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Critical Pedagogy: An Overview

“Critical” or “resistance” pedagogy is a relatively new set of ideas about the purpose and the process of teaching: the term itself doesn’t appear within academic literature until about two decades ago. But its first proponents emerged angry and outspoken, calling for an anti-establishment revolution in the schools that seemed all the more audacious in an era when conservatives reigned and educational standards were under their scrutiny. Officials of the Reagan administration were then citing studies like the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 “Action for Excellence” as proof that school systems had abandoned “the basics” at America’s expense. For critical pedagogues, however, these same systems seemed to be bleak learning factories. Schools were far from overly liberal, they asserted, and in reality served the dominant social class by making thoughtless drones of those students privileged enough to even make it through. Due to this radical stance, opponents were able to quickly tag critical pedagogy as another facet of the postmodern, politically-correct nonsense supposedly threatening the fundamentals of a worthwhile education. But in reality critical pedagogues had many critics among those “post-” intellectuals who were thriving in the 1980s and 1990s; their ardent faith in democracy and social progress seem to some a little naive. Thus, critical pedagogy has been forced over the years to address criticisms from all directions, and although the majority of its practitioners are quite far to the left in their political persuasion, they sometimes seem to be holding an unpopular middle ground, in defense of principles that many see as a little outdated.

This is in part because their politics are rooted in the past. Many clearly draw inspiration from their memories of the “free school” movement and campus activism of the 1960s and early 1970s. However, they also trace their educational theories to a number of older precedents. Most often mentioned are turn-of-the-century progressive philosophy and the Frankfurt School of social critique that emerged during the interwar years. Most critical pedagogues find these well-established intellectual figures useful, but also assert that these scholarly ideas must be combined with pragmatic lessons drawn out of far less typical learning contexts, meaning that indigenous struggles in developing nations, prison education programs, and Black Power leaders are often discussed in the literature and are treated as equally valid sources. This tactic is particularly appropriate to an educational movement that has set out to bring knowledge and activism together as “praxis.” It also explains why critical pedagogues sometimes find themselves in opposition to both conservatives and postmodernists; they don’t want a return to “traditional” subject matter or the kind of unrestricted academic freedom that generates obtuse theories for a closed audience. Instead, they seek more inclusive classrooms and try to design curricula in accordance with the needs of their surrounding communities.

Brazilian educator and social activist Paulo Freire was the pioneering figure of the movement. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) offered a general theory of

knowledge based on his personal experiences organizing illiterate peasants and the political persecution he suffered as a result. The book provided inspiration to many radicals then entering the teaching profession, and it remains a common reference point for critical pedagogues. The concepts Freire introduced can still be found in much of the literature: the “banking theory of education,” “conscientization,” “dialogical method,” and “transformative education,” among others. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* asserted that modern educational institutions were dehumanizing and simply reproduced the status quo. In the “banking” model of learning they employed, knowledge was treated as another commodity to be transferred as efficiently as possible from sender to receiver. As an alternative to this system of indoctrination, Freire proposed that education should be a dialogical process, in which students and teachers share their experiences in a non-hierarchical manner. When this kind of ongoing dialogue was connected to the forms of marginalization his own students experienced in their everyday lives, Freire saw them come to a realization of the larger reasons for their oppression (a process he termed “conscientization”) and then begin to seek out ideas for resistance.¹ Although he died in 1997, there is a Paulo Freire Institute at UCLA that holds yearly conferences and publishes an online journal exclusively dedicated to furthering these ideas.

(<http://paulofreireinstitute.org/freireonline/>)

The pedagogical theories of philosopher John Dewey were introduced much earlier in the twentieth century, and within a more traditional academic context, but they share a similar focus on making education a transformative experience. Dewey believed the ideal classroom would be a place where students used trial and error to develop needed skills for engaging in genuine or “ethical” democratic citizenship. Like Freire, Dewey asserted that learning cannot be standardized because it always takes place against the backdrop of the learner’s previous knowledge and experience. For this reason, he suggested that teachers tie new material into their students’ individual perspectives and give them freedom to subject it to testing and debate, an approach which is spelled out in his frequently cited *Democracy and Education* (1916).² Dewey was also an early critic of the way industrial modernization and scientific expertise were beginning to insinuate themselves into the classroom—the “Taylorization” of knowledge, to use a term gaining popularity among his contemporaries. This criticism is in part why his ideas resonate so well with the later social theories of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm, all of whom were associated with the itinerant Institute of Social Research (somewhat misleadingly referred to as the “Frankfurt School”) during the 1930s and 1940s. Although their ideas differ, each of these figures combined Marxist historical materialism, German philosophy, and Freudian psychology in an attack on the standardization and ideological indoctrination taking place in the consumer societies around them.

Critical pedagogues follow this line of thinking, and have maintained that an answer lies in working toward Dewey’s vision of a truly participatory democracy even when their optimism is looked down upon by many left-leaning academics. But they do acknowledge that these democratic values often put them in a difficult position. Their

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Revised Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

literature features continued debates about the amount of control an instructor should exercise and the appropriate role of their own opinions in the classroom. In other words, it has not proven easy to create an open, individualized learning environment that is still productive. And, as critics have been quick to point out, critical pedagogy is always in danger of becoming little more than “positive” political indoctrination, different in color but not in kind from the “negative” variety—elitist, capitalist, technocratic, etc.—it is designed to replace. While some critical educators have responded to this allegation by making a conscious effort to emphasize pluralism and by downplaying their personal views, others like Peter McLaren and Stephen Brookfield claim this is overly-compromised and abandons the movement’s Freirian origins. Conflicts between more and less radical proponents are not likely to ease up—longer established pedagogical styles might provide scientific principles or a more definite goal, but critical pedagogues have only their commitment to social change as a common ground.

Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom

Ira Shor’s *When Students Have Power* (1996) documents his personal successes and failures with critical pedagogy at a Staten Island campus of New York’s open-enrollment City University. Shor’s many novel ideas for restructuring writing classrooms as a collaborative environment with minimal “gatekeeping” (i.e., traditional hierarchical authority) have made him one of the most admired figures in the field. In order to create a more equitable system of “power sharing,” Shor suggests teachers need to democratically reorganize all aspects of the educational environment, from the physical organization of the room to the system used to evaluate student work. His students sit in circles or in rows, depending on their preference, but Shor avoids the front of the room and “backloads” his own comments to avoid intruding in their discussions. He also requires them to sign contracts generated through an extensive process of negotiation, which covers everything from grading standards to the exact number of minutes that can pass before students are considered late.³ Other notable figures like Henry Giroux have also adopted this contract system as a means of accommodating institutional requirements for letter grades while still tailoring the learning process to each class’s needs and capacities. Although both Shor and Giroux continue to mark grammatical and stylistic errors in their students’ writing, they allow unlimited opportunities for rewrites if a given individual chooses to improve their work.

From the onset critical pedagogy has paid much attention to writing instruction, seeing a direct relationship between literacy (or “literacies”) and the ability to exercise power in society. This belief in the liberating potential of literacy is symbolized by Freire’s pioneering work in Brazil. However, the aforementioned Marxist cultural critique associated with the Frankfurt School offers another rationale for focusing so intensely on the way students use and analyze language. After summarizing this school of thought in his *Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance Theory in Composition*, Joe Marshall Hardin advises composition teachers to emphasize the ways in which cultural ideologies structure all forms of experience and communication. “Critique

³ Ira Shor, *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

and resistance are admirable goals...,” Hardin writes, but they remain too vague unless teachers also “encourage [students] to see the very real relationship between rhetorical production and the material conditions of their own lives.”⁴ Seeking to foster this kind of critical understanding, some instructors begin their courses with personal or “expressivist” writing assignments and then incrementally broaden the subject matter by asking questions that distance students from their own language: “Where did you get these ideas from?”, “What value system are they informed by?”, “What kinds of social institutions and relationships do they perpetuate?” It could be argued that emphasizing ideology in this way runs contrary to the core democratic ideals of critical pedagogy because it challenges the authority granted to an individual’s “voice” or opinions within the liberal philosophical tradition. However, as Hardin notes, rejecting the idea that our thoughts are entirely our own does not necessarily invalidate the democratic notion that we can exercise agency by choosing our actions and judging between right and wrong.

An Annotated Bibliography

Brookfield, Stephen. “Putting the Critical Back into Critical Pedagogy: A Commentary on the Path of Dissent,” in *Journal of Transformative Education*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2003): pp. 141-149.

As his title suggests, Brookfield views current trends in critical pedagogy as the “domestication and distortion” (141) of educational strategies that are in reality inseparably bound to radical politics. Like Peter McLaren, who also contributed to this issue of the journal, Brookfield asserts that any transformation produced in the classroom is ineffectual unless it alters the larger conditions of a society—its material “base,” in Marxist terms. He includes a useful discussion of Cornel West, bell hooks, and Angela Davis in this analysis, but doesn’t offer any concrete advice for educators, radical or otherwise.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Twentieth Anniversary Edition)*. New York: Continuum, 1993.

First published in English in 1973, this book introduced the core educational principles that became known as critical pedagogy roughly a decade later. It remains just as important today, as these concepts—humanization, the “banking” theory of education, dialogical method, etc.—have never really fallen out of fashion within the movement. Freire carefully outlines his ideas with examples taken from Brazil and throughout Latin America. However, this is a theoretical work and not a historical monograph or personal narrative. Readers seeking more about Freire’s life or the political context he struggled within should look at his *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1992).

Giroux, Henry. *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CN: Bergin and Garey, 2001.

⁴ Joe Marshall Hardin, *Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance Theory in Composition* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2001), p. 55.

Giroux is another one of the most frequently-cited proponents of critical pedagogy, and this influential text, originally published in 1981, gives a general overview of his ideas. Giroux identifies and elaborates on themes now central to the field: restructuring the classroom as a democratic public sphere, a critique of the instrumental rationality at the root of “banking” theories of education, and the need to connect classroom activities to the everyday lives of marginalized students. Giroux places his understanding of pedagogy as praxis within the tradition of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and then offers his interpretation of the “hidden curriculum” that, in his view, keeps educators in the service of the dominant political and economic system despite their good intentions. Although he offers some advice here on the actual mechanics of teaching “critical literacy,” he is clearly addressing a theoretically-informed academic reader.

Hardin, Joe Marshall. *Opening Spaces: Critical Theory and Resistance Pedagogy in Composition*. Albany: Suny Press, 2001.

Opponents of critical pedagogy within the field of composition studies often claim it supplants the proper goals of writing instruction with a program of leftist political indoctrination. In response, Hardin offers his own system of “teaching resistance,” designed to enable students to make critical analyses of the ideologies underpinning all forms of discourse without necessarily promoting a specific value system. Students are encouraged to espouse their own values and opinions, but in doing so learn to analyze and participate in rhetorical production from a more detached standpoint. Hardin addresses these issues of politics and practice in theoretical terms, but offers little concrete advice for the classroom setting.

Harris, Rochelle. “Encouraging Emergent Moments: The Personal, Critical, and Rhetorical in the Writing Classroom,” in *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2004): pp. 401-418.

Harris defends the kind of personal writing assignment most often associated with expressivist methodologies as an appropriate element of critical pedagogy. Through an account of her personal successes and failures as a writing instructor, she advises other educators to begin with students’ personal experiences before engaging them in broader political or social critique. Although she sympathizes with the more overtly political agendas of McLaren and Freire, Harris defines praxis broadly as any “emergent moment” of self-reflexivity whereby the writer comes to see larger social forces at work in their own life, regardless whether this realization leads to a critique of the dominant culture.

Jay, Gregory and Gerald Graff. “A Critique of Critical Pedagogy,” in *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, eds. Michael Bérubé and Cory Nelson. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Jay and Graff’s article is worth looking at because it is the most frequently-cited attack on critical pedagogy. After noting their own affiliation with the goals of “progressive” education, the authors suggest that radical pedagogues like Freire are ultimately unable to

create a democratic classroom due to the absolutism of their politics. Educators, in their view, need to accept the legitimacy of students' opinions and generate more useful dialogue; this will entail introducing the views of contrasting authorities, such as other instructors at the same institution, through a process they term "teaching the conflicts." In this way, the potentially stifling effects of a teacher's radical stance could be counterbalanced and students might be more comfortable entering the conversation.

Kanpol, Barry. *Issues and Trends in Critical Pedagogy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997.

Kanpol provides a historical and theoretical overview of current approaches to critical pedagogy. In each short chapter, he addresses a different "facet" of the field, including popular culture, liberation theology, gender, urban schooling, and Outcomes-Based Education. Written for instructors and administrators in secondary and college classrooms, this text will provide them with a number of useful services, including clear explanations of methodologies and surrounding debates; discussion questions; the personal experiences of other teachers; and potential solutions to the problems they have faced.

McLaren, Peter. *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

A Marxist, well-traveled political activist, and undeniably forceful writer, McLaren has been a key figure within the field. After condemning the recent "mainstream" interest in critical pedagogy as a vogueish strain of liberal humanism, McLaren goes on to model his heroes Guevara and Freire as examples of a more revolutionary pedagogical practice. Guevara thus becomes an "internationalist pedagogue" (42) who linked his personal transformation into a militant to the lives of those he encountered along this path. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire—a more obvious candidate, and McLaren's close friend as well—embodies the ideal Gramscian "organic intellectual," more cognizant of his role as pedagogue but still as directly engaged in political praxis. However, McLaren clearly does not intend to offer a text on pedagogical styles. This is an extended critique of capitalist globalization and neoliberal thought, which discusses academic institutions only when lamenting their complicity with systems of political and economic domination.

Shor, Ira. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996.

Like Peter McLaren, Shor worked with Paulo Freire and is clearly very influenced by the Brazilian educator's life and thought. His 1983 text *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* was an early effort to translate Freire's methodology into the context of North American classrooms. In this more recent book, Shor revises and updates those ideas through an extended description of a writing class at City University that he organized around the theme of "Utopia." It usefully documents the everyday problems faced by the critical pedagogue, offering the kind of concrete examples—his syllabus and assignments, quotes

and texts from his students, their evaluations from the end of the semester—that are often left out of more strictly theoretical works.

Westbrook, B. Evelyn. “Debating Both Sides: What Nineteenth-Century College Literary Societies Can Teach Us about Critical Pedagogies,” in *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2002): pp. 339-356.

After noting that critical pedagogy is widely debated but rarely put to any kind of empirical evaluation, Westbrook attempts to evaluate the potential of one aspect—“agonistic” classroom debate (340)—using an example she regards as a clear historical precedent: the literary societies found on all college campuses prior to the Civil War period. In these often-mandatory extracurricular forums, topics in politics and philosophy were examined from “both sides” and then subjected to a vote. Westbrook finds that, rather than encouraging students to adopt a more critical perspective, these meetings most often led to a group consensus echoing the dominant ideologies of the period. However, her study is limited to a handful of schools in pre-bellum South Carolina, and her presupposition that “pro-con” debate is a central tenet of critical pedagogy is questionable.