

## Radical Pedagogy (2003)



ISSN: 1524-6345

### The Relationship between Critical Pedagogy and Assessment in Teacher Education

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#### Abstract

Critical pedagogy has been debated for more than three decades and appears in many and varied constructions and characterizations. One of the key issues to be considered is the potential for implementation of critical pedagogy in institutionalised educational settings, where it has not always found a comfortable home. In this paper, the historical development of critical pedagogy is the focus of attention. Some of the central tenets are examined with a view to understanding how critical pedagogy has evolved over the years and what critiques are inherent within it or have been directed towards it. The paper then focuses on the issue of assessment, particularly in teacher education, and the possibility of incorporating some of the principles and practices of critical pedagogy in the assessment process in this setting. The work of several writers is considered in relation to the establishment of empowering processes, not only for learning, but also for assessment.

#### Introduction

The education of teachers is subject to perennial attention and critique and the practices associated with assessment of student teachers to determine their readiness to be 'qualified' are complex and varied. Teacher educators who aspire to the inclusion of aspects of critical pedagogy in their own teaching and assessment, will benefit from a detailed examination of the critical pedagogy literature and an analysis of its value in teaching and in classrooms. The literature of critical pedagogy is, however, incredibly broad and the content often dense and perplexing. Consequently, in this paper, I track the historical development of critical pedagogy and examine some of the critiques inherent within it and directed towards it. The intention is to identify the central issues that potentially impact on teacher education and the related philosophies and practices of assessment of qualified teachers. It is my contention that the inclusion of critical pedagogy in the teacher education classroom, including attention to issues of assessment, can result in significant potential for ongoing social change.

Before investigating the premises and practices of critical pedagogy, it is useful to examine the meanings inherent in the words themselves. Pedagogy is a word which has had a relatively short history in English language writing about education. However, there is now a significant and developing research literature related to defining pedagogy in current educational contexts. Watkins

and Mortimore (1999: 8) suggest that “a suitably complex model is in sight ... [which] ... specifies relations between its elements; the teacher, the classroom or other context, content, the view of learning and learning about learning”. In this model, pedagogy appears as a relatively technical concept that reflects a fixed inter-relationship between various components of an academic setting. As such, it can be viewed as an academic model and may be in contrast with a practitioner’s model of pedagogy where the intricacies and particularities of a specific context may define the meaning of pedagogy. In this latter model, there is likely to be less definition of particular aspects and more acknowledgment of the dynamic inter-relationships between all the players in the learning context and the various influences on their learning.

Despite the potential differences in approach and utilization, pedagogy may be described as “a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities [*sic*] are produced within and among particular sets of social relations” (Giroux & Simon, 1989: 239). In any learning context there is an expectation that some kind of exchange will occur, so the practice of pedagogy relates to the production of knowledge. Therefore, in examining pedagogy, questions must be asked about the goals of education and the practices of the classroom or other learning context. If knowledge is to be produced, the pedagogue must systematically reflect on the role of the teacher in relation to the learners and must also examine such critical aspects as the social milieu that influences and is subsequently influenced by the learning experience.

### Critical Ways of Being

Critical pedagogy shares some considerable historical and contextual territory with critical theory. Critical theory concerns itself with issues related to the socialization of people for existence in society, usually a society defined by dominant discourses, and this is also the starting point for critical pedagogy. The notion of being critical (“examining and judging analytically and without bias” according to the *Collins Dictionary*, (1997: 177)) is considered desirable in contemporary educational theory and appears not only in relation to the practices of critical theory and critical pedagogy, but also in the tradition of critical thinking. While these latter two each share some broad commonality, critical pedagogy and critical thinking do not define criticality in the same manner (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Critical thinking, although briefly referred to here, is not the subject of attention in this paper. It has a relationship with critical pedagogy as indicated, but it has its own very comprehensive literature and associated discourses that are not examined here.

Critical thinking encourages an analysis of situations and arguments to identify faulty or unreliable assertions or meanings. While it may well encourage discernment in relation to the social and human condition, it does not specifically demand social action. Critical pedagogy, however, is preoccupied with social injustice and examines and promotes practices that have the potential to transform oppressive institutions or social relations, largely through educational practices. This expectation of action or social change clearly distinguishes critical pedagogy from critical thinking. Another key difference relates to the goals of the two. Critical thinking is primarily aimed at the individual and largely ignores the pedagogical relations, which occur between teacher and learner, or between learners. Critical pedagogy is more interested in collective action so “individual criticality is intimately linked to social criticality” (Burbules & Berk, 1999: 55).

Critical pedagogy encompasses understanding curriculum as political text. This political view of curriculum generates “the most voluminous body of scholarship in the curriculum field today” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1996: 243) and “no serious curriculum scholar would advance the argument that schools in general and curriculum in particular are politically neutral” (p. 244). However, it is a complex issue, given that critical pedagogy “

is not physically housed in any one school or university department, nor does it constitute a homogeneous set of ideas” (Giroux & McLaren, 1995: 29). Because the literature is so vast, this paper does not seek to map the whole territory of critical pedagogy. Rather, it takes an overview of the central concerns and philosophies, tracks their development and briefly examines some of the literature that critiques aspects of critical pedagogy. Ultimately, the intention is to identify aspects of critical pedagogy that are relevant to the issues of teacher education and the assessment of qualified teachers.

As mentioned above, critical pedagogy has its roots in critical theory and the two share many common philosophies and approaches. Both critical theory and critical pedagogy are concerned with investigating institutional and societal practices with a view to resisting the imposition of dominant social norms and structures. Critical pedagogy is, however, distinct from critical theory in that it is primarily an educational response to oppressive power relations and inequalities existing in educational institutions. It focuses on issues related to opportunity, voice and dominant discourses of education and seeks more equitable and liberating educational experiences. In short, “in the language of critical pedagogy, the critical person is one who is empowered to seek justice, to seek emancipation” (Burbules & Berk, 1999: 50). Collins (1998: 63) describes engagement in critical pedagogy as being “realistically involved in enlarging the *sites* within our institutions where genuine, noncoercive dialogue and reasonable opposition to oppressive bureaucratic controls can emerge”.

While this may seem to be an honorable and achievable goal, the realities of critical pedagogy are complex and fraught with challenges. The aims of critical pedagogy potentially contest a wide range of educational practices and philosophies. McLaren (1993) suggests that critical pedagogy involves a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state. Herein lies an enormous task for the critical pedagogue, for this calls into question not only practices related to racism and sexism, but also the whole range of societal and educational contextual issues. It also provides reference points from which to examine the goals and practices of teacher education.

### **The Historical Development of Critical Pedagogy**

Any analysis of critical pedagogy must begin with an examination of the work of Paulo Freire who is generally considered to be “the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy” (McLaren, 2000: 1), though Freire himself seldom used the term ‘critical pedagogy’ specifically. Although Freire’s initial focus targeted adult literacy projects in Brazil, his work has subsequently dealt with a wide range of social and educational issues and become popularly adopted and critiqued. Freire’s work was first influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then reemerged in the mid 1980s to dominate the literature of critical pedagogy.

The heart of Freire’s pedagogy revolved around an anti-authoritarian, dialogical and interactive approach which aimed to examine issues of relational power for students and workers (McLaren, 2000). In addition, the fundamental goal was to place social and political critiques of everyday life at the centre of the curriculum. There was no place here for mere critical thinking. Rather, Freire’s praxis - critical reflection and action - required implementation of a range of educational practices and processes with the goal of creating not only a better learning environment, but also a better world. Freire himself maintained that this was not merely an educational technique but a way of living in our educative practice (Freire, 1998). From this perspective, Freire’s (1973) ‘reading the word and reading the world’ approach to literacy, and indeed, education arose. Freire refuted the idea that education could be simply *about*

politics, but rather that education *is* politics, though the two need not be mutually exclusive. Importantly, however, he argued that a social and political analysis of life should be at the centre of curriculum, no matter what the official content. Education should not be about the transference of knowledge but rather the collaborative and collective production of knowledge grounded in the reality of students' lives. The former, banking education (Freire, 1984), is domesticating, the latter, liberating or humanizing. Human life holds meaning through communication and dialogical relations should be at the heart of any educational experiences. And through authentic dialogue between students and teachers and an emphasis on problem-posing, the students would develop a critical consciousness. Freire (1984: 68) stated:

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality.

These concepts form the basis of Freire's philosophy of education and give rise to a wide range of other educational practices. The implementation of Freire's philosophies of education to the realities of educational contexts often occurred in tandem with Ira Shor. Shor is deeply influenced by Freire and situates his classroom practice within Freirean philosophies. In his pedagogical analysis, *When Students Have Power* (1996), Shor describes the realities endemic in the implementation of liberating practices in the classroom with startling effect. Whereas Freire used the context of literacy for his liberating pedagogy, Shor concentrates on his community college (CUNY, Staten Island) English classes. His descriptions of critical pedagogy in action demonstrate that, while there are clearly benefits to be gained, the practices are not always straightforward.

Freire was quick to oppose any suggestion that his educational philosophy could be reduced to a handbook of classroom strategies. Rather, each educational context should be approached from the position of a broad goal of liberation and practices adapted for each individual situation. In embracing this notion, the term critical pedagogy itself may be inadequate. Freire acknowledged that pedagogy is grounded in and influenced by ideology and, through understanding that there are multiple social systems, defining a singular pedagogy of liberation becomes somewhat complex. "Consequently, one cannot speak of pedagogy but must speak instead of pedagogies which respond to particular necessities, interests and conditions" (Gaudiano & de Alba, 1994: 128). This expansion of the term subsequently occurs in many more recent analyses of critical pedagogy.

The complexities inherent in critical pedagogy have given rise to different interpretations of the concept. bell hooks (1994: 6) attributes her "engaged pedagogy" directly to inspiration provided by Freire who, she claims, was her "mentor and guide". And while there is clearly a Freirean focus in her writing, she does not promote the term critical pedagogy, but prefers to define an engaged pedagogy as one which espouses a combination of "anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies ... for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination ... while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students" (hooks, 1994: 10 cited in Florence, 1998). One of the central features of hooks' pedagogy is a critique of the elitist conceptualisation of knowledge practised in the academy, including the use of sophisticated language, which creates a barrier between the students and their teachers. As an alternative, hooks promotes a strong link between theory and practice, thus promoting a greater relevance for students. The Freirean influence is evident.

Perhaps one of the most influential approaches to critical pedagogy is the

'pedagogy of possibility' identified by Roger Simon. The possibility arises from Simon's (1987: 372) contention that proposing a pedagogy is also proposing a political vision. Inherent in this view is an "educational practice that is aimed at enabling a particular moral project, a particular 'not yet' of how we might live our lives together". He goes on to suggest that such a pedagogy must be transformative and:

will require forms of teaching and learning linked to the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world that is 'not yet' – in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived (p. 375).

This must, he urges, be embedded in the everyday practices of the educational context and not stand as an abstraction. Teachers committed to this pedagogy of possibility should not look for a prescriptive curriculum and methodology, but rather "approach such a task strategically, locally and contextually formulating practice within an integrated moral and epistemological stance" (Simon, 1992: 58). Given such a context, the potential exists for "counterdiscursive activity that attempts to provoke a process through which people might engage in a transformative critique of their everyday lives" (p. 60).

Simon's approach moves some of the discourse from the strongly Marxist theoretical standpoint previously occupied by critical pedagogy to a more complex but potentially more problematic and eclectic analysis of the realities of educational contexts. Subsequently, the literatures related to the political theories of education have rapidly expanded to encompass feminist, poststructural and postmodern critiques of critical pedagogy. While many of these perspectives have been incorporated, Pinar et al. (1996: 306) signal an impending crisis in critical pedagogy – "a crisis of overextension, overincorporation, and the incommensurability of poststructuralism and critical theory". A brief exploration of some of these critiques, however, may help in identifying the challenges to be considered in locating classroom practices in the terrain of critical pedagogy.

### **Critiques of Critical Pedagogy**

Perhaps the first critique to examine is that which comes from within. The very nature of critical pedagogy demands a continual examination of its philosophies, desires and practices. Giroux and McLaren (1995: 32) remind their peers that:

many current trends in critical pedagogy are embedded in the endemic weaknesses of a theoretical project overly concerned with developing a language of critique. Critical pedagogy is steeped in a posture of moral indignation toward the injustices reproduced in American public schools. Unfortunately, this one-sided emphasis on critique is matched by the lack of theoretical and pragmatic discourse upon which to ground its own vision of society and schooling and to shape the direction of a critical praxis.

Jennifer Gore's (1993: 40) critique of critical pedagogy suggests that there are, in fact, two critical pedagogies, or at least two distinct strands within critical pedagogy and these strands are identifiable through looking at individual figures who have dominated the discourse of each of the strands. Gore is relatively accepting of the contribution of Freire and Shor who she claims represent the "strand of critical pedagogy which offers concrete suggestions and examples taken from their own pedagogical practice, and which is intended to help other educators". She describes this strand as contributing to "pedagogical practice".

In contrast, Gore is more scathing of the approach taken by those who promote a 'pedagogical project', specifically Giroux and McLaren. Their approach is through articulation of an abstract political vision and should not be called "critical pedagogy, but critical *educational theory*" (p. 42), she contends. Gore believes the key concern here is in failing to prescribe specific practices for use in classrooms. The result is that:

their pedagogy might be seen to restrict its audience to those readers who have the time, energy, or inclination to struggle with it (namely, other academics and graduate students; not the avowedly targeted teachers or, in many cases, undergraduate students) and, in so limiting its audience, it subsequently limits its political potential (p. 38).

Clearly Gore (1992: 66) is concerned about the realities for teachers and the inclination of some critical pedagogues to create abstracted theories that lack applicability. She aims this same criticism at notions of empowerment, a central concept in critical pedagogy. These too have been characterized by abstract theories which impose "a requirement on teachers to do the work of empowering, to be the agents of empowerment, without providing much in the way of tangible guidance for that work". A plea is made for contextualized guidance for teachers or the critical pedagogies may not be able to be actualized as conceived. This is not to say that specific 'recipes' for educative practice are required. Freire himself, as indicated earlier, refused to do so but challenged every teacher to focus on the realities of students' lives and experiences and to construct learning experiences that articulate with these. There is clearly a responsibility on the teacher to create, adapt or determine the appropriate strategies for the particular context. Gore might argue, however, that some critical pedagogy theorists could do more to acknowledge the realities of educational contexts rather than dwell in the rarified terrain of the theoretical.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992: 91), also writing from a feminist perspective, articulates similar concerns. She suggests that even the term 'critical' is a "repressive myth[s] that perpetuate[s] relations of domination" and hides "the actual political agendas ... namely antiracism, antisexism, anti-elitism, anti-heterosexism, anti-ableism, anti-classism, and anti-neoconservatism" (p. 93). Ellsworth goes on to claim that:

theorists of critical pedagogy have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself (p. 98).

Further concerns are addressed to critical pedagogues who she suggests are "always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change" (p. 101). And finally, she directs criticism at the voices of white middle class men writing about critical pedagogy and suggests "a relation between teacher/student becomes voyeuristic when the voice of the pedagogue himself goes unexamined" (p. 104). These are serious allegations indeed.

Feminist critique is not the only voice heard in the debate over critical pedagogy. Bowers (1987: 127) has examined the work of Freire and his followers and, while acknowledging the significant contribution made by Freire, Bowers argues that his pedagogy "is based on Western assumptions about man, freedom, progress, and the authority of the rational process". Further, Bowers suggests that Freire's pedagogy contributes to a modernizing way of thinking, and thus runs the risk of reinforcing Western values and assumptions. "The problem with Freire's position is not that he advocates critical reflection but that he makes it the only legitimate source of knowledge and authority" (p. 129). And even more potentially dangerous is the use of dialogue as a tool for

emancipation. Bowers contends that the mode of thought implicated in dialogue “shifts the locus of authority from that of community and tradition to the individual who unifies thought and action in a new praxis” (p. 129). This analysis clearly indicates a conflict between the intent of Freirean pedagogy and what Bowers perceives as the potential outcome. In essence, Bowers is critiquing much of the literature of critical pedagogy which has developed out of the philosophies of Freire. Pinar et al (1996) warn, however, against directing too much criticism at Freire himself but suggest it is better directed at the political theorists who have appropriated his work.

Bowers (1987) has further criticized critical pedagogy in writing from an ecological stance. From this standpoint, his criticism is aimed at Marxist educational perspectives which, he contends, have failed to address the issues of the nature of the world and the ecological crisis. Bowers believes that the focus on the particular has led to a lack of focus on the wider issues. For example he suggests:

The problems of inequality and restricted individual empowerment are not nearly as important as the cultural roots of our alienation from nature. Regardless of how our agenda for social reform is framed, the bottom line has to do with reversing the global ecological deterioration we are now witnessing (1987: 159).

### Postmodern Critique

The final critique to be considered is that from a postmodern perspective, though the term itself and associated concepts are complex to define and, in fact, encompass a broad range of perspectives. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with all the expansive issues related to critical pedagogy and postmodernism but an overview of the relationship between the two is useful. It is interesting to note the problems inherent in this relationship. In many ways there are aspects of the two that are entirely consistent, or at least there are overlapping practices. In other regards, particularly when examined in their historical context and analyzed in relation to their core goals, there is undeniable tension. The goals related to resistance of oppression so firmly rooted in the history of critical pedagogy are not the same goals of postmodernism, where analyses of texts and multiplicity of approaches are uppermost.

Burbules and Rice (1991) attempt to examine the whole issue of a postmodern critique of critical educational studies. They suggest that there are difficulties inherent in any comprehensive critique beginning with the fact that, as suggested above, a definitive interpretation of postmodernism itself is complex. However they extract three recurring ideas that appear in the literature: the rejection of absolutes; the perceived saturation of all social and political discourses with power or dominance; and the celebration of difference. Having defined these as the key principles, they then go on to suggest that there are in fact two varieties of postmodernism that adopt “fundamentally different positions relative to modernism itself” (p. 397) and they call these two trends postmodernism and antimodernism.

The postmodernists, they suggest, imply the movement beyond something whilst “accepting the basic significance of the tradition it proposes to go beyond” (p. 397). Thus they suggest there are writers (such as Giroux or McLaren) who accept some of the basic democratic claims of modernism and yet develop beyond them. By contrast, the antimodernist position is “characterized by a strong antipathy to the language, issues, and values of modernism” (p. 398) and defines itself in opposition to modernism. Burbules and Rice are somewhat more critical of this position and comment that “having deconstructed all metanarratives and radically relativized all possible values, antimodernism is left with no clear way of justifying *any* alternatives” (p. 398).

To complicate the issue even further, they suggest there are writers who develop both postmodern and antimodern arguments in their critique of critical pedagogy or educational theory in general.

Burbules and Rice (1991: 415) go on to discuss interpretations of dialogue across difference and conclude that, far from promoting practices to establish and maintain positive dialogical relations, "certain postmodern, and particularly antimodern, tendencies in educational theory have worked against the goal of trying to achieve understanding across difference".

The dissenting voices heard in the debate over the relationship between critical pedagogy and postmodernism may, in fact, be related to these relative positions of postmodernism and antimodernism. To illustrate the above points, the positions of several writers are briefly examined. Some would argue that critical pedagogy is constrained by modernizing practices and bound up in metanarratives. Parker (1997), for example, writing from a deconstructionist perspective, maintains that many critical educational practices are located within modernist assumptions of teacher autonomy and leave much to be desired when viewed from a postmodern understanding of the nature of knowledge construction. Burbules and Rice (1991) might argue that this is more accurately viewed as an antimodern understanding.

Similarly, many critics have suggested that the preoccupation with class issues that appears most commonly in Marxist discourses often results in other issues (race, gender, sexual orientation) being significantly ignored (McLaren, 2000). A legitimate criticism can be advanced both from a feminist and postmodern position that *other* voices and concerns are not addressed by the promises made through some strands of critical pedagogy (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Weiler (1991: 450) has written in very clear terms of the tensions she perceives between the modernist tendencies of critical pedagogy and postmodernism. She writes from the perspective of a feminist influenced by postmodern theories who wants "to retain the vision of social justice and transformation that underlies liberatory pedagogies". Her intention is to build on rather than discard the universal goals of liberation which, she claims, do not always address the specificity of people's lives. She believes that these ideals "do not directly analyze the contradictions between conflicting oppressed groups or the ways in which a single individual can experience oppression in one sphere while being privileged or oppressive in another" (p. 450). To understand the reality of this type of critique, imagine, for example, a Maori (indigenous New Zealand) man who could legitimately claim oppression from colonial domination while simultaneously oppressing his wife through his domestic behaviours.

Weiler also suggests that the assumptions of a collective experience of oppression do not address the realities of the classroom. Attempting to name and struggle against oppression can be demanding if not impossible in the classroom because of the range of emotions that are engaged and even those best intentioned may well retreat to more traditional practices rather than confront the various issues involved. The key question to confront is that of commonality of experience of oppression and the need to define it in the "context of historically defined struggles" (Weiler, 1991: 451). In relation to this particular issue, Weiler challenges Freire's pedagogy and his premise that all people are subjects and knowers of the world. She contends that he does not acknowledge the possibility of a contradictory experience of oppression and concludes that she is arguing for "a more situated theory of oppression and subjectivity, and for the need to consider the contradictions of such universal claims of truth or process" (p. 456).

### **Mutuality and Diversity**

However, despite challenges such as these, critical pedagogy and

postmodernism do not need to be mutually exclusive. Pinar et al. (1996: 305) suggest that “central to a postmodern critical pedagogy is an elaboration of the relationship between the self and other”. A more inclusive pedagogy which addresses some postmodern concerns may be developed to more effectively address the issues of human suffering, domination and oppression, which extend beyond just those linked to class and the capitalist state. Collins too takes up this position and suggests that “postmodernist critical discourse is about the struggles for power ‘to be heard’ – about the empowerment of ‘other voices’” (1998: 76). However, he warns that attempts to link postmodernist thought with critical theory place critical pedagogy in a predicament because of the relative positions the two adopt on rationality.

By contrast, some writers argue that indeed Freire and other critical pedagogues *do* encompass postmodern thinking in their writing. Peters (1999: 117) suggests there are ‘postmodern tendencies’ in Freire’s work. These include:

his emphasis on textuality, on the text and text analogues for understanding the world; his emphasis upon subjectivity, experience and culture; and, to some extent, his understanding of oppression and the exercise of power.

Most writers would acknowledge that there are different phases in Freire’s writing and that his later work reflects a greater inclination to encompass postmodern thought. He himself concedes the “multiplicity of modes of oppression” and the importance of a “postcolonial politics of ethics and compassion” (Freire, 1993: xii).

Roberts (2000) deals with this issue at length and encourages the reader to approach Freire’s work holistically, including reading beyond the early texts, as many critics have focused their comment on this writing. He also exhorts readers to acknowledge Freire’s subsequent commitment to confronting postmodern critiques, particularly in his later writing. Roberts describes the key references to postmodern thought in Freire’s work, most notably in *Pedagogy of Hope* and concludes that Freire supported what he called ‘progressive postmodernism’. Freire urged educators “to become more tolerant, open and forthright, critical, curious, and humble” (Roberts, 2000: 112) in their attempts to overcome ‘modern’ tendencies in their thinking and working. Roberts concludes that ultimately, although Freire remained essentially allied to modernist thinking, he did promote unity in diversity as a means of confronting issues of oppression, whatever their nature. This is perhaps as close as Freire got to accommodating the challenges provided by postmodernism.

Weiler (1991), though critical of the shortcomings particularly of Freirean pedagogy, does not suggest it should be superceded, but rather enriched and expanded through the accommodation of feminist pedagogical perspectives (postmodern rather than antimodern approach). She describes three areas where this can be addressed and names these as the role and authority of the teacher, the epistemological question of the source of the claims for knowledge and truth in personal experience and feeling, and the question of difference. Weiler concludes by suggesting that acknowledging the differences between approaches “does not mean abandonment of the goals of social justice and empowerment, but it does make clear the need to recognize contingent and situated claims and to acknowledge our own histories and selves in process” (p. 470).

Clearly there is no universally acceptable definition nor approach to critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogies, as with any educational discourses, are constantly being reframed and redefined. However, there is clearly a call to action for teachers who espouse critical pedagogy. It is no longer appropriate to merely theorize about liberating practices. The milieu of students’ lives is implicated in the classroom and teaching students *about* critical pedagogy while

utilizing non-liberating and traditional modern teaching practices creates anathema, one which directly conflicts with the goals of critical pedagogy.

The critiques of critical pedagogy must be examined and considered for many of the reasons indicated here but this must not result in a sedating effect through over-problematizing the teacher's role or the educational environment. Yes, the challenges for critical pedagogues are compounded through internal and external critiques, but the alternative of inaction is untenable. Each teacher must react to the particular context in which they work and attempt, to the best of their ability, to participate in practice that promotes inclusion, engagement and empowerment of learners. Bahruth and Steiner (2000: 143) conclude that:

in our profession we have two choices. We can succumb to the mainstream and become programd toward deskilling our intellect, or we can become critical pedagogues and liberate ourselves and those who choose to join in the dialogue.

The dialogue must and will continue, both within the field of critical pedagogy and with those who critique it from other positions. The dialogue, however, must not be a substitute for action. And it is the particular action of assessment practice that I now want to address.

### **The Relationship Between Critical Pedagogy and Assessment**

In the literature and in practice, there are strong relationships between approaches to learning and the practices of assessment. Although critical pedagogy shares much in practice with other orientations to learning, it is the goals of social justice and emancipation that separate it from other approaches. Critical pedagogues would never compromise opportunities for social reconstruction by simply relying on currently accepted models of education. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the processes utilized in the learning context of critical classrooms may be familiar to excellent educators who do not necessarily advocate or practice critical pedagogy. Perhaps it is propitious to suggest that critical pedagogy may in fact be allied with general excellence in teaching.

In trying to summarize a critical pedagogical approach to assessment, there a number of themes that must be incorporated. A critical pedagogy of assessment involves an entirely new orientation - one that embraces a number of principles that may not be familiar in the generic assessment literature. To achieve a critical approach to assessment, it must be centered on dialogic interactions so that the roles of teacher and learner are shared and all voices are validated. It must foster an integrated approach to theory and practice, or what Freire would preferably term as praxis - theory in action. It must value and validate the experience students bring to the classroom and importantly, situate this experience at the centre of the classroom content and process in ways that problematize it and make overt links with oppression and dominant discourses. It must reinterpret the complex ecology of relationships in the classroom to avoid oppressive power relations and create a negotiated curriculum, including assessment, equally owned by teachers and students. Such an approach no doubt creates challenges and discomfort but opens up creative possibilities for the reinvention of assessment. It also accommodates some of the aspects of postmodernism that are seen to address the supposed 'deficits' in critical pedagogy, as discussed earlier in this paper. This is particularly evident in relation to the ecology of the classroom and dynamics of power relationships that Gore and Ellsworth identify.

Having established these general themes, let me now look at the overt links between the literature of critical pedagogy and orientations to assessment, and, in particular, self-assessment. In doing so, I acknowledge that there are multiple approaches to critical pedagogy, as described above, and also elements of other

disciplines that are easily accommodated in this literature and debate. Consequently, this is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the issue but rather a brief examination of some influences on assessment and critical pedagogy that I have found to be valuable.

### **Authentic Dialogue and Critical Consciousness**

As identified earlier, Freire's primary focus of attention was adult education and liberatory educational practices, defined as those that secure emancipation and reject oppression and domestication. Learning, says Freire, is an act of knowing and requires the presence of two interrelated contexts. "One is the context of authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects. ... The second is the real, concrete contexts of facts, the social reality in which people exist" (Freire, 1989: 49).

These are the contexts that frame the being of students in classrooms and can also be utilized as the framework for content and process, including assessment. Clearly they suggest challenges to conventional assessment practices. If traditional teacher-directed or institutionally imposed and standardized methods of assessment are used, they run the risk of reflecting the "social, political, cultural and ideological conditions" of society and thus are implicated in generating "divisions that make difficult the construction of our ideals of change and transformation" (Freire, 1998: 55).

Freire's beliefs offer insights, particularly for self-assessment. Authentic dialogue requires a relationship between teacher and learner where one "knowing subject [is] face to face with other knowing subjects" (Freire, 1989: 49). Education thus becomes "a pedagogy of knowing" rather than an exercise in "narration sickness" (Freire, 1984: 57). Students, in engaging in self-assessment, enhance their opportunities to become knowing subjects. It must be recognized, however, that Freire would suggest that students are in the *process* of becoming, so assessment must be constructed in ways that are not dehumanizing as this would defeat the purpose of liberatory education. The reality of such dehumanizing practice can be seen through deconstructing real situations. One such example could be that encountered by an immigrant student in one of my classes. If she is a recent arrival to this country and comes from an education system that is didactic and focused on unerring respect for the position of the teacher, she will not immediately feel comfortable in engaging in self-assessment. And, even if she does, she will be intent on representing herself as positively as possible so that she does not show the teacher any flaws in her thinking or practice. Asking her to participate in self-assessment will be threatening and not likely to contribute to the goal of liberatory education.

The second context, that of social realities, cuts to the heart of Freire's approach to education. Critical consciousness represents "things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations" (Pinto, cited in Freire, 1973: 44). The contexts of learning, which include reflection on objective reality and the presence of authentic dialogue, enable the learners to engage in praxis, objective action and reflection. "Knowledge involves a constant unity between action and reflection upon reality ... [which is] ... why we must take our presence in the world as the focus of our critical analysis" (Freire, 1989: 52). To assist students in engaging in critical consciousness, the educator's role is to empower students to reflect on their own worlds, to self-assess in fact. In doing so, teachers will need to employ processes that help the students in building their ability to 'become'. It will not be automatic.

And there are obvious links with the 'authentic assessment' that is commonly discussed in assessment literature and involves locating assessment within the realities of students' work. Freire would support the notion of authentic

dialogue and subsequently would probably endorse authentic assessment. He says “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about the world is concerned with reality, and does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (1984: 64). The suggestion is that the learning and the subsequent assessment are intrinsically linked with student realities and lives.

While it is easy enough to make these theoretical connections between Freire’s approach to pedagogy and assessment, whether this Freirean approach to assessment is possible in an institutional context in a regulatory environment remains to be seen. With the current reliance on standardized assessment and externally imposed standards, it is not easy to justify such a student-centered and dialogic approach to assessment.

### **Everyday Life and Powerful Students**

Shor develops some of these themes in looking at the use of Freirean notions of teaching in the context of everyday life of classrooms, particularly in institutional settings. Before examining the issue of assessment, Shor suggests that the whole milieu of the classroom must be re-examined and reconstructed. In particular, he favors a change of role for the student from object to active, critical subject. In doing so he suggests that students undergo a struggle for ownership of themselves (Shor, 1980). They have been previously lulled into some sense of complacency by the circumstances of their everyday lives, and through the processes of the classroom, they begin to envision and strive for something different for themselves.

Achieving such a goal is not automatic and Shor suggests that the practices of the classroom and the role of the teacher are critical in the process. Students need to be helped to separate themselves from the unconditional acceptance of the conditions of their own existence and once this separation is achieved then students may be prepared for critical re-entry into an examination of everyday life.

In an environment that achieves such liberating intent, one of the potential outcomes is that the students themselves assume more responsibility for the class. Power is distributed amongst the group and the role of the teacher becomes much more mobile, not to mention more challenging. This encourages growth of each student’s intellectual character rather than a mere “mimicry of the professorial style” (Shor, 1980: 103). What is required is a turn towards self-regulation, although Shor warns that this is not necessarily automatic or easy. Only when a new critical consciousness in the processes of the classroom is achieved can issues of assessment be problematized and reconstructed. This is a critical point that must be reinforced. The issue of assessment cannot be addressed in isolation from the everyday practices of the classroom, particularly when such complex issues as power and relationships are implicated.

Shor is not surprisingly critical of the current assessment environment which, he says, involves undemocratic approaches. “A standardized testing instrument brought in from the outside, or designed by the teacher separate from the class, would only contradict the emergence of students as subjects” (Shor, 1980: 112). Rather he promotes assessment as learning activities that are consistent with the democratic processes of the classroom. These processes usually take some time to establish as they often challenge all the preconceived notions of education and teacher power that students enter with from their previous experiences. These have potentially previously restricted students from participating fully in their own learning.

However, Shor does not suggest that assessment should be removed from democratic classrooms. He acknowledges that it is still a necessary part of higher education and it should be frequent and rigorous and high standards for student development should be set. But:

the instruments used to test and measure students should be based in a student-centred, co-operative curriculum. This means emphasizing narrative grading, portfolio assessments, group projects and performances, individual exhibitions, and essay examinations that promote critical thinking instead of standardized or short-answer tests (Shor, 1992: 144).

For Shor then, like Freire, assessment is an integral part of the learning environment and process and requires the same attention to the dynamics and roles of the classroom that is required in examining the whole learning context. At the heart of the process are the roles played by student and teacher which, says Shor, cannot be left unproblematized. Again, the Freirean influence is evident and Shor, in taking this stance, is promoting not only a dialogic approach to curriculum, but also to assessment. There must be a role of self-assessment in this environment.

There are clearly synergies between the writings of Freire and Shor in relation to assessment, though for all, the broader issue of the whole learning environment is the general focus of their work. Attention to the issue of assessment without significant attention to problematizing the wider learning context, the role of the teacher and the goals of critical pedagogy will be ineffective. One is implicated in the other. Even the current assessment literature outside of critical pedagogy indicates that assessment must be embedded in learning and curriculum so, as Shor suggests, attention must be paid to the whole milieu of the classroom if significant advances in assessment are to be made.

While few, if any, of the theorists offer pragmatic suggestions for an alternative pedagogy of assessment, there is hope. The implications of a critical orientation suggest pragmatic new approaches to assessment in teacher education. Student teachers should be viewed as capable of generating assessment strategies and criteria that have immediate applicability and validity in relation to the contexts of their work and everyday life. Linking experience and learning is not only a practice employed in critical pedagogy but is also validated through current learning theory. However, the examination of critical pedagogy in relation to assessment strongly supports an approach where students are active participants in the assessment process and in the generation of assessment criteria. Assessment becomes a more powerful contributor to the learning process if students are empowered to participate in this way, and assessments are subsequently more likely to reflect the diversity of students and realities of their lives if the students themselves are engaged in a dialogic process of criteria generation.

This does raise again the issue of dehumanization (Freire, 1984), as identified earlier. Students will need to be supported in developing to the point of confidence and competence in achieving such goals. I have experienced this regularly in my own teaching where I utilize student-generated criteria in relation to the students' own practice. Some students are immediately capable of defining appropriate and meaningful criteria as the basis for assessment and strive to set goals that reflect their own context and their own learning and practice needs. But some lack confidence, knowledge, experience or self-efficacy to do so individually. Some students will offer suggestions for practice that they think will meet the 'requirements' of the teacher. Some will generate statements that strongly reflect dominant and traditional discourses or teacher behaviours. Some will be superficial in their thinking. Over several years I have worked at finding ways to address this lack of consistent ability, or more often confidence, amongst students to engage in this process.

Rather than abandon the process because of such barriers, this lack of immediate efficacy on the part of the student can easily be addressed by utilizing a dialogic approach to pedagogy. While an individual student may

struggle, collectively students have proven to be extremely capable of defining criteria that effectively assess their practice and learning. And the very process of dialogue enhances understanding of the meanings inherent in the assessment criteria. So, having been immersed in the process of creating assessment criteria, the students subsequently have a deeper appreciation of desirable standards for practice and can interpret them in their own context. This collective generation of criteria then has meaning for all students and addresses the possibility of dehumanization. Once students have engaged in creating criteria, they can then effectively select those that are most appropriate to their own practice and context. So, each student is then assessed against criteria that are meaningful and contextually appropriate. There is no opportunity here for theory to stand as an abstraction. By contrast, there is an enhanced possibility for engagement in a “transformative critique of their everyday lives” (Simon, 1992: 60).

However, a word of caution is required. The teacher must ensure that this dialogic process does not imply or utilize simply a discussion approach. Freire (1998: 80) says that engagement of students in dialogue cannot be reduced to “simple to-and-fro questions that may also become tedious and sterile”. For dialogic teaching requires much more than this. Hence students and teachers should engage together in problematizing knowledge and it is the teacher’s role to provoke students to identify how to move forward critically in their practice. For, as Shor and Freire (1987: 99) suggest, “Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality”. The link with practice is strongly enhanced.

However, the process is not complete simply with involvement of students in generating assessment criteria. Teacher education students must also engage in self-assessment against these student-generated standards, thus developing their experience and expertise in critical and professional behaviours and practices. This is not something that should follow on as an expectation of teachers after certification and registration. If students have not been able to engage in these processes throughout their education, there is little expectation that they will suddenly develop competence in self-assessment in their own practice when they are qualified teachers.

### **Examples From Practice**

Although I do not make a claim for significant innovative practice in this area, nor for genuine dialogic and liberatory pedagogy, I have been involved in making changes in the area of assessment in my own early childhood teacher education program. I lead a team of other teacher educators, most of whom are also interested in establishing empowering and holistic strategies in both teaching and assessment. It must be noted that our program is a field-based one with students working in the field on a regular basis while studying.

The innovations we are working with have been developing over a number of years and reflect a commitment to the principles of critical pedagogy. They are still, to a certain extent, experimental and potentially flawed, as they are trialled, evaluated, adapted and re-implemented. However, I believe that they are moving towards the ‘not yet’ of a critical pedagogy of teacher education. At the same time they are moving away from teacher-directed, top-down, universally imposed and standardized assessments that prescribe the same for all students, regardless of their ability, values, ethnicity, their community requirements or their specific contexts. A brief elucidation of some of these practices may serve to indicate that there are alternative ways of approaching assessment and that teacher educators do not need to be constrained by individual, institutional, regulatory or societal barriers.

### **Student Generated Assessment Criteria**

This was our first foray into returning some assessment ownership and power into the hands of the students. This process involves students collectively and/or individually being involved in the generation of assessment criteria. The initial focus was the practicum where students were easily able to identify the behaviours, dispositions and skills of competent teachers (Keesing-Styles, 2000), even though they may not yet have all been capable of achieving these themselves. The outcome here has been students who are more prepared for practicum visits by lecturers, who own the assessment criteria because they have been responsible for generating them, and who are more likely to implement these practices in their everyday work. Students have also been able to identify which particular criteria are most relevant to their own work and contexts and which are areas they are personally focusing on in their practice.

Latterly this student generation of assessment criteria has been extended to other assessments including the traditional essays, projects (individual and group), reports and the construction of resources. The tasks for assessment are identified and the students are collectively very capable of generating criteria that effectively assess the task. In our experience, the students generate criteria that are equally good as those the lecturers may have conceived and they have the added advantage of being owned by the students. Because our program is based on students reflecting on their own experiences in teaching, they are developing confidence and competence in defining assessment criteria that truly reflect their own contexts and that also reflect the qualities of excellent teachers.

### **Student Generated Assessment Tasks**

This practice is an extension of the previous one. Once students become more competent at generating assessment standards for their assignments, and once they become more self-directed in their study and more sure in their estimation of excellent teachers, we introduce them to the notion of generating their own assessment tasks. This process takes longer and requires more personal development than the earlier one on two counts.

Firstly, the students require more confidence and competence in the whole tertiary assessment environment. No matter how much we want to take a critical approach to assessment, it must still be acknowledged that the current environment requires particular standards being met and it is up to the lecturers to ensure that happens. However, there are ways in which the process can be adapted to offer some alternatives where the students are much more active and increase their ownership. So, before we even address the issues of critical pedagogy, there are the issues of student self-efficacy within the teaching and learning context and the assessment environment to tackle, and this takes time.

And secondly, in terms of being capable of engaging in critical pedagogy, the students require support in their ability to confront their own realities and identify the factors that potentially oppress them. Many students find it hard to identify and engage in assessment tasks that challenge dominant discourses. On the credit side, however, many do create tasks that are more consistent with their own values or areas of interest or that resonate with the goals and ideals of their particular contexts. As with the previous strategy, this is not necessarily something that could be considered a specific move towards a critical pedagogy but it does put power back into the hands of the learners to some extent.

### **Removal of Learning Outcomes**

The assessment against established learning outcomes is entirely consistent with current approaches to assessment, particularly within the standards-based environment that dominates educational assessment discourse. The goal is to assess every student against a prescribed standard that is clear and appropriate for all students. In order for this to happen, learning outcomes are defined and the assessment tasks match the learning outcomes. This not only ensures that the

students are well informed about the assessment requirements, but it also assures that all aspects of the learning are being assessed.

There are many positive aspects of this approach to assessment and it is certainly better than the previous environment which was based on norm-referencing and which matched students against each other instead of against a standard. However, the more I have used this style of assessment, the more convinced I am that it dictates what students learn and how they learn it, it focuses students' attention on assessment rather than on learning, and it creates a degree of conformity.

An opportunity arose in my own institution to engage in an alternative approach to assessment. Our institute's quality management system has recently been reviewed and people were encouraged to pilot alternatives to the processes prescribed in it. Our program team proposed a pilot to look at assessment and we have had the opportunity to trial a different assessment approach with one group of our students. In the pilot, we have stated the aim of each course in more specific terms, we have removed all the learning outcomes from the courses, and we have been more thorough in detailing the content of the courses. These changes have led to altered approaches to assessment. In the pilot, students are now assessed against the aim of the course rather than against each of the particular learning outcomes. For each course, more broadly-prescribed assessment tasks focus on the overall aim which, in turn, is linked to the aims of the program. In their assignments, students are asked to consider the themes that have been encountered throughout the course, so each student is able to pick up those themes that are most meaningful and most relevant to their own lives and the contexts in which they work. This means a much more integrated approach to assessment can be achieved and students are able to take much more ownership of the assignments and, more importantly, their own learning. It demands greater student autonomy and it also requires support of the students who have become quite institutionalised in their approaches to assessment. We have surveyed both students and staff in relation to these changes and are receiving positive feedback on the process.

With reference to the goals of critical pedagogy, this is another small process that begins to put the power back into the hands of the students. I could not say that students are all tackling issues of oppression or liberation in their assignments. What I can say is that the majority of students are focusing on the particularities of their own contexts and writing assignments that are of good academic quality but which are personalised to the needs of individuals.

### **Peer Review and Self-Assessment**

These processes, like some of the others, are introduced incrementally into the program. From the beginning of their study, we initially encourage students to engage in self-reflection and then we build it in as an expectation and part of the assessment environment. We use strategies such as Smyth's reflection model (1989) from early in the program and we structure activities that consistently ask students to reflect both on their own practice and the practices they participate in. As the program develops and their confidence and competence progress, so the expectations increase to the point where they contribute to the assessment of their own and others' work.

Again, this issue requires careful handling and there are barriers to overcome. However, our third year students are now using self-assessment to contribute to their summative assessments. In addition, they are becoming familiar and increasingly comfortable with reviewing the work of peers, providing feedback and responding to feedback on their own work provided by their colleagues. The intention here is to try to equalise the power relations between students and teachers, to encourage autonomy and ownership of their learning and work, to help in the development of truly reflective practice and to equip the students

better to address issues in their everyday work outside of the classroom and after graduation.

## Conclusion

It would be fair to say that these initiatives on their own do not necessarily reflect the goals of critical pedagogy. To a certain extent, assessment tasks established in teacher education programs will never be able to avoid institutional and regulatory constraints and therefore truly achieve critical outcomes. What they can do is to contribute to the development of critical teachers if they are used in partnership with other pedagogical strategies. If, as Ramsden (1992) suggests, that our approaches to assessment are an effective indicator of what we value as an institution, then it is my belief that I must be at the forefront of promoting assessment reconstruction alongside pedagogical reconstruction to achieve the goals of critical pedagogy. I cannot claim that our processes are entirely consistent with these goals. In fact, I know we are only in our infancy in terms of what needs to be achieved and I have become supremely aware of the difficulties of achieving critical pedagogy in teacher education. However, though we work within the same institutional constraints experienced by most teacher educators, our goal is to envision the possible, not just be controlled by the current.

We have choices as teacher educators. We can continue to do what we have always done or we can commit to change. I do not suggest that the strategies suggested here should be universally implemented. That would be inconsistent with the whole notion of critical pedagogy. But I do challenge others to address the issues raised here and to look at the particularities of their own contexts. The intention is to generate a dialogic approach to assessment in teacher education, to validate student perspectives, to embed assessment in meaningful curriculum and contexts, and to promote critical reflection and action. In such an environment, students will be better placed to examine their own contexts and behaviours and to make progress in developing their own critical pedagogy.

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