

# Disruptive Practices: Enacting Critical Pedagogy through Meditation, Community Building, and Explorative Spaces in a Graduate Course for Pre-Service Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

*This study showcases classroom interactions that reveal the transformational potential of educational practices which disrupt traditional notions about teaching and learning. These disruptive practices create qualitatively different social relations within a classroom which open spaces for students to co-create knowledge in new and creative ways. Based on an ethnographic study, conducted in a foundational course for pre-service teachers, that explored the pedagogical practices of a teacher educator committed to a social justice-based critical pedagogy, analysis of classroom interactions revealed the following disruptive teaching practices: providing spaces for creative explorations, a focus on community building, and using secular mindfulness practices.*

*Keywords: Disruptive practices, teacher education, pre-service teachers, critical teaching practices*

## INTRODUCTION

Within a critical pedagogy framework, knowledge is recognized as socially produced and teachers are viewed as “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). If critical teacher educators wish to instill in prospective teachers this understanding about themselves as transformative

educators, they must enact practices in their own classrooms that disrupt and not replicate dominant notions of teaching and learning reflected in what Freire (2000/1970) called the banking model of education. One of the key elements of such critical teaching practices involves the deconstruction of classroom interactions and dynamics so that spaces open up where teacher and students can collectively and creatively co-construct knowledge. *Disruptive practices* unsettle traditional teacher/student hierarchies in the classroom, traditional notions of what constitutes knowledge, as well as traditional ways of engaging with the curriculum of a class. On the micro level of individual interactions, disruptive practices manifest in the form of classroom interactions that allow for collaboration, creativity and multiple ways of knowing within a safe and supportive classroom community.

Most pre-service teachers enter the college classroom with few experiences of such critical teaching practices. An effective way to guide pre-service teachers in developing their own critical teaching practices is by modeling such disruptive practices in teacher education classes. While there is no dearth of literature on the theoretical potential of critical pedagogy for transformative teacher education, the practical implications of critical pedagogy practices remain underexplored. Despite the recognition that *how* teacher educators teach plays a pivotal role for prospective teachers’ learning, very little research exists that focuses on how teacher educators model the kind of critical pedagogy

practices they hope their pre-service teacher students will employ in their future K-12 classrooms (Conklin, 2008; Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Swennen, 2007).

Grounded in the notion of the “demographic divide” between a largely homogeneous teaching force and a diverse student population (Hodgkinson, 2002), much of the research on critical pedagogy and teacher education focuses on culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching approaches and strategies (e.g., Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2007), on changing pre-service teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about diversity, difference, privilege and culture (e.g., Bartolomé, 2004; Capella-Santana, 2003; Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth, & Crawford, 2005; Duarte & Reed, 2004), and the discomforts and resistances particularly of White pre-service teachers in reaction to multicultural teacher education (e.g., Case & Hemmings, 2005). Studies of teacher educators are typically overlooked in teacher education research (Assaf, Garza, & Battle, 2010).

While some critical teacher educators engage in practitioner research, narrative inquiry, and self-study around the courses that they teach, systematic empirical research is largely missing. Drawing from a larger study that explored how critical pedagogy was enacted in one teacher education course, this article focuses on three disruptive practices that challenged and transformed pre-service teachers’ commonsense notions about teaching and learning: constructing *creative explorative spaces*, *community building*, and the using *mindfulness practices* in the form of secular meditation.

## METHODS

This research employed an ethnographic study design that allowed for multiple and flexible data gathering to establish what Geertz (1973) called thick description of observed patterns and interactions. The site selected for this study was a three-credit graduate course that introduces prospective teachers to the complexities of the work of teachers by critically examining the social and organizational context in which that work occurs. The course is offered every semester at the college of education at a large public university in the northeastern United States. I chose this site because Gloria, the course instructor, Senior Lecturer and director of the student teaching program for students enrolled in the master’s degree program for secondary school teaching, grounds her teaching in a social justice-based critical pedagogy and I wanted to explore how she enacts critical teaching practices in her classroom. There

were 17 students enrolled in the course, 12 female and 5 male students.

The diversity of this group of students in regards to racial/ethnic, class, religious background and age was remarkable: the age ranged from 22 to 41, two students were immigrants to the United States (from Pakistan and Brazil), one student identified as multiracial (black/Puerto Rican, Native American), one student identified as Hispanic, several students identified as coming from working class backgrounds and/or reported having experienced poverty while others self-identified as upper-middle-class, one student identified as Jewish, one student considered attending a Jesuit seminary after graduation while a third of the students identified as non-religious/atheist.

The primary means of data collection was participant observation of the class. I observed 12 of the 13 two-and-a-half hour classes, primarily remaining an observer. However, I participated in some activities, such as the meditation exercises, the sharing of the social identity paper, and whole class go-arounds. My field notes were complemented by audio-or video-recordings of selected classroom events (e.g. whole class discussion, interactive learning experiences). Triangulation of multiple data sources was built into data collection and analysis to achieve trustworthiness of the findings. I conducted a semi-structured 75-minute interview with the course instructor as well as interviews with three of the students. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire asked students about their experiences with the course. For further analysis, I also collected numerous artifacts, such as the course syllabus, class handouts, readings and the work students produced in class as well as out of class (e.g., written reflection papers, online blog entries).

Data analysis followed the procedures suggested by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) which involves using an inductive process that draws on a modified grounded theory approach. Based on the field jottings, I wrote extended field notes paying particular attention to the description of classroom events, later integrating the transcripts from the audio-recordings to include details from the classroom discourse. I then read and re-read the field notes several times, identifying categories and themes by coding and re-coding the data as I went from open to focused coding. During this process, I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA to enter and sort data excerpts into coded categories for further analysis and easy retrieval during the write-up of the findings. Throughout the process, I wrote conceptual memos and analyzed in depth relevant excerpts in excerpt-commentary units that provide the basis for the classroom practices described in the following section.

## RESULTS

*I think for me, in a lot of ways when I'm at my best in my practice as a multicultural educator and a critical pedagogue is when I am embodying the practices. I'm making a space. Space for my students' voices. And I'm sitting back and letting them wrestle with things. I'm challenging them, I'm disrupting their worldviews, but I'm doing that from a position of love. (Interview with Gloria)*

Teacher educators who wish to model critical pedagogy in their teaching practices have to rethink their own position in the classroom, moving from a position of authority to that of facilitator and guide of learning experiences. For Gloria, being a critical pedagogue meant not only to engage her students in critical thinking—often “disrupting their worldviews”—but it also meant to disrupt the traditional teacher/student hierarchy in the classroom. While Gloria acknowledged that she actively “challenged” her students—Gloria encouraged the students to consider issues of privilege, oppression and power through the course readings and frequently “pushed” back asking hard questions during class discussions—she also stepped back to “make a space for [her] students voices ... letting them wrestle with things.” Analysis of classroom interactions revealed that Gloria deliberately constructed creative explorative spaces where such “wrestling” could occur.

### *Constructing Creative Explorative Spaces*

Throughout the course, students were often engaged in small groups exploring their developing understanding of what it means to teach and to learn, to become and to be a teacher. These small group activities were not just discussion-based but, maybe more importantly, they often included creative explorations of the topics discussed.

In class session # 5, students engaged in a gallery walk presenting their creative reading responses. The week's assignment had been to “prepare a word collage, poem or other visual medium that uses the words from the articles to convey the thoughts, feelings, questions and challenges posed by these articles” (from the course syllabus). While one group of students presented their projects, the rest of the group walked around engaging with the presenters in conversations around their projects.

In class Session # 7, the students engaged in a visualization exercise. Gloria had asked her students to visually represent the connections and disconnections they saw between the readings and their course experiences, explaining to them, “Create something that shows the

connections and disconnections between the various parts of thinking that we've done. Think about the hidden curriculum, think about the field experiences, think about what teachers do and what we hope they can do and what their reality is.” In a surprising move, students sat down in groups on the floor. Translating their thoughts into images was no easy task as it asked students to leave behind traditional ways of engaging with readings and experiences (through discussion and/or writing) but as the lively talk that soon erupted showed students quickly immersed in the activity.

In class Session #10, one group of students in a dramatic enactment that represented the culmination of a series of learning experiences through which Gloria had guided her students during that class session. At the beginning of the class session, Gloria had prepared a carousel activity—a cooperative learning activity that combines movement, conversation, and reflection. Small groups of students rotated around the classroom, stopping at various “poster stations” for a designated period of time to share and discuss their field observation experiences, then posting their thoughts at each station for all groups to read. The discussion prompts on each poster were meant to guide students towards an analytical evaluation of their experiences. For example, prompts asked students to think about variables that impact individual and social opportunities, the connections of access-funding-literacy and knowledge-literacy-power. However, Gloria noticed that students' responses remained still very descriptive, which prompted her to adjust her lesson plan. Leading her students into another activity, she told them, “There are few places where there is some analysis. ... I'm gonna ask you to articulate your analysis of why you saw what you saw. I'm gonna ask you to write a paragraph as a group. ... I want some specificity with this. Some real analysis”. The sharing-out after small group activities is common practice to bring the conversation back to the whole class. Gloria decided to challenge her students to present their group text differently. She told them:

*Speak with conviction! Speak with CONVICTION. Say it like you mean it. So, you've just written these analyses. These are things that have come from some place inside of you. So, share it. Figure out how you're gonna share it as a group in a way that conveys either the conviction or the uncertainty if you're raising questions.*

When the first group of students simply read their paragraph ending with a low-voiced “We are waiting for a popular revolution,” Gloria responded emphatically:

*Now, I'm all about a popular revolution. But let's say it with conviction. Let's hear it. ... I'm thinking theater. So, think about how to convey what these words mean to you. More than read them. 'cause I really want to hear them. These are important thoughts. I want to hear them. [pause] The four of you. [looking at the first group] You are up. Again.*

The second time around, the group read their lines with loud dramatic voices, ripping their poster to pieces as all of them together shouted: “We are waiting for a popular REVOLUTION!” Stunned silence was followed by some laughter, then applause. The groups that followed took the enactment even further. One group role-played a situation on a school bus. Another group decided to have one student stand on a chair proclaiming their words in a theatrical voice while other group members enacted the words through gestures.

Few pre-service teachers have sustained personal experience with critical pedagogy practices. When they encounter such practices in their teacher education classes, at first they often resist taking ownership of their own learning. Student-centered activities like the ones described above might initially produce more surface level students’ responses if the teacher does not respond in ways that pushes students to consider class topics more in depth. That students appreciated the varied learning experiences that pushed them to a deeper understanding surfaced during the debriefing session when students commented on how transforming their words into action led them to a different level of understanding:

- Julie:* It changed it from something cerebral to something dynamic. I don't know why but I got the feeling that that probably gets us more deeply into things. I'm feeling that that allows people to learn on a different level because you experience it in two different ways.
- Christine:* And also to do something that started out as sort of brainstorming with all the different ideas that we came up with and then actually having to put it into an analysis and then actually having minutes to figure out how to create a play that depicts that to our classmates. It was a really interesting process.
- Lukas:* It makes it seem more real. Saying things makes it more real. You know, it's easy to think things. ... It solidifies the things

that we've talked about or thought about for a while. (all quotes - field note November 9, 2012)

The creative explorative spaces that Gloria designed disrupted many commonsense notions about teaching and learning. First, the creative element of the assignments changed how students engaged with the course readings and their course experiences. Instead of a focus on discussion and writing, students had to create visual and dramatic representations of their understandings. The creative act is a critical act or an act of liberation—it shakes up how we make meaning—and allows new ways of thinking to emerge. As such, a creative act is a “social, political, intellectual, aesthetic and personal process” (Rifa-Valls, 2011, p. 3). By creating learning opportunities that are multimodal (e.g., through poetry, drawings, performance, technology-based visuals, etc.), teacher educators can provide their students with explorative spaces that allow them to think differently. Cartwright and Noone (2006) call these kinds of learning experiences “imaginative moments” (p. 6) that create free spaces for “reconsideration/reformulation/renaming” (p. 8).

Second, in the classroom interactions described above, the traditional teacher/student hierarchy was unsettled. Taken for granted traditional notions about authority and position in the classroom were disrupted. This was most obvious in the way Gloria’s pedagogical choices changed the actual classroom space. Setting up a classroom differently in terms of spatial arrangement can be a critical act when it does not conform to institutionalized standards or demands. Ira Shor, who has analyzed the ideology of classroom furniture, calls the front of the room near the blackboard a “special spot of power” and designates the classroom design in which students are sitting in rows facing the lecturing teacher at the front an “architecture of control” (Shor, 1997, p. 11) because it allows the teacher to assert unilateral authority to transmit the officially sanctioned knowledge.

In Gloria’s classroom, the special spot of power was non-existent. Not only were whole-class discussions held in a large circle, but as the examples above show, students frequently had to get up and move around in the classroom space during various learning experiences. As students became more comfortable with taking charge of their learning, they also started taking control of the classroom space, for example, by sitting on the floor or standing on a chair. In this way, commonsense notions about what a classroom looks like (e.g., students occupying desks in rows, teacher standing in front) and about how students have to be in the classroom (e.g., silent, listening, faced towards teacher, not engaged with each other) were effectively disrupted.

Another practice that transformed students' understanding of teaching and learning was the importance that Gloria placed on community building in her classroom.

**Community Building**

*I think saying that what we're doing is building community as one of our priorities as a class is itself disruptive. I mean especially in the regime that we live under right now, where it's all about individuality and competition. That we make a space that is about community and community as the most important piece is one of the most disruptive things that we're doing.* (Interview with Gloria)

Drawing on Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (1999), Zohar and Marshall's concept of Spiritual Intelligence (2000), and Goleman's concept of Emotional Intelligence (2005), Rendón (2009) advocates for creating learning communities that foster connectedness and collaboration. Grounded in the belief that humans need to feel a sense of belonging, she critiques teaching practices that privilege individuality and competition instead advocating for a shift in thinking that recognizes community as a key condition for learning.

Community building and learning as a community were core elements of Gloria's critical pedagogy. From the start of the class, Gloria stressed the importance of community for learning telling her students, "Teaching and learning happen in communities. I'm just a facilitator. We all bring knowledge," (field note September 1, 2011 – Class Session #1). From the first day of class, Gloria deliberately engaged her students in a number of community building activities. Whole-class conversation were often introduced and/or ended with go-arounds in which students shared experiences, thoughts or insights.

Regularly assigning students randomly to small groups encouraged students to build connections across differences. This was enhanced by the dialogic format of the class and through assignments that provided space for the students to share personal stories and experiences, such as an "Educational Autobiography," or the "Social Identity Paper," both of which were shared with the class through read-alouds. Bringing the self as text into the classroom through sharing was a powerful experience for the students that included both feelings of discomfort and an appreciation of the community building effects. The following sequence demonstrates the tensions around such assignments:

*Christine:* I'm just pushing back ... I feel like people are being asked to divulge a lot of very personal information about them-

selves in an environment where we feel pressures to do well and to succeed. [responding immediately] It's hard to do sometimes but I think why we have to do a lot of these things is because it helps us to better understand ourselves and where we come from and so then we can better understand our students and know where they are coming from. ... You have to understand who you are in order to understand who your students are. If you don't have a sense of yourself, how can you understand another person?

*Gloria:* It's hard because we're in institutions that are academic institutions and that have very traditional notions about what constitutes knowledge and what we're learning to do and how we come together and who has power and who doesn't have power and so I really appreciate your bringing it up because it speaks to a very real tension about this assignment. ... I get the complexity of it. I also think, you know, you got to know yourself. ... Um, how much you want us to know you, that's complicated. But you better know yourself. So, if you can do your assignment in a way that works for you that way. (field note October 26, 2012).

These initial feelings of discomfort, however, led students to appreciate the process of community building through the sharing of their personal experiences. As one student said, "The people in class have gotten really close and I think it's because we go to places that are uncomfortable, which perhaps can make people upset or can make for intimacies between people." Another student commented, "I feel like we are a pretty close class. I feel more so than a lot of other classes. I think that [sharing the papers] definitely opened people up more." A third student who also felt that sharing the papers "made me feel closer to everyone else," added how this experience helped her to understand her peers and develop empathy with them: "There are things that other people may say that you completely disagree with, but it's just different when you understand how they feel about things."

The long-lasting effect of such community building became apparent when the students took steps to create their own Facebook page so that they could stay connected beyond the end of the semester. Recognizing how important

it is for pre-service teachers to have support from each other once they enter the field, these students extended Gloria's invitation to build a community. The following quote from a student interview exemplifies this:

*I feel like the learning allowed us to create kind of networks and partnerships with our peers and I kind of feel like the people that I have met in that class are going to be colleagues who I will keep in touch with. And I think that the material that she provided us with, the articles are really conducive to kind of strong feelings, which has created good discussions, which of course then can foster those tighter relationships.* (Interview with Jaclyn)

Logan, likewise, acknowledged the relevance of community building particularly in regards to creating a community of practice, saying, "I have seen the importance of community in education. Interaction and engagement with other teachers can be helpful for both emotional well-being and for bouncing ideas around about different approaches" (final reflection paper). Almost all of the students voiced in the end-of-the-semester questionnaire plans to keep in touch with others in this class, emphasizing how important "the relationships we formed and plans for continued networking" (Celia) were for them.

What makes community building such a disruptive practice, particularly within college classrooms, is its resistance to dominant ways of teaching that are grounded in notions of individuality and competition. When classrooms are envisioned as learning communities, a spirit of collaboration, connection, and empathy can develop in which both the teacher and the students come together in the act of co-constructing knowledge. Another disruptive practice was the use of mindfulness practices, such as secular meditation, as a classroom ritual.

### ***Mindfulness Practices in the Form of Secular Meditation***

It is 4:30 pm on a Wednesday afternoon. Seventeen pre-service teachers are sitting in a large circle, feet planted firmly on the floor, hands in their laps or on their desks, eyes closed.

*"What I want us to do is ground, center ourselves, feel where we are. ... Let us think about connections. Last week we got to know each other in a community, in a deeper way. Let us meditate on our shared breaths. ... Notice where you are and yourself in the space... Before you come back, take a moment to sort of know ourselves here. What we share, what separates us.*

*... When you are ready, open your eyes."* (field note November 2, 2012)

Some scholars have critiqued dominant pedagogies for privileging intellectual/rational knowing over emotional/spiritual knowing. In response, they developed pedagogical models that recognize the body/mind connection and attempt to teach in a more holistic way. For example, Rendón's (2009) model of a *sentipensante* (sensing/thinking) pedagogy is based on the notions of wholeness and consonance combining inner (working with emotions, reflective processes) and outer learning (intellectual activities, academic concepts). This pedagogical approach acknowledges the importance of contemplative or mindfulness practices for engaging learners deeply in the learning materials.

Zajonc (2006) has called contemplative practice or meditation "one of the most powerful transformative interventions" (p. 2) noting how secular contemplative practices are increasingly being appreciated as a useful pedagogical strategy. Hart (2004) emphasizes how contemplative practices can influence the quality of the classroom experience and ultimately transform the entire space in which education happens. Shapiro, Brown, and Astin (2008) in their review of research on meditation in higher education found that mindfulness meditation may improve preparedness, orient attention, decrease stress and anxiety, and support the development of creativity, among other outcomes. They conclude that "meditation complements and enhances educational goals by helping to develop traditionally valued academic skills" (p. 6).

The sitting meditation focusing on the breath that Gloria used in her classroom as a mindfulness practice served mainly to "ground" the students and bring them into the space of the classroom. Odahowski (2004) notes, "Mindfulness is training the mind to be present in the moment. A keen and compassionate awareness. Focusing attention to the present brings increasing awareness, connection, and acceptance" (p. 3). The following quote from the interview with one of the students illustrates this point:

*I really appreciate it. I mean that's another technique I really like about [Gloria's] teaching. It's nice because usually I'm rushing to class. So, I feel harried when I come into class and just to be able to sit there and let my mind go for a little bit, it does help to refocus. So, I think that's a really great technique.* (Interview with Jaclyn)

However, while Gloria used meditation in her class mainly as what she called a "focusing exercise," she was also aware of its disruptive effects as it challenged her students to

rethink the place of spiritual practices in the classroom and what is valued and recognized as teaching and learning:

*The meditations that we've been doing this semester, I think have been really important in just sort of disrupting how you start a class and what we're doing together and what it means to be together in silence. Breathing. And say that that's valuable. Just doing that, it's like what the heck are we doing here?* (Interview with Gloria)

This disruptive effect of mindfulness practices in higher education classrooms has been documented. Research has shown that some students react with dubiousness about the value of mindfulness practices in the classroom or resistance to such practices based on the belief that they are not learning anything from these practices (Soloway, Poulin, Mackenzie, 2010). While none of Gloria's students displayed signs of outward resistance in regards to the meditation, a few of the students were wary about it. Dean, who never closed his eyes during the meditation, commented about his experience, "I mean it's sort of nice to be able to collect my thoughts but I don't think it sort of channels any deeper direction within me." Most of the students in the class, however, participated willingly and some even very enthusiastically. Dean noted, "You can tell that a lot of people get a lot of out of it. Lukas, for instance, he really gets into it and he wiggles all around and stuff."

As with the other disruptive teaching practices that Gloria employed, meditation also allowed students to initiate disruptive practices on their own. During one of the later class sessions an interesting event occurred. When Gloria was about to start the meditation, Lukas suddenly got up from his seat and sat down on the floor exclaiming that he could better meditate sitting cross-legged on the floor. Julie quickly followed suit and also sat down on the floor (field note October 26, 2012). As before, students appropriated classroom space in their own ways, demonstrating the kind of agency that we want to see in critical classrooms.

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper showcased classroom interactions that reveal the transformational potential of educational practices which disrupt traditional notions about teaching and learning. Through the classroom interactions described

in the previous sections, I provided vivid and concrete examples of how critical pedagogy can be enacted in the form of disruptive practices in teacher education classrooms. By sharing the details of micro level interactions in the classroom, represented through classroom discourse and descriptions of selected classroom events, I tried to avoid theoretical rhetoric concerning critical pedagogy instead offering a glimpse of what instantiates critical teaching practices in pre-service teaching classrooms. The analysis of the described classroom interactions brought to light how teacher educators can enact and model teaching practices that provide their students with opportunities to experience a qualitatively different teacher/student relationship and new and creative ways of co-constructing knowledge in a supportive classroom community.

The pedagogical strategies Gloria employed not only challenged students to rethink the authority and position of the teacher in the classroom but they immersed students in the experience of a different teacher-student relationship. By creating creative explorative spaces, engaging her students in community building and meditation, this teacher educator disrupted her pre-service teachers' commonsense notions about teaching and learning, the role of students and the teacher in the classroom, what we understand as knowledge, how knowledge is created, in other words, what it means to know, learn and teach. As Gloria said, it meant disrupting what students walked in with "about what teaching and learning looks like, about why we educate, about how we do, about what it all means." Through the described disruptive practices, Gloria offered her students new ways to think critically and act with authority as agents in the classroom, exerting their own power as critically engaged human beings and taking responsibility for their own learning. In engaging the students in these disruptive practices, Gloria offered a valuable model for her students that they can implement with their own future (K-12) students.

The findings of the study presented in this paper show how enacting critical pedagogy through disruptive practices in the form of creative explorative spaces, community building and mindfulness practices, such as meditation, is an approach that can contribute to deepening students' learning and classroom engagement. Teachers across a wide variety of teaching contexts – from K-12 classrooms to college classrooms—can draw on the classroom interactions described here to more fully engage their students in their own learning.

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