Discussions in Pedagogy: Should we be molding “Good Citizens” or “Critical Thinkers”?

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Pull Quote: “One educated in critical pedagogy is more likely to be aware of the multitude of struggles students may face, is more likely to be compassionate for them through the act of listening, and is dedicated to empowering them by allowing this discussion to take place.”

“If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed” — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Introduction

What is the goal of education, if not to open minds? In many instances, schools have served as sites of indoctrination to teach the accepted views of our world, with the stated aim of students regurgitating these long-held beliefs. One could argue that there are certain universal truths, lending themselves to standardized teaching; sciences and mathematics at least rely on conventions that more or less apply across the board. Simultaneously, education is also a vehicle to impart political worldviews that impact a student’s entire life.

I can vividly remember in the third grade having to recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning. The California Education Code has a section (52720) requiring “daily patriotic exercises” in the classroom, typically the Pledge of Allegiance. In practice, teachers often fail to

enforce this rule—but not Ms. Tsuruda. I would not argue that Ms. Tsuruda's pedagogy was completely uncritical. That was the year I learned in depth about American slavery and came to idolize Frederick Douglass, as I do to this day. I believe that in the classroom there were two opposing ideologies: one, the omnipresent United Statesian force to uncritically idolize the flag and all it stands for; the second, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of our abhorrent history, which a banner of stars and stripes could never entirely cover up.

Educational discourse is at an impasse. As I write this, the federal Department of Education finished cutting half of its staff last night with little notice. There are those who want nothing more than for us to similarly cut all of the criticality from educational discourse, both in how we design curriculum and in how we impart knowledge to the students. "Let kids be kids," they say. "English is the official language of the United States," is President Trump's recent stance (implying that other language learning is unimportant, if not anti-American). Is this knowledge suppression at the level of book burning? It might be apples and oranges, but the era we are living through certainly gives the impression that they don't want our children to be able to read books in the first place.

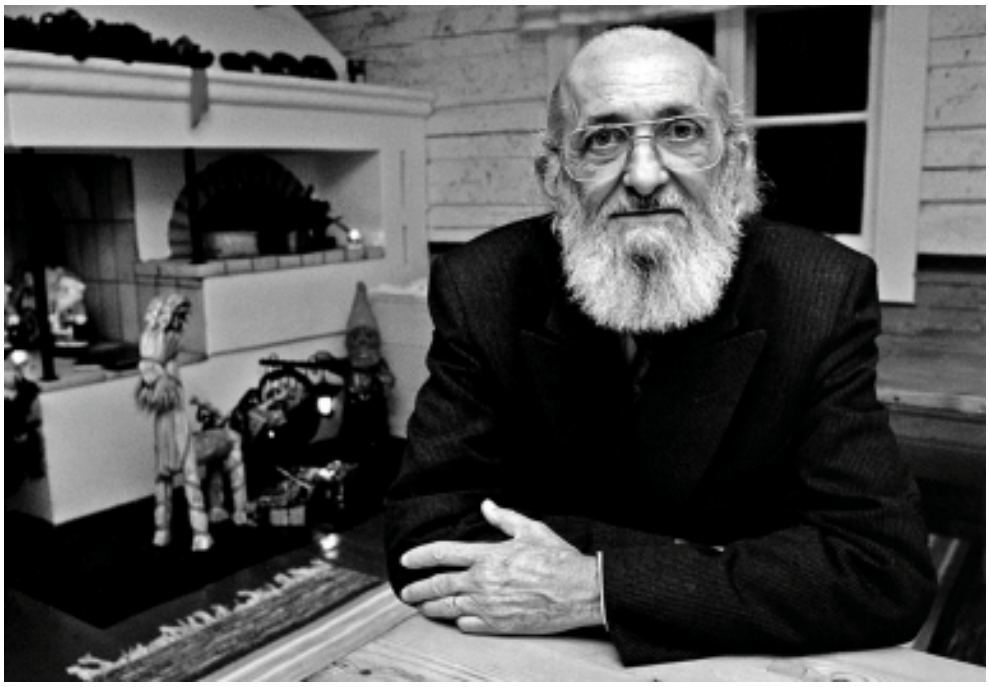
Critical pedagogy and international educational discourse gives a backdrop to all this, beyond what has arisen in home-grown American thought. While outside of our borders there do exist places with fewer rights to freedom of speech, expression, and assembly, there are also many countries that have emerged from punitive regimes with the opportunity to develop free thought in response. These thinkers, who are able to place their historical moment in context, may come to realize that educators are uniquely poised to either further the interest of the state **OR** to strengthen the minds of students and give them power.

George Jackson, African-American activist and author of the *Soledad Brother* collection of prison letters, asserts that the colonized make a mistake sending their children to schools, because those are an active instrument of the colonizer. He was right on the latter, but it is not always necessarily the case.

Pedagogical discourse has a vast collection of norms, terms, expectations, and potential goals that coexist but contradict each other. When we are uncritical, we support the role of education as something that indoctrinates, belittles, and denies both truth and opportunities to our youth. When we dive into the rich discourse of critical pedagogy, though, we find the tools to guide students rather than command them, allowing them to form a reality more equitable than the imposed standard of Anglo-American excellence.

Part 1: Discourse

Paulo Freire is widely credited with the initial development of critical pedagogy, a philosophy that aims to democratize education by breaking down the implicit power dynamics and reinforcement of oppression in schools.



Credit to Paul R. Carr, Pesa Agora

A Brazilian born to the middle class that had interactions with many peasant families and their children during his time as an educator and activist, Freire sought to dismantle what he observed to be a "banking model" of education, wherein teachers "deposited" knowledge in their students for a later withdrawal.

Freire pioneered critical pedagogy as a model to examine the role of the education system within wider society, and its awesome power to liberate students from hegemonic perceptions of the social structure. Building upon previous philosophers' work, Freire opened a discourse that continues to this day about education's purpose and the role of *students* to shape teaching and learning.

Freire was a proponent of the educated having *subjectivity* and *conscientiousness*. The

subject is a person who makes decisions based on their own critical analysis, rather than being swept up in social movements and controlled by outside factors as an *object*. For Freire, *conscientização*, literally translated from Portuguese as *conscientiousness*, or more often as *critical consciousness*, entails a person searching for self-affirmation and becoming aware of "the real elements of an oppressive situation" (36). When teaching peasants literacy—oftentimes, these people being the descendants of working-class and enslaved people going back generations—Freire felt the abstract educator had a responsibility to foster these elements in those being taught.

Central to Freire's thought is the dichotomy between the *oppressed* and the *oppressor*. Critical pedagogy hinges on this distinction: the *oppressed* are those in our world who are dehumanized through no fault of their own, but rather due to the social forces keeping them economically downtrodden and even fearful of freedom. Traditionally, educational systems are under the control of the *oppressor*, the classes with political and economic power, responsible for dehumanizing others. Education is thus a means to reinforce class dynamics and general acceptance of the status quo.

Through *democratization*, the process of being taught skills allowing one to contribute to political processes, *liberation* becomes attainable; critical pedagogy views *liberation* as an end goal, resulting from a deliberate process spearheaded by the masses. This means freeing oneself from internalized oppression and unlearning the concept of a strictly hierarchical world. The *oppressor* has conditioned a view of reality where some human beings are deserving of empathy, and others are exploitable. True liberation, to Freire, would be the abolition of this worldview entirely; a "new person" born of critical pedagogy is set on the humanization of all people.

Language is powerful, and to employ these terms seriously means taking a stance.

Namely, that stance would be a commitment to *social justice*, *equality/equity*, and the *agency* of all peoples. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Freire and his lexicon remain so popular to this day. If we are to engage in a political discussion about what education should be, the language of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers clear-cut guidance for the topic.

Freire's colleague Henry Giroux has expanded on his work in the context of the United States and is still active in the academic community, recently speaking on the current state of education being under threat. Giroux has long been concerned with the all-encompassing influence of *neoliberalism*, the philosophy of free-market capitalism and its associated policies that the United States has imposed on the world over decades. (Incidentally, neoliberal policies are historically contentious in Latin America, where Freire hails from).

Giroux's engagement with Freire's concept of critical pedagogy frames it as a method of reclaiming education from the neoliberal machine and returning it to "the discourse of democracy and civic culture." Furthermore, his view on the presence of politics in the classroom is to not push a partisan agenda following either side of the aisle; Giroux promotes critical pedagogy that has "educators vigorously resist any attempt on part of liberals and conservatives to reduce their role in schools to… that of technicians or corporate pawns. Instead, progressive educators might reference their roles as engaged public intellectuals" (Giroux, 40).

That the teaching of critical race theory, multiple modes of history, and so-called "gender ideology" became targets of the American right hasn't vindicated the liberals who gave their contingent approval, but it does demonstrate a national move toward silencing true progressives. Speaking with the Human Restoration Project in 2022, Giroux commented on the threat of

authoritarianism infringing on critical education's democratic sphere: "The American public is rapidly losing a language and ethical grammar that challenges the political and racist machineries of cruelty, state violence, and targeted exclusions."

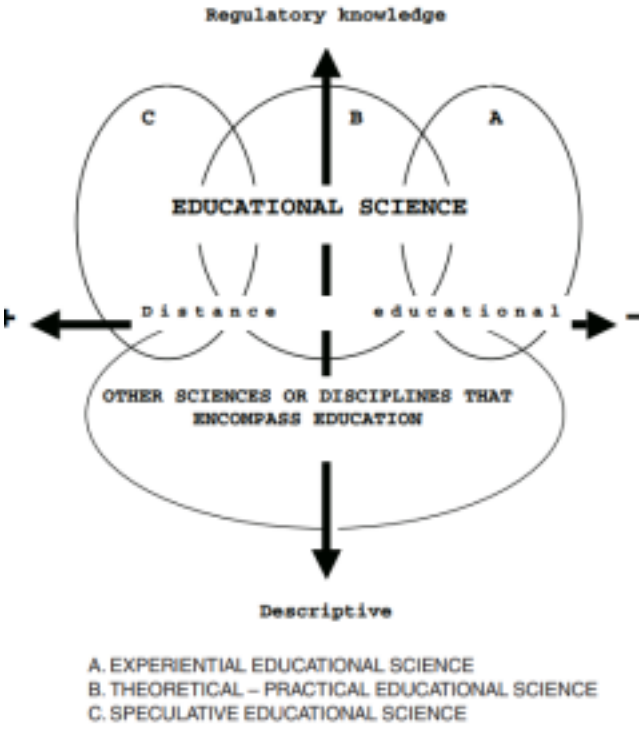
He goes on to champion a pedagogy which can "awaken consciousness," "rethink the conditions that shape (our) lives," and presumably articulate a response to white supremacy and fascism. While ignorance becomes fashionable in the eyes of extreme conservatives, those committed to changing social realities have to combat that pressure through critical pedagogies and subsequent actions. Giroux implies that rightful outrage needs the outlet of educational spaces so it can be effectively molded, then make headway in the public sphere.

Though scholar Jaume Trilla Bernet sparingly mentions Freire in his article *Educational Discourse and Educational Practice*, he nonetheless enters a dialogue with Freire and Giroux as he muses on the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to the education *of* teachers.

One of the nine tenets of Bernet's vision for educators is that they are not simply transmitting knowledge from the vantage point of "expert in their field"; for him, "An educator or teacher is not.. [a] historian, or mathematician or linguist… A teaching centre is a community; that is, a shared project and a system in which all its elements are constantly interrelated. That is why, in addition to sectorial and specialised knowledge, comprehensive, global perspectives are required" (Bernet, 38). In other words, teaching goes beyond specialized seminars, in many instances, to be a space where the educator *helps the student to relate to the world*.

Bernet's nuanced view of pedagogy included the speculative conceptions of teacher's roles, as well as the belief that it can be scientific, "experiential," or "theoretical-practical" (32). This raises the question of how success is measured, and the connection (or lack thereof) between

schooling and social outcomes.



Credit: Jaume Trilla Bernet

To view the field of teaching as a science implies an accountability for results, which are often measured as classroom outcomes within end-of-term grades and standardized testing. In the United States, college graduation outcomes still vary greatly based on socioeconomic status and first-generation status; some 40 percent of low-income, first generation students finish their bachelor's degree within six years, while nearly double that percentage of those neither low-income and first generation completed their bachelor's degree within six years (Genoa & Perna, 207).

Indicator Status: High Inequality

Among dependent students who first enrolled in 2011-12, 6-year bachelor's degree completion rates were 45 percentage points lower for those who were both low-income and first-generation than for those who were neither low-income nor first-generation (21 percent versus 66 percent). This pattern holds for dependent students regardless of whether they first entered 2-year or 4-year institutions.

A critical approach to this disparity might lead to the realization that generational factors are at play when it comes to success and graduation rate. Family responsibilities, in addition to the financial feasibility of paying for a four-year degree, can heavily impact someone's educational attainment and potentially their social mobility. Many jobs require a degree that does not come easy for all.

In the plainest terms, a student would be able to express for themselves the difficulty of attending school alongside other socioeconomic considerations. A teacher, on the other hand, would need to provide the space and comfortability for this information to come forth. One educated in critical pedagogy is more likely to be aware of the multitude of struggles students may face, is more likely to be compassionate for them through the act of listening, and is dedicated to empowering them by allowing this discussion to take place. Only then, through the acquisition of *conscientização*, can the disparity between classes be fully realized and then transformed into deliberate action.

Part 2: Language, Identity, and Change

The barriers that exist to a quality education can be massive, and so can the barriers that we erect between linguistic and cultural groupings. The only possible way to surmount the divisions in our society and learn to relate to a diversity of opinions is to decenter education, specifically language learning.

English is the hegemonic language of global business and much of science. Donald Trump would like to officialize its status as the single federal language of the United States. By enforcing a standard language in the United States, we ignore ethnolinguistic plurality, the plight of immigrants, long-standing communities in the country, and more.

Meanwhile, arbitrary distinctions are drawn between "us" and "them" to describe people coming from a place as close as Mexico. People are afraid to speak Spanish in public, lest they face retribution from ICE.

English has an effect on limiting the expression of non-native speakers. Zerep Mine Derince, in their article *Language learning through critical pedagogy in a "Brave New World*," took an educational approach that allowed their students to have dialogue in Turkish, their native language, before creating a final product in the target language of English (Derince, 392). Allowing students to examine their positionality by way of discussions in their mother tongue led to examinations of their positionality and the society they lived in, creating more empathy for Kurdish and Armenian people (391). To relate this example from Turkey to the United States, if we expect everyone to speak English in the classroom in a country of immigrants, there will not be opportunity for the type of critical inquiry that an egalitarian society requires.

In the case that a person wants or needs to learn English while living in the US,

pedagogies requiring input from student and teacher are a more pragmatic approach in classrooms that bring together speakers of many languages. TESOL, or Teaching English as a Second Language, can benefit from considerations of *Particularities,* linguistic, social, cultural and political, and *Possibility* of identity formation and social transformation, based on a student's existing sociopolitical consciousness (Kumaravadivelu, 69). Put more concisely, the preexisting context of an English learner's life matters; critical pedagogy is clearly essential to address the various needs of students from other linguistic backgrounds.

Conclusion: If you could only love the oppressor.

After becoming cognizant of so many intersecting systems of oppression, the difficulties that human beings are confronted with as a consequence of when and where they were born, the oppressor class, real or imagined, can seem like an irredeemable enemy.

Without doubt, there are those who revel in the superiority of their circumstances and enjoy their status in all its privileges of punching down. Freire never intended to preach hate against even those who occupied these positions.

In the article "Does Critical Pedagogy Work with Privileged Students?" Ricky Lee Allen and César Augusto Rossatto explain why:

> Loving the oppressor student requires that they be treated as capable of becoming more fully human once released from their investment in their oppressor status. Loving the oppressor student requires interventions that help them learn how to not dehumanize themselves and others. It requires not allowing them to take on the

> oppressor role in dialogue. And it requires letting them know that if they make a mistake they will still be loved. That is radical love. (Allen & Rossatto, 178)

The discourse of critical pedagogy is still relevant today because, within it, we find people who are committed to engaging in social justice work and changing people's lives. If anyone is capable of radical love to undo cycles of violence and oppression, it is them, in dialogue with any and all students.

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