Learning to Question Power: Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores theory(ies) of critical pedagogy and the accompanying implications for classroom pedagogy. The paper begins by examining the concerns and objections to critical pedagogy as expressed by theorists and educators who either do not agree either with the goals of critical pedagogy or find particular flaws with its theoretical bases or its implementation. The paper focuses both on broad applications of critical pedagogy as well as the specific application of critical pedagogy in the classroom. My goal in writing the paper was to locate where I fall on the critical pedagogy spectrum. While not all theorists or practitioners would agree that CP allows for a spectrum of ideology and practice, it is my contention that critical pedagogy must necessarily embrace a range of efforts while simultaneously encouraging practitioners to deepen their understandings of the goals of CP and bringing stronger CP practices to their classrooms. I would contend that it is ultimately more important that CP be inclusive than pure.

Introduction

Probably not unlike many educators with a background in literature and education (MA, Comparative Literature; MA, Education - TESOL; PhD, International Education), my introduction to critical pedagogy came via graduate school classes. In my case, I encountered Freire (1999) and bell hooks (1994) among others in courses that dealt with issues of equity (race, gender, sexuality, class) within both a Comparative Literature program and an International Education program (specifically in courses such as Sociology of Education). Already self-identifying as a left-wing liberal (a Southern-born, middle class gay, white male who had experienced significant amounts of bullying throughout middle school, high school and in college) who had come to be concerned about racism, sexism, and homophobia in particular, I was intrigued, inspired, challenged, and intimidated by the thoughtful and bold ideas about which Freire and others wrote. I was drawn to what many of these theorists wrote about the systemic nature of discrimination, and although I did not share most of the qualities that resulted in marginalization and discrimination, my position as a gay male from a conservative family
background enabled me to understand at least the edges of others' experiences. Moreover, living in the Netherlands from the ages of 11-14 also had a notable impact as I was witness to a more progressive society where different lifestyles were incorporated more openly rather than marginalized.

What I also have in common with many would-be critical pedagogues, however, is uncertainty concerning how to turn theory into practice. Over my years of teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, I have struggled, and mostly failed to richly implement critical pedagogy in my classrooms. I have adopted certain pedagogical styles that some might associate with critical pedagogy, and I have experimented with ways of encouraging students to take charge of their learning and to become pro-active and self-motivated questioners of the way the world around them is structured. I have also tried to assure students that it is acceptable to take critical views of the society around them, and I have tried to establish an environment where questioning authority was both possible and welcomed. However, I have been largely dissatisfied with both my attempts and the results.

Another question I have struggled with is how to balance concerns of critical pedagogy with the teaching of a skill-based subject such as ESL. Incorporating critical pedagogy in the teaching of reading is not difficult to imagine as it need not be significantly different than doing so in a literature course within an English department. However, constructing a grammar classroom based on critical pedagogy might be considered more challenging or even problematic. Some people, if they do not reject the teaching of grammar altogether, certainly might de-emphasize it in favor of a more whole language approach.

From one perspective, emphasizing grammar might be thought of as falling into the trap of establishing a gatekeeping mechanism to limit immigrants' access to the 'goods' of society
(e.g. leadership positions, the highest paying jobs, etc.). Some theorists might argue against the teaching of grammar. On the other hand, a lack of grammatical clarity, especially in writing, complicates communication and might curtail students' opportunities for advancement both in their chosen careers and in future education. It is legitimate to argue about (as numerous theorists do) how much we should be preparing students for the society that exists and how much we should be preparing them (encouraging, insisting) to re-make the world. Beyond these questions, however, lie other concerns such as ensuring that course objectives are met. Are practitioners of critical pedagogy willing to defy institutional and/or departmental requirements in favor of what many consider greater goods?

What I would argue based on my research and thinking up to this point is that critical pedagogy is an ideal which few reach. As theory, critical pedagogy is both inspiring and daunting. As a classroom practice, critical pedagogy is a constant struggle that is complicated not only by the criticism of non-believers but also by one's own many imperfections and doubts. My reading has convinced me that there are numerous theorists and practitioners who would no doubt harshly judge many educators' attempts to claim critical pedagogy for themselves and their classrooms. However, if questions about the distribution of power in societies are ever to be more than academic ones, the practice must be inclusive of a range of expertise. I would contend that practitioners should question, critique, and push each other. But they should push each other forward - not push each other out. It is much more important to engage in honest conversations than compete for who to be the purest theorist or most effective classroom practitioner.

**Definitions of Critical Pedagogy**

Settling on one definition of critical pedagogy might seem like a useful and helpful endeavor, but at the same time, doing so would mean that critical pedagogy is an immutable
field, and immutability would suggest exclusivity and inflexibility - concepts that would not serve the field well. Therefore, critical pedagogy is perhaps better served by laying out general principles, goals, and concerns as opposed to a narrow definition. I would not go so far as to say that critical pedagogy cannot be defined at all but that it should be defined loosely, and the means of achieving c.p. goals should be flexible, but self-critical, as well. Below I explore some of the concepts and concerns of a handful of critical pedagogy theorists and practitioners.

Of the proponents of critical pedagogy, Paolo Freire holds a preeminent position among theorists and practitioners, and his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is clear in its purposes. Freire (1999) indicates, "This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (p. 30). Freire was specifically reacting to the inequalities of Brazil in his belief that the education system is structured to ensure the continuity of the status quo. The central tenets of the pedagogy grew out of the belief that the power structures should be dismantled. Freire (1999) later expands, "In problem posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 64). For Freire, clearly, critical pedagogy was not just a theory but also a practice that was aimed at generating change within a highly oppressive and stratified society. He believed that there was no hope for poor people to obtain rights and equality without an educational revolution that would deconstruct the hierarchy that existed. Since power structures exist within every known governing and economic system to varying degrees, Freire's ideas concerning critical pedagogy became highly influential and have been adopted around the world and adapted to local contexts. In the United States, for example, bell hooks has been and
continues to be an influential proponent of critical pedagogy.

Hooks (1994) directly acknowledges Freire's influence but expands the reach of critical pedagogy within her particular societal contexts through her emphases on feminism and multiculturalism among other concerns. Of her own educational experiences in segregated schools, hooks (1994) explains, "We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (p. 2). Because her early educational experience occurred within a racially segregated system, hooks' school and teachers did not reify white culture and white knowledge; hooks instead learned to value herself and her culture. She points out, however, that when schools were integrated, her experience of education as freedom was replaced by school as a site for discipline and control, most especially when it came to minority children (1994, p. 3). Where previously her education in all-black schools had been rigorous yet supportive, her experiences in white schools were that African-American students were treated as outsiders, objects, and problems. Integration carried societal power structures into the lives of African-American students and ensured that they started and often remained at a disadvantage throughout their educational and likely by extension, professional lives.

In a similar vein, Kincheloe (2011) adds that "Any viable vision of critical education has to be based on larger social and cognitive visions. In this context, educators deal not only with questions of schooling, curriculum, and educational policy but also with social justice and human possibility" (p. 7). Finally, he adds that schools are often structured so as to discipline and control particular groups of students rather than providing them with pathways for success. Kincheloe makes an important point that resonates with me. For example, I fear that by teaching grammar and grading students based on their grammatical accuracy, I am succumbing to a gate-
keeping function that damages students more than it helps them. On the other hand, I worry that if I send students out with mediocre grammar, that they will be relegated to a second tier status, and the abilities and positive qualities they have will be ignored. This creates a certain trap because succumbing to the arbitrary parameters of language ability plays into the power of the capitalist labor system. In other words, arbitrary factors can be used to control who works and who does not.

Connected to this concern is one of the most commonly cited pedagogical issues of traditional education: the banking theory. Freire (1999) describes banking as an classroom practice "In which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 53). This educational practice ensures that education serves the established, if unacknowledged, goals of preparing students for specific roles in society. Burbules and Berk (1999) refer to the specific agendas of education in a capitalist society and the way in which critical pedagogy questions and criticizes that agenda. "As consumers, as workers, and as winners or losers in the marketplace of employment, citizens in a capitalist society need both to know their "rightful" place in the order of things and to be reconciled to that destiny. Systems of education are among the institutions that foster and reinforce such beliefs, through the rhetoric of meritocracy, through testing, through tracking, through vocational training or college preparatory curricula, and so forth" (Bowles & Gintis 1976; Apple 1979; Popkewitz 1991). Critical pedagogy emphasizes, instead, the subjectivity, humanity, and self-determination of all people and attempts to undermine the a priori destiny of individuals based on their race, class, and gender among many other characteristics that might mark them as not part of the majority. In the banking theory, students who start at the top of the
food chain, so to speak, as members of privileged classes, largely remain there, and students who start at the bottom rarely move up. Critical pedagogy seeks to provide space to restructure society all together rather than shaping students for an unjust system.

So although the distribution of power as duplicated and reinforced by most educational systems is a common concern across the spectrum of critical pedagogy, the variability of cultural settings necessitates flexibility in the way that structure is analyzed and questioned. Practitioners cannot assume that students share the same concerns or the same background knowledge. Approaches must evolve. Classroom teachers must be prepared to question themselves and interrogate their own agendas constantly. An unwillingness or inability to do so would undermine critical pedagogy from the outset. Below I lay out a few concerns or arguments from theorists and educators who criticize one or more aspects of critical pedagogy.

**Criticisms of Critical Pedagogy**

A common criticism of critical pedagogy is what I refer to above: the lack of agreement about what constitutes critical pedagogy (Thomson-Bunn, 2014). This situation is not entirely surprising as uncertainty, adaptation, and the lack of a fixed center sets critical pedagogy up as a field that is somewhat difficult to pin down. Moreover, claiming critical pedagogy could be fashionable and bring a certain cachet to those who invoke it. As numerous critics suggest, it can seem moral and cool to self-label as an adherent of critical pedagogy. Thomson-Bunn (2014) states, "In other words, the term critical pedagogy still has the power to call up feelings of revolution and resistance, of the disenfranchised critiquing a system that has excluded them, whether or not this is what is actually happening." (p. 5) Donning the mantle of critical pedagogy may make people feel good even if what they do as educators is not consistent with critical pedagogy practices. Thomson-Bunn (2014) notes that some teachers may claim to be
proponents of critical pedagogy simply because they teach students critical thinking skills, and although critical thinking skills are necessary, they are not sufficient to define oneself as a critical pedagogue. In other words, realizing that education is rooted in social power systems is not the same as seeking to effect changes to that system. Further, Thomson-Bunn (2014) indicates, "Students left out of the process of defining critical pedagogy are left to accept what we give them—what we have determined constitutes empowerment, critical thinking, responsible citizenship, fair critique of dominant power structures, and so on" (pp. 6-7) Interestingly, Thomson-Bunn's (2014) insistence that students should at least in part define critical pedagogy argues against the idea of having a fixed definition of the field. Nonetheless, Thomson-Bunn helpfully reminds the educator that critical pedagogy should make students an integral partner in the educational project, not the object of educators' goals.

In terms of the educator's role, Breuing (2011) adds an important dimension to the concerns of Thomson-Bunn. Breuing (2011) finds that the objectives of critical pedagogy are varyingly, and often poorly understood. Both overly-weakened definitions of critical pedagogy and overly-narrow ones are damaging. As Breuing (2011) points out, critical pedagogy is theory-based; it is not simply a set of blueprints for classroom practice. On the other hand, an overly-narrow definition of critical pedagogy from a theoretical standpoint tends to reify the centrality of the straight white male even as it supposedly questions that focus. I interpret Breuing as saying that it is better to have a preponderance of disparate voices than a nucleus of similar voices - a viewpoint with which I would agree.

Another concern shared by many is how to justify the implementation of critical pedagogy in classrooms if students have goals that are incompatible with c.p. or if they simply are not interested. Numerous critics reject critical pedagogy in favor of the students' career
aspirations. I can certainly identify with Durst's (2006) concerns. Durst's (2006) concern about students' instrumental focus is relevant to many ESL contexts. Employment may be the highest concern for many students; though students may have come from contexts in which they were marginalized in one or more ways, is it appropriate to decide for them what their primary concern should be in this country? They may not have the middle class/upper middle class luxury of making the same choices as their professors. One cannot assume either way. Political or religious oppression may take a backseat to earning money both for themselves, their children or other relatives in this country but also family members remaining in their home country.

Anecdotally speaking, I have encountered many students who came to the United States because they were forced to study for careers and professional lives that did not satisfy them. Others might have found their opportunities for higher education were non-existent or seriously circumscribed. These students have experienced a power structure that sought to limit or exclude them, but it may be that coming to the United States is a means to fulfill instrumentalist goals. However, I do not feel that career or job-related motivation has to be at loggerheads with the goals of critical pedagogy. Durst criticizes unthinking devotion to critical pedagogy, particularly in instances when critical pedagogy is pursued, based on what the teacher wants as opposed to what the students want. In essence, he sees a paternalistic and condescending attitude towards students. He prefers what he refers to as a "reflective instrumentalism" (2006, p. 111) which he feels, "accepts students' pragmatic reasons for attending college. . . . But the approach strives to build social consciousness, seeing these goals as complementary, not mutually exclusive" (2006, p. 111). Durst's criticisms underscore one of the more intransigent quagmires of critical pedagogy. If critical pedagogy is to be built on students' agency - their decisions about the kind of world they want to live in and what they want to study, how can we impose our own
concerns? On the other hand, if students are unaware of the ideological agenda of education in general, should we introduce them to the concept or ignore it?

Maxine Hairston, on the other hand, decries what she believes is critical pedagogy's politicization of the classroom. Hairston (1992) criticizes the ' politicizing' of the classroom because she believes it causes students to adopt fake positions to pass their classes and because she feels it turns the classroom into a "high-stakes" environment (p. 189). "Such fake discourse is a kind of silence, the silence we have so often deplored when it is forced on the disadvantaged. But when we . . . make students opt for survival over honesty, we have done the same thing (Hairston, 1992, p. 189). Many other educators also share Hairston's concern, believing that critical pedagogy leads to student resistance. There is no doubt that such resistance occurs. However, such resistance should not be the end of the conversation. It is important to investigate the roots of this ' rebellion.' I imagine that many proponents of critical pedagogy would locate unacknowledged privilege in some instances of resistance. They claim that students reject what they interpret as faculty manipulation - a teaching of a political agenda rather than teaching a particular subject. Of course, the counterargument to that concern, as mentioned above, is the students' lack of recognition that any ideological framework in their lives is a result of manipulation/imposition. We tend not to recognize the religious, moral, political, and ideological systems with which we grow up because they are presented as 'natural.' Often, we accept these values as the correct ones that should not be questioned. Who knows what accounts for our willingness to accept challenges to or to erect rigid walls to protect these value systems?

Hairston further argues, "Then one can say that because standard English is the dialect of the dominant class, writing instruction that tries to help students master that dialect merely reinforces the status quo and serves the interest of the dominant class. . . . What nonsense!"
(1992, p. 184). Hairston adds, "How easy for theorists who by the nature of the discipline they have chosen, already have a facile command of the prestige dialect to denigrate teaching that dialect to students" (1992, p. 184). Although I do cannot ultimately agree with Hairston's dismissal of critical pedagogy, I believe we would be naive to dismiss her concern that students may dissipulate to survive. No matter how open we are in terms of telling students we will grade them on the quality of their writing, for example, and not for the views they express, some students are most likely not to believe our assurances. They may have previous experiences in which 'authority' figures have betrayed their trust, or they may simply not believe us.

Finally, Elizabeth Ellsworth suggests that a local context is necessary for authenticity and that critical pedagogy as a general approach is not effective. Even within a community, how would one decide whose context should be the focus? Who chooses? Why does this mean that you cannot incorporate critical pedagogy in a 'regular' classroom? How do you mine students' minds for issues that are meaningful to them? As an educator, is suggesting or introducing students to particular issues taboo? Of course, the educators' choices delineate that person's power, and her interests may not resonate with students. Every choice takes away a choice. As many critics of critical pedagogy point out, one of the central tenets is that people should be permitted to reject the concerns of critical pedagogy and its proponents if they choose; in this view, educators must honor students' lack of interest if that is what they express. If they fail to do so, many critics suggest that proponents are simply substituting one set of values for their own, preferred values.

Certainly, incorporating critical pedagogy in a classroom without defining it, and acknowledging it is problematic. Most students enter the classroom believing that it is a politics-free zone. They do not understand that the choice of curricula, textbooks, and the selection of
particular teachers, to highlight just a few, are decisions that are based on a particular view of society. The educational enterprise is not simply a random assemblage of parts. bell hooks illustrates the high level denial of the politicization of education when she describes the experiences she and Chandra Mohanty had when working with colleagues at Oberlin College. hooks states, "We found again and again that almost everyone, especially the old guard, were more disturbed by the overt recognition of the role our political perspectives play in shaping pedagogy than by their passive acceptance of ways of teaching and learning that reflect biases, particularly a white supremacist standpoint" (1994, pp. 36-37). It seems to me that one of the central tenets/missions of critical pedagogy must be to continuously challenge students as well as ourselves and to allow students to be the subject of their own narratives as much as possible.

**Classroom Practices of Critical Pedagogy**

As mentioned above, theorists and practitioners engaging in critical pedagogy see the practice as a de facto announcement of a political agenda, a desire to re-imagine and reconfigure societal power dynamics. The fact that this endeavor is not covert operates both as an advantage and a disadvantage. Announcing an agenda could make one seem manipulative and self-interested, or honest and courageous depending on the perspective of peers, administrators, students, parents, and politicians. Even the basic desire to open space for students to make decisions for themselves is controversial (plenty of people have no desire for students to make decisions for themselves, including, often, their own families). Of her own experience, bell hooks, for instance, states "But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone" (1994, p. 3). This situation is largely as a result of the invisibility of the status quo, which establishes itself as an 'unmarked' purveyor of facts (those in power do not see their positions as a perspective; only those who question the
status quo are seen as taking a stance or as rebelling). One of my struggles in the classroom has been how much to engage in self-disclosure in terms of political perspective and personal ideology and to what extent to try to get students to see the power structures of society particularly within the context of a skill-based field such as English-language learning.

My biases and concerns have never been particularly well-hidden as my choice of class readings and the questions I pose about them would attest, although I am aware that most students, because they view schools and education as agenda-less sites, may mostly not have noticed. Even more than U.S. American students, my students, who come from many different parts of the world, are often reluctant and uncomfortable presenting themselves as subjects of education rather than objects. In other words, they have been raised in and are most comfortable with the banking model of education and see education as a package of digestible items that they are to consume and reproduce rather than as learning ways of analyzing the world and then questioning what they find. For the most part, they are relying on their parents, teachers, the school administrators or the state, to determine what they need to learn to complete (receive a degree) and succeed (obtain a job in their field of study). However, I have mostly found that when students are introduced to issues of injustice and unequal power relations, they quite often express interest.

In discussing the configuration of a critical pedagogy classroom and reaffirming that each educational situation will necessitate its own particular relationship to critical pedagogy, Sarroub and Quadros (2015) explain, "To use critical pedagogy, practitioners attempt to reconstruct their classrooms as a three pronged discourse structure. . . . students' interests, cultural needs, and community empowerment" (p. 254). They point out that while a discussion-oriented class in the United States might not be sufficient to constitute a critical pedagogy classroom, "elsewhere, and
in countries where historically there has been little communication in the classroom from students, a more dialogue-oriented set of teaching and learning tools form a critical pedagogy” (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 255). So what might qualify as not sufficiently challenging to the status quo in one cultural context might be a necessary first step in another. Years ago, prior to thinking of education in these terms, I had several students tell me that my class had been important to them because it was the first time they had ever been asked to express their opinions. Although the class was not structured in what most U.S. teachers would consider a radical way, some students nonetheless experienced the difference from their culture's norm as transformative. Therefore, it makes sense to me that what is not significant in one setting might have a great impact in another.

The approach of Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), founded on a synthesis of ideas among cultural texts that may appear incompatible, may be one means of avoiding the scripted, inauthentic responses that Hairston fears. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell discuss applications of critical pedagogy in an urban high school English class setting in Oakland, CA. They express an opinion that probably reflects a dilemma with which many critical pedagogues struggle: 'Regardless of our philosophical foundation, we understood that our students existed in a world where they would be expected to take and perform well on standardized tests that served as gatekeepers to postsecondary education and, as a consequence, professional membership” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 4). A difficult question surfaces from this acknowledgement. To what extent should educators play the testing game and thereby tacitly accept the system of inequality as it is? Doing otherwise would seem to be sacrificing the students’ future for the instructor's concerns. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell attempt to preserve the students' short-term prospects of educational success while simultaneously helping them find
their own voices. So, in addition to teaching canonical texts, they used hip-hop music and popular films. By combining texts across centuries and across national borders, students are able to make connections with cultures and histories that might not initially seem to share commonalities (2008, p. 7). Although Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's pedagogical practices might not qualify as critical pedagogy to some of the more restrictive theorists, they feel strongly that they are helping students develop academic, critical, and cultural tools that give them more power in society. "The goal is not to make them slaves to a different (and more politically correct) ideology, even if it happens to be one that we agree with' (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 9). Furthermore, they object to the elevation of "elite" culture over "popular" culture (2008, p. 10).

For my own teaching, my experience to this point is that I need to set parameters for what is covered in class. For example, within an upper level English for Academic Purposes class, I ask students to bring in articles on topics that interest them and to lead a classroom discussion. However, I stipulate that articles should be academic in subject matter, a designation that is interpreted broadly. Students tend to bring in articles about science, social issues, and politics. I also try to attach my teaching to current and local events. Although some proponents of critical pedagogy would object to my choosing class readings, I have found that many of my students have had limited interactions with written texts; the fact that I choose texts does not mean that my students will not appreciate and learn from them; sometimes new interests arise from being exposed to texts you might not have chosen for yourself, and although I set the basic framework, I invite students to help direct the developing narrative of the class. Time is also a factor that cannot, regrettably, be ignored. If we elect to have students determine the goals, the grading policies, and what to read in a course, there is less time to cover language-related concerns. What
is the tipping point in terms of course goals? We are governed by established course learning outcomes? Or is that just an excuse/cop-out for not being radical? Certainly, all of these tasks require rather serious and in-depth negotiations among students, and there is no guarantee that students will be able to negotiate a class plan that will be any more satisfactory to the class as a whole than what the instructor would have offered.

**Final Thoughts**

I have read insightful, and often scathing, criticisms of educators who call themselves liberal or progressive. As a result, I am developing a deeper understanding of some of the many quagmires associated with enacting critical pedagogy. I know many of these critiques rightfully apply to me. I understand the paralysis that blankets educators who do want to do more than they do but do not know how to proceed. For every action, there seem to be dozens of questions questioning the rightness or appropriateness of the action. This echoes a long-time that thought I have considered in regards to my ESL students and strikes at a central question for any teacher. What is my primary responsibility to my students, and is that a stable responsibility? I have many other questions to which I do not have the answers. How do I implement critical pedagogy in a low level ESL class? How I can best infuse critical pedagogy in a class that is centered on a skill? If my goal is to teach English, I can't abandon the construction of the language in favor of ideas only. Moreover, my students' language skills, particularly in writing, can make it difficult for them to articulate complicated ideas.

Although I need to help the students obtain greater facility with English, I also feel compelled to have them look critically at the world around them. However, I cannot assume that they do or do not already do so. Many of my students left their birth countries precisely because they did not like the parameters, or limitations, of their lives there (or someone in their families
did not). My concerns about economic injustice may seem slight to them in comparison to what they witnessed or experienced at home. Moreover, they are unlikely to share in the white guilt to which I remain a party. Do these students look at the United States more or less critically due to their own experiences? Does life here seem too good to question or disappointing, or somewhere in between? Finally, some of my students have limited experience with an educational style that asks quite a great deal of them in terms of leadership and self-actualization. Some may feel alienated by these practices just like some U.S.-born students are.

Hairston's criticism of educators she accuses of pursuing their own ideological agendas at students' expense presents a challenge that often seems irresolvable. How do you redistribute power? Who should concern themselves with this change? Can you do so from the inside? Who establishes the terms of the fight? Hairston's position suggests that educators are taking a lofty and self-serving position. By virtue of their education, educators, especially at the college level, are if not part of the economic upper class, are at least, part of an intellectual upper class. Is it appropriate for them to be warning students away from something they themselves have not given up?

Yet another concern is how to handle a classroom in which students disagree with each other. hooks refers to the inevitable tension that arises in a classroom where critical pedagogy is the operating principle. How can that be mitigated since one of the goals of most ESL classrooms is to lower the affective filter because anxiety has shown to diminish the effectiveness of language learning. Tension could arise when one group of students sets the agenda. As critics suggest, there is always a hierarchy in the classroom; however much the teacher wants to deny it, the students are likely to regard the teacher as 'above' them. However, if students begin to set the agenda, it seems almost inevitable for hierarchies to appear between and
among students. This development could be highly destructive.

For my own classroom, this means spending time at the beginning of the semester having a discussion about student goals and concerns so that I can better integrate those into your selection of reading materials. I also ask them baldly what they would change about the world or their towns and neighborhoods, or their college if they could. I use that as a way to get at social justice from a less direct angle. While students may balk at, or feel helpless in the face of, direct calls to challenge racism, classism and other inequalities, framing it in a lower stakes manner can sometimes be more fruitful. I will never reach the point of being a flawless practitioner of critical pedagogy. However, I refuse to see critical pedagogy or almost any other undertaking as an all or nothing proposition. To argue that imperfect efforts can never bear fruit (or do not bear enough fruit) is cynical and, I believe, akin to bullying. I prefer to see critical pedagogy as a continual, if imperfect, path of growth.

References


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