

4-18-2018

## Learning with Stephannie Kerschbaum

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### Recommended Citation

SCP, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, "Learning with Stephannie Kerschbaum" (2018). *Writing & Rhetoric MKE*. 23.

<https://dc.uwm.edu/writingmke/23>

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## Learning With Stephanie Kerschbaum

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It was such a privilege to *learn with* [Stephanie Kerschbaum](#) this week. Not only was she UWM's Vilas Trust guest lecturer, she also joined our classroom community and discussed her book, [Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference](#), and article "[Anecdotal Relations](#)" with us.

When we think about differences between people, what is it we're thinking of? Chances are we think about demographic differences, and that we also conceive of these differences as static or permanent. Instead, [Kerschbaum](#) argues that "differences emerge during interactions" (9). The stakes for such an approach are high. As her first chapter, "The Market for Diversity in Higher Education" shows, when we leverage demographics for marked difference, we commodify people. And I hope it goes without saying (though I'm obviously still going to say it) commodifying someone's identity is grossly unethical.

[UWM currently has plans to become a Hispanic Serving Institution](#). With Stephanie Kerschbaum in our class, one of my colleagues asked how we saw her "Market for Diversity" chapter informing UWM's new initiative. This is an important question for us to dwell on—we are commodifying "Wisconsin's fastest growing group of college bound students." And as Kerschbaum warns us, "In this language, difference is neither dynamic nor flexible: it is individual property that institutions cover" (32).

We already know what it's like when institutions, [largely white \(male\) ran institutions](#), consider [people as property](#) because of difference.

Additionally, we are never just one facet of our identity. Drawing from [Kimberlé Crenshaw's](#) work, Kerschbaum urges "teachers [to] consider their students not in terms of single identifiers but as the embodiment of a complex set of identifications that must be considered together, rather than independently from one another" (10). In this way, we can begin to conceive of how difference functions relationally. To use an example Kerschbaum brought up in class, and that she's written in her book, "To evoke my deafness as difference, it must be considered relationally: How does my not-hearing (of a particular form) make me different from a specific interlocutor?" (72). Her deafness is not a static marker of difference. Difference(s) must be contextually based, and can only emerge in social interaction.

With that said, Kerschbaum asks us to think about the difference between "*Learning about* and *Learning with Others*" (74).

She asked us, in class, "Can you imagine what 'learning with' would look like in your class"? One of my classmates answered this question by explaining the games he employs in the beginning of his class period. He argues that by allowing play to set the tone of the room, he *learns with* his students as they all participate in building [confianza](#).

Bringing up the concept of *confianza* led to an important part of conversations we should all be having on the teaching of language. Because our language practices are so tied to who we are, to ask students to share their language, with each other and with us, we need to create a classroom community that fosters relationship building. To do this, we must give *time* for it. Like Kerschbaum argues, we must be able to see our students one on one. And Like [Rachel](#), our

professor illustrates in her book [Translanguaging Outside the Academy](#), “Relationships formed, and translanguaging was possible because of these relationships” (115). In between those two examples, we can demonstrate *confianza* in our classrooms, what [Steven Alvarez](#) defines as, “a

**Table 2.1: Questions for *Learning about* and *Learning with* Others**

Learning About	Learning With
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What differences are present in the classroom?</li> <li>• What groups do individuals belong to?</li> <li>• What names or labels can describe particular individuals and/or associate them with others?</li> <li>• What can we learn about the individuals in the classroom?</li> <li>• What information about the self is being communicated in talk?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do individuals position themselves alongside others?</li> <li>• How are individuals positioned by others?</li> <li>• How do individuals acknowledge similarities and differences between themselves and others?</li> <li>• What differences are made salient through classroom interactions?</li> <li>• How are students and teachers learning with others in the classroom?</li> </ul>

reciprocal relationship in which individuals feel cared for... built through an ongoing, intentional process that is centered in local communities and involves mutual respect” (4, *Community Literacies en Confianza*).

Mutual respect cannot be established if our students feel commodified or if we regard their identities as static.

As we near the close of our semester, I think we can all see connections and themes between all of our readings and class discussions. If languages and dialects have to be seen as fluid and flexible (and they do have to), then that must mean we also have to see the identities involved with languages as dynamic and contextually based. Even if they’re not using language in that moment, to quote from Kerschbaum’s lecture, difference(s) “are contextually embodied and deeply rhetorical.”

I want to close by repeating [Stephanie Kerschbaum](#)’s question: “Can you imagine what ‘learning with’ would look like in your class?” Does it look like Alvarez’s *confianza*? Or maybe it looks like “Writing Risky Relationships” wherein we learn how to “mak[e] mistakes and lear[n] from them. It also means [listening](#) to conflict, difficulty, and resistance for the sense-making behind others’ acts” (Kerschbaum, 149). And maybe *learning with* can happen “over humor, songs, and play” because, in the writing classroom we don’t learn “Without taking risks and making mistakes” (Bloom-Pojar, 115).