CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE SOCIOLOGY CLASSROOM: 
CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS*

Although critical pedagogy has been discussed in the Teaching Sociology literature for nearly twenty years, dialogues about the difficulties in practicing and implementing critical pedagogical strategies in everyday classroom life are less common. In this note, we discuss a predominant theme of our workshop: challenges and concerns that may arise when one attempts to do critical pedagogy. We focus on both challenges and potential solutions for learners, instructors, and institutions of higher education. Understanding what some of these obstacles are and how they manifest in institutions of higher learning goes a long way in devising strategies to assuage their deleterious effects.

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ALTHOUGH IT IS BY NO MEANS part of the teaching canon, critical pedagogy has had a steady, albeit modest, presence in the sociology classroom. As evidenced in the pages of Teaching Sociology, instructors have been discussing and employing critical pedagogical strategies for nearly twenty years (Ballard 1998; Braa and Callero 2006; Fobes 2005; Gaianguest 1998; Gimenez 1998; Hardy 1989; Jakubowski and Burman 2004; Kaufman 2001; Long 1998; Solorzano 1989; Stoecker et al 1993; Sweet 1998a, 1998b). In addition to this body of literature, the ASA has published two editions of a resource manual titled Critical Pedagogy in the Sociology Classroom (Kaufman 2002, 2006). The publication of the second edition of this resource manual was the impetus for our teaching workshop at the 2007 ASA meeting in New York City.

To some extent, it is difficult to distinguish critical pedagogy from other forms of active learning. For example, McKinney et al (2004) recommend that sociology departments incorporate diverse pedagogies to stimulate student engagement. Although they specifically mention cooperative/collaborative learning and problem-based learning, and they suggest a movement away from traditional lecturing to a more student-centered classroom, they never make mention of critical pedagogy. Nevertheless, the techniques they discuss can be viewed as integral parts of the critical pedagogical classroom. For the purpose of this note, as well as for our workshop, we offer the following main points of critical pedagogy based largely on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (for a fuller understanding of critical pedagogy see Freire 1970, 1998, among his other works; Darder, Baltodano, Torres 2003; Wink 2005; and the citations listed above):

- Encourages the eradication of the teacher-student contradiction whereby the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen; and the teacher is the subject and the students are mere objects.
- Promotes a problem-posing dialogue (instead of a banking/lecturing style) that emanates from the lived experiences (generative themes) of the learners.
- Fosters epistemological curiosity in both teachers and learners.

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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

- Strives for praxis: reflection and action of the social world in order to transform it.

The distinguishing feature of critical pedagogy is that it is both a form of practice and a form of action. Critical pedagogy does not only tell us how to teach and learn—much less what to teach and learn; rather, it also implores us to use our teaching and learning to effect positive social change. This joining together of process, content, and outcome makes critical pedagogy uniquely problematic for both learners and teachers. Since there are many examples of how to bring critical pedagogy into the sociology classroom (again, see citations noted above), we will discuss a predominant theme of our workshop: challenges and concerns that may arise when one attempts to do critical pedagogy. We focus specifically on matters related to learners, instructors, and institutions of higher education. Although we present these in three separate sections we certainly recognize and allude to the fact that they are in no way mutually exclusive. Furthermore, we acknowledge that our brief discussion of these challenges merely scratches the surface and does not represent a comprehensive account of the issues or possible solutions.

Challenges Concerning Learners

Recovering Students’ Voices. Critical pedagogues posit that teaching and learning occur relationally through the reciprocal exchange of teacher-student discourses. Such an approach mandates that as instructors we construct learning opportunities that honor students’ voices, many of which have been squelched by the banking system of education. In respecting what students know, we can help them link knowledge from the curriculum with the concrete reality of their everyday lives, and facilitate adventurous curiosity, risk-taking, and openness to the new (Freire 1998). The main challenge we face is re-socializing students to accept these learning experiences. We find that especially in the beginning of the semester, students may feel uncomfortable with discovering and/or recovering their own voices, asking questions, and tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty. Initially, many students are more comfortable with the traditional model of compulsory note taking and the regurgitation of “facts.” Yet our experience is that students adapt quickly. As testament, instructors have documented how critical pedagogy can help students find a comfort zone while exploring a wide variety of topics ranging from homophobia (Little and Marx 2006) to hip hop culture (Hill and Ramsaran 2006). Recovering students’ voices helps bring them into the fold as co-learners and co-teachers.

Resistance to Professors’ Political Agendas. As stated earlier, a distinguishing feature of critical pedagogy is that it is both a form of practice and a form of action; it beseeches us to use our teaching and learning to work towards a more equitable society. In so doing it is not a value-neutral approach to teaching; it is decidedly on the left of the political spectrum. But what if students do not see themselves as scholar change agents? And what if they do not share our progressive social and political orientations? Although we may try to frame critical pedagogical assignments by encouraging students to work towards eradicating social inequalities and promoting social justice, some students may hold conservative perspectives that are at odds with our views. As a result, some students may voice reservations, even resistance, about being required to work for social change—much less progressive social change. A number of workshop participants shared stories of student opposition to this type of action-based learning (see Shor 1996 for a full account of student resistance to critical pedagogy). We feel that the best way to address such concerns is to dialogue with students about the purpose and obligation of education. Through problem posing questions we would ask students to consider the function and rational for being in school. Do they hope to use their education to transform their social reality (such as through getting a job)? Does the knowledge they gain...
through schooling make them act differently—to other people, to other social institutions, or to themselves? Questions such as these may help students recognize that education is an inherently active endeavor and that by pursuing a college degree they are implicitly acting as agents of change.

**Free-Rider Problem.** Because critical pedagogy engages students cooperatively, assignments frequently involve group work. In nearly any group work project the possibility of the “free-rider” problem exists. Free-riders are students who benefit from group grades without doing their fair share of the work. This topic provoked lively discussion in the workshop and several possibilities for addressing the free-rider challenge emerged. First, we suggest faculty meet frequently with groups outside of scheduled class time, in place of one or two class sessions throughout the semester. By meeting semi-regularly with groups, the instructor can facilitate their progress by suggestion or direct intervention (Yamane 1996). A second possibility is to raise the free-rider issue with the class at the outset and explain that benefiting from another’s work while contributing little of their own is at odds with a project intended to make the world a more equitable place. An extension of this suggestion is to allow the class to determine the parameters of what constitutes a free rider as well as any sanctions that they deem necessary. Further, individual students in each group can be required to keep a “work log” detailing the time put into the projects as well as their accomplishments (see Fobes and Hefferan 2007). Some instructors also build in peer grading as another mechanism to deter free-riders. Finally, setting up groups according to compatible schedules and shared interests, as well as strengthening the internal organization of groups with students assuming roles such as discussion leader, reporter and meeting coordinator may also decrease the possibility of free-riding (Yamane 1996). Ultimately we believe the benefits of cooperative and collaborative assignments outweigh the risk of the free-rider problem.

**Challenges Concerning Instructors**

**De-centering Authority.** One of the most difficult and paradoxical tasks facing the critical pedagogue is breaking down the teacher-student contradiction. How do we invite students to be co-teachers if we (instructors) begin from a position of intellectual authority? How do we encourage students to take control of their education if they know (and we know) that we are still the gatekeepers of the course? How do we allow students (through their generative themes) to establish the curriculum of the course when there is a discipline-specific body of knowledge we feel compelled (or are required) to cover? And how do we de-center authority when we are working to gain authority if, for example, we are a new, non-white, female teacher? To begin answering these questions requires that we reflect on our own position in the classroom as both teacher and learner. Although we certainly have some degree of institutional and intellectual authority, we can still approach the classroom as a space to both share and, where appropriate, negate some of this authority.

Bickel (2006) offers an example of “democratizing the classroom” whereby students, through debate and dialogue, decided the subjects they covered, the amount of reading assigned per week, the due dates and page lengths for paper assignments, and the attendance policy. As Bickel discovered, by inviting students to assume co-ownership of the classroom, instructors may actually find themselves gaining more respect, and paradoxically, more authority among the students. Furthermore, eliminating the contradictions between students and teachers does not mean that teachers no longer teach; rather, it suggests that “both the teacher and the students know that open, curious questioning, whether in speaking or listening, is what grounds them mutually” (Freire 1998:81). In other words, the goal is not to abdicate our responsibilities or to deny and conceal our knowledge but to create a genuine space for students to contribute to the curriculum: “to teach is not to transfer
knowledge but to create the possibilities for
the production or construction of knowl-
dge” (Freire 1998:30).

Grading and Assessment. Once we de-
cide to de-center some of our authority we
are likely to feel somewhat hypocritical
when it comes time to grade and evaluate
students. It may seem as if all of our hard
work to lessen the teacher-student contra-
dictions is for naught as the wall between
students and teacher is quickly re-
established when grades are assigned.
Equally complicated is figuring out what
methods of assessment should be used. If
the goals of critical pedagogy are to pro-
mote dialogue and encourage students to
name their world so that they can change
their world, how do we evaluate such objec-
tives within the context of the substantive
course content? These issues are not easily
resolved and they connect with some of the
institutional issues we discuss below.

Having students participate in the con-
struction and selection of evaluative meas-
ures is one way to address this challenge.
For example, Fobes and Hefferan (2007)
asked students to create a grading rubric in
class for praxis project assignments. While
Fobes stood at the blackboard writing down
students’ criteria for an “A” paper and an
“A” PowerPoint presentation, Hefferan
took notes and typed up the rubric for dis-
tribution to the entire class. Another ap-
proach is to re-evaluate pedagogical goals
and objectives and create alternative means
to assess student learning. For instance, in
their class on community organizing, Braa
and Collero (2006) adopted an alternative
four-point evaluation policy, collectively
defined by students through dialogue and
consensus. One of the benefits of Braa and
Collero’s model is that “it promotes dia-
logue and assessment without jeopardizing
the group solidarity so critical to community
power” (p. 10). For many of us, our meth-
ods of instruction and evaluation mirror the
educational practices that we experienced
when we were objectified students. Instead
of relying on the same demeaning, irrele-
vant, and unimaginative techniques used by
many of our teachers, we should tap into
our creativity to transform the means
through which grades are determined and
assigned.

Modeling and Maintaining Epistemologi-
cal Curiosity. We believe that one of the
great misconceptions about discussion-based
(problem posing) teaching is that it is easier
and less labor-intensive than the lecturing
(banking) approach. While it is true that
different teaching styles may suit different
people, there is no denying the immeasur-
able energy required to be a critical peda-
gogue. And the number one ingredient that
simultaneously fuels and drains our energy
is epistemological curiosity. Freire (1998)
argues that epistemological curiosity—the
endless questioning, the awareness of our
“unfinishedness,” the capacity for the be-
ginner’s mind—is a crucial component of
critical pedagogy. If we hope that students
are engaged with the course material and
with the outside world, then we need to
demonstrate what such engagement looks
like. We cannot rest on our laurels and rely
on what worked well in the past. We need
to constantly create and recreate the course
based on the students in the classroom, the
state of current affairs, and our own devel-
opment as human beings. If we truly want
to be co-learners and co-teachers with stu-
dents, if we want to mesh their lived experi-
cences with our disciplinary expertise, if we
want to construct a classroom environment
that legitimizes their voices, and if we want
to create avenues for them to explore the
possibilities of being agents of change, then
we need to do a lot of creative, critical, and
challenging work to ensure that these goals
are achieved. Franzosi (2006) offers an illu-
minating account of the kind of reflective
and resourceful work one must do in order
to become a critical pedagogue.

Institutional Challenges

Mundane, Bureaucratized Practices. His-
torically the institution of higher education
has operated by establishing mundane, bu-
reaucratized practices that may function to
discourage critical pedagogy (Sweet 1998).
As Mauksch (1986:42) points out, “Class size, classroom arrangements, and support facilities for teaching activities are based on institutional policies and practice, rarely on teacher demands or teacher influence.” For example, classrooms may be physically arranged such that chairs are set in rows, and are sometimes immovable. Often classrooms are not conducive to discussion with little or no space for small group work. The few classrooms that are conducive to discussion or that do have movable chairs may be highly sought after and therefore available only on a competitive basis. Also, some instructors may have texts and curriculums chosen for them, especially part-timers or in departments where, for example, an introductory text is chosen for all sections. Centralized control of book orders, filled prior to class meeting dates, may deter students’ input into grass-roots curriculum development (Sweet 1998). All of these institutional impediments may constrain an instructor’s capability to implement a critical pedagogical framework.

As with many of the preceding challenges, crafting solutions to these bureaucratized practices requires time, energy, and creativity on the part of instructors. Mauksch (1986:48) recommends shifting power from hierarchical, administrative structures to peer initiatives, emphasizing collegial concern with improving instruction, and cultivating “an environment of appreciation.” More specifically, Gainguest (1998:125) suggests finding colleagues from different disciplines in our home institutions who share similar pedagogical approaches and then working towards one area of institutional change “that has a likelihood of success.” Although it may be difficult to totally free ourselves from the institutional iron cage, these suggestions of reaching out to like-minded colleagues strengthens our social capital and ensures that we will have a cadre of supportive peers with whom to face these challenges.

**Institutional Vulnerabilities of Instructors.** One of the consequences of the increasing bureaucratisation of teaching combined with the dehumanization of the banking system is that critical pedagogues are susceptible to institutional forces. One area of vulnerability is instructor assessment. Standardized teaching evaluations, based on “measurable universalistic and replicable criteria” may lack indicators designed to assess the effectiveness of key elements of critical pedagogy such as creativity and innovation (Mauksch 1986:46; Sweet 1998). Further, the tension between teaching, research, and service may be heightened for the critical pedagogue. As stated earlier, long hours in labor-intensive preparation and teaching combined with obligations to attend to and support student social action projects outside of class may leave less time to devote to scholarship, which, depending on the college or university, is likely to be increasingly valued in hiring, tenure and promotion decisions (Marchant and Newman 1994). We also found workshop participants, part-time or untenured, who were concerned about the repercussions of practicing critical pedagogy for their careers. For example, when it comes time for reappointment and promotion, how do traditionally-oriented colleagues react to a critical pedagogical teaching portfolio? Might instructors be labeled as “troublemakers” for using “subversive” teaching techniques? What if students want to protest social problems on campus that jeopardize the college or university’s reputation?

The institutional risks of practicing critical pedagogy became acutely evident to Kaufman one semester when his students were engaged in a critical pedagogical project based on censored news stories (Kaufman 2001). For the praxis component of their project, one group of students made a mini-documentary simulating their censored story: “CIA Kidnaps Suspects for Overseas Torture and Execution.” In their dramatization of this story, the students used fake blood (ketchup) and toy guns; unfortunately, a passerby thought the props were real. The campus police were called to the scene, drew their guns (because they...
assumed the students were armed), arrested them, and charged them with criminal nuisance and disorderly conduct. Kaufman found it particularly difficult to advocate for these students because he was untenured at the time and he was concerned about how some administrators would react when they learned about the story that the students were enacting. Despite Kaufman’s letters and phone calls to campus administrators in which he suggested that the students should be applauded for their creativity, enthusiasm, and level of engagement, neither the administration nor the campus police would step in to drop the charges and the students were forced to appear in court. In the end, the town judge recognized the innocence of the students’ actions and said their records would be clear after six months of probation. For critical pedagogues, the incident serves as a cautionary tale of institutional vulnerabilities potentially faced when utilizing transformative educational practices.

Pressure to Stay Inside the Institutional Box. As already described, many professors (including several workshop participants) feel pressure to conform to institutional regulations and constraints. At the same time, we believe that it is an illusion to think that if we were free of our home institutional constraints, all would be well. One of the ironies of critical pedagogy is that if we take our role of professor-as-learner seriously, the lack of institutional structure—such as a classroom, hallways, and office—may be daunting, especially at first. Something as simple as spending unstructured time with students in protests or in traveling can be disconcerting, in part because we are taking risks of vulnerability by stepping outside of the institutional box. For example, in a critical pedagogical approach to a travel-study course in Peru, Fobes (2006) reflects on how unsettled she was within the first twelve hours of the trip, long before reaching Peruvian soil:

[Traveling with students is] not like the classroom, hallway, or office where I have control over how long I [interact with students]. I’m used to enacting front-stage behavior with students and backstage, only as I am comfortable. Here [on the airplane and in the airports], students can observe and become privy to [my] backstage behavior: brushing my hair and teeth, reading my meditation book, listening to my CDs, watching/seeing me eat. It’s unnerving. I want to run and hide and we haven’t been together 12 hours! (PP. 10-11)

As in the case of Fobes, we might not even recognize the extent to which the institutional box controls us and provides us with security until we begin to step outside of it. However, Freire (1998:51-4) calls us to expose who we are anyway—as unfinished human beings. No wonder critical pedagogy is unsettling! It is unsettling—for students, teachers, and institutions of higher education. That is precisely the point.

CONCLUSION

One of the underlying themes of critical pedagogy is that education is much more than just the transmission of knowledge. Instead of merely inculcating students with “objective” and “value-neutral” facts, figures, and theories, we must recognize that “education as a specifically human experience, is a form of intervention in the world” (Freire 1998:90-1). To paraphrase C. Wright Mills, education as intervention is both the task and the promise of critical pedagogy (and, we would argue, of sociology). For those of us who attempt to bring critical pedagogy into the sociology classroom, the challenges and concerns are many. Understanding what some of these obstacles are and how they are manifested in institutions of higher learning goes a long way in devising strategies to ameliorate their deleterious effects. In both the workshop and in this paper, we identified some of the major issues of fusing together sociology and critical pedagogy. Although there are many more issues than the ones we discussed, and although we offered only cursory solutions to some of these challenges, we hope that more instructors will be encouraged to consider critical pedagogy as a
dynamic paradigm for teaching, learning, and intervening in the world.

REFERENCES


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