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"I Didn't Know Anything About It": Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Literacy, and (Missed?) Opportunities for Praxis

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Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Literacy, and (Missed?) Opportunities for Praxis

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Introduction

In the Spring semester of 2016, Casey facilitated a new course, titled Educational Studies Senior Seminar: Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Literacy. The course was required for senior students majoring or minoring in educational studies from our highly selective residential liberal arts college located in the Southern United States. The course sought to not only study the theories and practices of critical pedagogy and cultural literacy, but to enact them as well. Our aim was drawn directly from the Freirean (2000) notion of *praxis*: action and reflection in equal measure on the world in order to transform it. In this course, students would become student–teachers, the professor would become a teacher–student, and collectively the class would work to engage others in critically interrogating our oppressive social reality. At least, that's what we said we would do.

Over the course of the semester, student–teachers were required to facilitate a series of cultural literacy circle meetings. These cultural literacy circles were established by the student–teachers themselves. They were able to select any group of people they wished to work with and were asked to meet as a circle at least six times over the course of the semester. There were no parameters around whom their participants had to be, and the circles ranged from a group of fifth graders in an afterschool program, to a group of volunteers at a local refugee cultural center, to groups of fellow college students. The last population was most common. Of the eight student–teachers in the course, six worked with their peers—fellow students at our college. The only rule for the topics and content of the cultural literacy circles was that participants themselves had to articulate issues and concepts that they genuinely wanted to get smarter about. In Freirean terms, participants in the cultural literacy circles were to pose problems, work toward generative themes, and analyze limit situations in contexts that were significant to them. The various themes of the groups are detailed later in this work, but it should be made clear from the outset that each group successfully completed this major course assignment. Every group met at least six times, took up issues and questions that were generated by their participants, and worked toward supporting one another to better understand their topics in complex and nuanced ways.

In an effort to further blur the lines between teacher and student, the professor for the course, Casey, also facilitated a cultural literacy circle made up of junior faculty from across the college.

Professors from geography, English, psychology, political science, and educational studies all met together to better understand critical pedagogy and the ways in which our own courses can better work to support our students' and our own desires for justice. Cue was a participant in this cultural literacy circle, and it was in this context that conversations about the course and our work led to a serious plan to collect data and study the senior seminar taught by Casey.[1]

The present study seeks to theorize and contextualize what happened in this course. We first detail the major course readings as a kind of literature review, as a way to both contextualize our approach to critical pedagogy as well as to provide greater details about the course under study. Next we discuss our methods in this work, focusing both on our data sources as well as our ongoing collaboration and dialogue as coresearchers in this project. The majority of our work here focuses on analyzing what we have come to think of as "levels" of critical engagement in the cultural literacy circles. While creating any kind of hierarchy in this way is immediately problematic, we think of these levels not so much in a developmental progression, but more in terms of the struggle for praxis. Through our analysis and critical dialogue we came to recognize that while each cultural literacy circle reported positive outcomes, and positive feelings from group members regarding participating in the circles, only one group took action in a material way meant to explicitly combat oppression. Nearly every group *talked* about oppression and the struggle for justice, but ultimately their work remained at the level of discourse. They thought about oppression, talked and read about oppression, but their work as cultural literacy circles, with one exception, did not lead to concerted efforts to make an intervention in the historical reality their group focused on. We conclude with implications of these outcomes for others whose courses center critical pedagogy as both a topic of study as well as a pedagogical approach.

Our Approach to Critical Pedagogy: What We Read Together

The course began with a close reading of Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Here we focused on Freire's critique of banking education, wherein students are seen as receptacles to be filled by information from the teacher. We can think of banking as a literal metaphor in this context: where the teacher makes a deposit in the student, with an aim toward a return on their investment in the form of docile behavior, acceptance of the oppressive status quo, performance on assessments, and so on. We also spent significant time understanding the dialectical relation of the oppressed and the oppressors, working to understand this relationship both in Freire's writing as well as in our own lived experiences. Central to our engagement with this text was our interest in Freire's insistence that our educational work be about more than simple literacy and numeracy. The purpose of such activity is not for the sake of literacy as such, but rather for "reading the word to read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 16). In other words, to perform complex and critical readings of both text(s) and context(s) in order to better understand our social reality and the ways in which we can struggle together to affect a more just society.

We next turned to Kincheloe's (2008) *Critical Pedagogy Primer*. Here we focused first on the origins of critical pedagogy and its relationship to critical theory more broadly. We paid special attention to the Frankfurt School and other foundational theorists that impacted Freire's work.

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[1] The present study does not analyze the experiences of participants in the faculty cultural literacy circle. We plan to analyze these data and experiences in a separate paper.

Key to our work with Kincheloe was his insistence that "there are as many brilliant forms of practice as there are brilliant practitioners" (p. 116). We theorized this as signaling that critical pedagogy is not after one single pedagogical practice which can be understood as "best" or "most effective." Instead, we sought to locate our own work and commitments within Kincheloe's discussion and think of ways that we might articulate our own sense of a personal critical pedagogy.

Following Kincheloe, we took up Horkheimer's (2004) *Eclipse of Reason*. This text was seen by student–teachers as the most difficult and complex text of the semester. We focused on Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason, wherein reason in our contemporary reality is no longer a faculty of the mind, but rather a tool or technology to be used in order to arrive at additional aims. Instrumental reason is neither on the side of justice nor oppression, and can be used for any purpose regardless of moral commitments. Horkheimer's analysis focuses on the ways in which a dogmatic faith in science as such does not adequately help us understand what it is we ought to be putting science to work toward. We can think, for instance, of Nazism and the various scientific projects National Socialists took up in Germany in the mid-twentieth century. The very same mathematical logics can be used to devise ways of committing genocide as it can to redistribute goods and services. We paid special attention to the ways in which pragmatism and positivism are "limited truths" that do not lead directly to what our social and moral aims ought to be.

Next we shifted to a section of the course Casey characterized as "critiques of critical pedagogy." First in this section was Althusser's (2008) *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. While working from the Marxian critical theory tradition, we read Althusser's critique of schools as the dominant Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as signaling the ways in which schools are too enmeshed in dominant state logics to be sights of social justice and transformation. We then took up Ellsworth's (1989) "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." Our conversations centered around the gendered character of much of Freire's work, and questions of what desires students have for their relationships and interactions with teachers and professors. Following this we read Gore's (1990) "What Can We Do for You! What *Can* 'We' Do for 'You'?: Struggling over empowerment in critical and feminist pedagogy." Here we formulated critiques following Gore of the ways in which power is imagined and enacted in critical pedagogies. We were especially critical of notions of "giving" power, and of student desires for teachers who do not always map onto the critical pedagogical project of blurring the lines between teacher and student.

Following this we took up Freire's (2006) *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. Our reading focused on locating the ways in which Freire responded to critiques of his previous work, and on the shifts in tone and audience from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We concluded that the critical demand for humanization remains constant in Freire's work, but many in our course read his latter book as more inviting to practicing teachers. Freire's work felt familiar to us, and his emphasis on reinvention and "armed love" were central to our conversations and work with this text.

Our final course meetings saw pairs of student–teachers assigning readings and facilitating class based on interests they identified. First, the teacher–student, Casey, partnered with another

professor on campus to facilitate a course meeting focused on McLaren's (2001) notion of a revolutionary working class critical pedagogy, read in conversation with Bourdieu's (1984) introduction to *Distinction*. We then moved to a series of readings chosen by the student–teachers. During these course meetings, we paid explicit attention to the ways critical pedagogy could help us generate sophisticated understandings of concepts and contexts seemingly removed from the purview of critical pedagogy. Namely, we explored Noddings' (1984) work around a "feminine" approach to care and caring; the implications for special education made available from critical pedagogy; the role of physical education and sports; and finally, an examination of Greek life and imagining fraternities and sororities as pedagogical sites.

While our ongoing engagement with critical pedagogy incorporates many other authors and texts, those featured here were the texts we took up in our course. Our work for this present project is also informed by Shor (1987), hooks (1994), Ladson-Billings (2006), Delpit (2006), Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), and Casey (2011, 2016). We connect culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural education as projects in solidarity with critical pedagogy (see Casey, 2010, 2016), and our reading and interpretations of the data we next turn to should be read as part of a broader engagement with critical, socially just commitments to teaching and learning in teacher education.

Methods: Critical Connections and Analyses

Our approach to this project was inspired by the work of Mitchell and Rosiek (2006) on the scholarship of teaching. In their study, one author served primarily as a researcher of the other's teaching, with specific attention to the ways in which the racial identity of the professor and students takes on significant and complex meanings in the context of college classrooms. Our study departs from their work slightly, in that we were/are most interested in the ways that courses that explicitly focus on critical engagements with texts and contexts on the side of humanization are experienced and felt by those engaged in the course(s). We see the present project as part of a larger study involving multiple participants and multiple facets of the course and the approach(es) to critical pedagogy in play.

Our approach to data collection and analysis follows Kincheloe's (2008) notion of *bricolage*, incorporating a number of multidisciplinary forms of data collection and analysis. Kincheloe writes that bricolage "demands a new level of research self-consciousness and awareness of the numerous contexts in which any researcher is operating" (p. 131). Bricolage necessitates researchers locating their own positionality, with attention to the inherent complexity in any and all interpretive acts. Rather than working towards a single "rationalistic" interpretation of phenomena, bricolage invites nuance and subjectivity. Further, bricolage invites appropriating elements of research practices drawn from across the sciences and humanities, and is thus especially well-suited to our present project, conducted by a psychologist and a curricularist.

There were five women and three men enrolled in the course. All five of the women identified as white, cisfemale, and heterosexual. Two of the men in the course identified as white and cismale, with one expressing a heterosexual identity and the other a queer/questioning positionality. There was one person of color in the course, who identified as cismale and heterosexual. He was a second-generation immigrant whose parents were from the Middle East. While the differences

and similarities among and across participants certainly impacted the varied experiences of student–teachers in the course, for the purposes of the present paper, which is part of a larger ongoing project, we do not analyze individual student–teacher contributions. In our analysis of the data, we were struck by the shared and similar characteristics across the various cultural literacy circles. Thus, for the present paper, participants are not given pseudonyms nor compared to one another. Each of their interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. For the interviews, we worked together as coresearchers to develop a protocol following Merriam's (1998) "semistandardized" approach. While we had a set of questions we wanted each participant to be able to respond to, we also wanted to make space for participants to voice their own insights, questions, and opinions. In a semistandardized interview, participants are encouraged to wander from the questions in order to more fully share out experiences. In addition to these interviews, we collected all of the written work students completed in the course. These data included analytic memos written by each student–teacher after each of their cultural literacy circles, as well as their final reflective essays for the course.

Working across these different types of data, we worked to follow a form of qualitative data analysis informed by Saldaña (2009; see also Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). We started by coding individually, looking for themes and areas that occurred in multiple accounts and formats (those areas that participants mentioned in the interviews as well as wrote about in their memos). These initial codes were then refined in collaboration between the two authors, following Creswell's (2013) approach to "intercoder agreement." Meeting together, we worked to reorient our themes around questions of critical engagement. We became cognizant of the contradictions in the data as they centered around engagement with oppression as a concept, but in almost every instance there was no discernible material action taken to combat or transform the oppressive system in question. Our codes then became a way of examining what we came to think of as the depth of engagement in critical pedagogy as a praxis. We then used these themes to organize the present manuscript, and each are detailed in the relevant section below.

Student–Teachers Voicing Engagements with Critical Pedagogy

Student–teachers' narratives of their experience(s) engaging in cultural literacy circles were coded into five major themes. These themes included: critique of banking, student-centered approaches, democratic culture, problem-posing dialogue, and collective action. The current section provides accounts and analyses of student–teachers' narratives, both written and from the interview data, and uses direct excerpts to demonstrate students' understanding(s) and application(s) of critical pedagogy in their cultural literacy circles. While it is problematic to attempt to outline a hierarchy or "steps" one might take toward enacting a critical pedagogy, this tension was central to our engagement and analysis of the data. In many ways, we came to understand these student–teachers' engagement with critical pedagogy as especially *partial*, and while engagement with any critical project will always have gaps and omissions (Kumashiro, 2009), we found that revolutionary praxis, the ultimate aim of Freirean critical pedagogy, was not present across the cultural literacy circles.

The question this tension produces is addressed in the Conclusion section of the present paper. Despite its absence, the role of revolutionary praxis must be analyzed against and in comparison to the examples of critical pedagogy student–teachers took up and enacted in their cultural

literacy circles. What does it mean if a course aimed at enacting critical pedagogy fails to impact material practices of oppression? What if the critical pedagogies enacted do not produce revolutionary praxis? Is such work still understandable as "critical pedagogy?" These questions are taken up in detail following our discussion of each of the five identified themes.

> Student–teachers' reflections of their experiences within their cultural literacy circle meetings consistently rejected this banking concept and emphasized the need for group participants to be actively involved in the higher order and transformative thinking skills.

Critique of Banking

The critique of a unidirectional distribution of knowledge from teacher to students was one of the most common themes in students' narratives. These narratives illustrated one of Freire's main critiques of the existing education system, which he refers to as *banking*. Freire (2000) notes, "Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and 'makes deposits' which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat" (p. 45). We should think of banking as a literal metaphor, wherein the authoritarian teacher makes deposits into the students with an aim toward extracting a return on their investment in the form of docile behavior, acceptance of the status quo, and acquiescence to the authoritarian teacher's demands. This theme was shared by all eight student–teachers. Student–teachers' reflections of their experiences within their cultural literacy circle meetings consistently rejected this banking concept and emphasized the need for group participants to be actively involved in the higher order and transformative thinking skills that were used in their practice of dialogue, rather than be passive recipients of information. In describing their group interactions, many student–teachers also referred to their group members' abilities to be active participants and engage in collaborative learning. Additionally, they described how the cultural literacy circles encouraged deeper and more meaningful levels of engagement and dialogue in the group. For example, one student–teacher mentioned,

> We, as a group, took action by finding relevant topics to us and our environment, expos[ing] ourselves to information in order to be more informed and explor[ing] the topics and information critically and analytically.

References to critiques of banking education suggest that group members were empowered by the opportunity to learn something new and gather additional knowledge on a particular subject. Many acknowledged the difference between traditional teaching methods that lacked the space to provide input, and their cultural literacy circles in which they played an integral role in the curriculum design, topic selection, and their own learning. For example, one student noted:

> It became more than eight college students sitting in a room and discussing.…It became an environment that fostered learning, questions, and discussion beyond what is required in many of my college classes. I liked how we were able to choose our topic every week, and I felt more invested due to this involvement in what I was learning.

Other researchers have found support for Freire's critique of banking education. Studies have shown that pedagogies that promote active participation help improve students' overall learning and performance in comparison to traditional teaching methods, such as direct instruction (McCarthy & Anderson, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Parente, & Bjorklund, 2001). Across all eight of the cultural literacy circles analyzed here, student–teachers voiced a critique of banking education explicitly with their participants, and were encouraged to discuss the differences participants felt between other educational experiences they had and their engagement with the cultural literacy circles. Unequivocally, every student–teacher was critical of traditional banking approaches, and organized their cultural literacy circle in student-centered ways.

Student-Centered Approaches
The eight student–teachers in the study also described employing a student-centered approach in their cultural literacy circles. This consisted of allowing the focus and direction of group sessions to be guided primarily by the participants' interests. Although many discussed initially formulating their own discussion theme or topic, many also shared how those topics were often altered by the desires of the group. The student-centered approach spoke specifically to the need for student–teachers to understand the curiosities of the participants in their groups and to develop dialogue around these topics. The following quote is indicative of many participants' conceptions of the need to center their participants' lived experiences and interests in their cultural literacy circles:

> The group, after throwing out a few ideas, agreed on the topic of cults. My group members found cults to be an interesting topic because it was something that was never talked, taught, or explained to them throughout their education. This was not a topic I had any background knowledge on or knew anything more than my group members did, but [I] thought it would be a good opportunity for us all to get smarter about something.

The language here of "getting smarter" is appropriated from Casey's approach to engagement in cultural literacy circles. *Getting smarter* here functions as a humanizing gesture that rejects more instrumentalist conceptions of "mastering" subject matter. Further, it opens up possibilities for more participants to engage in ways that feel self-appropriating (Rogers, 1989): learning in ways that build on and refine existing knowledge and commitments. Another example of this student-centered approach is the following, from the fifth-grade cultural literacy circle:

> As we prepared to begin our first cultural literacy circle, I was not quite sure what to expect. I had a list of topics in my mind that I had some ideas for ahead of time, just in case one of these was chosen by the group. When I first asked what they wanted to discuss and learn more about, the answer was unanimous: sports. This answer threw me off at first.…This was not a topic that I expected. When I think about critical pedagogy, sports is not one of the first topics that comes to mind.

Utilizing student-centered approaches has also been shown to increase student performance and engagement (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson & Weiss, 2009; Meece, 2003). From a critical pedagogical perspective, the inclusion and affirmation of student voice eliminates the cultivation of passive and silenced learners, and is also critical to students' learning (Freire, 2000; Nieto,

2000). The student–teacher's ability to let their participants direct the path of the cultural literacy circles illustrated their understanding of the importance of student voice and empowerment in their individual group settings.

Democratic Culture
Another element of critical pedagogy that was found in students' narratives was the cultivation of a democratic culture within their groups. Reflections of this theme showed that students were able to eliminate the division of powers between the group leader and the group members. One student–teacher noted,

> As the "teacher" of each session, I listened and observed the participants, only interjecting as a fellow member of the group rather than as an authority and all-knowing figure.

Student–teachers, especially in the six groups comprised of fellow college students, were especially cognizant of the ways many of their past pedagogical experiences felt authoritarian, rather than democratic (Freire, 2006). As shown in the following example, student–teachers also made references to a community of practice, in which students and teachers worked together rather than replicating organizational hierarchies that are present in traditional classrooms.

> Through such dialogue, students are able to connect material to real-world issues with the intent to discover how the curriculum impacts their individual lives, as well as others (Shor, 1993).

As the meetings progressed, I realized that we had actually started to learn together and become more knowledgeable about useful matters on campus or in the world that we face every day as women and members of [our college] community.

In traditional classrooms, teachers are often seen as the expert and possessor of subject matter knowledge, while the students are seen as passive recipients or spectators (or, more critically, as commodities) (Casey, 2013, 2016). However, in the description of their communities of practice, student–teachers and their fellow peers were able to learn and grow together.

Central to our conception of a democratic culture in the cultural literacy circles was the Deweyan notion of democracy as a practice. Dewey (2007) thought of democracy as "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 68). This democratic commitment was central to all eight of the cultural literacy circles, and signaled participants' close engagement with Freire's notions of democratic educators compared with authoritarian banking educators.

Problem-Posing Dialogue
The next most frequently occurring theme was identified as problem-posing dialogue. Six of the eight student–teachers made specific references to engaging in discourse to solve a problem. In his description of Freire's critical pedagogy, Shor (1993) notes that "inside problem-posing dialogue, students reflect on the lives they lead, asking questions to discover their meaning and value" (p. 30). Through such dialogue, students are able to connect material to real-world issues

with the intent to discover how the curriculum impacts their individual lives, as well as others (Shor, 1993). Again, this diverges from the traditional curriculum that often focuses on the lives and stories of historical events and people, which are often foreign or distant from the lives of students and taught without interpretation of how it relates to the students and the current context. When writing about the problem-posing dialogue that took place during their critical literacy circles, one student–teacher wrote,

> Though the spirit of this fundamental tenet of critical pedagogy was present as a part of the type of learning this literacy circle practiced, our group largely "read the world to read the word." While our understanding of the nuanced nature of acts of oppression was limited, we were able to gain an understanding of these individual acts through reading the systemic agents of oppression so easily identifiable and present in college life.

Within students' narratives, clear connections were made to the readings, their own lives, and existing issues of oppression. For teachers, problem-posing supports the idea that students come into the classroom with prior knowledge and, therefore, should be active agents in the learning process. For students, it empowers them to engage in critical thinking about how their personal experiences relate to the topic and major societal issues, as well as how to resolve those issues (Nixon-Ponder, 1995; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1998). Similarly, student–teachers' descriptions of their engagement in problem-posing dialogue often acknowledged their discussion of personal connections to previous experiences, connections to events on campus, gathering additional information on the problem, and identifying alternative resolutions.

Returning to the earlier discussion around the various ways we might consider a (problematic) "hierarchy" of critical components that make up a critical pedagogy, this is the point at which almost every cultural literacy circle stopped: posing problems. The focus of their work in the cultural literacy circles was primarily about discussion, about posing problems for the purposes of dialogue, and to "get smarter" about issues and questions that participants were passionate about. While we celebrate these student–teachers' commitments to and enactment of problem-posing dialogue, merely posing problems is not the desired end or outcome for critical pedagogical praxis.

Collective Action
Although students often reflected on critical issues related to oppression, only one group tackled the other aspect of praxis, which is action. Collective action was the last theme that was identified in the student narratives. In general, this theme represented specific attempts to combat oppression and implement interventions presented by the group. It is important to note that this group, which met at and focused their work on a local refugee empowerment center, did not include fellow students at the college. Instead the group leader chose to work directly with members of the surrounding community. From the beginning, this group quickly developed an issue to address, then developed and implemented a plan to address it. The student–teacher made specific references to the groups' collective action in the following way:

> As a group, we all agreed and decided that something must be done to reach out to parents and/or older students in order to create a stronger sense of responsibility to education at the center. Because many of the students' parents work several different jobs

and it is difficult to get them all in the same place at the same time, we had to move on to alternative ideas. Pretty quickly, one of our group members suggested creating a peer mentoring program for everyone at [the center]. Everyone in the group loved this idea, so we pursued it enthusiastically. We researched models for the peer-mentoring program such as Big Brothers Big Sisters so that we could get an idea of how to start our own program. We also conducted polls among the students at [the center] so that we could get their input in the process. Meanwhile, we continued discussing the logistics of implementing this type of program at our meetings every other week.

By the end of the semester the center had established a peer-mentoring program that paired middle school students with elementary students, and those middle school students with high school students, so that all the school-aged youth at the center were part of a network of peer supporters and mentors. The program continues presently, despite the student–teacher who led both the cultural literacy group and the effort to start the peer mentoring program graduating and moving out of the state for graduate school.

Revolutionary Praxis
Our final "theme" under consideration is not truly a theme at all. Across all eight of the cultural literacy circles, we did not find evidence of engagement with or a push toward enacting a revolutionary praxis. Praxis is the aim of Freirean critical pedagogy, and can be thought of as action and reflection in equal measure on the world in order to transform it. This transformation requires a radical redistribution of wealth, access, and power. We understand revolutionary praxis here as McLaren and Jaramillo (2010) have articulated it as part of a revolutionary (Marxist) critical pedagogy. Thus, in the final section of the paper we return to our earlier questions of the ways in which the absence or lack of a revolutionary praxis across the cultural literacy circles negates the work of the student–teachers as critical pedagogy. To organize this discussion, we first return to Freire's (2000) cautions in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* around the present state of a revolutionary society (or lack thereof). Next, we examine the Freirean conception of "reinvention" in the context of the cultural literacy circles detailed above. Finally, we conclude with an analysis and interpretation of what we have come to think of as a critical pedagogy of partiality with three primary implications for others engaged in similar projects.

On the final page of Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) writes, of enacting revolutionary praxis, "While only a revolutionary society can carry out this education in systematic terms, the revolutionary leadership need not take full power before they can employ the method" (p. 86). We are thus given a caution: We should not think of critical pedagogy as a practice that can be systematized in an oppressive reactionary society. While we can "employ the method," the larger social transformation of which critical pedagogy is the educational arm is essential to realizing a far-reaching critical pedagogical praxis across school contexts. In the absence of a revolutionary society, we must understand any and all pedagogical interventions as always-already partial. No practice at the level of the classroom can transform the broader systems of oppressive dehumanization that make up so much of our present reality. This does not mean antioppressive work at the classroom level is not essential to this revolutionary project. But it does mean that we must know the limitations of our work, and remain cognizant of said limitations throughout our engagement.

So positioned, it would not be expected for undergraduate students, completing a course for credit, to enact a sweeping revolutionary change. Still, we understand critical pedagogy as a striving, as a project that aims to build capacity for more and greater humanizing educational programs and projects to work toward a more wholly just social reality. Our participants showed evidence of working toward this aim, but did not fully realize the aims of revolutionary praxis in their cultural literacy circles. One possible way of interpreting this outcome is through the lens of Freirean reinvention.

Freire (2006), in a conversation with Donaldo Macedo, said, "I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas" (p. x). In class, student–teachers lingered on this concept, and routinely returned to the notion of reinvention throughout their time in the course and in their cultural literacy circles. With reinvention, we run the risk of losing essential components of Freire's pedagogical commitments. How far might one reinvent critical pedagogy before it ceases to be an instance of critical pedagogy? While our work to articulate components of critical pedagogy as expressed by participants and analyzed as themes and codes above is a possible starting place for such a project, we hesitate to place limits on what is possible in the context of reinventions of critical pedagogy.

Kincheloe's (2008) insistence that "there are as many brilliant forms of practice as there are brilliant practitioners" is an important insight to follow here (p. 116). Read alongside Kumashiro's (2009) contention that "no practice is always antioppressive," we are faced with the untold possibilities for work in pedagogical settings on the side of justice (p. 3). Thus, the absence of revolutionary praxis in the accounts and narratives of our participants does not automatically signal a failing—perhaps more importantly it signals all the variability and inherent complexity to critical pedagogy. We now conclude with a generous account of what we see this work contributing to other critical pedagogical projects, as three pieces of a critical pedagogy of partiality.

Content As a Means To

For each of the participants, the content felt like it should matter: student–teachers and their group members wanted to get smarter about things that felt relevant to them, and were based on their interests. Yet the overriding feeling that many student–teachers felt throughout their time in their cultural literacy circles centered on worrying if what they were reading, if their chosen topics, "counted" as actual learning. Because so many worked with others who are currently students themselves in formal educational spaces, and because of the selectivity of our institution, we have been "schooled" to believe that learning needs to follow certain rules. It needs to "feel like school" or "be something we could learn in a class" in order to "count." Our experiences taught us that, if we resist such fears, we are able to work towards complex interpretations that we could never have anticipated were wedded to a formalized curriculum that we *must* complete.

Thus, and while it took several groups multiple meetings to discover this, once we surrender a commitment to specific content, the content itself becomes a means for us to explore and learn in

humanizing ways. Freire (2006) is clear in *Teachers as Cultural Workers* that the disciplines are to be regarded seriously, that we should understand that in order to practice humanizing pedagogies, we must be *disciplined*. But he is also clear that such discipline is meant to be directed: It is meant to be acted on and with, not to merely exist for its own sake. It is most certainly not something to be "banked" into learners. Thus, surrendering imagined commitments to rigid content demands enables a plethora of pedagogical possibilities we would likely never have imagined. Learning that is full of passion and joy, learning that is humanizing, is possible with innumerable means by which to actualize it.

Self-Appropriating Learning

The notion of self-appropriated learning employed here stems from the intersections of critical pedagogy and the work of Carl Rogers (see Casey, 2016, for greater analysis of these intersections). Rogers (1989) argued that the only learning that compels us to action, the only learning that is truly *ours*, is that which we have self-appropriated. He asks us to test this for ourselves, by thinking of the things we feel we know especially well, and then asking how we came to such knowledge. How much of those experiences are instances wherein we have sought out and/or taught ourselves, learned for ourselves? The parallels to Freirean aims of problem posing are clear from the outset: Rogers is describing the process of reading the world to read the word and reading the word to read the world. In the cultural literacy circles, we found this notion reinforced countless times.

Towards the conclusion of the semester, in the final meetings of the cultural literacy circles, an overriding theme emerged, and became part of our senior seminar discussions. The theme was how it *felt* for the participants to be in our cultural literacy circles. Many participants shared with their facilitators that their experiences in the cultural literacy circles were the first times in their educational journeys that they had been able to choose something they wanted to learn about, and then actually get to learn about it with others. For Rogers, this is precisely the kind of education we ought to be striving for. The possibilities again abound. Creating more opportunities for our students to choose their own course of study, to articulate for themselves their own areas of inquiry, and to be able to work towards those aims, must become far more commonplace in formal educational environments.

Reinvention as Ongoing

Finally, we argue that throughout the various reinventions of Freire articulated above, student–teachers expressed multiple reinventions throughout their engagement with critical pedagogy and their cultural literacy circles. Each of them took up the project of reinventing Freire's critical pedagogy for their own particular contexts, based on those they were working with. Yet this act is not reducible to a mere gesture. In our present era, characterized as it is by the search for "effective strategies" in the context(s) of P12 education, we must understand that the act of reinvention is not a one-time occurrence. It is not something that we perform to maximize the humanizing potential of our present pedagogical setting, once, and then move on to the next "step." Rather, we must understand that there are no "steps" to the praxis of humanizing education. The messiness of "real life"—of real existing men and women in the world—requires that we be reflexive and responsive to the complex demands we are presented with.

This is precisely what the student–teachers strived to do in each of their cultural literacy circles. When they needed to shift course, to change texts, to change the conversation, to follow an important observation or question, they did. When concrete demands presented themselves, when limit situations were confronted, they worked with their comrades and student–teachers in ways that enabled them to learn from each other, and from their engagement with critical pedagogy. The notion that these projects did not realize a revolutionary praxis signals the always-already partial nature of pedagogical interventions. Acknowledging this partiality, making partiality a central component of our approach to critical pedagogy across contexts, creates new and untold possibilities for student–teachers and teacher–students to work together in worthy and humanizing ways. We look forward to more reinventions, and to the possibilities for all of us who work with others to articulate our own praxis and to further reinvent praxes, that we might strive together to work and live toward justice.

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