

Adventures in Critical Pedagogy: A Lesson in U.S. History

By Deborah Seltzer-Kelly

Introduction

When I became a U.S. history teacher in a public high school, I was plunged headlong into the challenge of teaching for critical democratic citizenship in a system of public education focused upon standardization, accountability, and objectively-assessed factual knowledge. I began my secondary teaching career in the immediate wake of September 11, 2001, so these concerns were augmented by urgent political discourse over the meanings of security, freedom, and citizenship. I had also just begun my doctoral work in curriculum studies, and Paolo Freire's (1970/2001) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* formed the counterpoint to my first weeks in the classroom. Immersed in Freire's call to re-imagine conventional notions of education in order to render it a process of liberation rather than one of domestication, I struggled with the much-noted theory-praxis gap in critical pedagogy (Wardekker & Miedema, 1997): that is, the difficulty in answering the question, "But what would that look like in my classroom?"

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The article that follows recounts and analyzes my experiences as I struggled to incorporate a liberatory practice into a public school setting. It is comprised of excerpts from a seminar paper I wrote in December of 2001, at the conclusion of that first semester, interspersed with commentary written from my present perspective. In the sections from the present, I am essentially "writing back" to the self of the past, engaging in a conversation that incorporates some of

the understandings I have gained in the intervening years. It is my hope that this work will add to the growing body of literature that seeks to deepen the insight of teacher educators and mentor teachers into the challenges faced by new teachers who aspire to education for critical democratic engagement. I also wish to shed some light on a somewhat less-discussed phenomenon: the experience of those new teachers when they are mentored by older colleagues and teacher educators who have, on some level, opted out of engaging the tensions between the mandate to prepare future educators to deliver standards-based school curricula, and the fundamental commitment to democratizing education.

Holding Freire's Feet to the Fire

In common with many new teachers, once I entered the classroom I found that much of what I had learned in my college of education seemed to be of little or no help in my new circumstances. This was despite the fact that my new students were “just ordinary kids,” in the words of my predecessor (a veteran teacher who had been promoted to an administrative position just after the school year began). In contrast to the high achievers enrolled in the honors track, the 153 high school juniors now assigned to me were mostly average students with average grades. The school, also, was ordinary—a suburban high school with about 2,300 students, of whom roughly 15% were members of racial/ethnic minorities, echoing the larger community. I did have some lower-achieving students with special needs, of course, and my classes were enlivened by a few very bright and ambitious students who had opted for honors courses in math and science and a little less challenge in history.

Unlike my professors, my students apparently didn't believe in constructivism. They didn't see any point to reading, thinking, and discussing to develop critical understandings; they just wanted to know the right answers so they could pass the tests, get the credit, and graduate from high school. As I quickly discovered, too many of them couldn't read and comprehend—much less see the relevance of—the primary sources I had been taught to integrate into my lessons. All of this seemed to me to threaten their ability to develop the kind of critical thought that I had been taught was inextricably connected to responsible citizenship.

My students' own concerns in the realm of citizenship, by contrast, centered around what they saw as the school system's continual suppression of their rights: issues of personal expression including the school dress code, body piercing and tattoos, and the speech they used (their native languages, profanity, and slang that eschewed “correct” grammar and spelling). Intriguingly, however, our interests also intersected on some of these issues; many were anxious to engage me in conversations relating to the nature of democracy and the meaning of civil rights, especially as they existed in the wake of September 11. Most of all, they were vitally interested in their dissent from the school district's vision of how education should prepare students for citizenship.

Now, even as my new colleagues in the school district offered to share their time-tested worksheets and lecture outlines with me, my professors in my new doctoral program were focused upon critical pedagogical theory. In something of an uneasy compromise, my previous teacher licensure coursework had sought to bridge these essentialist and critical poles. I had acquired the perspective that the new state history standards were desperately needed in order to provide clarity and consistency for educators and students, and also that it was my job as an educator to help my students surpass mere factual data as outlined by the standards and become liberated and critical historical thinkers. At the time, it did not occur to me that there was any potential contradiction. I intended to begin by designing a unit that would facilitate truly critical understandings of history, and yet still address the standards and district curriculum for my grade level.

I resolved to continually return to Freire (1970/2001), not only for inspiration, but for practical guidance in the face of any obstacles I would encounter. This determination, especially combined with teaching according to the standards, struck my classmates—and, as I later learned, my professor—as quixotic. While many of us acknowledged the descriptive power of Freire’s work in identifying the dilemmas we saw in our educational system, not one of the classroom educators I knew at that time believed that his work provided robust guidance for the public school teacher in the present-day U.S. I, however, was engaged in an exercise of “holding Freire’s feet to the fire;” I could not accept his theory base if it did not work in my daily practice. I was aided in this pursuit by my discovery of the work of Henry Giroux.

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In thinking about how to approach creating a lesson in my field, U.S. history, that would allow critical independent thought while still reflecting the state standards for that particular unit of instruction, I was inspired by Giroux’s (1988) assertion that “the writing of history entails a process. The historian defines a principle that relates the details of any event or series of events... [and] the historian ... [makes] choices. These choices involve selecting evidence, making assertions that incorporate evidence, and presenting assertions in a sequence” (p.66). I believed that if I could engage my students in the process of history-making about some phase in U.S. history, they would be able to combine use of their critical faculties with gaining a reasonable degree of acquaintance with the people, dates and events the state Department of Education considers crucial.

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My first concern here—one that would continue to grow as I taught in the public schools and increase exponentially when I began to teach preservice teachers—was to dispel for my students the idea that textbooks contain an objective view of history. My own exposure to postmodernism and postcolonial writings during my master’s degree studies in history had awakened me to the fallacies of any pretense

to historical objectivity, and I was convinced that reliance upon textbooks serves to rob teachers and students alike of the skills they actually need to acquire through the study of history. While my state's history standards did contain a requirement that students be able to understand and analyze historic events from a variety of perspectives, this focus was minimized, buried among 57 closely-printed pages of meticulously detailed people, dates and events. In practice, consideration of a variety of perspectives was generally limited to the occasional gesture by textbook authors, such as a supplemental worksheet offering a few lines from one of Abigail Adams's letters to her husband advocating rights for women.

I hoped that if my students engaged in history-making as Giroux (1988) described it, researching and then deciding how to present historical information, they would gain an understanding of this process as it occurred in the textbook industry, enabling them to reject the notion of a single, objective view of history. I was also willing to gamble that my students would gain at least a minimal familiarity with the facts dictated by the standards through meaningful exposure, as they engaged in the process I envisioned. Of course, the equation of history with a set of facts to be learned is an ongoing source of discord for educators, politicians, and the public. Both educational publications and the popular media inform us regularly that, "U.S. History Again Stumps Senior Class," citing poor test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) examinations (Manzo, 2002). As Gaudelli (2002) reminds us, though, the NAEP study and others like it serve mostly to reveal the tendency toward perennialism and essentialism in the test-makers' priorities. In electing to elevate the history-making process over fact acquisition, I was already positioning myself on one side of this ideological divide. My next critically-based decision—to allow my students some choice of subject matter—pushed me yet further toward the tipping point in the uneasy compromise I was attempting to walk.

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The issue of offering students some choice in subject matter calls into question whether it is even possible to engage in critical pedagogy within the framework of national and state standards in a field. For an educator in our current system of "accountability" and "measurable objectives," this first dilemma is sometimes enough to derail even a serious interest in critical pedagogy. After all, how much good can we do our students if we are no longer employed to teach them? In this sense, the teacher is also numbered among the oppressed, giving rise to the question, "if the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution?" (Freire, 1970/2001, p.54).

Although I was unable to give my students a completely open choice of subject matter, since I needed to be teaching about Manifest Destiny and westward emigration during the early to mid-1800s, I thought that I could allow quite a range of choice

to my students about what aspect to explore. Many students had expressed interest in the story of the Cherokee and the Trail of Tears, I had several Mormons in my class who were interested in exploring their own migratory roots, and still other students wanted to learn more about the Gold Rush and/or the Donner party. With this in mind, I created a unit plan that gave the students a choice of eight groups of emigrants to research, with the provision that they could choose any other, with my prior approval.

At this point, I fell into a trap. Frankly, I reverted to a style of lesson planning that I myself had found oppressive during my own educational process: I created a detailed outline of the required elements of the project, with a clear and itemized rubric. Because I believe in authentic assessment, I suggested many options for “reporting back” to me, including a standard report, creative writing options including journals and poetry, and visual options including posters and collages. I provided an extensive list of appropriate websites as starting points for research, and arranged for the school library to assist also. I instructed my students repeatedly that they had many choices in how to convey the information, but that they were not to simply download web pages or copy articles and turn them in; they must use their own words.

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Although I did not recognize this at the time, while the instructors in my teacher licensure program were all nominally constructivists, there was a considerable range in how this manifested in their practice, and significant gaps in what we were taught. In general secondary methods courses, I had learned to plan curriculum and assessments in a manner that Ralph Tyler (1949/1969) would have found commendable, with clearly-articulated and measurable objectives. The addition of a few “cooperative learning” activities served mostly to provide supervised practice after direct instruction had taken place. In my social studies methods course, by contrast, the professor focused upon “meaningful” learning and emphasized the use of primary sources, good literature, and assessments that included drama and Chautauqua presentations to accomplish this. The idea of connecting the curriculum to students’ own knowledge and experience was never mentioned in any of these courses, nor was the need to teach content-area reading and writing skills. I had begun to grapple with these factors on my own, but, as I was about to learn, simply allowing for some student choice and providing materials at a wide range of reading levels does not necessarily lead directly to critical understandings.

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Of course, the projects I actually received revealed that the vast majority of my students had either no understanding of, or perhaps no interest in, my guidelines. Many—a little over 15%—appeared to be simple downloads of websites, with the student’s name written on the cover sheet. Even more (over 60%) were select bits

and pieces of websites, some presented in a sort of collage format, others showing evidence of the student's efforts to weave the information into a meaningful whole, and many interspersing the students' own narratives with unconsciously plagiarized paragraphs and pages. This last phenomenon was the most troubling to me, because it gave some evidence of independent thought, but showed a blurring between the students' ideas and the theoretically authoritative sources. I am also relieved to report that I received a large number (almost 25% of the total) of really outstanding projects, revealing that the students involved had immersed themselves in the stories of the people they had studied, and then returned from that immersion to think critically about the meaning of the emigrants' experience. In fact, and most excitingly for me, several of these were from students who had previously taken no interest at all in the material we were studying, but who had become, almost against their own wills, interested.

Viewed strictly in terms of my rubric, I was faced with a major dilemma. I had managed to achieve a "U-Curve," in which about a quarter of the students did very well—a B+ or better—and the remainder were at a D level or below. Clearly, something was very wrong. How could I, without abandoning a commitment to academic quality, engage in a genuine assessment of the work I had received from these students, try to both give them some kind of a grade, and also prompt something even more productive—an understanding of what they had actually accomplished? Freire (1970/2001) proposes the theory base underlying my problem in this way:

If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process. The leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting....The leaders do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction—but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis. (pp. 126-127)

He goes on to outline the ways in which it is necessary for leaders (or teachers) to engage in dialogue with their students, and the many ways in which this process can instead become one of domination.

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This aspect of the teaching and learning process would become central to my own inquiries: the problem of negotiating learning. While Freire (1970/2001) highlights the importance of the teacher listening to the students about what, and for what purpose, they wish to learn, he does not provide a way to think about how to consider student interests in relation to educational needs and issues the teacher may face – state standards, differences among individual students, and broad educational and/or content-specific processes and principles. And, as I was beginning to discover, a learning experience that is actually of tremendous value may not conform to what was originally envisioned. These are dilemmas that are central to

a standards-based system of public education, and they are also the source, in Freire's view, of a particular oppression that teachers too often visit upon their students.

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One notable method of diverting educational process into oppression is manipulation, particularly through the achievement ideology: "the model of itself which the bourgeoisie presents to the people as the possibility for their own ascent" (Freire, 1970/2001, p. 147) In other words, the myth that, through hard work, any American can achieve virtually unlimited economic and social advancement serves to divide and conquer the oppressed through its suggestion that lack of achievement is due to lack of effort. In this way, members of oppressed groups are encouraged to blame themselves and/or each other for failure to succeed. I could, in my search to educate, actively participate in this form of oppression also if I held to the idea that all of my students could (or should!) be conditioned to produce work that matched my expectations, as outlined in my lovely and detailed rubric. I had to truly examine to what extent I was motivated by a desire to domesticate my students, to render them fit for the dominant social structure of our culture.

Overcoming all of these mechanisms of oppression and domestication, according to Freire (1970/2001), can only be accomplished through genuine dialogue, cooperation, and, ultimately, trust. His emphasis upon re-imagining the role of leadership to that of a leader within and among the oppressed people offers a persuasive theoretical model to the educator, suggesting a focus upon carrying out cultural action as "an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture" (p. 181). The adaptation I made to Freire's ideas, in order to engage in a dialogic process with my students, was to have a conference with each and every student (all 153 of them!) to discuss their own assessment of their learning, and to decide together how to appropriately assign a grade to that effort.

In the course of discussing the projects with their authors, I learned that many students had learned a great deal that they were not capable of relaying unassisted. When I questioned them, they could answer a range of specific and general questions, and had clearly retained quite a bit of factual information. Most of these, however, had not reached any kind of critical level with their knowledge; they had no idea what facts and ideas they thought were important, or what kinds of broader concepts might be drawn from those facts. A very few students (mostly special ed students with specific reading/writing disabilities and ESL students) had learned remarkable amounts and could discuss their understanding in very sophisticated terms, including a critical assessment of meaning, but clearly had no way to convey complex meaning through written language or symbols.

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My later research in John Dewey's work finally addressed my problems with the theory-praxis gap and provided a way to go about the complex business of

planning in a way that balanced the students' interests with my own knowledge and constraints while engaging, as Freire (1970/2001) advocates, in ongoing dialog. As Dewey (1902/1976) argues: "The radical fallacy...is the supposition that we have no choice save either to leave the child to his own unguided spontaneity or to inspire direction upon him from without" (p. 290). For Dewey, the teacher's planning process resembles the preparation of a map that serves to provide general guidance and to articulate the major important features of the learning experience, while still leaving open the opportunity for the student to explore and create. The goal that might seem to be enshrined by the production of a map is anything but prescriptive; it is, in his (1916/1980) own terms, merely an "end in view," and is subject to continual review and revision in light of actual events. For Dewey, as for Freire, the engagement of the student is critical; while the teacher may take on the pre-planning role, an ongoing dialogic process is what converts the inquiry into an opportunity for genuine learning.

Thus, my preparation of a plan for the student projects was appropriate since it attempted to outline possibilities and suggest ways to begin. I had even, in the manner advocated by both Freire and Dewey, been guided by awareness of my students' interests. Where the process broke down, however, was in the exquisite detail of my initial plan, and my inability to update it in response to my students' actual learning as events unfolded. I had recognized the need for revision only when presented with the gap between my expectation and the final product: my students' projects. In future years, guided by Dewey's principles, I would learn to become far more flexible as lessons and units progressed, making significant changes in response to my students' insights and questions.

In hindsight, I can see that much of what gained my students' attention in the research process was the imaginative element: they had acquired and internalized a tremendous amount of information about what it felt like to wear the clothes of the period, to travel for great distances (very slowly by their own standards), the emotional experience of leaving home and family, seeing herds of buffalo and great deserts. What they confused was the basic factual information—I had students writing about seeing buffalo in eastern Nevada, for example—the essential geography, names, and terms I had believed they would absorb through grappling with material presented in context. Too many did not have the reading skills to grapple with the complex texts that might have introduced them to critical issues relating to Manifest Destiny, or the schema to meaningfully absorb much of that information. I, in turn, lacked both insight into what was happening, and the ability to comprehensively rearrange the curriculum to respond to what I had finally learned about their actual needs that year. Despite the fact that my students had never acquired the prerequisite knowledge and skills, I could not stop and teach all of it; I had to keep going in order to cover all of the curriculum that was required. This, as I could see even at the time, was a function of oppression as Freire (1970/2001) understood it.

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To turn to the issue of oppression, public school teachers are, on one level, hardly an oppressed class. Teachers receive adequate (albeit barely so) compensation, reasonably good benefits, and apparent control over the conditions of their own production. In addition, they enjoy a high degree of control of cultural capital, including wide-ranging social standing and acceptance, and recognition of the power of knowledge they possess. However, even as the compensation issues have, at least, grown no worse, the control over the conditions of the workplace has, for many teachers, decreased dramatically, placing teachers clearly among the oppressed classes. In many systems, the role of the teacher has been reduced to that of the presenter of a prefabricated curriculum, while at the same time those same teachers are criticized for a lack of education, knowledge, professionalism, and so on.

In Giroux's (1988) social-phenomenological approach to educational theory, an examination of how students and teachers construct meaning together is undertaken. It calls into question the ways in which power and knowledge determine curriculum development, and "[strips] the school curriculum of its innocence" (p. 25). It is in this nexus that Giroux finds the neo-Marxist educational theory most complete and compelling, since "The neo-Marxist position points out that schools in corresponding ways are linked to the principles and processes governing the workplace. The cutting edge of this perspective is its insistence on connecting macro forces in the larger society to micro analysis such as classroom studies" (p. 27).

Freire (1970/2001) defines the problem of connecting the individual to the larger forces of society in this way, "the concrete situation of individuals conditions their consciousness of the world, and ... in turn this consciousness conditions their attitudes and their ways of dealing with reality" (p.130). Freire then articulates a general educational philosophy that has particular resonance for a teacher of history:

It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their condition as objects by the status of Subjects—the objective of any true revolution—requires that the people act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed. (p. 130)

The ways in which history is taught, of course, can help determine whether actual reflection upon it, as Subjects, takes place, or whether "oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating" (p. 51).

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In my critical pedagogy seminar that fall, my professor finally confided that he believed there was no way to deal with the challenge that would be posed by classrooms and schools filled with truly critical thinkers. After all, our public school system relies upon the ability of a single secondary teacher to instruct 150 or more students in groups of 30-35. That professor's personal opinion, shared explicitly

with us, was that truly critical education would render this system completely unable to function, as students began to actively inquire into their own circumstances. Over time, it became clear to me that he and the other critical educators among the faculty were deeply disillusioned; they had come to believe that their deepest-held values about truly democratic education were irreconcilable with the needs and assumptions of the public school system. For me and my fellow graduate students, this often manifested in the sense that our actual daily experiences in the classroom were unwelcome. The faculty wanted only our emotionally removed analysis of educational theory; attempts to connect theory and praxis were not acceptable.

This, as I came to see, is a part of the larger dynamic that prevents real change from occurring within the system itself: “Critical theory has emphasized primarily the negative moment of the dialectic. It has attacked domination, rather than describing explicit, determinate possibilities for new social formulations” (Antonio, 1981, p. 341). In other words, the critical approach, traditionally focused upon critique of existing structures, fails to offer any possibilities to replace those it has just stripped away. This lack of a positive vision for change is accompanied by a lack of any pedagogical praxis to effect the change, the famed theory-praxis gap. As Wardekker and Miedema (1997) note, this is particularly devastating to the field of critical pedagogy, since “... Even theoreticians concluded that a critical approach that can offer only critique, that is not able to give any directions for concrete practices, leaves the practitioners to their own resorts. *Such a critical approach is in itself conservative* [emphasis added]” (p. 53). Freire (1970/2001) himself argues that the realization of alternatives is vital: “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 49), but his own work is curiously silent as to how to actively engage that perception and activate the transformation.

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Integrating Freire’s (1970/2001) thoughts with those of Giroux (1988), it is possible to see that the structural-functional model of education serves to domesticate students into the existing systems of knowledge and authority, rather than to teach students to inquire into the conditions of their education. According to Giroux (1988), this view of schooling identifies the ways in which “schools socialize students to accept unquestionably [sic] a set of beliefs, rules, and dispositions as fundamental to the functioning of the larger society...the school provides a valuable service in training students to uphold commitments and to learn skills required by society” (p. 24). For Giroux, the shortcoming of this view of the educational process is that “By defining students as passive recipients, conflict is explained mainly as a function of faulty socialization, the causes of which usually lie in institutions outside of the classroom or school or in the individual as deviant” (p. 24)

This educational view seems to me to match much of my experience in the

public education sector. At the high school level, much is made of preparing students for later life, both in post-secondary educational institutions, and in the workplace. The idea of teaching students respect and responsibility is deeply ingrained in practices such as requiring that students remove hats in class, maintain a notebook with teacher-determined sections and contents, and habitually bring that notebook, the text, and appropriate writing utensils to class. Students who do not comply with these procedures are commonly viewed as lacking in responsibility, usually as a result of parents who “refuse to hold them accountable” for their own actions. Those students who resist even well-scaffolded efforts to instill responsibility, undertaken by parents and teachers in concert, are frequently considered to be “bad seeds,” resistant to the reclamation efforts of all those who genuinely care for them and for their futures.

In my particular teaching field at the moment, U.S. history, resistance by the students to the course materials is generally constructed as resistance to discipline and the virtues of patriotism. Especially given the events of this autumn, the part played by U.S. history teachers in instilling patriotism is unquestioningly accepted at many levels, including colleges of education. Very few educators seem willing to seriously consider the argument frequently posed by high school juniors: “But why do I need to know all of this stuff? It’s boring, it’s about people who have all been dead for centuries, and I will never need to use it again.” The most common answer I have heard to this challenge, given by veteran educators and administrators, is an echo of the Jeffersonian notion that education serves to prepare citizens to participate in democracy. One has to wonder, though, how critical a student who has been thoroughly socialized is capable of being. At a certain point, the requirement of functioning smoothly and cooperatively in society will come into conflict with a critical appraisal of what that society is doing, and whether it needs a fundamental re-examination.

Conclusions

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My transformation into subversive educator, fomenter of democracy within my own classroom, was well underway. As my graduate studies progressed, I met others like myself—nominally teaching to the state standards, but simultaneously working to validate our students’ resistance to domestication, to encourage their questions and dissent, and allowing those to fuel our own. We had all come to believe that the Jeffersonian vision of education for democracy has given way to an educational system that accomplishes precisely the opposite—promotes mindless schooling, or even worse, forcible domestication—producing students who are disenfranchised from their own educational process and from society at large. We chose, however, to explicitly reject the pessimism of the faculty members who advised us; we believed we could effect change, or at least help some of our students, from within.

In an interview on NPR in the spring of 2002, a musician named Bill Homans

(AKA Watermelon Slim) described my students' preoccupation with personal style at the expense of critical citizenship memorably: "The people in this next generation have not had an issue to coalesce around for... 20 years, or more. It is difficult when a culture has behaviorally modified kids these days, such that their most important concerns are titty rings and tattoos" (Karr, 2002). Giroux's (2002) thoughts on the subject reflect those of Homans, albeit in more academic language. He describes a pathological system in which the physical display of sexualized attire, tattoos, and piercings result from the needs of our nation's youth for personal expression, an expression that has been denied them in other realms of society, where youth are "pushed to the margins of political power within society.... increasingly denied opportunities for self-definition and political interaction... transfigured by discourses and practices that subordinate and contain the language of individual freedom, social power, and critical agency" (p. 1).

During my four years in the public school system, I was surrounded by many caring and conscientious professionals who had given up on any dreams they ever had of engaging critical democratic thought in their classrooms. Many told me clearly that they had realized the best they could do for their students was to help them succeed at the basic tasks required to graduate from high school and acquire employment. Faced with a gap between what they have been taught to do in many teacher education programs (integrate primary sources, encourage critical examination of multiple perspectives, and facilitate constructivist activities that are designed to build upon prerequisite knowledge), and the actual practice they encounter once they enter the school system, our new teachers will almost inevitably default to the known and familiar—boiling down the curriculum to its "essentials" and presenting it through the medium of overheads and PowerPoint—in order that the lack of reading and critical thinking experience will not prevent their students from obtaining those vital facts and using them to pass the test, to get the credit, and to graduate. Such mentoring as these new teachers receive in the majority of their schools will reinforce and reward this choice, given the demands posed by current education policy.

The preservice teachers I now work with are compelled to spend much of their classroom time creating word walls, teaching the mathematical assumptions underlying the construction of timelines, and implementing content-area reading strategies in their classrooms, in order to ensure that their schools will make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In my present position as a teacher educator, my observations in classrooms throughout my local school district have confirmed that, despite repeated claims of change and reform, surprisingly little has actually changed since my own high school days three decades ago. The "bad" teachers are still lecturing with overheads and assigning readings complemented by section review questions from the text. Now, as then, too many of the "good" teachers are also still lecturing, albeit now with much jazzier visuals thanks to PowerPoint. To a large degree, their goodness resides in their gifts as storytellers, making people

and events come to life, entertaining their students through otherwise monotonous hours of instruction. If they are able to help their students gain some interest in important people and ideas from the past, then that generally comes as a pleasant bonus. While I do not discount the importance of helping our students find enjoyment in the study of history, my training leads me to believe that this approach offers little in the way of education for critical engagement with the challenges of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.

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So, we are left with the practical problem of creating pedagogy that, at the very least, does not further oppression, and, preferably, that examines it with a goal of liberation. Gloria Ladson-Billings, interviewed by Carlos Alberto Torres (1998), expressed the problem in this way:

[A]cademic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical critique—serve the triumvirate of culturally relevant pedagogy.... The major issues are: Do you believe children are smart? Do you believe they can learn something? Do you believe there's some value in what they bring to the learning situation? And do you believe it's important for them to develop a language of critique, so that we don't keep reproducing what we have? A critical piece is understanding, number one, that the system is not fair. It is not meritocratic. These teachers' understandings of themselves as political beings becomes instrumental. (p. 197)

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At a certain point, my doctorate became more than a fun accessory; it became the credential I needed to be able to do anything meaningful about the dilemmas that my students and I faced every day in our system of public education. The questions my students asked me that first semester, not only about our nation's history, but about the ways in which they were forced to learn about that history, became the motivating force behind my own work. Their questions, I came to believe, were far more meaningful than my state's educational standards, than the benchmarks set by the NAEP for proficiency in history and civics, than any construction of patriotism my government had to offer. My covert work within my classroom to engage and empower my students was not enough; I wanted the system to work better. More, I wanted continuing exchange between theory and praxis for myself, my colleagues, and my students.

Now, in my new role as teacher educator and educational researcher, I miss my secondary school students almost every day. I miss the urgency, the immediacy, the intimacy I experienced with their lives and questions, their challenges to me and to the curriculum I was assigned to teach. I don't, however, miss the subsidiary machinery of domestication: the bathroom passes, the mindless routines, the standardized tests and inflexible curriculum. The pre-service teachers I work with frequently ask me why I pursued my doctorate, how I feel about leaving the public

school classroom, or what my experiences there were like. In responding, I do my best to strike a balance—sharing honestly, without burdening them with cynicism or disillusionment. In a conscious departure from the mentoring I experienced as a new teacher, though, if they have begun to see a tension between the mandates of our public educational institutions and the ideal of democratizing education, I explicitly validate their experiences and refer them to authors and works that address these issues. My hope is that all of us will become part of a widening circle of support for meaningful change, realized through sharing our truths.

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