Are They Empowered Yet?: Opening Up Definitions of Critical Pedagogy

SHARE [http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum]

Heather Thomson-Bunn

Abstract: Approaching definitions (and the act of defining) as inherently political and ideological, this article argues that there is a lack of definitional precision surrounding *critical pedagogy* and its core terms (e.g., *student empowerment*). This lack of precision can impede the successful and ethical implementation of critical pedagogy in the composition classroom. This article calls for a deeper articulation of what critical pedagogy is and does, and for sharing definitional power with students by enlisting their help in this articulation. Inviting students to participate in such definitional work may mitigate resistance by offering students a greater say, and a greater stake, in their own education. Defining these terms more precisely may also help instructors to enact and communicate critical pedagogy in a more open and purposeful way.

Before I started graduate school, I had never heard the term "critical pedagogy." Over a decade later, I sometimes forget that not everyone considers it a lexical staple. I began graduate school as an MFA student directly out of college, and I was nervous about teaching the section of first-year composition I'd been assigned as a new Teaching Assistant. Along with the other newcomers, I was given a three-day crash course in composition pedagogy before classes started. When the semester commenced, and we'd been thrown into the swimming pool, so to speak, we all attended a weekly teaching seminar throughout our first full year, in which we were introduced to critical pedagogy and developed our own teaching practices. By the end of that year, I was more confident. I could talk about student empowerment. I never lectured my class. I tossed Paulo Freire's name around like I'd always known it. I felt that I was doing a relatively good job.

It was only as my academic focus shifted from fiction writing to composition studies that I learned how complicated—and how contested—a notion "critical pedagogy" really was. And though critical pedagogy (as both a term and an approach to teaching) has been used in composition circles for decades, it continues to be a source of debate, particularly as it relates to ideology and student resistance. Gwen Gorzelsky acknowledges this contested status in her 2009 article "Working Boundaries: From Student Resistance to Student Agency":

> Composition studies' use of critical pedagogy to promote equity and social justice has been fundamentally called into question. The issue is students' resistance to this pedagogy, as documented by scholars such as Jeff Smith, Russell [sic] K. Durst, David Seitz, Jennifer Trainor, and David L. Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald (64).

Gorzelsky notes how Smith urges instructors to set aside their "ideological agendas in favor of students' instrumentalist goals" and mentions that Durst "advocates making students' pragmatic, professionalizing goals central to our courses" (64-65). Trainor, according to Gorzelsky, "retains a stronger commitment to critical pedagogy's core concerns and contends that student resistance stems not from instructors' unethical commitment to those concerns but from teachers' inadequate attention to how critical pedagogy positions students as readers and writers" (65). Durst puts the matter plainly in a 2006 *CCC* Interchange when he writes, "[C]ritical pedagogy has been part of composition for nearly twenty years now. It's fair to ask: At what point are you no longer blundering for a change? At what point are you simply blundering?" ("Can" 111).

Despite these legitimate concerns, abandoning critical pedagogy altogether seems too extreme a reaction to the difficult and complicated ethical questions that sometimes accompany it. After all, critical pedagogy does not *always* lead to "blundering." For example, Gorzelsky's ethnographic study of a writing course taught by "a particularly talented instructor who integrated process and critical pedagogy approaches" led her to conclude that "critical pedagogy doesn't automatically provoke students' resistance" (66). In "Understanding Problems in Critical Classrooms," William Thelin rejects scholarly objections to critical pedagogy, writing, "Recent scholarship in critical pedagogy would lead us to believe that perceived failure in implementing liberatory goals taints those goals and makes them unworthy. In other words, when students do not respond to the pedagogy in a way that we conclude is positive, we should find new goals" (115). He goes on to ask, "Why must the goal fall in disfavor when the pedagogy appears not to have worked? Is there another way we can look at failure to use it productively toward strengthening critical pedagogy and its goals?" (117).

In this article I'd like to discuss what I see as one major failure of critical pedagogy—not to hammer another nail in its supposed coffin, but to work in conjunction with Thelin's aim of "strengthening critical pedagogy and its goals." The failure I'm addressing here is not one of ideological commitments, but of definitional precision and transparency. What troubled me as a graduate student studying composition theory, and what continues to trouble me now, is that it can be difficult to discern exactly how certain elements of critical pedagogy—for example, a notion like "student empowerment"—are being defined.

Before discussing this problem in more detail, it may be valuable to examine a number of definitions; by doing so, we can identify significant commonalities among them that reveal some of the underlying (often political) aims of critical pedagogy. These definitions highlight the collaborative, anti-authoritarian model of classroom learning that is a key component in most articulations of critical pedagogy. I have put words in bold that reflect several of the key terms and ideas that accompany critical pedagogy:

> *Critical pedagogy is not about polemics or preaching one's politics in the classroom. Rather, it involves **authorizing students to share responsibility** for their education while posing problems based in students' collective experience in the world around them. Critical pedagogues **challenge the status quo** both in content and method.*
> ~William Thelin ("Response" 117-118)

> *[C]ritical pedagogy can promote multicultural education and sensitivity to cultural difference . . . [It] involves teaching the skills that will **empower citizens and students** to become sensitive to the politics of representations of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other cultural differences in order to empower individuals and **promote democratization**.*
> ~Douglas Kellner (1)

> *[C]ritical pedagogy is not simply concerned with **offering students new ways to think critically and to act with authority as agents in the classroom**; it is also concerned with providing students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to expand their capacities both to **question deep-seated assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices** that structure every aspect of society and to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit.*
> ~Henry Giroux (2)

> *The students—no longer docile listeners—are now **critical co-investigators** in dialogue with the teacher . . . education, as **a humanist and liberating praxis**, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their **emancipation**. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process by **overcoming authoritarianism** and an alienating intellectualism.*
> ~Paulo Freire (81, 86)

*The primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is with **social injustice** and how to **transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions** and social relations.*
~Nicholas Burbules & Rupert Berk (47)

In just these few definitions, many of the core terms of critical pedagogy come into focus: student empowerment, social justice, liberation, democracy, and responsible citizenship. These are the abstractions that lurk in the corners of our classrooms. All reach beyond what many people (including students) might define as aspects of good writing, all have a sociopolitical dimension, and all might be imagined and enacted in vastly different ways.

The general sentiment represented by definitions of critical pedagogy (such as those presented above) seems to be that a social/political agenda is a natural element of critical pedagogy, as critical pedagogy is often conceived in relation to social and political problems. In his book *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?,* David Seitz writes:

> Although there have been overlapping strands of critical pedagogy in college writing classes over the past fifteen years, teachers influenced by these ideas all hold one assumption in common. All of them believe the educational system, to varying degrees, promotes the cultural reproduction of social and economic injustice (5).

Christine Sleeter, in her book *Multicultural Education as Social Activism*, writes that "critical pedagogy rests on the assumption that society faces a crisis of grave proportions that impacts very disparately on different groups"(124)—a statement that makes apparent how foundational sociopolitical considerations are to critical pedagogy. Remove that foundation, and the structure collapses.

When we discuss critical pedagogy, then, we are usually talking about a theory that moves beyond the walls of the academy and does so as part of its central purpose. The definitions above point to critical pedagogy not merely as a way to transform classroom practice, but as a way to transform society. Given the gravity and far-reaching nature of this goal, we have a responsibility to examine and re-examine what we do, and to articulate this goal in a way that is accessible to those directly influenced by it. As James Berlin writes, "We cannot help influencing our students, but we can do all we can to be straightforward about our methods and motives" (180).

Yet, the current discourse of critical pedagogy circulates almost exclusively among academics; students rarely play an active role in defining key terms and ideas. The *aims* of critical pedagogy, reaching beyond conventional notions of "writing instruction" to sociopolitical transformation, make that exclusivity problematic. Much of the discourse of critical pedagogy revolves around a core of large, abstract ideas such as social justice, student empowerment, co-construction of knowledge, and critical thinking. This is not a problem in and of itself, but what happens when these ideas are brought into the concrete world of the composition classroom? Articulating these terms more precisely for ourselves may also help us to enact and communicate critical pedagogy in our classrooms in a more open and purposeful way. Inviting students to participate in such definitional work as well may mitigate resistance by offering students a greater say, and a greater stake, in their own education. After all, several of the definitions suggest that students and teachers are undertaking this critical enterprise *together*, with students sharing "responsibility for their education" and acting "with authority as agents in the classroom."

Whether we want it or not, we have a certain degree (I'd argue a high degree) of power over our students, by virtue of being the ones who get to define critical pedagogy and all that it entails.{1} [#note1] Definitions, by nature, are political, "affirm[ing] or deny[ing] specific interests and encourag[ing] particular linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors" (Schiappa 68). It follows, then, that the person or persons who do the defining are the ones who wield the power of determining these linguistic and nonlinguistic interests and behaviors. It is worth examining (and better defining) some of the core terms of critical pedagogy, because they are typically worthy notions that nonetheless can make for a rocky transition from theory to practice. Though they sound unproblematic and easily agreed upon—who, after all, is against "critical thinking"?—they are politicized

terms that do "affirm or deny" specific interests. Give the egalitarian goals of critical pedagogy, it is imperative to expose and interrogate these interests.

In this article, I first explore the significance of definitional power and demonstrate how such power, when retained solely by instructors, can undermine the goals of critical pedagogues. Next, I examine how definitions can shape classroom practice and students' response to critical pedagogy. I then consider how the political dimension of composition complicates the notion of sharing definitional power with our students. Finally, I suggest that our perspectives on redistributing definitional power are shaped by the way we define our students, and propose building upon David Walton and Helen Rothschild Ewald's notion of "mutuality" to begin working together with students to define key critical terms. In this article I argue for a deeper articulation of what critical pedagogy is and does, and for student involvement in this articulation. By "deeper," I mean an exploration that reaches down beneath the surface of familiar words—a liquid articulation that seeps between the hard, rooted definitional teeth of theory to the more tender, vulnerable places, to the nerves and blood vessels that sit below, holding everything up.

Definitional Power

In order to examine the language of critical pedagogy, we need first to recognize the definitional power that critical pedagogues hold over that language, and to tease out the ramifications of that power. Many composition courses introduce students to concepts such as"critical thinking," and this generally means that students are introduced—implicitly or explicitly—to what their teacher has decided that being "critical" means. Like any discourse, the discourse of critical pedagogy "implies an author"—it is an act shaped by certain motivations and "certain characteristics of the language user[s]" (Black 110). Students are, of course, "language users," but they are not the ones creating and disseminating the discourse, which is perplexing in light of critical pedagogy's emphasis on student voice and empowerment. The foundational language of critical pedagogy—and more significantly, the *meanings* of that foundational language—is governed primarily by faculty members. If teachers retain sole control over the definitional language of their pedagogy, that control may limit the extent to which education acts as a force of liberation and empowerment.

It is important to step back for a moment to point out an apparent contradiction: I've both claimed that critical pedagogy is a"given," and that we don't engage in sufficient definitional work around it, and offered several (of many) printed definitions. I wish to make a few distinctions here for the purposes of this discussion. First, the fact that these definitions are often printed but rarely verbalized (especially to students) keeps the definitions relegated to a relatively small group of people who *read* these publications. In other words, we are seldom called upon to define the term for people outside of the field, and can therefore adopt what Edward Schiappa would call a "natural attitude" toward the definition (30). We make an assumption of general consensus, at least within our discourse community. When we consider that our students (and some instructors as well{2} [#note2]) are outside of this discourse community—a consideration that I will pursue in more depth below—the consequences of that attitude become more obvious.

I also want to approach definitions of critical pedagogy as what Douglas Walton would call *persuasive*definitions. Persuasive definitions involve both the *descriptive*meaning of words (i.e., the factual/descriptive content of a word) and the *emotive*meaning of words (i.e., the feelings/attitudes that a word suggests or evokes). Persuasive definitions allow for "redefining the descriptive meaning of the word while covertly retaining its old familiar emotive meaning" (Walton 118). Viewing definitions as persuasive removes the façade of neutrality from the language we use, and it also reveals the fact that definitions are not necessarily fixed or benign. The definition of "critical pedagogy," for example, is generally traced back to Paulo Freire, who grew up in poverty and worked with Brazilian peasants; when he talked of a "liberating pedagogy," he meant liberation in a sense that does not mesh with the lived experience of most Americans in higher education. In fact, in his Introduction to Freire's*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donald Macedo contrasts "Freire's denunciation of oppression"to the "intellectual exercise that we often find among many facile liberals and pseudo-critical educators" (12). The emotive meaning of critical pedagogy (the struggle for liberation by oppressed, impoverished peasants) is retained, while the descriptive meaning (an approach to

teaching that offers students a voice in their own education) has been redefined according to history and context. In other words, the term *critical pedagogy* still has the power to call up feelings of revolution and resistance, of the disenfranchised critiquing a system that has excluded them, whether or not this is what is actually happening in writing classrooms. This emotive meaning is powerful—*persuasive*—because it can mask the need to articulate and interrogate what we mean, and what we do.

Even the terms embedded within definitions of critical pedagogy have strong emotive connotations. As Walton says, "a word like 'liberation' has positive connotations, while a word like 'oppressed' has negative connotations. Because of the lingering of this emotive meaning, the respondent is covertly persuaded" to react a certain way (118). As new instructors and graduate students are introduced to the tenets of critical pedagogy, how many of them are likely to reject—or even question—something defined as "emancipatory," "egalitarian," and "liberating"? To do so would be to risk looking foolish, naïve, or unfeeling. This is a perplexing situation: Many graduate students are taught critical pedagogy without necessarily being taught to think reflexively and "critically" about its definition. What does that mean for the graduate students' professional development as teachers, for the students they will teach, and for the next generation of graduate instructors whom they may train?

Power over definition grants power over practice. In other words, those with authority to distinguish between critical and uncritical thinking (or pedagogy) wield authority over what belongs, and what does not belong, in a critical classroom—a troubling situation for a pedagogical approach that seeks to diminish a teacher's authority, not solidify it. In his critique of various practices in English studies, Myron Tuman picks apart definitions of critical pedagogy and notes the established binary between what is considered critical and what is not. If teachers get to decide what "critical" means, he writes, "[i]s this anything more than the traditional claim of teachers who want to pass on their knowledge and wisdom to their students?" (6).

Tuman's question touches on the danger of unrecognized agency. We may be content to think of critical pedagogy as student-centered, liberating education, and leave it at that, but the power we have won't disappear just because we choose to ignore it. In *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom,* Xin Liu Gale argues that many compositionists adhere to the "unrealistic assumption" that the "teacher can choose to abandon the institutional authority that oppresses students and reproduces inequality" (34). Gale contends that authority is "always indispensible" (and potentially dangerous) and that misunderstanding the indispensible nature of authority "may lead to progressive teachers' misguided belief that, once they have abandoned institutional authority in their theories and pedagogies . . . they are then free from the risks of oppressing their students with their authority" (34). To ignore instructor authority in the classroom, she suggests, may increase the risk of inadvertently exerting that authority in unproductive or harmful ways. Gale concludes that "compositionists need to recognize the complexity of the teacher's authority and the context in which it is used" (34).

Definitions in Action

I've stated that we've developed a kind of "natural attitude" toward critical pedagogy and its definitions, which is not surprising given how crucial it is to the work that many compositionists and other educators do. This attitude becomes problematic, however, when we think about the discourse communities involved when we go about *implementing* critical pedagogy. In the classroom, there is a mix of (at least) three different discourse communities—the academic, the student, and the public (itself an underdeveloped term sometimes used simply as a foil for the academic community). I separate *student* from *public* because I see the student discourse community as being in a unique and tense position. It draws its identity from the public (from which it came), the academic community (toward which it moves and from which it receives instruction), and the larger undergraduate community (with which it spends the majority of its time). The students are theoretically meant to be intimately involved in critical pedagogy, as critical co-investigators who share responsibility for their education. But would most students define *themselves* this way?

Many college students, understandably, see their coursework in the context of a "successful" college education—getting good grades, preparing for a good job, and so forth. In *Collision Course*, Russel K. Durst notes that students often have very pragmatic, pre-professional goals for their courses that are "in many ways a positive quality. As individuals, students are motivated in their studies in large part by a desire to achieve the level of academic success necessary to enter their chosen fields" (174). Composition classes in particular carry with them the idea that they are requirements to be filled, stepping stones towards academic and/or professional success. Durst notes that "first-year students typically enter composition with an idea of writing and an understanding of what they need to learn about writing that are dramatically at odds with the views and approaches of teachers" (2). As a result, students are sometimes blamed or dismissed for the "utilitarian" attitude they have towards their classes.

There is also a gap between the stated goals for composition courses (especially required first-year writing) at many institutions and the liberatory goals of many critical pedagogues, and this gap contributes to differences between why a first-year composition student thinks she is in the class, and why her instructor may think she is in the class. To look at it on a larger scale, students are told that they are taking first-year composition because they need certain skills in order to be successful in college. For example, the University of Michigan, where I taught for many years, has this to say about the course in its online description: "The goal of the First-Year Writing Requirement is to prepare students for the type of writing most often assigned and valued in University classes."{3} [#note3] Students are told that they are enrolling in this course to gain academic survival skills. Would they guess that our goals in a required writing course are also focused on responsible citizenship and justice?{4} [#note4]

I'm clearly running into the difficulty of "us versus them," placing students and teachers in opposing, stable groups. It is a binary so firmly entrenched that it is hard to avoid its influence even as I will myself to write against it. I want to highlight this binary as I now move into a discussion of student empowerment, because its very entrenchment in discussions of critical pedagogy signifies how difficult it is to create a fertile space for empowerment.

I had never truly considered empowerment to be a problematic point until I asked students in a first-year writing course at the University of Michigan to do an in-class writing in response to the question, "Can writing be empowering?" I was surprised to discover that more than half of my students either didn't know or weren't sure what empowerment meant. Being unfamiliar with the term is not the same as being unfamiliar with the concept, of course, but it still strikes me as odd that a term used so frequently among teachers to describe what should happen in a writing course could be foreign to students enrolled in the course. If empowerment had only to do with a theoretical interest in composition pedagogy, it could be argued that it rightly belongs in the realm of teacher discourse. Empowerment, however, is something we want to see *happen* in and/or for our students, and this makes its translation into classroom discourse crucial.

If students do not know our terms, as was the case in my classroom, *why* don't they know them? Most likely they don't know because their instructors have not drawn attention to them. If we leave out these terms, we have made a choice regarding what students should, or need, to know—e.g., "empowerment" belongs to teacher discourse; it has been discussed *for* rather than *with* students. Such a language practice collides with the elements of "empowerment" and "co-construction of knowledge" embedded in our notions of critical pedagogy.

This collision disrupts critical pedagogy's translation from theory to practice. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks states that "[w]e must envision the university as a central site for revolutionary struggle, a site where we can work to educate for critical consciousness, where we can have a pedagogy of liberation" (31), but who we count as part of that "we" is a key question, I think. How many students believe that they are working towards their own liberation? How many students would even have a clear sense of what hooks means by "liberation"?

Students left out of the process of defining critical pedagogy are left to accept what we give them—what we have determined constitutes empowerment, critical thinking, responsible citizenship, fair critique of dominant

power structures, and so on. This is a crucial point: even in well-known discussions and case-studies on critical pedagogy such as in David Seitz' *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?,*{5} [#note5] Ira Shor's *When Students Have Power,*{6} [#note6] *and* Russel K. Durst's*Collision Course,*{7} [#note7]we find *no* instances of instructors collaboratively defining the terms of critical pedagogy with their students. This means that the movement toward"critical consciousness" is ultimately limited by teachers'retention of definitional power. As a result, it is less likely that students will experience education as the "revolutionary struggle"that hooks calls for. They are more likely either not to recognize this dimension of our pedagogy at all, or to resist what strikes them as our personal ideologies shoehorned into writing instruction.

The Politics of Composition

It is difficult to read a substantial body of composition theory without picking up on the strong political dimension of the field. The precise political view might vary from theorist to theorist, but many address politics directly and see education as inherently political. We recognize education's ability to reproduce systems of hierarchical power, when it "fail[s] to provide an account for why and how some discourses, knowledges and texts 'count' more than others" (Luke 312); and we hold education up as an institution which has the potential to create more egalitarian social relations (Cazden; Sleeter; Anderson; Giroux). Beth Daniell goes so far as to say that "few disciplines are as blatantly political as composition is—departmentally, institutionally, nationally" (128).

If the politicization of composition is well known to those in the field, we must ask why this politicization is often undisclosed to other groups, students in particular. Many people, including some students, parents, and cultural critics, not only do not see composition as political, but specifically want it *not*to be.

A well-documented example of the tension surrounding composition as a political subject comes from Linda Brodkey's proposed—and ultimately rejected—course at the University of Texas-Austin in 1990. In what became a heated and, certainly political, battle, composition and its purposes were scrutinized as academic work made a surprising leap into the public domain. This case reveals the complexity of depicting composition as blatantly political. It raises complicated questions about the relationship of the academy to the public, about the authority to make political decisions in a required course, and about the fear of bias, power, and indoctrination. Its status as a requirement puts composition in a tough position politically, because students who are "forced" to be there can be looked at as captive to a professor's personal ideology. At the same time, many compositionists have devoted a tremendous amount of reflexive work to this very issue, in an effort to mitigate the likelihood of such indoctrination.

Another example of this discomfort with the blending of composition and politics was offered to me several years ago when my mother recounted a conversation she'd had with an undergraduate student on a flight into Pittsburgh. It was a brief exchange, the small talk of two passengers waiting for a plane to take off. She asked the student what he thought of his first-year composition course. His response was, "It's the worst class I've ever taken. It's just the teacher feeding us a bunch of his philosophy the whole time."

This student clearly sensed an agenda of some kind—he described the class as not only full of "a bunch of philosophy," but he also specifically marked it as the *teacher's*philosophy, which was being "fed" to the students. The instructor's philosophical force-feeding appears to be the explanation for the course being "the worst ever," so it is safe to say that this student viewed the teacher's agenda as misplaced and inappropriate, at best. I would guess that a student who saw composition as inherently political would not have balked quite so much at his teacher's politicized stance, and might instead have seen the "philosophy" involved as a natural element of the course.

Maxine Hairston suggests that a political pedagogy must be considered in terms of its effects on students—not its ideal or envisioned effects on them, but its practical effects, given the structure of power present in an academic institution. Students, she is quick to point out, are hyperaware of being evaluated and will not generally risk taking an independent political stance, "particularly if their radars are picking up clear signals

about what their teacher's views are" (B1). Many students desire academic success in a course above most everything else, and their fear of negative evaluation, Hairston claims, will lead them to choose safety over honesty or critical thinking.

Hairston maintains that composition is intended to teach students to organize their ideas and communicate them effectively, and this narrow definition implies that political ideology is something *added on* by writing instructors, rather than inherently present in any given pedagogy. In a sense, Hairston is making the teacher invisible even as she makes students visible. Stick to the content, she seems to argue, and all of these nasty political problems will go away.

Quite a few philosophers, historians, and sociologists, not to mention composition theorists, would take issue with this assertion—among them, Knoblauch and Brannon; Giroux; Mann; McClelland; Myers; Schildgen; and Shor—all of whom argue for the impossibility of a classroom, or a teacher, free from politics. Our pedagogy, some would say, inevitably arises from ideology; the position of "teacher"is always already steeped in political significance; education's current and historical link to citizenship makes it impossible to extract from politics; and writing courses are embedded within an ideological structure. As Richard Shaull bluntly puts it, "There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process" (34). In a recent interview, Ira Shor affirms this idea when he claims, "Education is politics, then, simply because it develops students and teachers this way or that way depending on the values underlying the learning process" (qtd. in Macrine 121). It would seem, from this perspective, that Hairston's implication that writing classes can remain apolitical is impractical. A teacher is situated politically, and her decisions about curriculum and pedagogy will inevitably be linked to that situatedness.

The issue can't merely be dropped there, however, because what we *do* with an acknowledged lack of neutrality becomes critically important. If teaching is political, and we can't help but carry our political and social identities into the classroom with us, it may seem logical to accept that fact and go ahead with a pedagogy that represents our own personal vision of social or political justice. We have to teach something, so why not make it what we hold most important, most vital in combating social problems? Why not teach in accordance with our own values? As Douglas Walton notes, persuasive definitions are "inevitable, and so they might as well be turned to your own advantage" (127).

This stance allows ethical qualms about feigned neutrality to be overlooked in the name of working towards a social or political good—for example, the liberation of historically dominated groups. Walton argues that "redefining terms to wrest political power from older groups by persuasion or even coercion, is justifiable" (127),{8} [#note8]and this is perhaps a tempting line of reasoning for instructors who are troubled by systemic injustice and who see an opportunity for change via their teaching—even if it means prioritizing the instructor's ideology over students'.

The reality is that our students, if offered the kinds of co-constructional power I am advocating, can throw up roadblocks in our chosen path to social justice. They can disagree, they can persuade others to disagree, and they can leave our classrooms with opinions that make us cringe. Thelin, for example, describes a male student who used class discussion as an opportunity to present a theory about women's place in the world and men's innate superiority "which bordered on misogyny" ("Understanding"124). In theory, we may say that we accept the expression of all ideas as part of the educational process. In practice, that becomes more difficult. I have heard numerous faculty members—and these are professors and instructors that I respect and admire a great deal—say that pursuing social justice may be worth a few ethical qualms here and there in terms of student voice and power, suggesting that the ends justify the means, even if those means are a bit suspect pedagogically.

I believe that this perspective comes from a deep desire for change, and the imperative to "get things done" is understandable. Looking more closely, however, what does this acceptance of ethical qualms reveal about the kind of power we've chosen to hold onto in a critical classroom that is theoretically based on decentralizing authority? We can perhaps rationalize the retention of power by pointing to the assumptions and values that students bring with them into our classrooms. If, for example, we see certain students reinforcing what we

view as systems of oppression, isn't it logical to present a different perspective? After all, if they've already been influenced by "the other side"—whatever we imagine that other side (or sides) to be—don't they deserve to hear an alternative?

In "Ironic Encounters: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the 'Liberal Bias' of Composition Pedagogy," Jeff Pruchnic illuminates a clear problem with such a stance. He writes:

> At the end of the (school)day, if such an approach is taken as itself an ethical intervention, it must have some alibi to explain how such a leveraging is proper, some way to validate that it is resistance against—rather than simply another example of—unethical interpellation. Thus, any settling by a progressive scholar on a *particular*critical frame leaves them finding their rationale in the unlikely Hegelian "negation of a negation": the forcing of a particular mode of epistemic or critical valuation as primary is justified only insofar as it is taken to be the corrective to an existing distortion previously forced on the subject (65-66).

Trying to provide a "corrective" to what students have encountered elsewhere may be a well-intentioned sentiment, but it also has some significant drawbacks. First, it incorporates an implication that we know exactly where our students are coming from, and that we have a firm grasp on their identities. We may, in fact, have some insight into our students' backgrounds, but it is dangerous to make assumptions regarding our students' cultural and ethical psychology. Second, if our mindset is that we need to "give" or"provide" something for our students in terms of politics, and we are deciding what they "need," aren't we edging toward an authoritarian model of education that critical pedagogy is designed to work against (Freire 72)? The question becomes whether we are willing to risk this slide toward authoritarianism in order to move forward with our own pedagogical agenda.

Defining Our Students

Students should be the deciding factor in answering tough questions like these, if indeed they are the "center" of our pedagogy and we prioritize their education and intellectual development. Students themselves are defined in various ways in composition scholarship, and it is worth sifting through these definitions to see how they shape the ways that students are factored in (or not factored in) to our pedagogical decision-making.

In some cases students are portrayed as blossoming negotiators of power and voice (Dillon 87). In others, they are viewed as agents with the power to resist (Harkin 280). Some scholars present students as the next generation of active citizens (Myers 158; Murray 121; Shor 269-70; Murphy 109-10), or as young people just coming to a sense of selfhood and freedom (Shor 99; Knoblauch and Brannon 167).

If we define and regard students as co-constructors of knowledge, they will be granted a significant role in determining how our class is run—what is discussed and how it is discussed, how authority is distributed, and so forth. If they are co-constructors of knowledge, their perspectives are as valued as ours, and disagreements are an important, productive part of the learning process—for both student and teacher. One particularly useful conception of such a co-construction of knowledge is David Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald's notion of *mutuality.* In *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*, they explain that mutuality can"be understood as teachers and students sharing the potential to adopt a range of subject positions to establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom" (3). The authors contend that "student participation is fundamental to learning and meaning making. However, the degree to which students are engaged in classroom discourse depends, to a large extent, on how teachers exercise their considerable authority" (66).

One way that Wallace and Ewald suggest that teachers exercise their authority is in reconstituting what they call classroom "speech genres"—for example, by allowing students more of a voice in classroom discussion, as well as a greater say in how those discussions are run and which topics are discussed (34). At the same time, they insist that "the concept of students having voice must move beyond the basic sense of being able to

express opinions and feelings in the classroom" and that students' contributions must truly be valued *as knowledge* (32).

Though they don't explicitly mention the idea of co-defining key terms with students in the classroom, the type of cooperative definitional work I'm arguing for seems very much in keeping with Wallace and Ewald's vision of mutuality and the type of participatory "meaning making" they advocate. This act of co-defining key pedagogical terms with students in the classroom would build upon the valuable foundation of mutuality, adding an important new dimension to Wallace and Ewald's useful work.

What might this co-defining look like? I imagine that it could take a number of forms. In *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*, Joan Wink offers an example of co-definitional work (though she does not explicitly label it as such). In her text, she provides several definitions of the term *critical pedagogy* from former students who had completed their undergraduate work and were preparing to start a teaching credential program; these definitions illustrate how variable understandings of terms can be (30). She then invites readers of her book to generate their own definitions of *critical*, *pedagogy*, and *critical pedagogy* in blank spaces embedded in pages of her text (29-30). Readers are encouraged to create generative definitions for each word based on "[their] own experiences"(29). As she notes, "It takes longer this way. It is more difficult this way. But, once you have created some meaning for critical pedagogy yourself, you will never forget it, and you will be able to enrich your meaning only as you learn and experience more"(28). Though she is writing for teachers, Wink's sentiment is equally applicable to students. It is quicker, and simpler, for students to be provided with (implicit or explicit) definitions; some students would even prefer it. Co-defining, though more labor intensive and potentially frustrating, opens the door for students and faculty to generate meaning together—meaning that is ultimately more enriching and memorable than material transferred from teacher to student.

However, if students are perceived as potential threats to our pedagogical goals, their perspectives are more likely to be viewed as obstacles to overcome, and disagreements are more likely perceived as bouts between competitors. Given the institutional authority of the instructor, which makes any "competition" somewhat unfair, students situated in this way are likely to find their ability to influence the classroom greatly diminished.

This particular act of defining comes down, finally, to an issue of trust. Do we actually have faith in our students' ability to make good choices for themselves through a classroom governed by a participatory pedagogy? Freire stresses the importance of faith in our students when he notes that a "real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust" (60). Yet, the concept of trust is in some ways at odds with proceeding with a pedagogy that seeks action and change. Trust in other people can require the relinquishment of control. It implies partnership. It cancels out self-sufficiency, makes things messier and more complicated, and creates a greater potential for frustration and impasse. It finishes the phrase "If you want something done right…" with "you *can't* do it yourself."

Trust comes at a price, then. Giving our students a greater role in defining the work of our courses—and, as a result, a bigger say in establishing the specific goals of the course—provides them a more direct way of attacking or resisting the goals we hold most dear, if they are so inclined. It opens us up to the possibility of antagonism and rejection and can potentially create a classroom environment that feels counter-productive to the kinds of change we'd like to see. I would argue that this potential threat to our vision of the critical classroom is a necessary one, however, since critical pedagogy is so uniquely intended to establish space for students to have such agency in their own education. It is a point at which theory becoming practice can be frightening, precisely because our theory shifts some of the control to our students. We can't always anticipate what will happen, a necessary condition highlighted by Thelin when he writes:

> If everything in a critical classroom worked as well as some accounts of critical pedagogy make
> it seem . . . we would not have a transformation of a classroom. We would have a recasting of the
> typical hero model of teaching, where the instructor rescues students in need of saving . . . Some

unpleasant moments must spring from attempts to implement critical pedagogy, then, and instructors have found that the consequences of differing democratic, progressive pedagogies are hard to anticipate ("Understanding" 127).

These"unpleasant moments"—uncomfortable as they may be for instructors—can also be some of the most productive moments and can allow for students to experience education as an empowering process. In teaching a class centered in on the theme of Utopia, Ira Shor encountered student resistance to the topic and seemed to thrive on it. In *When Students Have Power*, he writes:

> Students expressed doubts about the idea and purpose of Utopia, even the study of it! These questions had an attitude about them, which is good because the students were emerging into the material, not memorizing or mimicking my take on it. They were challenging me to prove that Utopia was of human value and curricular value. That's a worthy challenge for students to pose to their teachers on the first day of class, not taking the material for granted, not easing back . . . and waiting to be told what to think (54-55).

Shor delights in the fact that his students are questioning the very purpose of the course, because this questioning demonstrates critical engagement in their own education—the students are learning to critique, to break away from passivity.

There is no way for Shor to control whether or not his students end up thinking the same way he does about Utopia and its relation to social and political issues. Some of his students could pass the class, fill the requirement, and never put into practice what Shor had in mind when he designed the course. This state of not knowing is significant to note because it is another problematic intersection of theory and practice. Once we take the initial step of trusting our students as critical thinkers, we have to accept that we can't predict or control the outcomes of their experience in our classrooms, any more than we can ensure that they will finish our course with a love for language and writing. As Shor indicates, relinquishing control (or a pretense of control) creates an atmosphere of freedom for our students, but it also allows us to learn in new and unexpected ways.

An important means of exhibiting trust in our students is by loosening our grip on our definitions of core terms, by relinquishing a degree of the power we wield over our pedagogical language. In *When Words Lose Their Meaning,* J.B. White describes language as being "in part a system of invention" and adds that "[s]ome of these inventions are shared with others and become common property" (8). Critical pedagogy is a continuous invention that cries out for this kind of communal ownership. Making critical pedagogy "common property" grants students the opportunity to disrupt and challenge it. More importantly, though, it grants them a greater stake in determining what the writing classroom is for and allows them to invest more fully in their own education.

Notes

1. I recognize the rhetorical difficulty of employing "we" here, especially since those who consider themselves critical pedagogues may have varying reasons for defining themselves that way. For the purposes of this discussion, "we" will refer to college composition instructors who are committed to critical pedagogy. (The reasons for this commitment lead to a different discussion, and will therefore be left aside.) Like any other grouping based on selected characteristics, "we" is an imperfect construction; it is also, I think, a necessary construction in a study of practice that is widely accepted even among very different individuals. (Return to text. [#note1_ref])
2. I am referring here to graduate students (in literature, creative writing, and other fields) and faculty who may or may not have training in composition theory or critical pedagogy. (Return to text. [#note2_ref])
3. http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/writingprogram/firstyearreq.asp [http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/writingprogram/firstyearreq.asp] (accessed 5/4/13) (Return to text. [#note3_ref])

4. Gorzelsky suggests that it may be a mistake to treat these goals separately. She writes, "[W]e should neither pursue critical pedagogy at the expense of promoting effective classrooms nor abandon it in favor of students' pragmatic goals. Certainly it is essential to incorporate students' goals and interests into our courses. But to sharply prioritize either pragmatic goals or the pursuit of critical consciousness is to privilege a single variable at the expense of creating classrooms that promote real learning" (81-82). (Return to text. [#note4_ref])
5. In his "Afterword," Seitz proposes "four necessary conditions" that must be "active within a teacher's critical pedagogy if she wishes to promote students' internal persuasion of social critiques" (232). The second of these four conditions is asking students "to build their own cultural and social theories, rather than primarily apply the critical theories of others" (232). It seems reasonable, then, that Seitz would support the idea of students being involved in the process of defining critical pedagogy—a theory of teaching governing their classroom experience—even though he doesn't discuss it in his book. (Return to text. [#note5_ref])
6. In his famous discussion of a critical pedagogy course he led on the concept of "Utopia," Shor mentions introducing a few key critical terms into classroom discussion. Shor writes that in one class discussion he "named an experimental alternative to traditional education—'negotiating the curriculum'—for which [he] also used synonyms like 'power-sharing,' 'shared authority," and "cogovernance," to indicate collaborative decision-making, democratic deliberation over policy, and codevelopment of the syllabus" (*When* 59). Though Shor introduces and discusses these terms with students, there is no suggestion that they were actively involved in *co-constructing* the definitions, despite the student-centered, collaborative nature of his course. (Return to text. [#note6_ref])
7. Sherry Cook Stanforth, the writing instructor that Durst observed at the University of Cincinnati as part of his research on critical writing courses, *did* initiate a collaborative, definitional activity. Students broke into groups of four and worked together to "define and explain" various concepts for their classmates. Rather than work to define key terms of critical pedagogy, however, the students discussed social ideas such as "bulimia, vegetarianism, the American family" among others (97). While such an activity might serve as one model for how students can work together to define key critical pedagogy terms, there is no evidence that Stanforth's students did this. (Return to text. [#note7_ref])
8. Walton's new dialectical view, like postmodernism, acknowledges the inevitability of persuasive definitions; it does not, however, "draw the postmodernist conclusion that all definitions . . . are all equally justifiable" (127). (Return to text. [#note8_ref])

Works Cited

Anderson, Virginia. "Property Rights: Exclusion as Moral Action in 'The Battle of Texas.'"*College English*: 62.4 (March 2000): 445-472. Print.

Black, Edwin. "The Second Persona." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56.2 (April 1970): 109-119. Print.

Berlin, James A. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures Refiguring College English Studies*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1996. Print.

Brodkey, Linda. "Making a Federal Case out of Difference: The Politics of Pedagogy, Publicity, and Postponement."*Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. Ed. John Clifford and John Schilb. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1994. 236-261. Print.

Burbules, Nicholas C. and Rupert Berk. "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits." *Critical Theories in Education*. Ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Cazden, et. al. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures."*Harvard Educational Review* 66 (Spring 1996): 60-92. Print.

Daniell, Beth. "Theory, Theory Talk, and Composition." *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. Ed. John Clifford and John Schilb. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1994. 127-140. Print.

Dillon, George. "Argumentation and Critique: College Composition and Enlightenment Ideal."*Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies*. Ed. Anne Ruggles Gere. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993. Print.

Durst, Russell K. "Can We Be Critical of Critical Pedagogy?" *College Composition and Communication* 58:1 (Sept 2006): 110-114. Print.

---. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1999. Print.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Press, 1973. Print.

Gale, Xin Liu. *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Print.

Giroux, Henry A. "Introduction: Democracy, Education, and the Politics of Critical Pedagogy." *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now?* Ed. Peter McLaren and Joe L. Kincheloe. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. 1-5. Print.

Gorzelsky, Gwen. "Working Boundaries: From Student Resistance to Student Agency."*College Composition and Communication* 61:1 (Sept 2009): 64-84. Print.

Hairston, Maxine. "Required Writing Courses Should Not Focus on Politically Charged Social Issues."*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. XXXVII, Number 19, Jan. 23, 1991. Print.

Harkin, Patricia. "Narrating Conflict."*Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. Ed. John Clifford and John Schilb. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1994. 278-288. Print.

Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997. Print.

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989. Print.

Kellner, Douglas. "Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogies."*Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Instituting Education, and the Discourse of Theory*. Ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Knoblauch, C.H. and Brannon, Lil. *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1985. Print.

LSA Resources. "First Year Writing Requirement." College of Literature, Science & the Arts. University of Michigan. Web. 5 September 2012. <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/students/academicsrequirements/lsadegreesrequirements/writingrequirements [http://www.lsa.umich.edu/students/academicsrequirements/lsadegreesrequirements/writingrequirements] >.

Luke, Allan. "Genres of Power? Literacy Education and the Production of Capital."*Literacy in Society*. Ed. Ruqaiya Hasan and Geoffrey Williams. New York: Longman, 1996. 308-338. Print.

Macrine, Sheila L. "What is Critical Pedagogy Good For? An Interview with Ira Shor." *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times*. Ed. Sheila Macrine. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 119-136. Print.

Murray, Donald. "Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent." *College English* 20:2 (May 1969):118-123. Print.

Myers, Greg. "Reality, Consensus, and Reform: the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching." *College English* 48:2 (February 1986): 154-174. Print.

Pruchnic, Jeff. "Ironic Encounters: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the 'Liberal Bias' of Composition Pedagogy."*JAC* 30:1-2 (2010): 53-93. Print.

Schiappa, Edward. *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. Print.

Schildgen, Brenda Deen. "Reconnecting Rhetoric and Philosophy in the Composition Classroom."*Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies*. Ed. Anne Ruggles Gere. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993. 30-43. Print.

Seitz, David. *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?: Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004. Print.

Shaull, Richard. Foreword. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Press, 1973. 29-34. Print.

Shor, Ira. *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Boston: South End Press, 1980. Print.

---. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.

---. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.

Sleeter, Christine. *Multicultural Education as Social Activism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Print.

Thelin, William H. "Understanding Problems in Critical Classrooms."*College Composition and Communication* 57:1 (Sept 2005): 114-141. Print.

---. "William H. Thelin's Response to Russel Durst." *College Composition and Communication* 58:1 (Sept 2006): 114-118. Print.

Tuman, Myron. *Language and Limits: Resisting Reform in English Studies*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. Print.

Walton, Douglas. "Persuasive Definitions and Public Policy Arguments."*Argument and Advocacy* 37 (Winter 2001): 117-132. Print.

Wallace, David L., and Helen Rothschild Ewald. *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. Print.

White, James Boyd. *When Words Lose Their Meaning*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.

Wink, Joan. *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 2000. Print.

SHARE [http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=compforum]