Beyond Critical Pedagogy: An account of youth enactment in multiliterate culture

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Abstract

Educational reform both nationally and internationally is underpinned by an emancipatory agenda, in particular the principles of social justice. Educators are called upon to achieve this through a pedagogy which is immersed in the language of critical theory. Whilst syllabus documents and curriculum policies reflect such an agenda, it begs the question of whether such policies and pedagogical practices are influencing the everyday social lives and practices of youth, particularly in cases where emancipation is not a key issue. Are contemporary youth making choices that further the critical transformative cause, or are our critical pedagogies simply serving to perpetuate dominant understandings?

Within a critical poststructuralist framework, this paper explores and interprets accounts of youth enactment of the tenets of critical pedagogy within their multiliterate lives.

Introduction

Syllabus documents and curriculum policies nationally, internationally, and specifically in Queensland, are steeped in the language of critical pedagogy and social justice, supporting the notion of developing students’ knowledges, abilities and attitudes as critical consumers and citizens, with the power to transform or redesign social futures (Education Queensland, 2000; 2002; 2004).

Within changing societies which are increasingly characterised by discontinuity, we attempt to cope with changing labour markets, family structures, new technologies and literacies, political structures and power authorities. The role of schools, school systems, teachers and resources has become somewhat cloudy and ill-defined as schools try to adapt to social change (Levin & Riffel, 1997). Halpin (1996) suggests that schools can imitate a particular version of the past, or they can engage with and anticipate change (in Levin & Riffel, 1997). Critical Theorists and pedagogues, however, argue that schools should initiate change and challenge hegemonic ways of seeing the world, rather than simply coping with change (Featherstone, 1992; Giroux, 2000; Kanpol, 1997; Shapiro, 1995). Such theorists believe that in our postmodern world of corporate culture, the critical pedagogy agenda is important to engender a revitalised, vibrant, informed public forum in which ‘media realities’ of our social world can be interrogated and contested (Shapiro, 1995).
Critical pedagogy: Some contemporary issues

The practical implications of critical pedagogy are sometimes impeded by particular structures, practices, policies and hegemonic ideas within the school system and the curriculum. Many scholars argue that schools are steeped in modernity (Giddens, 1991; Lankshear, Peters, & Knobel, 1996), with structures and traditions that form ‘spaces of enclosure’ (Lankshear et al., 1996) within which education takes place. Even critical teachers must incorporate generative themes within the bounds of the enclosed space of the obligatory curriculum, often working with required texts, imposed pedagogical and assessment structures and school rules, so they are caught in the very web of power structures that they purport to reject and challenge. Kanpol supports this view as he states that teachers and/or students sometimes resist oppressive structures, yet such acts of resistance often accommodate such structures (Kanpol, 1997), so they are caught in a ‘Catch-22’ situation. Patti Lather also asks the question: ‘How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance?’ (Lather, 1995 p. 169), when too often such pedagogies couch empowerment as something done ‘to’, ‘for’ or ‘by’ someone to enlighten the ‘as-yet unliberated’.

Sumsion (2003) suggests that humanist discourses in schools position teachers in terms of personal agency and see them as potentially powerful actors, yet such discourses tend to overlook the possibility that these individualist notions are a means for self-regulation or Foucault’s ‘technologies of self’ (Foucault, 1979) whereby the individual imposes self-disciplinary mechanisms to secure adherence to accepted orthodoxies or hegemonic discourses. This can also apply to students in schools who take pleasure in conforming to powerful individualist discourses of success.

This is juxtaposed against the ideals of critical pedagogy, where such power dominance and authority is contested, and students are encouraged to be independent, critical thinkers who challenge such structures and norms in our society. It ends up being a hypocritical curriculum, and in many cases it simply reinforces the hegemonically constructed nature of school knowledge and the hidden curriculum, in fact ‘schools divide their clientele into social slots, with minimal hopes of social transformation’ (Kanpol, 1997 p. 132).

Kanpol argues for ‘resistance’, which he defines in this instance, as questioning and interrogating the dominant ideology and hegemony. He refers to this form of resistance as ‘cultural political resistance’, which leads to acting upon such interrogations, and
subsequently to social change. He suggests that students need to become aware of their own dominated lives, in order to remodel their collective experiences (Kanpol, 1997).

This is particularly important for today’s youth who have been described as the choice generation. This choice generation is at the heart of what Giddens (1991) describes as life politics, which is the politics of choice – the politics of lifestyle. In some respects life politics can be constructed as a politics of self-indulgence. It is conceivable that the politics of self-actualization have actually been detrimental to the class struggle. For example, Klein (2000) argues that the lobby groups who have had considerable success in changing policy over the last 20 Years have in their quest as individuals for self-actualization led to an abandonment of perhaps a higher cause in terms of alleviating oppression. Does it assume simply a burgeoning middle class and an assumption that life chances are improving for all? Do today’s youth see any need for an emancipatory agenda, or can they simply pick and choose trendy social causes that suit their lifestyles?

New constructions of critical pedagogy
Shapiro proposes a pedagogy that allows an emancipation which enables the silenced voices and lived experiences of students to be heard and to begin accounting for and naming their own worlds (Shapiro, 1995). Lather (1995) also considers that deconstructing our own practices can animate and expand our sense of possibilities for change-oriented practices. Critical theorists call for a pedagogy in which multiple voices and narratives are foregrounded, and given space for informed critique and development (Giroux, 2000; Lankshear et al., 1996; Lather, 1995). Many argue for the use of technology and cyberspace to break out of the spaces of enclosure to encompass emerging postmodern spaces (Kellner, 2002; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Lankshear et al., 1996; Luke, 2000; Weaver & Grindall, 1998).

Critical dialogues are central to this concept, to decentre notions of power, recognize difference, redefine the self, and challenge the use of technology as a means of control, whilst promoting the nurturing of multiple personalities and hybrid identities, with regard to the broader social, economic, political and cultural climate within which they are constituted. This approach to pedagogy has at its core, ambiguity, contradiction and uncertainty, and it sees educational practice as more self-regulated, purpose-driven, more egalitarian and socially constructed than any traditional modernist concept of education.
**Lived experiences and subjectivities: Plaisir vs jouissance**

According to Kenway and Bullen (2001), pleasure is an important ingredient in youth culture, and the pleasures that are evoked are of different kinds. *Plaisir* is defined by Grace and Tobin (1997) as a pleasure derived from conforming or relating to the social order, so students would display behaviours that are in-sync with social norms, and they would derive pleasure from praise and reinforcement of such behaviours. They would consequently derive pleasure from being able to use the system to their advantage. Such students’ lived experiences and subjectivities are bound up in their desire for particular pleasure (Kanpol, 1997), and as they hold power in dominant institutional systems and social spheres, they have no investment in the change of such systems.

*Jouissance*, on the other hand, is defined as a voluptuous pleasure which knows no bounds, and is derived from transgressing the social order (Grace & Tobin, 1997; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Kristeva, 1982). These students take pleasure in acts of resistance to social norms and hegemonic systems, and invest in a subculture of rebellion (Wyn & White, 1997). Girls in particular may celebrate their capacity to exploit and use different forms of sexual expression derived from their view that their sexuality is ‘natural’, and by freely expressing it, they are breaking down and challenging patriarchal values within the school hierarchy (Blackman, 1998). Students such as this may have an investment in the change of the dominant social order, as they reject it. Some students, however, may not want to change dominant structures because of the pleasure derived from transgressing them.

**The research process**

**Relevant literature**

This paper is drawn from a broader study of critical pedagogy and youth, and draws on poststructural notions of subjectivity through discourse and language, which focus on:

- the shifting, fragmented, multi-faceted and contradictory nature of our experiences...as we find ourselves positioned now one way and now another, inside one set of power relations or another, constituted through one discourse or another, in one context or another (Davies, 1994 p. 3).

An individual’s subjectivity is multiple and contradictory, and is made possible through the varieties of experiences and intersections of discourses and storylines through their life history (Davies, 1994). This view of subjectivity within poststructural theory rejects the
notion of a fixed, humanist identity in favour of one that sees the subject as dynamic and fluid, and in that sense, as open to differing and imposed interpretations.

The process of actively taking up discourses in dynamic ways through one’s own desires and choices, is called subjectification (Davies, 2003; Threadgold, 2000; Weedon, 1987). These discourses then shape the subject and the ways in which they exist in the world. Subjectification concerns power, the powerful forces of discourses (ideologies) that constitute the subject, and are then reproduced through the subject.

(T)he construction of meaning, authority, and subjectivity is governed by ideologies inscribed in language and which offer different possibilities for people to construct their relationships to themselves, others, and the larger reality (Giroux, 1990 p. 85).

The study
The research was conducted at a State High School in regional Queensland, chosen because of its reputation in offering programs informed by critical pedagogy, particularly in relation to visual and multimodal text.

Participants
The participants were drawn from a group of students at this State High School, identified by their English teacher as being competent in visual and critical literacy, so the possible transfer of such abilities into their everyday lives could be studied.

This paper will focus upon one participant from the broader study who was in Year Eleven at the time of data collection, and was sixteen Years old.

Data sources
The data used for this paper were gathered on a number of levels, including the use of a multi-modal popular culture text (constructed as part of normal class activity) as a prompt for discussion, learning conversations (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985), semi-structured interviews and group discussions.

Data analysis
I have utilized an approach to data analysis that is informed by the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This is a multidisciplinary approach that Fuller and Lee (1997 p. 410) with reference to the work of McHoul & Luke (1989) suggest “draws upon other disciplinary methods of text analysis outside linguistics, notably semiotics, critical theory and
poststructuralism, in order to engage critically with questions of power and subjectivity, while at the same time paying close attention to the specificity of text”.

I have drawn extensively from Fuller and Lee’s (1997) application of Halliday’s interpersonal function of language, which is concerned with the interactions within and between texts, or the enactment of social relations, and how this can be related particularly to dimensions of power and solidarity as part of broader institutional discourses. Specifically they work with the term ‘collusion’ which they describe as:

> a way of discussing the necessary conditions of any socio-discursive practice. Collusion is about moving around inside relations of power. The term resonates with the silences and ambiguities, the elusions and complicity between writers and readers which inhabit all textual practices...mediated through institutional discursive regimes (pp. 410-411).

Fuller and Lee have taken a poststructuralist perspective on this interpersonal function, which they see as being “problematically located within humanistic, rationalist and individualist discourses” (1997 p. 413) and they have replaced it with the term ‘intersubjective’ to reflect the “shifting positioned practices negotiated over the course of the text” (p. 413). Further to this, they take Fairclough’s (1992) term ‘manifest intertextuality’ and refashion it as ‘manifest dialogia’ to reflect their intersubjective motivations. They suggest that manifest dialogia is realized grammatically on a scale from ‘other-ness’ to ‘own-ness’, through:

- Quoting, or making another’s text explicit in one’s own.
- Interpolation, or explicitly constructing a dialogue between textual interlocutors such as I believe/argue or you think, and
- Probabilisation, or evaluations around the probability or surmisability of propositions such as maybe, apparently (1997 p. 415).

This perspective has been particularly useful in the analysis of how the participants’ changing personae within textual instances, along with their weaving of other texts into their own, particularly their utilization of particular multiliteracies, can determine the success of a collusion or text. This allowed me to explore the possible implications of such collusions on the enactment of a critical agenda.

This paper interrogates one particular aspect of the broader study, that is, the ways in which students are encouraged to collude in traditional humanist discourses of schooling that focus on individuals realising their potential in terms of school success. It poses the question as to
whether students draw on a powerful but limited range of discourses to make sense of schooling.

**Paul’s story**

For the purposes of this paper I have focused upon one of the participants (Paul) from the broader study as the data indicate his story to be particularly illustrative of the textual collusions, *plaisir* performances and multiple personae that students engage in within the traditional humanist discourses of schooling which focus upon individual agency for success.

Paul is (at the time of the study) a Year Eleven student who positions himself as a ‘good’ student, interested in school and learning, involved in a variety of extra-curricula activities such as drama and writing, and a proficient and enthusiastic user of information and communication technologies and game consoles. He chooses not to have a part-time job, preferring instead he says, to focus on his grades and his extra-curricula activities at the expense of having money to spend.

Paul’s accounts of himself and his activities indicate successful collusions in the game of schooling and *plaisir* performances that afford him particular forms of power in institutional settings such as family and school. His accounts also, however, suggest multiple personae in his interactions with the researcher, which are complex and sometimes contradictory to his self-positioning as a successful student. Paul’s data will be analysed in terms of these multiple personae as he engages in textual collusions and *plaisir* performances.

**Textual collusions**

Some of the discussions with Paul were about the advertisement (see appendix one) and marketing campaign that he constructed as part of his class work at school. Paul explicitly and purposefully drew from other texts and contexts to successfully construct a text in order to achieve an A grade, even though the content of the advertisement was not, by his own account, what he himself believed, or even wanted to include, so his textualised persona in this instance is purely for the benefit of the audience (his teacher).

*(Note: MR = Researcher; PH = Paul)*
MR: I notice your ad is about parties and that sort of thing, because of the type of product it is, um are you into that sort of thing? Music or dancing or parties?

PH: No, I did that because what happened was, I had an idea and my teacher didn’t really like it, so I decided to go with just a stereotypical brand thing that I knew I could write an ad on, and get an A.

MR: Right, so can you tell me what your original idea was?

PH: Um, I can’t remember now, its…Have you seen the ad?

MR: Yeah

PH: Well it was going to be this globe thing that you could put a DVD in, and convert it to VCR or put a CD in and convert it to audio disc, just ’cause it’s so hard to convert from one to the other, like DVD to video or…well DVD to video’s not hard, but anything else is, so I wanted to do this machine that would just do it all.

MR: And why don’t you think your teacher liked that idea?

PH: Ah, too complicated for the ad really, so I just dumbed it down a bit.

MR: So you felt you had to dumb it down for the assignment?

PH: Oh that’s because um, it’s kind of hard to say all that in an ad whilst still attracting attention and all that.

MR: And do you think it was very much geared towards what your teacher would think so you’d get a good mark for it?

PH: Um, well she kind of said, ‘I like this THETA idea, it is kind of unusual’, it was just a symbol that I got out of my Maths C book, and um, so she said just make this into a kind of party machine, so I said ‘yeah ok’, then later on…it didn’t have lights on it, and her husband read the ad ’cause I know her husband through drama at the Uni, this is my old teacher…I’ve got a new one now. So he suggested that, so I wrote that in too.

Paul successfully (as indicated by his grade of A) deconstructed his advertisement for this assignment, including analysis of how the visual effects, language and design would manipulate a stereotypical teenage audience. His well-developed collusionary tactics mean that he used sophisticated meta-language to impress his teacher, and he showed evidence of recognising and moving around inside the relations of power (Fuller & Lee, 1997) in this setting by drawing appropriately on ‘own-ness’ through his knowledge of multiliterate designs of meaning such as visual, spatial and linguistic; knowledge of teacher expectations; and by embracing traditional discourses of schooling, along with ‘other-ness’ by directly quoting from other texts and contexts, such as his Maths C textbook, his teacher and another adult in a different context.

Whilst Paul is successfully colluding in the discourse of schooling that purports to be steeped in critical pedagogy, it is important to note that later in the interview he suggests that he is unable to deconstruct or critically analyse a multimodal text without looking back at his school notes.

MR: Have you said those sorts of things about teenagers, simply because you think it’s a media construction?
PH: That’s what the teacher wanted to hear, pretty much, so...and all of these...I’ve pulled out of my...That’s why I couldn’t answer the questions earlier...I can’t remember a thing I wrote, I look at this, and I could probably, if I had my book with what things mean, I could probably write a 800 page essay, but, yeah, cause I don’t remember a thing about it.

MR: So if you looked at that, without looking at what you’ve written, could you tell me stuff about it, or would you need to go back to look at the sort of stuff...?

PH: I could probably tell you a few things, but most of it...Like this kind of thing, ah, rule 3 there - make the audience feel comfortable, I remember cause we do that in English, in Film & TV I think and Drama and just when I’m writing essays. Um, Theta 2000 actually I think sounds hi-tech. It actually means Greek symbol for T 2000, which isn’t really that hi-tech, but it sounds like it, um... ‘Don’t be the only kid on the block without it’ – appeals, but I’d probably have to have a look at my book to read over what I’ve written, cause...

MR: When you see ads yourself, in your everyday life, do you think you’d be able to look at them and deconstruct them?

PH: Yeah I think I’d be able to deconstruct ‘em but again, I’d probably have to go back to my notes cause, yeah. Sometimes, while watching it, it might trigger my memory, like I think, oh that’s right, we learned about how teenagers appeal to sound capacities of words...sorry about that.

Paul seems to be so adept at successfully colluding within school texts and contexts, that unless he sees himself as being able to produce a criterion-perfect text, then he positions himself as unable to do it. This, despite his later explanations about his analysis of the Bible to determine the source of Christian attitudes about homosexuality, which he suggests is constructed as being an evil on par with murder. Paul deconstructs the use of words such as homosexuals and homosexuality and analyses their use in terms of the time in which the document was produced and the meanings that have been constructed from it.

PH: Yeah it’s like, with Christians, I used to be Christian, but I don’t agree with their stance on homosexuality, like I’m not gay myself, but I don’t um think that you should not like people because they are gay, or call ‘em sinners or whatever, cause, um, anyway...?

MR: Keep going

PH: You’re sure? Um, well um, in the Bible it says...I’ve read through the Bible once or twice, and homosexuality is mentioned in about 6 places I reckon, like 3 times in the Old Testament, and 3 times in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, it’s mentioned in Leviticus, is it Leviticus?

MR: I think so.

PH: Well, it goes um, if somebody’s dying, kill them...not these words, but... if somebody’s gay, kill them, so we apparently ignore all the bits except the ones we want to hear, well not we, you know, ‘christians’, and... not all, sorry...I’m trying not to put anyone down, but so they pick on that, and they think that’s a good enough reason, they go, what about all these others that are right next to it, like about killing blind people, and they go oh, that doesn’t apply anymore, so they get to the homosexuals ...and in the new testament, Jesus mentions homosexuals about once or twice in a huge list, like...
thou shalt not um, I don’t know, but it’s about adulterers, swindlers, homosexuals and all these other ones, and it’s mentioned about three times in a list, and people think that’s good enough. Cause you don’t see us going out stopping the adulterers, making it illegal, not letting ‘em get married and all that, and also, I read a site once that was all about how the Bible’s been translated over the years, and they reckon that the homosexuality bit, actually referred to homosexual rapists, when Jesus was talking about it, so I think that people just believe what’s written in the Bible cause Jesus said it. It’s like…do some research and just find out…it might not even mean that...

Paul shows evidence of interpolation (Fuller & Lee, 1997) as he constructs part of this explanation as a dialogue between unidentified third parties, including his own comments on the fictional conversation, which is a way to draw the listener (researcher) in, a collusionary technique often employed as part of casual conversation with friends. He is testing the power relations in this interview situation as evidenced by his interpersonal language: by checking in with the researcher; by adopting familiar conversational techniques; and by making comments about his intentions ‘not to offend anyone’. He also, however, positions himself as part of the dominant normal group in society by his use of us and them, and this allows him to introduce ‘own-ness’ (Fuller & Lee, 1997) through his evaluative comments.

Whilst Paul is successfully achieving the outcomes related to critical analysis of multimodal text, there is a danger that critical pedagogy can lead to a formulaic approach to the emancipatory agenda (McLaren, 1998), particularly for those students who are generally unaffected by such an agenda in their everyday lives. Particular texts and contexts are authorised to be deconstructed according to particular criteria, which leads to successful demonstration of outcomes, which leads to school and therefore life success. The constraints of time, curriculum needs and resources (Lankshear et al., 1996) mean that often whilst critical pedagogy is embraced and embedded into programs on paper, the powerful humanist progressive discourses of schooling, particularly those which focus on the individual forging their own stable and continuous identity (Davies, 1990; Sumsion, 2003) as a successful student by achieving outcomes or pathways to life success, often circumvent a critical agenda.

Paul continually endorses such individualist discourses in his accounts of self, and even throughout the interviews he tried to maintain the attention on him and his successes at school and life. His interpolative use of the pronoun ‘I’ is extensive, and his confidence to make judgements about other students, teachers and contexts at this site indicate his self-positioning as an authority on school discourses of individual success. Paul was quite happy to deconstruct and analyse particular texts and contexts, however he often tried to de-rail
questions that attempted to prompt him to construct a resistant reading of self (Johnson, 2002) by explaining his new X-box game or how he won a gaming competition or how he made a DVD and sold it over the internet. Paul was determined to have control over the direction of the discussion, and his success in textual and contextual collusion in the past has alerted him to the power and to the pleasure (plaisir) that this can bring.

**Plaisir performances**

Paul was trying hard throughout the interviews to gain my approval. He often suggested that he didn’t want to offend anybody; he regularly checked whether his discussion was okay; he asked for the researcher’s opinion about his viewpoints; and he constantly expounded his school success throughout the discussions. He takes pleasure in conforming to hegemonic school discourses as it positions him as a successful student. This positioning has certain rewards: teachers admire him and choose him for special projects, for example, this research project where he gets to talk about himself to a willing audience; he is able to stretch the boundaries of certain behaviours at school that his ‘unsuccessful’ peers are not; he is able to freely use the internet at home with no surveillance; and his parents are able to talk about him with admiration to their friends and family.

Paul legitimates humanist progressive school discourses through his accounts at various times. He talks about a friend who dropped out of Maths B…

**PH:** Well, I think she could have...using her as an eg...I think she could have got an A if she’d worked harder at it. She didn’t work hard cause she didn’t enjoy it, but I think...

**MR:** So do you think the most important thing is getting an A? Is that the measure of success?

**PH:** It’s hard to say, I mean if you care about your OP, you should work...even if you don’t enjoy it, you should work at it, get an A, as opposed to drop out of it, go to Maths A and get a lower OP...but...

**MR:** And what’s the biggest disaster if you don’t get a good OP?

**PH:** Um...I have no idea actually, I’m just...

**MR:** Well that seems to be a thing that’s really highly valued isn’t it?

**PH:** It is, yeah, very much, cause it’s a measure of how hard you work I guess, and how well you did academically against other people. Cause anywhere in Qld, they’ll know the OP, so you can say, I got an OP 1, and oh I got an OP 5, and...

**MR:** What about...have you ever thought about those kids...like, who maybe aren’t interested in what school has to offer, like it doesn’t connect to them...have you thought about how they might be disadvantaged if they don’t buy into school knowledge?

**PH:** No...I can’t empathise with them...I just don’t know anyone who’s like that...don’t understand the whole viewpoint...
He cannot (and seems unwilling to) see that there are alternative discourses that can be legitimate in schools. He describes teachers as wanting what is best for the students (good results for university) even though they are constrained by curriculum requirements, and he suggests that 90 percent of students at school just don’t care enough to try hard and do well to get a good OP (overall position) exit measure at the end of Year Twelve, which is used for university entrance. Paul’s intersubjective realisations of ‘own-ness’ are again evident in his use of probabilisations (Fuller & Lee, 1997) where he evaluates and surmises the probability of particular propositions and the outcomes of particular attitudes. He knows he is valued at school, and he takes pleasure in being positioned by himself and others (particularly teachers and parents who are powerful participants in Paul’s life) as a valued student who is able to comment on his own and others’ practices.

The critical agenda which values students’ contributions to a socially just society and which rejects the unquestioning acceptance of hegemonic discourses seems to be contradicted by the institutional discourses underpinning the practices of schooling, and the rewards given to those who successfully and pleasurably collude in such contexts. Paul’s account of his willingness to enact the critical agenda seems to fall within the parameters of school-endorsed social justice. He claims to be passionate about gay rights which is a focus area in the school program, and is of course in the broader social construction in the media, for example through high rating lifestyle shows and sitcoms that romanticise a gay lifestyle, a sexy and trendy issue for teenagers to be passionate about. He seems to take pleasure in taking up discourses of social justice that he has studied at school, yet he says that he is not interested in other causes for social conscience.

**MR:** Ok um...now....are you interested in the corporate activity of particular companies, like for example, you said you like McDonalds food...are you aware of some of their corporate practices?

**PH:** No

**MR:** Like for example, their happy meal toys, you know, like children in Asian countries make those for like 5c an hour, and that sort of thing...

**PH:** No, not...

**MR:** Not aware of any of that?

**PH:** That ties into what we were saying before about homeless people...who is compassionate...I’m compassionate, but not specifically compassionate enough to care about it...it sounds coldhearted probably but....

**MR:** So you don’t think that that’s an issue that we as a society should take up?

**PH:** I think we as a society should, just not we as a ...me.
MR: So if everyone had your attitude, what would happen?

PH: Umm...that's a good point, yeah. Um...well everyone doesn’t, so that’s invalid to begin with...but if everyone did...if everyone had my attitude I think eventually something would happen, because...well it wouldn’t function...society would not function if everyone had my attitude.

MR: So you’re kind of saying, it’s not my problem? Someone else can deal with it?

PH: Yes, but in saying that, I mean I’m going to be dealing with other problems instead. I can’t deal with every single problem, but I am planning on dealing with problems eventually. For example, homosexual rights, as you may have noticed, I’m an activist in that sense...well not an activist, but...

It seems that Giddens’ (1991) notion of life politics whereby youth of this generation make choices about social activism according to their lifestyles, is pertinent for Paul’s story. He chooses those causes which are endorsed by his school learning, and which impact on him through his affiliation with gay friends. There seems to be no interrogation within the critical pedagogies of this school, of why Paul would make such choices, how he has come to think in these ways, and what legitimate alternatives there are for him. Whilst Paul takes on different positions or personae throughout the discussions, the humanist discourses of fixed identity at play mean that he doesn’t account for why this might be so.

Despite his account of his open-minded and fair persona, he positions and describes his peers in negative ways if they don’t conform to his idea of success or appropriate behaviour.

MR: Now in the last interview you talked about when you were in grade 8, you know the whole popularity thing...um, and you talked about some of the girls there, the popular girls as being slutty...and...well can you tell me whether you think popularity is linked to sexual behaviour? Or is that what slutty means? Is that what you...?

PH: Well, there’s acting slutty and there’s being slutty...I can’t remember which one I meant.

MR: Well tell me what slutty means.

PH: Acting slutty is acting like you want to have sex, being slutty is having sex with people.

MR: So you think they were acting slutty?

PH: I’d say so, like yeah, because um...

MR: So what sort of behaviours would you characterize as acting slutty?

PH: Ummm...well Cath and Paula, two girls here, you can cross out their names...they um, they I don’t know...they kind of talk about their breasts like in a conversational manner, and oh...yeah, they act slutty, I don’t know if they are, but they talk about giving blow jobs to people...I don’t know if they do or not, but they definitely act slutty. And then there’s Kelly, whose in my English class...um, she sleeps around, she has sex with people, but...and she’ll bring it up in conversation only if it’s mentioned, so she doesn’t act slutty unless you know, it’s what the conversation’s about, but I’d say she is...

MR: So you think if you sleep with people, you’re slutty?
Paul is again pleasurably positioning himself as both morally superior and a good teenager with his admission about his own sex-life, which again means that he feels able to make judgements about his peers. He represents girls in negative ways as he categorises their moral characters according to their use of language about their bodies and their performative statements about sexual acts. These girls may in fact be engaging in jouissance performances, in juxtaposition to Paul’s plaisir performances, yet this is not how they are represented by Paul.

As a successful student in critical analyses and multiliteracies as measured by his grades and his nomination for this project by his teacher, he seems unable and/or unwilling to problematise his own multiple personae and his processes of subjectification. It isn’t surprising that Paul does not engage in such interrogation of self, because he doesn’t have to. He is successful and valued both at school and outside of school; he successfully colludes in the traditional discourses of schooling as he takes responsibility for his own success in gaining university entrance and therefore the promise of life success; and his life situation does not call for any ‘radical’ emancipation. So why should he?

**Conclusion**
Critical pedagogy seems to achieve its purported outcomes to some extent for Paul, in that he has acquired the skills of deconstruction and analysis, and he is able (in theory) to recognise that some groups can be empowered or marginalised in society; however he only chooses to apply these skills in proactive ways to particular social justice issues that fit with his lifestyle options. Paul’s school is steeped in traditional humanist discourses which in many ways derail the critical agenda and focus upon progressive notions of individual agency to ensure one’s own life success.

Critical pedagogy should not focus entirely on the analysis and deconstruction of others’ texts; rather it should ensure that students are exposed to poststructuralist discourses of
multiplicity and complexity so that they are able to explore and problematise their own processes of subjectification, and come to some understanding about why they legitimate particular discourses at particular times, and why other equally legitimate discourses can be valued within a broader social context which acknowledges the multiple ways that meaning is constructed and enacted.

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References


Appendix One

The Theta 2000

Advertisement and rationale
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