for responding to one person's question, but for responding educationally for the benefit of everyone else in the auditorium.

In this example, the contentious comment was made to a guest lecturer rather than the regular instructor, and I did not have an opportunity to postpone my response to a later date. In other situations, however, a comment may be made by a student to another student, or to a teacher who is with students for many weeks or months. In such cases, the idea that language should be addressed in the context in which it is launched still holds, but I would add that language does not necessarily need to be addressed immediately. If a teacher hears a student make a racist comment in class, even if it was addressed to a particular other student, that comment has effects beyond the intended addressee. If a teacher were to respond by discussing the inappropriateness and hurtfulness of the comment only with the student who made it, or even with them as well as the intended addressee, the teacher would leave the effects on the other students who heard the comment unaddressed. However, it can be difficult to respond well in the moment, especially because the desire to discipline the student who made the comment may be stronger than the desire to educate the student as well as everyone else about the language that was just launched in their classroom. Sometimes, then, it can be better to address the language with the whole class a day or so later, without even necessarily referring back explicitly to the incident that sparked the discussion. Notwithstanding the possible necessity or appropriateness of a delay, the language *does* need to be addressed. As the expression "the words hung in the air" suggests, words do not disappear after they have been spoken; they linger, leave a trace, hang in the air as they do in the memories of those who heard them, regardless of whether they were the intended audience. Returning to Boysen's (2012) studies, I would say that it matters not only that "the target of bias should be able to witness the teacher's response after a public expression of bias" (p. 528), but that all who witnessed the original expression of bias, regardless of whether they were targeted by it, should be able to witness the teacher's response.

When teachers address language others have used in the classroom space, this could on one level be considered a form of "repair," or "error correction" as it is discussed in the literature on language teaching (Walsh, 2011, pp. 14–17). For instance, if a language learner says, in a Canadian classroom, "I don't know any Indians," then the teacher could focus on teaching the student simply that "Indians" is an incorrect term to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada. If the only desired outcome is that this individual student learns to use appropriate language in the future, then it doesn't matter where the error correction is done: in the moment itself in class, in a private comment during office hours, or even in a written note. But if we recognize, as Walsh does, that "the language being used may be performing several functions at the same time" (p. 2), then correcting the error made by the individual student is too narrow a view. The social context of the classroom means that the language was also heard by others. Since others may have been affected by the language, it is important to address it in the context where those others are present.

The nature of this social context, of course, varies, and so should the teacher's response. In a classroom of students who are new to Canada, and may use English as an additional language, a different kind of explanation is needed than in a classroom of students whose first language is English and who are familiar with the Canadian context. However, in both classrooms, the fact that other students heard the comment should be taken into account. In all of this, the focus of the educator's response is on the effects of the language, not on the speaker's intentions, which may not be ascertainable.

Public and Private Apologies

My argument that language should be addressed where it is launched echoes the scholarship on the role of public apologies. If I, intentionally or unintentionally, make a hurtful comment to a friend while the two of us are having a coffee in my kitchen and there is no one else around, it will suffice for me to apologize to this friend and only this friend.⁵ However, in other cases, a person may hurt another person in a context where other people are present, or may inflict harm that has effects beyond the direct victim. In such cases, a more public apology is warranted. In an analysis of the moral functions of apologies, Kathleen Gill (2000) argues that, even in cases where one individual has harmed another individual, “it is important to recognize that apologies commonly involve more than two parties” (p. 24). For example, in legal cases, even those with one perpetrator and one victim, “the practice of having offenders publicly express apologies helps to maintain a general attitude of respect for the law; the legitimacy of the law is reaffirmed as those who violate it acknowledge that they were wrong” (p. 17). Similarly, when harm has been done by a group, such as a corporation or religious organization, a public apology has relevance beyond the immediate victims of the actions: “Just as apologies offered within the criminal justice system help engender respect for the law, apologies issued by large organizations help reinforce acceptance of the violated standards, and perhaps moral standards generally, within the society” (p. 20).

I want to stress here the apology as discursive act, that is, as the circulation of particular spoken or written language in a given space. The circulation of an apology as remedial language has value in and of itself, regardless of whether the apology is voluntary and sincere. Robyn Carroll (2010), in a discussion of the value of court-ordered apologies, concludes that there can be value in an ordered apology. She notes that, obviously, no court can order sincere “sorriness” (remorse), but a “statutory acknowledgement of wrongdoing” serves a purpose in a social space guided by, for example, anti-discrimination legislation (as is typically the case in educational spaces). Intent and sincerity are not irrelevant to apologies, but even an insincere apology serves a purpose, as it is remedial language launched into the same, or a similar, space as the initial harmful language. It matters that the remedial language is uttered or published and that it is heard or read, even if it is not heartfelt.

When I was a first-year faculty member, an older, male, and more highly ranked colleague made comments about a paper I had presented at an education conference that were not just critical of the argument (which would have been perfectly appropriate) but personally disparaging. He made the comments in the public context of the conference session and, like the boy with the catapult and the wad of paper I mentioned earlier, his words ended up hitting not just me but other conference attendees, who came up to me afterwards to tell me the comments had been inappropriate. Later that evening, in the hotel restaurant, the colleague approached me and apologized to me personally, but his words left me dissatisfied. Leaving psychological analyses of my bruised ego aside, there was a mismatch between the public context in which he had made his comments and the much more private context in which he addressed them. His words fell short of an apology because they did not reach the

⁵ I take “hurtful comment” here to be a comment that has the effect of hurting the other person, regardless of whether the comment was intended to be hurtful or could be considered to be hurtful in and of itself. For further discussion of these distinctions, see, for example, Barrow (2005).

many members of the audience who had not been the intended target of his comments but who had nevertheless been affected by them.

Since then, I have been firm on the principle that an apology or other remedial discourse must be circulated in a context with a degree of publicity or privacy that is the same as, or as similar as possible to, the context in which the original language was released. More recently, I had the opportunity to apply this principle, as one of my colleagues notified me that, during a public presentation, a speaker had referred to me, by name, as having been implicated in an incident that happened more than a decade ago, and in which I had not, in fact, been involved in any way. I was not present at the presentation, so was obviously not the immediate addressee, though the words affected me once I knew they had been uttered. I emailed the speaker, explained that since the comments had been made in public, they needed to be corrected in public, and we reached a mutually agreeable form for that correction. In this case, I did not seek an apology (although the speaker did offer one), but rather a correction of the misperception that had resulted from his words.

It is easy to imagine similar situations in a classroom. A teacher, whether in jest or in irritation, might make a comment in class to a student but be left with the nagging feeling that perhaps the comment was unduly harsh or sarcastic. The teacher might, later that day or the day after, take the student aside, perhaps as everyone is leaving the classroom. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I was irritated, but you should not have borne the brunt of that. I apologize." The student may well appreciate the teacher's apology, but what is missing is the educative modeling on the part of the teacher in the setting in which the comment was first made, and with those who witnessed it.⁶ As with all lessons, the principle that we should take responsibility for our words should not just be stated but foremost modeled. It matters where we say what we say and, in this fictitious example, the teacher should have addressed their own words in the same setting in which they were uttered: the classroom.

A stark example can be seen in the French film *Entre les Murs* (Cantet, 2008). In the film, set in a culturally diverse high school in Paris's 20th arrondissement, a heated conflict between teacher François Marin and the students erupts when the teacher tells two girls in his class that they have an "*attitude de pétasses*." Dana Strand (2009) explains the contentiousness of the term:

In the film's subtitles, *pétasse* is translated as 'skank' ... [but] the exact definition of the term is elusive. While some suggest that 'bimbo' might be an accurate translation of the term, others find the English word 'slut' more appropriate. At any rate, it seems clear that opinions vary on the sexual connotation of the word. (p. 265n3)

There is extensive discussion between the teacher and students about how offensive this phrase is; the girls argue that the teacher has effectively told them they are "skanks" or "prostitutes," while the teacher insists he did not say the students are *pétasses* but rather that they have an "*attitude de pétasses*." Perhaps the teacher's most egregious flaw is not that he slips up and utters offensive language in the heat of the moment, but that he fails to take responsibility for it. In fact, when confronted with his words and what they mean to the students, he disavows the seriousness of the term and refuses to

⁶ Whether or not the apology is always the best or most appropriate form of remedial speech is a discussion I cannot fully enter here. As I have stated earlier, I am interested in how and, in particular *where*, language that is used in educational settings and that has negative effects is addressed, whether that is in the form of retracting it, offering an apology for its effects, explaining how it was intended, some combination thereof, or a different form altogether.

apologize. Strand characterizes Marin's disavowal as "back-pedaling": "Marin tries to back-pedal by explaining that he did not accuse the girls of being *pétasses*, but was simply characterizing their behavior" (p. 267). The teacher becomes locked in a power battle with particular students and appears to forget his broader educational responsibility for the entire class. When he launched the word *pétasses* into the classroom, many other students besides the two girls addressed directly were hit by this word. The teacher failed to accept his discursive responsibility when he neither acknowledged nor remedied the effects of his language in that same classroom space.

Location has not always been considered in discussions of language that has negative effects, and appropriate responses to such language. For example, considerations of location are absent from Robin Barrow's (2005) discussion of people "taking offence" at what others say. Barrow advances the argument that, in many (though not all) situations in which people today take offence, "not only is it not necessarily wrong to cause offence (in the sense in question), but it is actually often wrong (morally weak) to take offence" (p. 273). He opens the article with the following, hopefully fictitious, example:

I, who happen to be a male, call a female colleague, to her face, a 'stupid bitch'. May she, can she, ought she to take offence? If offence is to be taken, does this depend on the facts of the case? Had some of the facts been different (it was a male colleague; it was a stranger; the phrase was actually 'silly bugger'), would the answer to the question of whether offence was to be taken have been different? Or does it depend upon my intentions? Upon her feelings? On the background to the event? Perhaps on some combination of these, or on something else entirely? (p. 266)

Barrow's interest is not primarily in the kind of remedial speech that would or would not be appropriate after he uttered these words. Rather, his concern is with sorting out when taking offence is warranted, in relation to the differences between "1) meaning to offend; 2) actually giving offence; and 3) behaving in a manner that is likely to cause offence" (p. 268), and between "1) what is offensive to some people; 2) what is offensive to all people; and 3) what is offensive in itself" (p. 269). However, it seems odd to me that the whole discussion avoids consideration of where the words were uttered in the first place. When Barrow writes, "I, who happen to be a male, call a female colleague, to her face, a 'stupid bitch,'" I want to know *where* this happened. Were the words uttered during a one-on-one meeting behind closed doors, where nobody else was around to hear them? Were they uttered in the hallway of a university building, where some passersby, including students, may have heard them? Or were they uttered in a large meeting or conference session, where they were inevitably heard by dozens of other people? Barrow considers only the two individuals in the scenario, the male speaker and the female listener. When he goes on to consider whether or not the listener should take offence and should demand an apology or take some other action, he never considers that uttering the words "stupid bitch" may have effects far beyond the individual female listener. Barrow writes:

To take offence is more than to be hurt, more than to be spurned into an emotional reaction. To take offence involves regarding the behaviour that causes the hurt as reprehensible; it involves a judgement on the propriety of the behaviour, and one can choose not to make such judgement. (pp. 268–269)

When someone addresses the uttered words "stupid bitch" or demands that the speaker address his own speech, this may well be an appropriate educational judgment one ought to make. In fact, the

judgment may be made by someone other than the female individual in the scenario, and may not involve personal hurt at all. Let us elaborate the scenario a little. Imagine I am the colleague whom Barrow calls “stupid bitch,” and that he does so during a conference session in which several other colleagues and perhaps students are present. Regardless of whether or not I feel personally offended by these words, I have an educational responsibility to see that these words, which have been launched into a public space, are addressed. Whether I ought to lob back an epithet, demand an apology, retort with a witticism, ask that the speaker be removed from the conference, or respond in some other way is a discussion I leave aside here, but I cannot, in a space that is marked as educational and in which other listeners are present, responsibly leave the words “hanging in the air.” If others have been exposed to, and thus potentially affected, by the uttered words, these others should be taken into account in the location of the remedial speech that follows.

Responsibility for Effects Beyond Intentions

In a few places now, I have suggested that, as speakers and writers, we carry responsibility for the effects of our language beyond our intentions. I have argued previously (Ruitenberg, 2008), in the context of situations of bullying in education, that one need not be the originator of the language in order to carry responsibility for using it: “The individual who reiterates the racial slur shares the responsibility for keeping this discourse in circulation, but does not carry it alone” (p. 266). This means that one is responsible for carelessly repeating language that one personally does not intend to be harmful but that nonetheless is perceived to be harmful. I understand the slippery slope argument made by Barrow (2005) when he points out that it is unreasonable and unworkable to consider offensive everything that somebody somewhere, for whatever reason, might possibly take offence to: “Once the notion of offensiveness is allowed to float free it is naturally open to interpretation across the spectrum” (p. 272). However, rather than limiting the idea of discursive acts that need to be addressed to those that are obviously and inherently offensive, I include those discursive acts of which one could, within the social context in which they are uttered or published, reasonably be expected to know or have made the effort to know that they are likely to give offence (or have another negative effect).

If someone teaches me a word in a language I don’t know, and I go around calling people this word just because I am curious what effect it will have, I cannot then absolve myself from responsibility for the effects of this word by saying, “But I don’t even know what it means!” In that case, I would bear responsibility for circulating the word and for not informing myself better about what I was doing when I was using it. I give this example because teachers sometimes excuse hurtful language used by younger students by saying, “But they don’t really know what they’re saying. They don’t know what the words mean.” Young children learn “bad” words in context, and the context tells them it is a “bad” word that affects people. Children demonstrate very effectively that they do not need to know exactly what a word means in order to know that they can use it to hurt people. Part of a teacher’s educational responsibility is to model that we cannot just scatter words in social space willy-nilly any more than we can scatter seeds in a field without informing ourselves whether some of them might be invasive weeds.

A corollary of the idea of educational responsibility for the words launched into an educational space is that when language is launched in public, it is *addressable* in public. This means that language

launched in the (semi-)public space of a classroom or conference session cannot be declared off limits for questions or comments. Put simply, if a speaker or writer does not want their words addressed in public, they should not launch them in public. This idea prevents statements being made and then shut down for further discussion by the speaker declaring, “I don’t want to talk about it” or “I’m entitled to my belief so you can’t question it.” Once the discursive act is done, it cannot be undone, but is available for response. The fact that language cannot be un-circulated also means that the speaker (or, more generally, “discursive agent”) cannot disavow responsibility for it. This is illustrated well by a scenario often used in courtroom dramas. The prosecutor or defence attorney asks a question they know perfectly well is out of bounds, and when the other party objects, they state, “Withdrawn, Your Honour.” They do so in the hope that the jury cannot unhear what they heard and will be influenced by it, even if the judge instructs them to disregard the comment. This same scenario plays out when a student, when questioned about a comment they made, disavows responsibility by declaring, “I was just kidding!” Once launched, language cannot be un-launched; it can merely be addressed, redressed, compensated, or otherwise remediated by other language.

Conclusion: Discursive Responsibility

The two central claims I have sought to advance in this paper are (1) that teachers have an educational responsibility to address both their own and others’ hurtful language and other discursive acts that have negative effects in educational contexts, and (2) that the response needs to be at a level of publicity that is the same as, or as similar as possible to, the language it responds to. A teacher does not normally respond to a comment made in class by discussing it at the weekly assembly with the whole school. Likewise, a teacher educator does not respond to something written in a student teacher’s reflective journal by discussing it with the whole class. But just as a teacher does not publicize what was said or written in private, a teacher should not privatize what was said or written in public.

Discursive responsibility is not about settling the question of culpability for what has been said or written, but rather about treating all language that circulates in educational contexts as part of what is being taught. However, even though the emphasis is on correcting discourse, not punishing the discursive agent, this may not be how it is perceived. If a teacher addresses language that has been uttered by a student, even if it is a day later and without reference back to the person, the student may feel reprimanded or called out. As Boysen (2012) explains in summarizing the literature on this topic, “confronting bias can ... lead to negative affect in the person who is confronted ... including negative self-evaluation, discomfort, and anger” (p. 509). Therefore, pedagogical tact and care remain important considerations, just as they are in any discussion of a controversial topic. However, a teacher’s response in the classroom is never only about an individual student; it always involves the other students. While an individual student’s comfort in the class is a relevant consideration in how the comment is addressed, it can guide neither whether nor where the comment is addressed. To state the principle in the most general terms: All discursive acts in an educational setting that have negative effects on others in that setting should, because of the educational nature of the context, be addressed, and this should take place in a location with a level of publicity that is the same as, or as similar as possible to, the location of the original discursive act.

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About the Author

Claudia Ruitenberg is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality* (2015), co-editor of *Education, Culture and Epistemological Diversity: Mapping a Disputed Terrain* (2012), and editor of (among other titles) *Reconceptualizing Study in Educational Discourse and Practice* (2017). As of May 2017, she is also Academic Director of UBC Vantage College, an innovative program for international first-year students.