GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Critical Pedagogy

By Elena Quiñones | April 22, 2024

Theories of critical pedagogy foreground the transformative power of education through consciousness-raising approaches to teaching. Among different approaches to critical pedagogy, there tends to be consistent attention to creating a horizontal student-teacher relationship, seeking new strategies for critical consciousness-raising of institutional structures and social realities, and suggesting methods for integrating social-historical reality into the pedagogical space. In focusing on the liberatory possibilities of education and centering the self-guided education of the oppressed, critical pedagogy is linked to the liberatory politics of Global South thought.

Critical pedagogy was popularized through the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, most famously in his critical work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), and also through his many other critical works on pedagogy as well as his field experience in adult education in Brazil. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,Freire argues that through a consciousness-raising approach to pedagogy — an approach he calls *conscientização* — "the oppressed unveil the world of oppression," which creates the terms of education that then allows for a process of transformation (54). Critical pedagogy creates and maintains commitments to radical political projects of freedom and liberation for the oppressed peoples of the world.

Many researchers and educators have written about critical pedagogy since Freire. It remains an important field in philosophy of education with a high volume of ongoing research.[1] Given spatial constraints, this essay aims to offer an introduction to the concept by focusing on three key contributors — Paulo Freire, Enrique Dussel, and bell hooks. The essay starts with Freire then moves to Dussel and hooks to consider how their writings furthered the idea of critical pedagogy. To articulate the features and stakes of the project of critical pedagogy, I examine its key terms and arguments, focusing on *conscientização*, the student-teacher relationship, and the transformative possibility of education. The final section of this essay turns to debates on critical pedagogy in the twenty-first century, identifying the terms of the contemporary debate and positing the continued relevance of critical pedagogy in a changing social and political context.

Conscientização

Conscientização defines the process for critical pedagogy, reflecting its values as a method "from below," in which the students' role in their education is prioritized. Freire uses the term *conscientização* to describe the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1968, 35). In this description, the act of consciousness-raising is rooted in the social-historical context of oppression. Consciousness-raising is what allows a group of people to

“take action” toward liberation; it is a key element of revolutionary praxis.

In his earlier work *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1965), Freire describes the necessity of a pedagogy based in *conscientização*. Referring to Brazil as an “alienated society,” Freire suggests that people in an alienated society “seek to transplant from other cultures solutions to their problems” (1965, 10). Because these solutions are “neither generated by a critical analysis of the context itself, nor adequately adapted to the context, they prove inoperative and unfruitful” (10). The context-specific nature of *conscientização* takes on a primary role in developing a critical pedagogy. *Conscientização* is the pedagogic process by which oppressed peoples can be empowered to move away from external solutions for symptoms and structures of oppression and develop their own context-specific solutions instead. This reflects the “from below” nature of a pedagogy centered on *conscientização*. The description and critique of society comes from the oppressed group. Then, the transformation of society is based on that critique. The students’ thoughts are centered in this process.

In Freire’s thought, the pedagogical format that emerges from *conscientização* is described as a “‘problem-posing’ education, responding to the essence of consciousness” (1968, 79). This is opposed to what Freire calls the “banking method” of education, where students are seen as sites for depositing information. The banking method of education, thought to be the hegemonic form of education against which Freire forms the “problem-posing” style of education, furthers a top-down style of teaching and learning. In a problem-posing style of education, the students — through *conscientização* — define the terms of the problems of reality rooted in the socially and historically specific context of oppression. This is the “from below” nature of critical pedagogy.

In his critical work *Pedagogics of Liberation: A Latin American Philosophy of Education* (2019), Enrique Dussel writes about the extent of social transformation made necessary and possible by consciousness-raising. He considers the positioned nature of consciousness-raising as he offers the foregrounding of “Latin American being”: “Politically, Latin American pedagogics begins by welcoming the revelation of the ‘Latin American being,’ *our voice*”(Dussel 2019, 121). By naming the importance of the “Latin American being” and “voice” in his theory, Dussel emphasizes the context-specific stakes of a new critical pedagogy. Dussel’s *Pedagogics of Liberation* offers an expansive view of critical pedagogy, taking the discussion from pedagogy to pedagogics to reflect a larger-scale theoretical commitment to the ways in which all social systems and institutions form a disciplinary education for the people. Dussel defines pedagogics as “the part of philosophy (along with ethics, politics, and economics) which considers face-to-face relationships… Pedagogics as we intend it here has a greater significance than pedagogy, covering all types of ‘discipline’ (what is received from another) existing in opposition to ‘invention’ (what is discovered on one’s own)” (47). Dussel’s intervention in a discourse of critical pedagogy via pedagogics prioritizes large-scale social transformations that change the terms of “face-to-face relationships.”

Written from the site of the U.S. academy, bell hooks’ essays in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) consider the possible routes and obstacles to a consciousness-raising pedagogy. Citing inspiration from Freire’s work, hooks also critiques Freire and stages the importance of a model that integrates “anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies” (1994, 10). Reflecting the specific context of U.S. higher education in the early 1990s, hooks analyzes the conditions that create inequities in the classroom

context with a focus on gender, class, and race. In considering different sites of tension amidst a multiculturalist moment, hooks thinks about the limitations of both teachers and students to participate in a consciousness-raising process of education, suggesting the necessity of discomfort and growth in the process: “Often, professors and students have to learn to accept different ways of knowing, new epistemologies in the multicultural setting” (41). In *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks offers theories and stories from her classroom experience, reflecting the challenges of building a collective interest in such a pedagogy for both professors and students.

The Student-Teacher Relationship

As is suggested in hooks’ idea that “professors and students have to learn to accept different ways of knowing, new epistemologies,” a critical pedagogy rethinks the roles of teacher and student to arrive at a more horizontal construction. What is so illustrative about hooks’ articulation is the notion that in a critical pedagogy mode, teachers and students are doing the learning and accepting together. It is not a situation in which the teacher knows what is correct before the student. In a critical pedagogy, truth is explored and created in “solidarity” between teacher and student (Freire 1968, 77). The idea of solidarity between the teacher and student emphasizes the mutuality of the critical pedagogy approach.

To this effect, Freire develops a useful vocabulary around the teacher-student dynamic in critical pedagogy. In a few instances, he calls teachers and students “co-investigators,” reflecting the mutually-insightful process of a critical pedagogy (1968, 81). Similar to hooks’ formulation, the new ways of knowing are happening for the teacher and student at the same time. Another term Freire uses to describe the teacher-student dynamic is “co-intentional education,” naming the mutual subjectivity and mutual responsibility in the construction of a critical pedagogy (69).

In Freire’s articulation of critical pedagogy, dialogue and the centrality of students’ role in creating dialogue is central to the project. Stemming from the same logic of *conscientização* that grounds consciousness-raising in the students’ perception of social reality and oppression, Freire sees the “dialogical” construction of the problem-posing method as “constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world, where their own generative themes are found” (1968, 109). This reflects his larger motivation in rejecting a top-down model of education. In describing the role and responsibility of teachers, Freire writes, “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (96). In Freire’s theorization of critical pedagogy, the teacher’s responsibility is to create a learning environment in which a dialogue about the world, different ways of understanding it, and new ideas about what a transformed world could look like are able to emerge.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks extends the critique of the teacher-student dynamic to look critically at the role of the broader classroom dynamic in education. In describing a successful classroom dynamic, hooks emphasizes collective participation and presence. To this effect, hooks writes that “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (1994, 8). The idea of “community” is another term that locates the priorities of critical pedagogy in its collective aspirations.

Dussel's project to think about critical pedagogics brings the critique of the teacher-student dynamic to the level of the state. In *Pedagogics of Liberation*, Dussel argues for the importance of the teacher figure listening to the student figure whether that is in the school setting or in other sites of education in the systems and governing institutions. He discusses the roles of teacher and student on this larger scale, writing that "…the teacher that listens to the voice of the young person, the State that educates its young people and community, must know how to stay silent at times, must leave young people to perform their historical responsibility" (Dussel 2019, 119). This framing reflects the continuity of change and the importance of letting students lead in their education.

Transforming Systems, Transforming the World

The political project of critical pedagogy is toward freedom, liberation, and humanization for everyone. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* suggests that the "struggle for humanization" can only be led by oppressed people (1968, 44). His idea of a critical pedagogy stakes radical belief in the transformative power of education. Freire argues that in the process of consciousness-raising and dialogical learning, students and teachers are able to critically analyze the contextual situation of oppression and participate in the act of creating a new reality together. As this pedagogy toward a "new reality" is realized, it "ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation" (54). This is not a single process, however. Freire emphasizes throughout his work that such a pedagogical approach is an ongoing process.

Reflecting the continuity of a transformative pedagogy, hooks writes about "education as the practice of freedom" (1994, 15). A practice signifies an ongoing process. A critical pedagogy is an ongoing process rather than a singular revolutionary event. Freedom is a keyword across works on critical pedagogy, inflected in Freire's writing in its concreteness and situatedness: "Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (1968, 47). Freire's critical pedagogy is interested in how the condition of freedom can be created and continued through the educational setting.

Dussel establishes the imperative of transforming all sites of pedagogy, calling for "a new school, a new medicine, and other new services for the oppressed" (2019, 140). The route to liberation is across sites of pedagogy and requires a transformation of all pedagogic institutions to prioritize the needs of the people and to be sites of continued and sustainable care.

Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century

This final section reflects on twenty-first century ambivalence and optimism around the political promises of critical pedagogy. As critical pedagogy continues to be a significant force in research and thought on the philosophy of education, scholars wrestle with education's potential to conduct radical social transformation. Early theorists of critical pedagogy, such as Freire, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor staked their thought in the possibility of social transformation. Skepticism of education's ability to produce such revolutionary futures has become a core feature of critical pedagogy discourse with texts like *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (2018) articulating an alternative source of hope in the liberatory present of

education.

Many contemporary volumes organize their critique of the effectiveness of critical pedagogy around its ability to respond to the conditions of neoliberalism. In his chapter “Critical Pedagogy and Class Struggle in the Age of Neoliberal Terror” in *Neoliberalism, Critical Pedagogy and Education* (2019), Peter McLaren is reluctant to embrace the optimism of the revolutionary promise of critical pedagogy in the neoliberal context. Seehwa Cho’s critique of critical pedagogy in *Critical Pedagogy and Social Change: Critical Analysis on the Language of Possibility* (2012) takes issue with the lack of specificity in the articulation of possibility in earlier writings on critical pedagogy, suggesting an emptiness in its political promise in the neoliberal context.

On the other hand, contributors to *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities* (2012) claim the continued importance of critical pedagogy, arguing that it is “needed to provide a framework for the identification and active responses to neoliberalism’s predatory schemes of crises, errant politics, and resultant policies” (Macrine 2012, 4). Tomas Boronski’s *Critical Pedagogy: An Exploration of Contemporary Themes and Issues* (2021) establishes a critique of neoliberalism from a British perspective and suggests that the advantage of critical pedagogy is how it creates alternative ways of interpreting “hegemonic views” of contemporary life through the eyes of oppressed people (4). The same social structures that render critical pedagogy ineffective for McLaren and Cho are the ones that make it necessary and hopeful for Boronski and the authors in *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times*.

Critical pedagogy continues to be debated on its contemporary significance and political viability. By tracking core features of critical pedagogy such as consciousness-raising, horizontalizing the student-teacher relationship, and social transformation, this essay grounds the term in its practical features and stakes. The articulation of liberation that is central to critical pedagogy keeps the theory around it alive as researchers and practitioners continue asking how to most effectively implement it amidst rapidly changing circumstances. Critical pedagogy’s lasting focus on liberation, whether in search of liberatory futures or in arguing that education holds the makings of a liberated present, maintains its link to Global South politics and thought.

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[1] Recent trends in critical pedagogy scholarship have involved applying the principles of critical pedagogy to specific educational formations, such as disciplinary fields, student communities and identities, and curriculum topics or teaching methods. Some scholars theorize critical pedagogy in the context of specific disciplines such as physical education (Kirk 2020), nursing (Dyson 2018), and language and writing (Bogdan, et al. 2023). Others take up critical pedagogy in the context of specific populations such as online learners (Oztok 2020), Japanese expatriates in Singapore (Toh 2022), and rural American students (Mitchler 2023). Another branch of critical pedagogy research focuses on re-theorizing its political outcomes. For example, a recent volume examines critical pedagogy alongside the ideas of critical literacy and social justice (Covino and Mulcahy 2024). A recent manifesto rejects the idea that critical pedagogy will lead to state transformation, instead emphasizing the liberatory present of education (Hodgson, et al. 2018).

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