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Critical and Social Justice Pedagogies in Practice

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Synonyms

[Critical pedagogy](#); [Educational practice](#); [Social justice pedagogy](#)

Introduction

While pedagogy is most simply conceived of as the study of teaching and learning, the term critical pedagogy embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns. Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teachings, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the wider community and society. Critical pedagogy is historically rooted in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and was greatly influenced by the work of Karl Marx, particularly his views about labor. According to Marx, the essential societal problem was one of socioeconomic inequality, believing that social justice is essentially dependent upon economic conditions. The “New Left scholars” in North America, including

Henry Giroux, Roger Simon, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren (among others), focused their efforts on examining and better understanding the role that schools play in transmitting certain messages about political, social, and economic life. Postmodern currents associated with Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Ebert, and others have also problematized the social, cultural, and economic contexts of sources of knowledge and pedagogy. Critical feminist pedagogues argue that education should challenge the structure of the traditional canon and develop and offer alternative classroom practices. Feminist pedagogy reinforces the idea that both the content of the curriculum and the methods of pedagogy employed teach lessons (Breunig 2011).

Critical social theorists, neo-Marxists, liberatory pedagogues, pedagogies of hope and possibility, New Left scholars, educating the Democratic citizen, globalization, and social justice education all offer multiple, (sometimes) overlapping, (sometimes) contested, and varied terminologies to describe critical pedagogy. Despite the varied meanings and approaches, the core of critical pedagogy remains focused on education as a means to bring about a more socially just world (Malott and Porfilio 2011). As Boyles, Carusi, and Attick assert, “The term *social justice* seems to be in the ears and on the lips” of many educators these days (Ayers et al. 2009, p. 30).

There is a rather extensive body of literature that considers the theory of critical and social justice pedagogies, but significantly less literature

that specifically addresses the ways in which professors attempt to apply these theories in practice. How do professors who teach critical and social justice theories practice it within the postsecondary classroom? The academic separation of theory from practice is a manifestation of the ways in which knowledge has become fragmented from lived experience. There have been numerous calls for critical pedagogues to move beyond theory and focus on the formulation of a praxis that acts on the possibilities of critical pedagogy, including within the postsecondary classroom. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that people need to develop critical conscientization and engage educative praxes that incorporate theory, action, and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice. Malott and Porfilio (2011) assert that there are far too many “theoretical one-trick ponies that have an impulsive urge to tear down the work of others” (p. 37). They impel critical pedagogues to move beyond endless critique, deconstruction, and deferral, shifting their energies toward real-world struggles guided by radical love, social justice, and hope. Gramsci (and others) believed that individuals should seek places for counter-hegemonic resistance and solidarity and that the university can serve as one site for the exercise of these practices. The purpose of this entry is thus to consider and convey how scholars might meaningfully and collaboratively engage in social justice praxes within postsecondary spaces.

Social Justice Pedagogy in Practice

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2013), a pedagogical theorist and teacher educator, impels educators to consider social justice pedagogy for new century children. These new century students have a deep connection to hip-hop culture, receive their news from the “Daily Show,” and tweet and instant message, viewing email as antiquated. They are “shape-shifters” (p. 108), according to Ladson-Billings. They do not fit neatly into the rigid categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, or national origin that have been used to make distinctions, create hierarchy, and use as

comparators. Talk of “safe space” in the classroom, genuine dialogue, disrupting hierarchies, and encouraging student voice may be simultaneously relevant for critical pedagogues and outdated for these new century students. Paulo Freire (1970) writes about praxis, involving theory and practice, reflection, and action as activism. In this sense, action is not just an activity for the sake of doing something but an activity that is purposeful, social justice oriented, and relevant to a changing society.

Getting Started (or a Bit Further Along)

Schools themselves are constructed through linguistic, cultural, social, and pedagogical specific interactions which both shape and are shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics and norms. From this perspective, “societies, communities, schools, teachers and even students engage in oppressive practices” (Ayers et al. 2009, p. 569). Building upon the aforementioned concepts of Gramscian counter-hegemonic praxis and Freire’s critical conscientization, how might a social justice pedagogue engage in schools in a manner that offers a counter-narrative to this dominant/normative (potentially oppressive) institutional one?

Something as seemingly basic as trying to schedule a room with movable chairs in it can be a challenge. Trying to combine theory with meaningful praxis and ample reflection in 3 h time blocks can be a restraint within these “fixed” classroom spaces. In many ways, critical/social justice pedagogy is a slow pedagogy. Originating in principles from the slow food movement, slow pedagogy offers a “slow living” perspective which challenges the dominant narratives of institutional norms. Slow is therefore a counter-hegemonic concept, which strikes at the core of neoliberal rationality. Environmental educators Philip Payne and Brian Wattoo (2009) have devised an experiential learning program that draws upon aspects of the principles and practices of the slow movement in order to provide students with a learning experience that does not fit “neatly” into traditional time blocks. This kind of critical, experiential praxis challenges the orthodoxies of speedy pedagogy and points the

way toward an educational alternative that might create the kinds of citizens that social justice pedagogues desire.

How might new century students and pedagogues think beyond the bounds of classroom spaces and time? Certainly online courses, flipped classrooms, and using university-based technology systems provide some means for engagement beyond the “traditional” concept of classroom. But how might we improve upon the design of a learning environment even more – one that encourages students to think and act beyond the bounds of the classroom walls and time/frame? How do we increase our focus on contemporary literacies (digital, media, community, and global) and ways to engage (social production, social networks, media grids, semantic web, nonlinear learning) and integrate students into the very design of our courses and instructional practices (Zmuda et al. 2015)? Equally important to ask ourselves is, “Is collaborative design and engaging new medias an aspect of course development that best ‘fits’ with the class purpose and intent?” Too often, there is an appeal in engaging in the “new” with too little regard for the additive aspect of what this may offer.

“Can you please lecture more often?” is a query that professors may often hear when they collaborate with students on course syllabus and classroom design. “You hold the relevant expertise” is an adage that students may invoke, in large part because their previous preparation has most often “trained” them to believe that the teacher is the one who delivers the knowledge and the student is the one who accepts whatever gets “deposited” (Freire 1970). The neoliberal argument that schools must align their policies and practices with the notion of knowledge as a tradable commodity, one based on efficiency and accountability, offers little to the counter-hegemonic social justice pedagogue and student. “What value does this ‘academic’ exercise of collaboration offer?” is often the resultant query. With many students going on to think (if not articulate) that this kind of educational approach is certainly out of sync with the neoliberal discourse that predominates the work/world, is it worth it then or not?

A Slippery Slope

“Will you be marking us on APA for this assignment and do you want it double-spaced Times New Roman font size 12? I am really hoping to put effort into this and get an A, so knowing this would really be helpful!” These questions and expressions frustrate many critical pedagogues. Not only does it speak to the institutional norms that students have clearly learned well, but it speaks to their focus on good grades and “pleasing” the professor that is so much a part of “traditional” education. Bell Hooks (1994) discusses how learning emphasizes silent, passive obedience, even in postsecondary schools. As the mystic poet and philosopher, Rumi, wrote long ago in a poem entitled *Two Kinds of Intelligence*,

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired,
as a child in school memorizes facts and
concepts
from books and from what the teacher says,
collecting information from the traditional
sciences
as well as from the new sciences.
With such intelligence you rise in the world.
You get ranked ahead or behind others
in regard to your competence in retaining
information. You stroll with this intelligence
in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always
more
marks on your preserving tablets.
There is another kind of tablet, one
already completed and preserved inside you.
A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence
does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid,
and it doesn’t move from outside to inside
through conduits of plumbing-learning.
This second knowing is a fountainhead
from within you, moving out. (Rumi 2004,
p. 178)

How do intelligences get honored? How do students succeed in a counter-hegemonic social justice classroom and what is the measure of success? Because, for them, as we know, the letter grade on their transcript matters, and it would be naïve for critical pedagogues to not acknowledge this. Consider this from a Marxist perspective. Grades are often the equivalent of money. A student in a typical Canadian university does not even have the opportunity to apply for most grants and bursaries without a certain average

grade on her transcript. How then might critical pedagogues, many of whom reject having to reduce and deduce learning to a letter grade, engage this reality?

Or conversely how might a critical pedagogue manage an incident whereby the students protest the veracity of collaborative learning environments and course design if at the end of the semester, the professor still has control over the grades? There is an inevitable push/pull tension and slippery slope aspect to all of this that merits consideration. How does a social justice pedagogue collaborate in a manner that goes beyond “offering” student agency in the form of dialogue and the development of a classroom community in ways that are truly counter-hegemonic and meaningful? Is codesigning course syllabi and assignments sufficient? Is peer-marking an equitable approach to “power sharing”?

Students may start to “capitalize” on what they perceive as the lax or less structured approach to teaching and learning. Formal grievances, low teaching evaluations, assertive resistance, expressions of professor incompetency, and declarations of the teacher being a “fraud” are not uncommon in the counter-hegemonic classroom. In turn, professors often (over)react with “taking back” control, becoming martyred or disengaged, or reverting back to the very same traditional practices that they are attempting to disrupt and problematize.

What Now (and How)?

Social justice pedagogy is distinctly political and needs to be acknowledged as such. Teachers serve as agents of social change as do students. The hope is to alter current inequalities in society by equipping marginalized communities with strong future leaders who are able to succeed (Ayers et al. 2009). “The teacher’s role is to equip students with the knowledge, behavior, and skills needed to transform society into a place where social justice *can* exist” (p. 590). Social justice education shifts the focus from issues of cultural diversity (i.e., multicultural education) to issues of social justice, making social change and activism central to the vision of teaching and learning. Social justice efforts must join with other levels

of the educational system as an organization in the public and private sector and with the community to improve the educational opportunities and to address the current realities of students (Ayers et al. 2009; Malott and Porfilio 2011).

Positive mentorship, teacher training programs with a social justice focus, and participating in supportive communities of practice of like-minded social justice pedagogues can provide a platform for success. “I am surprised that you are doing all this pedagogical risk-taking given the current university administration” is a common utterance shared with social justice pedagogues. This kind of comment positions the scholar as a radical “other,” which on some level may be welcomed but on another level may leave her feeling quite alienated. Identifying all the “others” in your faculty or university and establishing communities of practice can help allay feelings of solidarity. Establishing transdisciplinary scholarship groups with a social justice bent and activist orientation can provide sources of support and new inspiration.

Enacting Social Justice in the Classroom

A social justice classroom should demonstrate a curriculum and classroom practice that is grounded in the lives of students, critical in its approach to the world and itself, hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary, pro-justice, activist, academically engaging and rigorous, and culturally competent (Ayers et al. 2009). This next section will take a brief look at each of these core foci.

Know thy students first. Classroom practices need to be shaped around the lives of students, the classroom context, the educative aims of the practice, and the institution to construct learning experiences that articulate these (Breunig 2011). Writing exercises such as “I am” or “Dear (insert professor’s name here)” letters provide students with an early opportunity to share details about who they are, what they value, how they learn, and why they are there. Professors can begin the semester with this baseline knowledge and create lessons that align with students’ learning styles and needs. The social justice classroom and pedagogue need to be critical of the world and itself (including the institution and its constraints).

Professors need to acknowledge that the university as the contested site of critique is itself a space that reflects traditional norms of power and dominance and is also a site of privilege. There are many environments that are more conducive to counter-hegemonic resistance than the university (i.e., Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders). In choosing the university, for both students and professors, you are choosing an environment that privileges the very concept of critical thinking, a privilege that is not afforded to everyone given the time and resource commitment. Approaching critique from what Kevin Kumashiro refers to as a pedagogy of “hope” and what Henry Giroux refers to as a pedagogy of “possibility” helps frame these conversations in the positive potential of social justice pedagogy, one that the above authors refer to as pro-justice. Patti Lather discusses her experiences with *getting lost* and being in a stuck place and then *getting found* in a cycle, falling in and out of hope (with moments of despair) in practicing social justice pedagogy in the postsecondary classroom.

Linda Keesing-Styles cautions against establishing a set of recipes for praxis. “Why do students leave the classroom in large lectures when the professor introduces an experiential activity to complement the content and to address the various learning styles of the students in the room?” Media literacy, experiential activities, case studies, guest lectures, creative writing exercises, performing curriculum, group work, “unpacking” bias and privilege activities, student-led initiatives, community-based service learning, self- and peer-marking, and hegemony treasure hunts are often met with student skepticism and resistance. “I left the room because you stopped teaching content. You were done with the powerpoint lecture” is a refrain often heard in the experiential social justice classroom. How do social justice pedagogues maintain engagement and reinforce that experiential activity is content? As mentioned above, attention to purposeful and intentional activities rather than just an activity for its own sake is important. Given students’ previous preparation as silent, passive, seated recipients of knowledge, what can professors convey

about the importance of connecting meaningful activities to theory? How can professors adopt praxes that are relevant, engaging, additive, and rigorous? “Will we be marked on this?” is something that is often heard in response to embodied activity engagement? Students have been trained to write down the powerpoint text and to memorize and convey understanding of that key content, but what should they do with these movement-oriented, group praxes? The professor holds a responsibility to convey the what, how, and why of purposeful social justice activities and also needs to be aware when too much activity is too much activity. Students may begin to rote act and respond, “Are we reflecting and journaling again? I am so tired of all this ‘think-pair-share’ activity but at least I now know what the teacher is looking for and how to deliver it.”

Most cultural competency initiatives focus on developing the interpersonal skills needed to understand, work with, and serve culturally diverse students. The term social justice competency provides a more expansive view of this construct, focusing on competencies beyond cultural ones, including socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion, and national origin, among others. Developing social justice competency starts with the professor identifying the ways in which positionality, biases, preconceived notions about pedagogy, previous training, the university “climate,” and student composition impact how the professor herself approaches social justice classroom praxis. “What is taught?” “How is it taught?” and “What is left out?” are some preliminary questions that merit exploration. It is naïve to assume that the social justice classroom is an objective or safe space. Just naming it as such does not make it so. Social justice pedagogy is pedagogical risk-taking and involves some personal exposure and vulnerability to enact.

Conclusion

There will forever be institutional constraints and student resistance when enacting social justice

pedagogies in the postsecondary classroom. “Dancing” on the periphery of the institution involves acknowledging the restraints and sometimes even embracing them while simultaneously engaging in praxes that offer counter-hegemonic possibilities of hope. Students have ample classroom experiences with being submissive, silent, passive, and dismissed. They also have ample messages that convey despair, bullying, and activist aggression. Students have classroom experiences that leave them feeling “stupid” or “impostors” of the very environment that is meant to be a site for learning and growth. The positive potential of the pro-justice postsecondary classroom, one that demonstrates in praxis, the very concepts that it theoretically purports, profers professors and students with a unique opportunity to engage the theory of the course with their experiences in the course, helping to bridge the gap between *what* is taught and *how* it is taught. The effort is worth it in the end.

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