
Stories from the gap: Towards a critical pedagogy of community service journalism

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Abstract

The ways that journalists teach and learn through the production of knowledge is the fundamental concern of this paper. Popular journalism provides a powerful pedagogy that names and effectively silences marginalised communities as objects of knowledge. Such communities are confronted by the contradictory struggle to expose the gap between the promise and reality of liberal democratic capitalism while challenging the gap between dominant, negative representations and their lived experiences. It is increasingly questionable whether contemporary journalism is capable of serving the interests of socially and culturally diverse publics that fall between limited success-narratives and the impoverished language of marginalisation and social injustice.

A critical pedagogy of community service journalism challenges journalists to shift their consciousness from a politics of critique to a language of possibility and strive for substantive democratic encounters through cultural action and critical knowledge. As a form of knowledge work grounded in a set of pedagogical practices, journalism is shaped by four “integrated spheres of praxis”: Emotional Attitude, Power Awareness, Critical Engagement and Knowledge Production. Through these spheres, journalists are potentially empowered to imagine innovative ways of entering the politics of representation and critically engaging grassroots and marginalised communities while reporting on complex issues and problems.

The powerful pedagogy of popular journalism ...

The closest encounter I had with a journalist in my first 25 years occurred the month before my eleventh birthday. It was pure spectacle. Standing in my backyard with the familiar sound of police sirens rising and fading along Carlisle Avenue, I watched a news helicopter descend upon the back streets of Mt Druitt to tell the story of the so-called Bidwill-Plumpton Riots. I was too young to appreciate the finer detail and deception of the television coverage or the *Daily Telegraph*'s front page story, “Savage Night of Violence: 1000 Kids in Wild Rampage” (Powell, 1993, p. 101; Mowbray, 1985, p. 86). Nevertheless, I unknowingly received my first lesson on the power of media to represent the lives of *others* and shape a pattern of public conversation that suggested I should feel ashamed of the place I called home.

The ways that journalists teach *and* learn through the production of knowledge is the fundamental concern of this paper. Specifically, I am researching how “community service” journalism (Loo, 1994; Hippocrates & Romano, 2001) can enter the politics of representation and critically engage grassroots and marginalised communities while reporting on complex issues and problems. I conceptualise journalism as knowledge work grounded in a set of pedagogical practices;

journalism's "integrated spheres of praxis" that potentially raise the critical consciousness of the practitioner, the subjects of a story and audiences. A critical pedagogy of community service journalism challenges journalists to shift their consciousness from a politics of critique to a language of hope and possibility that imagines a dynamic future in the ongoing recreation of substantive democracy through collaborative cultural action and the production of critical knowledge.

Communities in suburbs like Mt Druitt live at the socio-economic, cultural and political coalface and continue to endure a well documented history of journalists, researchers and politicians mining this seam to illustrate the human face of failed and contested policy (Burchell, 2003; Collins et al, 2000; Collins & Poynting, 2000; Grace et al, 2000; Mowbray, 1985; Peel, 2003; Powell, 1993). Ensuing public conversations are mediated and reconstructed by journalists who assume "an objective distance and an authority to produce knowledge" that names and effectively silences "all of those social groups and cultures which are outside the prevailing cultural ideal:"

Other knowledges are invoked, other authorities consulted and quoted but the objects of the knowledge are subjects without a legitimate speaking position. The style is repeated over and over again in stories about the health of western Sydney, the level of domestic violence, car thefts, burglaries, about child abuse, truancy, eating habits and lifestyles (Powell, 1993, p. xviii–16).

The limited language of marginalisation and social injustice shapes a never ending game of "tactical stories that distort the present and darken the future" (Peel, 2003, p. 29) as communities and the caring professions engage in a contradictory struggle to expose the gap between the promise and reality of liberal democratic capitalism while challenging the gap between dominant, negative representations and their lived experiences (Giroux, 1983; Peel, 2003). For outsiders *and* insiders, popular news frames of conflict and crises provide a powerful pedagogy grounded in predictable stories indicating "lack, passivity and victimisation: *unemployment, broken homes, wasteland, worst affected, forgotten, degraded, hopelessness, aimlessness, despair, emotionally unprepared, expectations turn sour*; and those implying an excess of socially unacceptable behaviours – *vandalism, problems, epidemic, plague, violence, wife and child bashings, alcoholism, gambling, trouble*" (Powell, 1993, p. 10).

From banking on the "badlands" to a journalism of hope and possibility ...

Journalists inhabit privileged positions in the prevailing social order (Castillo and Hirst, 2000; Meadows, 2001, 1998; Schultz, 1998). Through the rhetoric of democracy, objectivity and autonomy that underpin their credibility and quest for professional status, through their education and training, their embedded relationships with institutional power, their consequent level of access to information and their taken-for-granted right to name the world and produce knowledge, journalists are intellectuals of a precarious kind, bound by the tensions and contradictions of serving an imagined public for very concrete, private and powerful interests (Hirst, 2002, 2001). In this context, it is increasingly questionable whether journalism is capable of serving the interests of socially and culturally diverse publics that fall short of the limited success-narratives of liberal democratic capitalism. What is beyond question is journalism's propensity for exploiting marginalised communities and reproducing inequalities in the name of "objective" journalism. When the pressure is on, journalists can bank on metropolitan and regional "badlands" for a good story (Castillo & Hirst, 2000; Peel, 2003; Powell, 1993).

To borrow a concept from Freire (1996), the "banking" model of journalism knowledge mobilises tried and tested routines and techniques to withdraw new pieces of "truth" from the social world. It depends on a static concept of knowledge that lacks a critical consciousness of the journalist's role in making meaning through the reconstruction of experience. No amount of professional rhetoric can extract journalists from the psycho-social and historical context that constitutes their "praxis ... the complex activity by which individuals create culture and society" (Heaney, 1995, p. 8). "Banking" journalism's favoured news frames shape paternalistic stories in which "marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a 'good, organised, and just' society" are "regarded as the pathology of healthy society" who must be "integrated" and "incorporated" into the commonsense understanding of the world (Freire, 1996, p. 53-54; Hirst, 2002; Meadows, 2001, 1998; Peel, 2003; Powell, 1993).

Efforts to reorient Australian journalism within the dynamic context of late-capitalism acknowledge a "powerful alliance waiting to be built between the media consumers and those actively involved in media production ... a two-way relationship ... notoriously difficult to cultivate and nurture" (Schultz, 1998, p. 9). A journalism that offers hope and embraces a language of possibility is re-imagined as "a way of knowledge that is socially produced" and journalists as "people capable of producing and communicating knowledge" who learn to "read ... the never stopping movement of reality" (Meditsch, p. 1-5). Meadows' (2001, p. 41)

complementary argument views journalism as “part of the broader process of making culture – or ‘imagining’ to use Benedict Arnold’s term:”

If journalism is seen as a cultural practice made up of sub-sets of practices – making news judgements, reporting, applying particular linguistic and narrative techniques, and of interpreting information or meaning – then it is possible to re-think modern journalism in terms of what it does (‘making’ the world and ‘making’ journalists) rather than in terms of what it is (part of the fourth estate, independent, professional, objective, standing up for ‘the public’s right to know’, and so on) ... This means that journalism practices should be seen as anything but self-justifying – they must be contingent on the social consequences they provoke in the formation of democracy (p. 52).

Hippocrates describes Public Journalism as an “intellectual journey” that endeavours to form new relationships with communities by giving them “an opportunity to have a voice on an issue and to have an issue completely discussed, in a user-friendly manner, with a range of points of view represented” (Hippocrates, 1999, p. 66). Pauly argues the US Public Journalism movement has “settled for a demure, middle class conception of public life” that reinforces the “deeply mythic structures of American politics as commonsense,” and he calls for a rejuvenated “cultural journalism” that mobilises the politics of representation by engaging politics and culture as it finds them (Pauly, 1999, p. 146–149; also see Wolf & Johnson, 1990). It is too early to say whether the Australian brand of Public Journalism will move beyond limited, middle class conceptions of public life, though a journalism that embraces a language of possibility is always “in the process of becoming” – it is a journalism of non-guarantee (Glass, 2001, p. 19; Loo, 1994; Hall, 1996, 1983). “Cultural” or “New” journalism has an equally uncertain place in the Australian mainstream (Hirst, 1998) and is more often than not embraced for its aesthetic and commercial potential at the expense of its capacity for penetrating the politics of representation. This was the case in Fairfax’s recent push for a more narrative style of political reporting from its Canberra bureau (see Simper, 2002, p. 1–5); a “New Journalism” stripped of its historical meaning and reduced to a style remedy.

Scott and Loo view the politics of representation and cross-cultural competence as fundamental to re-imagining Australian journalism. The media might move beyond narrow conceptions of knowledge production by accepting “that journalists are always growing and learning” and “have a responsibility to their audience and themselves to develop their understanding and judgement in

ways that reflect a commitment to fairness” (Scott, 2001, p. 144–145). Loo’s concept of “community service reporting” (Hippocrates, 2001, p. 183; Loo, 1994) is an adaptation of Development Journalism. With teaching at the centre of his discussion of Development Journalism, Loo provides a “social change perspective” that moves journalism beyond the “professional knowledge gap.”

Students should be shown other ways of framing their stories they write. Instead of asking “Will this story interest my readers?” students should also ask “How will this story affect my readers?” or “How will this story improve the social conditions of my readers?” or “How will this story impact on a multi-cultural society?” (p. 8).

Loo appears to share the ambition of critical educators who seek to enhance democracy by “merging their science with the internalized knowledge of the people and, more particularly, fusing their vision of the future with popular imagined futures” to avoid “the elitism of the various political vanguards” (Aronowitz, 1996, p.20). This of course requires journalists to develop different understandings of how they might approach people and their stories, and demands recognition of the subjectivity and critical potential of all citizens.

Imagining a critical pedagogy of community service journalism ...

The proposed model of community service journalism embraces Oakham’s (2001) ethno-Marxist methodology to “accommodate: economic structure (base) + cultural, political, and editorial interventions (superstructure) + individual ideologies (consciousness)” (p. 83). As a synthesis of Cultural, Development and Public journalism, a critical pedagogy of community service journalism moves beyond formal, middle class conceptions of public interaction in search of substantive democratic encounters grounded in cultural action and critical knowledge (Giroux, 1983; Glass, 2001; Mayo, 2000):

Knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterised by participatory, open communication focused around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluated consequences ... it must respect the everyday language, understanding, and way of life of the knowers, and it must seek to create situations in which they can more deeply express their own hopes and intentions (Glass, 2001, p. 19).

Within this framework, a critical pedagogy of community service journalism facilitates the convergence of academic, pedagogic, journalistic and everyday knowledge. As such, it provides a comprehensive means of conceptualising, analysing, doing and teaching journalism through what I call knowledge work's four "integrated spheres of praxis": Emotional Attitude, Power Awareness, Critical Engagement and Knowledge Production. In summary, the integrated spheres of praxis:

- represent the dynamic and complex ways that journalism knowledge is produced;
- cycle through an action research process of planning, action and reflection;
- loosely organise the technical fields of reflective practice, background research, field research and media production and,
- facilitate Freire's process of *conscientization*, the "ongoing process by which a learner moves towards critical consciousness" (Heaney, 1995, p. 6; Freire, 1996, 1972).

Emotional Attitude shapes a journalist's core sense of agency and emerges from critical reflexive praxis; that is, from a capacity to "grasp the outward direction, meaning and consequences of action, and also its inward meaning as the realization and articulation of a self ... a kind of historico-cultural, political psycho-analysis that reveals the *formation* of the *self* and its *situation* in all their dynamic and dialectical relations" (Glass, 2001, p. 18). It is a personal and critical confrontation with what Hirst (2002) calls the "emotional dialectic" – the internalised contradictions and tensions of doing journalism under liberal democratic capitalism. The emotional attitude of community service journalism involves a commitment to "disciplined subjectivism" (Loo, 1996, p. 8) and critical engagement rather than objectivity and professional distance, and a preparedness to empathise with those marginalised by power and choose sides. At the concrete level of technique, the journalist embraces "reflective practice" to "identify, sort and prioritize contextual elements surrounding practice" as a means of moving "from 'knowing how' to 'being able'" (Sheridan Burns, 2002, p. 27–33).

Power Awareness is cultivated by analysing the dominant discourses and representations that shape the lives of the subjects of a story. That is, it is the process of "mapping hegemony" in which "hegemonic ideology refers to a dominant way of seeing/making sense of the world around us. Such ways of seeing are predicated on taken-for-granted rules of discourse and cultural codes"(Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991, p. 4). This approach builds on conventional strategies of background research to establish deep knowledge and understanding and empowers the community service journalist to identify gaps between the promise and reality of lived democracy,

and between dominant representations of marginalised communities and their everyday experiences. As Pilger would have it, this process unearths “hidden agendas” and “distant voices” (1998, 1992).

Critical Engagement requires the community service journalist to collaborate in the gap through a process of learning together and making meaning. The journalist moves outwards from a core sense of agency into the social world of contingent relationships to embrace a collegial praxis that names and transforms that world through cultural action and the production of critical knowledge. Journalism assignments are initiated and negotiated and strategies selected for critical collaborative learning, action and reflection. The conventional techniques of field research are extended through the methods of ethnography and critical pedagogy and include dialogic interactions and participant observations. These democratic encounters begin with people’s codifications of their concrete experience, pose those experiences as problems and objects of mutual inquiry, and decode and demystify the emerging issues to draw out more complex understandings and interpretations (Freire; 1996, 1972; Heaney, 1995; also see McLaren & Leonard, 1996).

Knowledge Production involves reflecting on, constructing and representing experience and opens up the conventional techniques of media production for critique and development. The community service journalist selects text-types, language and narrative style to frame background and field data in a manner that is loyal to the subjects’ experiences, understandings and interpretations of emerging issues. This process requires the journalist to reflect on the journalist-subject-audience relationship and consider potential consequences of the knowledge produced. As the final stage of the action research cycle, the production of journalism knowledge demands a comprehensive evaluation of: the “intellectual quality” of interactions; the “connectedness” of and between knowledges, participants and lived experience; the extent to which critical engagements provided a supportive learning context; and, how successfully the process embraced a meaningful “recognition of difference” (New Basics Branch, 2000).

The way forward

At the risk of “trying to push the bus on which one is riding” (Berger & Luckmann, p. 25), my primary research objective is to use the model *to research and develop the model* in the full range of relevant knowledge work: as a community service journalist, media worker, educator and researcher. There are a number of journalists, journalism educators, media workers and social researchers who already operate in the gap between the promise and reality and whose experiences

and knowledge are invaluable to the development of the critical pedagogy model. My intention here is to dialogically explore their work in relation to the spheres of praxis in order to further understand and inform journalism theory and practice. As a brief example, John Pilger's work embodies a strong *emotional attitude* (often derided by conservatives as "committed") and he conducts thorough (but not infallible) background research to cultivate *power awareness*, expose hidden agendas and promote social justice. His journalism expresses empathy for marginalised and disempowered people, yet he too struggles with the never ending game of "tactical stories that distort the present and darken the future" (Peel, 2003, p. 29). The hope that Pilger finds in the struggles of striking miners and resistance movements from across the world is absent during his short visit to Sydney's margins:

Western Sydney is seen by few outsiders. If you do not live here, there is every reason not to come. One and a half million people, almost half the population of Sydney, live here. But the Sydney of beaches and views and tree-lined, undulating streets, Thai restaurants and Italian delis, does not reach here. Western Sydney is a void between Arcadia and 'the back of beyond' ... The white African notion of 'township' has an echo here (1988, p. 322–323).

In the four and a half pages that Pilger dedicates to Sydney's west he adopts a language of critique "predicated on taken-for-granted rules of discourse and cultural codes" (Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991, p. 4) that shape popular misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the region and its people. What elements of his praxis deny a politics of possibility? The repetitive use of "here" positions him in Sydney's west, but Pilger is undeniably an outsider describing a world of *others*. What kind of relationships does he establish? How does he engage the subjects of a story and what processes does he go through to reconstruct their experience and produce knowledge? How would he approach the same story tomorrow? How has Pilger learnt and grown as a journalist? These are the sort of questions I wish to explore as objects of mutual inquiry. The core challenge, of course, is to learn from others and personal experience and use the model to produce innovative, publishable journalism. Driven by *my* emotional attitude towards the social injustices and marginalisation experienced by the diverse communities of Sydney's west, I am determined to enjoy the "fineness of striving" for a journalism (Freire in Glass, 2001, p. 19) more hopeful and honest than that of the helicopter journalist who descended upon the backstreets of Mt Druitt twenty-two years ago.

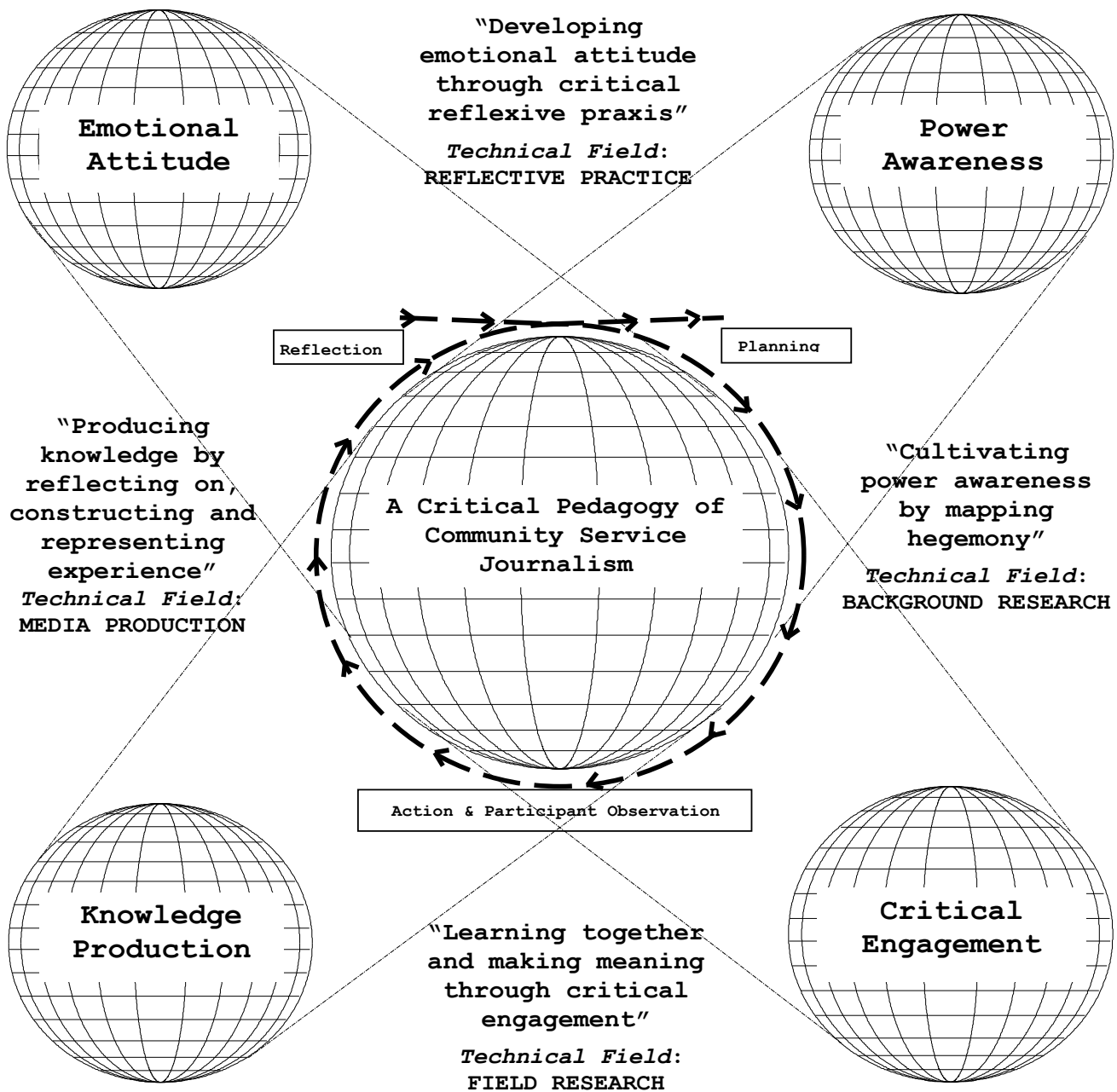


Figure 1. The Critical Pedagogy Model and Journalism's Integrated Spheres of Praxis.
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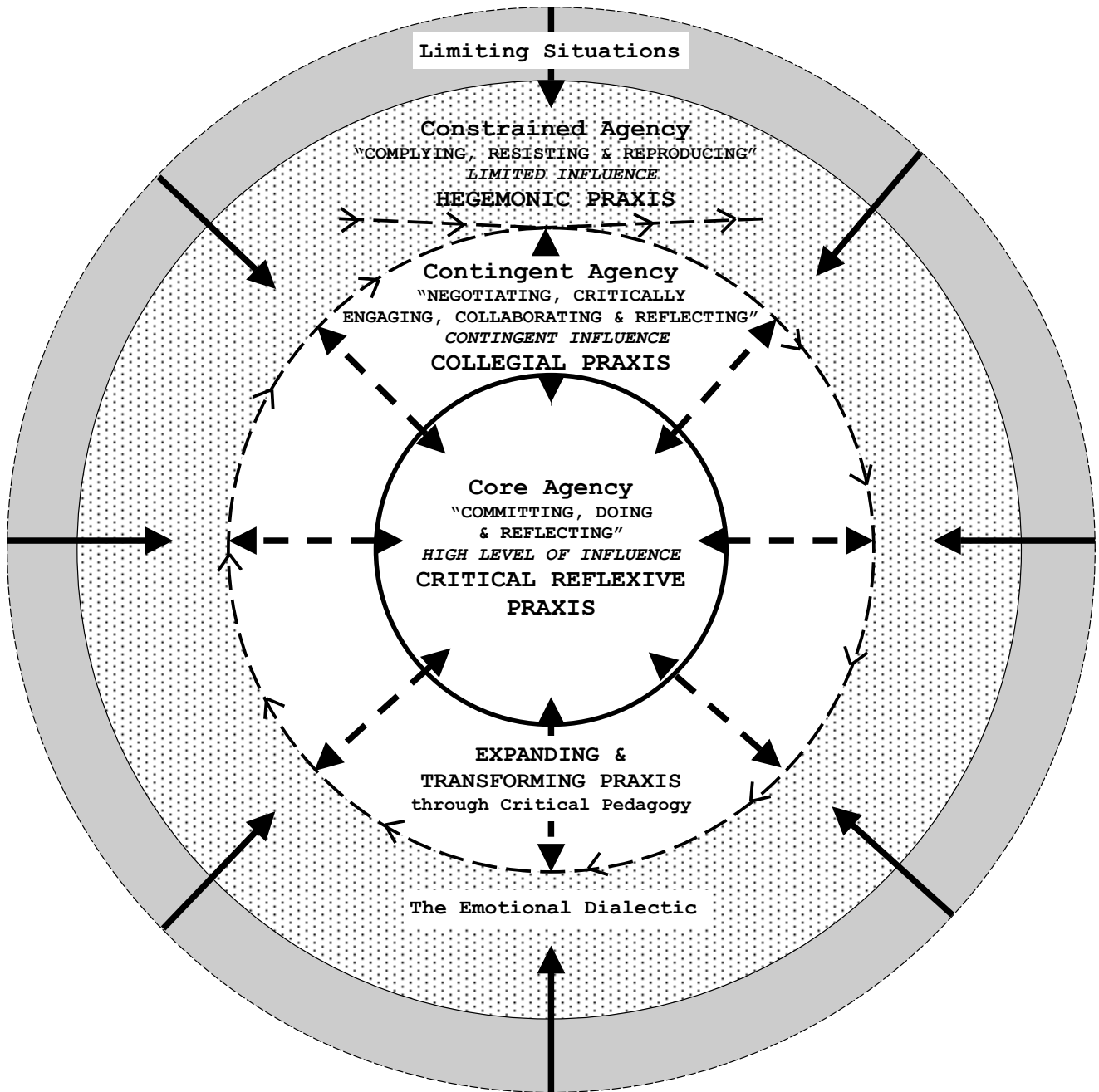


Figure 2. Dissecting the spheres of praxis and examining layers of agency. © Michael de Wall 2003

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