

Conscientização, simply put, is a critical awareness of social, political, and economic inequalities as they play out in everyday life, combined with action taken to transform society's oppressive structures once this critical awareness has been reached.

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Integrating critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and standpoint theory: connecting classroom learning with democratic citizenship

Integrando pedagogia crítica, pedagogia feminista e a standpoint teoria: conectando aprendizado em sala de aula com cidadania democrática

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that processes stemming from feminist pedagogy and feminist standpoint theory can be used to enact two central goals of critical pedagogy in the classroom, those of creating a co-intentional educational space and of pursuing *conscientização*. Further, this integration of critical and feminist pedagogies and standpoint theory allows educators to model multicultural democracy and hone the tools of democratic citizenry with students in an emergent process that connects politics in the broader society with classroom learning. After laying out the theoretical foundations for the paper, I discuss my experience in applying these melded pedagogies in an American college course with a diverse student population entitled "Black Voices, Black Liberation."

Key-words:

Political Processes; Critical Pedagogy; Feminist Pedagogy; Standpoint Theory.

Resumo

Neste artigo, discuto os processos relativos à pedagogia feminista e à "standpoint" teoria que possibilitam os dois principais objetivos da

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pedagogia crítica em sala de aula, e que intencionalmente criam espaços educativos em vista do desenvolvimento do processo de conscientização. Além disso, a integração destas teorias permite aos educadores um modelo multicultural de democracia e de aperfeiçoamento dos instrumentos de cidadania democrática com estudantes em um processo emergente que conecta a política em termos mais amplos com o aprendizado em sala de aula. Após apresentar os fundamentos teóricos deste artigo, discuto minhas experiências de aplicação destas teorias pedagógicas em uma universidade americana através do curso "Vozes Negras, Libertação Negra", lecionado para uma população heterogênea de estudantes.

Palavras-chave:

Processos Políticos; Pedagogia Crítica; Pedagogia Feminista; "Standpoint" Teoria.

1. Inequalities and links to the classroom

In this time of global economic crisis, educating students to be active democratic citizens is arguably more crucial than ever. Because economic systems are crumbling in the U.S. and other parts of the globe, we need new infrastructures and a renewed commitment to democratic processes in order to solve these problems collectively, using the creative ideas of all citizens in the process. Concurrent with the development of the global economic crisis, income inequality has increased in the U.S. since 1969, with the share of household income decreasing in the lowest income quintile during that time, and rising in that same period of time in the highest income quintile. In terms of poverty statistics, 14,9 percent of white citizens fell below the poverty line in 2007, while 34,5 percent of black citizens and 28.6 percent of Hispanic citizens fell below the poverty line in that same year (U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2009). With disproportionate numbers of people of color in poverty in the U.S., our racial and class inequalities are alive, well, and institutionalized into the U.S. economy (FLETCHER, 2004).

While racial and ethnic inequalities remain entrenched in the U.S., education for all citizens focused on active membership in a multicultural democracy is not widely taught in schools, homes, or through youth culture, despite the pleas of Blum (2004) and other educators. In contrast, critical theorists argue that today's popular culture is a powerful anesthetizing force in society that encourages young people to be more interested in the next reality show winner, the next hit artist, the hottest video games, and the lives of celebrities than they are in participating in local, state, national, and international politics (ADORNO, 1991). Adorno and other critical theorists argue that citizens experiencing this anesthetizing culture become passive consumers instead of active change agents in their own environments.

West (2004), pondering further the political passivity of the majority of U.S. citizens, argues that our democracy is in danger unless we begin

teaching people to become democratic citizens. Ralph Waldo Emerson's (apud WEST, 2004) concept of the democratic citizen is someone who thinks, judges, and speaks freely for him/herself (EMERSON, 1990; originally published 1837, in essay entitled "The American Scholar," and in 1841, in essay entitled "Self-Reliance"). The democratic citizen, therefore, needs to possess sharp analytical skills, an ability to evaluate arguments and evidence, and a unique voice that can be exercised comfortably in the public arena. West, like Adorno (1991), believes that false consciousness and its resultant passivity must be actively countered in society. I believe that the integration of critical and feminist pedagogies, understood as a relationship-based form of engaged, inclusive teaching and learning (SHREWSBURY, 1987), infused with standpoint theory can serve as at least one powerful counterpoint to popular culture and its anesthetizing effects that keep students from fully participating in democratic processes. By infusing a classroom with these pedagogies, the particular skills of democratic citizenry can be honed in the classroom and then applied in the broader society.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Critical pedagogy (FREIRE, 1970) starts with the argument that we must move beyond the banking concept of education and its assumption that students are passive vessels to be filled with knowledge by expert teachers. Within this model, students get high marks by regurgitating information back to teachers without incorporating their own analyses or voices into the material. Alternately, Freire argues that we can practice co-intentional education in the classroom, which involves teachers and students unveiling reality and creating new knowledge, and indeed a new reality, together. Beyond Freire's immeasurable contributions to the development of a critical pedagogy, Giroux (1983), Shor (1987), hooks (1994), McLaren (1997), and many others have offered insightful and innovative ways to enact emancipatory, not oppressive, classroom practices that allow students and teachers to unveil reality and create new knowledge together.

Beyond the creation of a co-intentional educational space, critical pedagogy calls students and teachers together to move toward *conscientização* (FREIRE, 1970). *Conscientização*, simply put, is a critical awareness of social, political, and economic inequalities as they play out in everyday life, combined with action taken to transform society's oppressive structures once this critical awareness has been reached. Freire argues that action taken without the critical awareness of inequalities and oppressive structures is senseless, thoughtless action, while a critical awareness that does not turn into action fails to transform society. In all of my classes, the pursuit of *conscientização* (or critical consciousness, as English-speaking authors often call it) is a primary goal. Together, I believe that my students and I can unveil the realities of race, class, and gender oppression in our society, and we can support and challenge each other to take action in order

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to transform these oppressive structures into more humane living conditions for all people.

When coupled with critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy (see for example SCHNIEDEWIND, 1987; SCHACHT, 2000; CRABTREE & SAPP, 2003), provides rich processes for sharing power and encouraging voice in the classroom as we move toward *conscientização* together. Feminist pedagogy, like critical pedagogy, assumes that the classroom can become a liberatory space for students and teacher. Shrewsbury (1987) argues that feminist pedagogy is a form of engaged, inclusive teaching and learning in which students and teacher, linked together in a web of relationships, actively engage in critical reflection with the texts, with each others' viewpoints, and with their own conceptions of the world. Learning becomes very personal, relevant, and connected when pursued through a feminist pedagogical lens. Further, while most feminist pedagogy treats women and/or gender as the central focus of inquiry, I believe that feminist pedagogical processes can be lent to other types of course content beyond (but also including) those that centrally analyze gender.

Schniedewind (1987) argues that there are several powerful processes that can ensure a feminist, or inclusive, power-sharing classroom: the development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community in the classroom; shared leadership; a cooperative structure; the integration of cognitive and affective learning; and action. I believe that these feminist processes provide a method for achieving the co-intentional educational structure in pursuit of *conscientização* that critical pedagogy calls us toward. In sum, critical pedagogy provides a format for liberatory teaching and learning through co-intentional education, and a central aim of that learning community is *conscientização*. Feminist pedagogy, in turn, offers specific *processes* for achieving a co-intentional learning community in pursuit of *conscientização*.

In order to add another layer to these integrated pedagogies, I incorporate Collins' standpoint theory as a way to encourage all students to lend their voices as text to the fabric of the course. Standpoint theory argues that people, based on their social locations (locations in the social structure according to categories like race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and geographic region), will see the world in different ways (COLLINS, 1990). If I witness an event and someone else beside me witnesses the same event, our interpretations of the event may be quite different because of our differential social locations and their accompanying experiences (COLLINS, 1990). Indeed, we each may see unique aspects of the same event that the other does not see because of this standpoint. Standpoint theory assumes that we all have something valuable to contribute when creating new knowledge together in the classroom because of our differential social locations; this implies that we can therefore learn more by listening to each other in a dialogical classroom. In this way, co-intentional

education is overtly informed by the rich and diverse experiences of each classroom member based on his/her social location. Each student's voice, then, becomes part of the fabric of the course, just as other valuable texts are incorporated as core components of the curriculum.

Further, Collins argues that those who occupy an "outsider-within" position in a particular social context will see that context in a way in which insiders simply are not capable. For example, we Americans often do not see ourselves as other nations see us until we read media from other countries, travel to other places, or pursue *conscientização* ourselves within our own spaces. Using standpoint theory in the classroom rejects the practice of seeing one "right" answer in a discipline like sociology (my own) and asking all students to assimilate to that way of seeing. Standpoint theory, when incorporated into a classroom, privileges instead of denigrating the outsider-within position and asks students from all social locations to use their experiences as core texts in a course. Diversity based on social location, then, becomes an enhancement and a key part of the learning process instead of a problem or a deficit. This kind of classroom, where all voices are heard and respected, models participation in a multicultural democracy and gives students a taste for what it means to truly incorporate the voices of all citizens into the fabric of daily life.

3. Applications of combined critical and feminist pedagogies and standpoint theory

The central argument in this article is that two of the goals of critical pedagogy, creating a co-intentional educational space and the pursuit of *conscientização*, can be facilitated through the processes inherent in feminist pedagogy combined with standpoint theory. Additionally, these combined pedagogies allow us to connect classroom learning with political processes in the broader society through modeling a multicultural democracy and allowing students to hone the skills involved in being a democratic citizen: sharp analytical skills, an ability to evaluate arguments and evidence, and a unique voice that can be exercised comfortably in the public arena. In this section, I will discuss my experience in applying these melded pedagogies in a college course entitled "Ethnic Groups in the U.S.: African Americans," which I subtitled "Black Voices, Black Liberation." This upper-division college course focused on Black authors who either historically or currently have written on the topic of Black Liberation in the following subject areas: Black Feminist Thought; Black Political Thought; Liberation Theology; Radical Pedagogy; and Black Liberation Movements. This class consisted of 25 students of diverse social locations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Their racial or ethnic backgrounds were as follows: nine African American students; seven white students; four Latino students; three mixed-race students; and two Asian American students. There were seventeen

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women and eight men in the course, and two students in the class were openly gay (one man and one woman) while two others wrote in reflections about being gay (one man and one woman), but were not openly so. I taught this course in the spring semester of 2009, so at the time of this writing, the course has just reached completion.

My goals for the course were for students to: 1) understand and integrate a variety of Black liberation thought and 2) understand the concept of the Emersonian democratic citizen, while 3) creating a co-intentional classroom space where each student can exercise his or her voice and participate in new knowledge creation, and 4) create a space where everyone is moving together towards critical consciousness, both in the realm of critical awareness of race, class, and gender inequalities and in the realm of action designed to transform society's inequalities while 5) modeling multicultural democracy and 6) practicing the tools of democratic citizenry: sharp analytical skills, an ability to evaluate arguments and evidence, and a unique voice that can be exercised comfortably and clearly in the public arena.

In order to reach the process goals listed above, I used the processes inherent in feminist pedagogy: development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community in the classroom; shared leadership; a cooperative structure; the integration of cognitive and affective learning; and action (SCHNIEDEWIND, 1987). Taking each of these processes in turn, I will discuss how I incorporated it into the "Black Voices, Black Liberation" classroom. First, in a classroom with students of diverse social locations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality as I lay out above, it was extremely important to me to develop an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community in the classroom. I wanted to develop this kind of atmosphere within a developmental process, with a goal of eventually achieving deep trust amongst class members. First, students simply met and then introduced another student to the class, telling others why that student wanted to join the class. Explanations for wanting to join the class ranged from a deep knowledge of Black liberation thought to a desire to know something about the subject even though the starting knowledge was quite thin. Students largely showed respect and admiration for others' desire to learn more about Black liberation thought, regardless of their starting points.

Also early on, I talked with students about what it means to treat others with respect and dignity. I talked about how students may disagree with each other, their texts, or me, and that this kind of disagreement is welcome. However, treating each person with respect and dignity means listening to the person's arguments first, never focusing disagreement on the person, but on their arguments, and never texting or talking while anyone else is talking in the class. Once I lay out what respect and dignity look like in this particular classroom and then we model these behaviors in our speech in the first few classes, students rarely violated these rules. Further, the respect, trust, and sense of community in the "Black Voices, Black Liberation" class

built developmentally over time, up to a point in the end of the semester where there was real solidarity and camaraderie amongst classmates and teacher across all social locations.

Shared leadership was also a key part of the structure of this course. As a white woman, I told students that I was a facilitator of dialogue within the course, but by no means attempting to come from an expert position. In my opinion, it would be ludicrous for a white woman to try and come across as an expert on African American issues, no matter how much I have studied Black liberation thought. I do not have the experience of being an African American in the U.S., and the voices of both African American students and students of other races and ethnicities are just as important as mine in the classroom. Beyond setting myself up as a facilitator and not an expert, I asked students routinely about what they preferred in terms of what chapter we would read next, whether we would discuss readings in groups or in a shared inquiry fashion in the broader class, and other process-related questions. At all times, student voices on the text and where we would go together were the most important part of the course.

Building a cooperative structure links closely with the processes of building respect, trust, and a sense of community in the classroom and of shared leadership. When students are not competing to give the "right" answer but instead are sharing their different standpoints on an issue, they can learn from each other and help build new knowledge together. Early on, students in the "Black Voices, Black Liberation" class would help to fill in gaps in each other's knowledge, saying, "I really agree with x person," and "What she said made me rethink my own position on topic x." One student, at the end of the course, highlighted for me how much this cooperative structure had encouraged him to develop his voice in the classroom. He told me about another class he is in where he feels that the atmosphere is competitive and students put each other down for their answers. In contrast, in this class, he talked about how comfortable he felt in sharing his thoughts with others. I was surprised that this bright young man felt at all inhibited in other classes, because of his vibrant participation in ours. However, he assured me that the feeling of cooperation and collaboration in our class highly influenced him to move beyond silence and become a full participant in the class.

In terms of integrating cognitive and affective learning, I continually asked students to write about their thinking, feelings, and behaviors related to a particular topic in Black liberation. This method, called the ABC method of reflection (WELCH and JAMES, 2007), asks students to write about affect (A), behavior (B), and cognition (C) on any particular course topic. The method assumes, by adding the affective and behavioral components to the typical cognitive component required of students in a course, that students will have both emotional responses and potential behavioral implications related to the course material. In a class like the "Black Voices, Black Liberation" course I

taught, emotional responses to the material were quite common, and I think that an important component of the course would have been lost if I had not provided space for these types of reflections. Students would struggle with the material and would mention shame, guilt, sadness, and a feeling of being overwhelmed, along with elation, joy, laughter, and other types of emotions related to the course topics. After doing critical reflections on the topics, students began to use this kind of language seamlessly in classroom dialogue as well.

In terms of taking action, the final feminist pedagogical process that Schniedewind (1987) mentions, I built a community-based research component into my course. All students were required to work with women's poverty group called the Women's Economic Agenda Project in nearby Oakland. Students joined different project groups that were designed to hone the tools that this poverty group was able to offer to its constituency, and therefore students got to take action along with an experienced advocacy group that attempts to change social policy for women and minority groups. Of course, I assume that students will reflect upon and take their own action to transform society's oppressive structures while pursuing *conscientização*, but participating with others in social action was an excellent learning experience for that type of future action, in my opinion.

Beyond using the processes inherent in feminist pedagogy in order to reach the goals of a co-intentional classroom space and the pursuit of *conscientização*, I used standpoint theory (COLLINS, 1990) to help us reach those two goals as well. Students routinely talked about the deep value of learning from others from different social locations in the classroom. When standpoint theory was built into the fabric of the course, each student's voice was seen as a valuable addition to the collaborative knowledge creation process we were doing in the course. For most students, at the end of the course they talked about how much we are all alike, and that the sharing of standpoints across social locations allowed them to realize that in a new way. Latino and Asian American students talked about identifying with African American struggles, and white students talked about understanding their white privilege in a new way because of the dialogue with their classmates. In this way, our voices modeled a multicultural democracy. This practice in multicultural democracy where all voices were privileged and none were silenced was an empowering experience for students. Many talked both publicly and in their writing about how exciting it was to learn from their classmates, and how they wish they could learn this much from classmates in all courses. The experience of participation in a multicultural democracy definitely left students desiring more dialogue across diversity, both in their future classrooms and in the public arena.

Finally, I deeply wanted students to have the experience of honing the skills involved in being a democratic citizen within this multicultural

classroom space: sharp analytical skills, an ability to evaluate arguments and evidence, and a unique voice that can be exercised comfortably in the public arena. As I have previously discussed, the development of voice within a collaborative environment characterized by respect and trust was carefully incorporated in the “Black Voices, Black Liberation” course. Further, the central goal of honing sharp analytical skills was incorporated in the course, as it is in most academic courses. Students were asked to evaluate the arguments and evidence of all of their authors and their classmates within this environment of respect and trust, and then they were asked to share their thoughts about the texts and others’ arguments and evidence. Within a collaborative, cooperative classroom, this kind of task was difficult for some at first, but by the end of the course, students were disagreeing with each other comfortably and sometimes heatedly, but respectfully. In one exchange between an African American man and an African American woman, voices were actually raised, but they were raised in a passionate yet respectful way with each other because of the heartfelt emotion that each student was expressing. As a teacher, I had to become comfortable with such emotional exchanges, because students were truly just passionately exchanging ideas with each other. For some, the desire to shut down any emotion in the classroom would override the desire to promote deep learning, but in this classroom, I wanted to allow such exchanges to occur and to allow for people to be uncomfortable within the learning process. This is what a multicultural democracy looks like: we think differently, we come from different social locations, we are passionate, we all have creative ideas, and we yet are one body.

At the end of the course, one female student wrote in her final paper:

After learning about black liberation theology, the study of Black consciousness and the Black experience of being oppressed, this course has taught us that Black liberation involves self-empowerment, self-definition, self-affirmation and self-determination. With this said, the oppressed must come together to form a movement to fight for their rights and stand strong as to what they believe is equality for all. After being educated, I now know that having a consciousness as to how Blacks were oppressed can easily affect how I think and act in any situation within the real world (CLAY, 2009).

As someone who was asking students to stretch, disagree, participate in a multicultural co-intentional classroom, and teach each other, I can say that I learned things from students in this multicultural classroom about self-empowerment, self-definition, self-affirmation and self-determination that I will never forget.

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