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From Critical Theory to Action Research or Why this Feels Empowering

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Abstract

This essay reflects the attempts of the first author of this paper to teach the sociological foundations of education from a critical theory perspective and discusses a surprising outcome—some students feel disempowered by the approach. It suggests that action research offers teachers the opportunity to consider their roles as social agents. One teacher's story is shared to illustrate how her local efforts play a significant role in transforming the classroom into a more inviting, less alienating locale—addressing the "homelessness" that characterizes the modern school. Her story illustrates how action research, grounded as it is in specific, local concerns and personalities, can be transformative.

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Abstract

This essay reflects the attempts of the first author of this paper to teach the sociological foundations of education from a critical theory perspective and discusses a surprising outcome—some students feel disempowered by the approach. It suggests that action research offers teachers the opportunity to consider their roles as social agents. One teacher's story is shared to illustrate how her local efforts play a significant role in transforming the classroom into a more inviting, less alienating locale—addressing the "homelessness" that characterizes the modern school. Her story illustrates how action research, grounded as it is in specific, local concerns and personalities, can be transformative.

For many years now critical theory has been a mainstay of my thinking. The Frankfurt School literature—works by Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, Habermas, and later, the work of the curricular reconceptualists , Apple, McLaren, Freire, were constant companions. I was enamored with the conceptual territory they laid out for me and found great utility in the use of terms such as hegemony, ideology, alienation and reification. These terms enabled me to discuss macrolevel processes and the structural inequalities in capitalist societies. I used these concepts with some effectiveness to discuss for example, the ways that social interactions between teachers and students are systematically distorted (as Habermas would have it), by the hierarchical and oppressive patterns of communication and interaction that pervade the vigilant cultures of fear in prisons (Wright, 2004). So you can imagine my joy at discovering later on in my career this landscape when I was asked to teach the foundations of education course.

My syllabus in the Foundations of Education (EDUC 605) at California State University is situated in pedagogical practices associated with the literature on critical pedagogy. The course examines the social organization of schooling and the way that it silences, marginalizes and oppresses the often disenfranchised and most powerless students. In this course, I hope to contribute to the formation of wise teachers who have a critical knowledge of context. I also hope that they become sufficiently concerned and angry enough at the injustices to act as transformative intellectuals.

Despite these "noble" intentions, students in the past have said to me that the "book is depressing." (The assigned text is *The Way Schools Work: A Sociological Analysis of Schooling* , by deMarrais & LeCompte,1999). They say too that it is "very difficult to read and understand" and that the concepts are very confusing. Some of this is natural in an introductory graduate level course, and to be honest, most students are willing to take a leap of faith until the text with the lectures begins to make some sense later in the quarter. However, some students not only have real difficulty with the

material, but with the underlying tragic spirit that pervades critical theory. This past quarter was no exception. I was struck by one student's comment in particular. In the middle of my discussion about transforming the American school system, she tentatively raised her hand and in a quiet but plaintive voice complained: "You know, when you speak about our roles in transforming our schools, you make me feel as if I'm not doing anything at all to make them better. Everyday, I'm fighting for my students, trying to make their lives better." My response was to elaborate on the significance of treating personal problems as social issues drawing from my a lesson I learned from reading C. Wright Mills, a sociologist of the '60s who I think, probably took the theme of thinking globally and working locally quite seriously. However, on the drive home that night I realized that that my critical stance has silenced the very voice of the student I had hoped to hear..

Her comment haunted me—and reminded me of an article by Elizabeth Ellsworth I read some time ago titled "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy" (1989). As a critical theorist and feminist, Ellsworth found that the highly abstract and utopian assumptions of critical theory she had endorsed, did not fully appreciate the specificity and diversity of the local, historical and social contexts both within the classroom and outside it. Boldly she claimed that the

key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, 'empowerment,' 'student voice,' 'dialogue,' and even the term 'critical'—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination. By this I mean that when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work again, including Eurocentricism, racism, sexism, classism, and 'banking education' (p.298-9).

In her attack on critical pedagogy she calls into question the "darling" of critical theory—the critical public sphere. Jurgen Habermas's (1962/1996) work on the public sphere was foundational in this regard, to the work of Giroux, McLaren and others. According to Habermas, the critical public spheres are created through dialogue when ideal speech conditions apply—when rational and disinterested speakers convene, when they all have equal opportunity to speak, where there is a genuine recognition of others in a spirit of reciprocity, and when all ideas are bracketed for consideration, and where the best argument results in consensus and decision-making. But, she argues, the classroom is far from this ideal. There are asymmetrical power relations between teachers and students; students bring their own biases of racism, sexism, ethnicity into play. They are self-interested at a minimum, with regard to their grade in the course, but beyond that, to their own invested position in society. She believes that we can no longer assume consensus based on a grand narrative (that includes as well as excludes), articulated under ideal conditions and to do so actually devalues local, context-specific practices in the classroom and leaves unexamined, embedded power relations. Instead, she adopts a feminist, post-modernist stance that it is epistemologically biased towards the personal, practical, contextualized knowledge that teachers hold and use in schools and

the differences from others (intentional and not) that enable teachers to articulate who they are, and what they believe and feel. Rather than proposing a classroom based on ideal conditions of dialogue and consensus, she proposes that pedagogues begin with the assumption that students and teachers are working together across differences. She privileges too, the local interests and knowledges of the students. Since 1989, when Ellsworth wrote this article, it was probably true to say that the practical consciousness of teachers and the concern for the working knowledge of teachers has gained in popularity in research and practice in the wisdom in education studies, and studies of personal, practical knowledge (PPK). The work of Nancy Fraser (2001) provides another good example of the reworking of the public sphere from a phenomenological, feminist, post-modern turn that underscores the important of differences embedded in local knowledges.

Nevertheless, despite the turn towards the local and specific, the students' responses in the my class suggest that while critical theory offers important and profound insights into the organization of schooling, the language and conceptual framework is disempowering because it invalidates and incapacitates (at least for the novice student of critical theory) their knowledge and specific, local action. Intuitively I had sensed that some, if not many students were not leaving the Foundations classroom with a sense of their own agency, despite my intentions—perhaps because critical theory provides students with such a grand narrative that they cannot relate its story to the local place, time, and personalities that constitute their professional and personal world. Action research makes smaller, more specific claims about its ability to transform. It is aligned with the local production of knowledge that nurtures the students' sense of agency. It is empowering from the perspective that it critiques knowledge that appears to come from "elsewhere."

Like a vast corporate enterprise in an Ayn Rand novel, the majority of teachers, counselors, and administrators spend their careers at the receiving end of 'manufactured' research projects produced in remote university 'factories' by unseen research experts. Seen this way, the conventional role of the teaching system is merely to buy and use the products of others. (Quigley, 1997, p.3).

Action research is particularly important now, at this time, because students are oppressed by a "scientism" that legitimizes the standards movement and scripted curriculum.

I think that action research provides students with the focus that sometimes is lacking when it comes to appreciating change locally and specifically. As the quarter progressed, I slowly adopted a more action research approach by sharing and opening us for discussion, concepts that were equally rich and analytic to those in critical theory, but were different because they were concepts that students could easily work with and through, to apply to critical theory and more importantly, to their classrooms and schools. And so this past quarter we discussed the concept of "homelessness" to see if the term made sense as an explanation of the way modern schools affect students, and even teachers—and they felt it did. They were able to use the term to scaffold and revisit critical theoretical terms such as alienation, habitus, hidden curriculum, restricted language codes and to appreciate how schools perform the functions of vast, bureaucratic sorting machines, and lack the

intimacy and community conducive to learning. We agreed that students do not feel "at home" in contemporary schools and so we explored phenomenologically, what it means to be at home and homeless (and even homesickness). My students found this less abstract concept useful, meaningful, and helpful when we discussed how we might reshape their classrooms and schools to address the homelessness of the students. In retrospect, this concept served as an introduction to 'action research' by promoting the students' sense of ownership and control of the research process and its applications and by establishing the relevance of theory to practice. In some ways we might say that action research addresses the students' zone of actual and proximal development in their transition from normative or functionalist theory that pervades educational practice today to critical theory. This is not to say that critical theory should be abandoned, but rather we must seriously take into consideration our approach to its abstractions and applications.

So what happened in the classroom? What follows is an essay by the second author of this article. It is one teacher's story of how she began to re-conceptualize the physical setting of teaching from the perspective of homelessness and thereby transform her classroom into a more inviting locale.

Spotless (by Carolyn Marquez)

"How do I want my floors?" SPOTLESS!" If you come into to my classroom any day, Monday through Friday, about five minutes until 3 o'clock this is what you would hear. I am a stickler for a clean carpet in my classroom. My students know that they must clean around their desk before going home. Right before we walk out the door, I do a once over. If there are any areas that have not been tidied up, back to the desks they go to do their job. This has been our routine every afternoon since August.

Needless to say it gets a bit tiring. One might think that by this time in the year my students would know to clean up properly the first time so they don't have to go through the hassle of going back to their desks to do it. That is not the case. I would say that at lease twice a week I have to remind someone to clean up their area. For some reason they have not become accustomed to the procedure.

When we first had our discussion about homelessness (in the foundations class), this scenario came to mind. I began to wonder if my students feel any kind of attachment to our classroom. If they did, would it make it easier to get them to take care of it? I decided to pursue this by reflecting on my classroom environment.

Although I do expect a clean carpet at the end of the day, I am the first to admit that my classroom is not the neatest room. I refer to it as a "working room". I have lots of work piled everywhere. I should be glad that none of my students have called me out on the fact that I force them to pick up after themselves, but I don't practice what I preach.

In order to begin to that practice, I did some research on classroom environments. One web site on feng shui in the classroom caught my attention. I found some very practical and helpful hints to making a classroom more comfortable that are relative to the art of feng shui. The suggestion to

make a classroom a more positive space was to make changes in color, sound, smell, placement, and clutter. I found many of the suggestions helpful and began to plan for the changes I could immediately make. As I was doing that I realized that I was making the classroom cozier for myself, but was not considering my students. I decided that I would get their perspective the next day. I went to school and asked, "If you could make our classroom feel more like home, what would you do?" I took a risk asking my students that question without giving them any guidance. I just threw it out there. I wanted their raw emotion to come through. I asked them this question just before dismissal and told them we would talk about it the next day. I was very surprised with the responses I received. Julisa really caught me off guard. She came to school the next morning with a sketch of a classroom that was reminiscent of a house, but incorporated the necessities of a classroom. In the sketch she included basic items like desks and computers, and made the library the focal point of the classroom. However, she also included very untraditional items such as a skirting along the counters and flowerpots in many areas. Although my other students were not as elaborate in their responses, the overall consensus was that I needed to clean up. Brian made me smile when he said, "You have a lot of stuff Miss Marquez. Maybe you don't need it all."

With that, I decided to take action. I began to treat this like an investigation. I didn't mention the topic the rest of the day. At the end of the day I tried something. I didn't say a word to my students as they packed up to go home. Several of them looked at me, obviously waiting for the clean-up reminder. I pretended to be busy doing paperwork. After they went home I examined the evidence. Many of them had neglected their areas!

Over the next few days I started my classroom transformation. I got my start from the website dedicated to feng shui in the classroom, along with the ideas my students. I decided to begin with the suggestion that the website and my students had in common-get rid of clutter. One of the most helpful suggestions given from the site in regards to clutter was to force yourself to throw 10 items away. Because I am a self-proclaimed packrat, I knew this was a good place to start.

Once I began throwing papers away I was on a roll. I spent about an hour after school cleaning up. The next day I was very pleased that my students noticed my efforts. At the end of the day something very unusual happened, not only did some of them clean-up their own area voluntarily, a few of them offered to help clean-up the area surrounding my desk as well.

Pleased that the environmental changes were working, I tackled another suggestion. The feng shui website also mentioned that particular sounds can be very soothing to students. Specifically, it said that the sounds from a water fountain can have a very calming effect. I decided that this would be another easy way to possibly make my classroom more comfortable for all of us. I have had a small water fountain in my own home for sometime and have always enjoyed the pleasant sounds of the water flowing across the rocks. I simply took the water fountain from my home and put it in my classroom.

At first I was going to have it on my desk, but decided against that because I think my students would have thought of it as mine, rather than ours. I spent a bit of time explaining what it was

(many of them have never had one in their own homes). I let them know that because it was something that I enjoyed at home I thought we could enjoy it together in our classroom. Again, the results were positive. I don't think we have had a quieter day! I watched them at the end of the day. I was particularly excited when I saw Daisy dusting around the area where I had placed the fountain. I thought for sure that someone would tattle on her, but they just watched her. I think that because Daisy has become the matriarch in our classroom, they trusted her to handle this task.

I have enjoyed this informal investigation and plan to follow through with it. Another suggestion was to create smells in the classroom that are pleasing. Right now our classroom smell is far from that. My next step is to get a plug-in that has a light lemon scent. The author of the website suggested that particular scent eases listlessness. I have seen such positive results thus far, so I wouldn't be surprised by more.

What pleases me the most are my students' reactions. Although I consider myself a critical theorist, these actions are definitely interpretivist. (I privilege the meanings that students bring to the situation.) I am hoping that my students are attaching new meaning to their classroom that will lead them to feeling positive about coming to school. I have found new meaning by engaging in this process. I feel better being in my classroom for long hours now that it is a more desirable space. I don't expect that my students will ever compare the classroom to home for obvious reasons. For many of my students now (and in the future, I suspect), their home environments are unstable and not necessarily welcoming. Through all of this I have found that it is not difficult to create an environment that is welcoming and cozy. Although I may not have much in common with my students socially or economically, I believe that making the classroom a livable environment, may create a foundation for commonalities. What I have done thus far is very generic. I think the next step is to somehow bring my students' backgrounds into the décor to further strengthen a common bond.

Just for fun, today at the end of the day I hollered, "How do I want my room?" Many of my students chimed in "spotless", mostly out of habit. Daisy, on the other hand, quickly informed me, "It's our room." As it should be.

Conclusion

Early in our foundations course, the first author "warned" the class that what we would read and hear would be very critical of schools. Many problems within schooling would be highlighted, but what we would have to live without, were immediate solutions. In the end, this was not the case. Yes, we tackled many of the issues within schooling that continue to be problematic. I now feel, however, that macro problems can have micro solutions. The story that I shared before is an example of that notion. Issues of hidden curriculum, ignorance of student culture, and the like, continue to exist. What has changed (in my mind at least) is the notion that I can transform what is readily available to me (in this case my classroom environment) in simple but meaningful ways.

I have heard teachers state, "Why get a masters degree in education? I can't use any of the knowledge I gain [within a scripted curriculum] anyway." I find it extremely unfortunate that some teachers feel that way. It is clear to me that through action research this perception will cease.

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