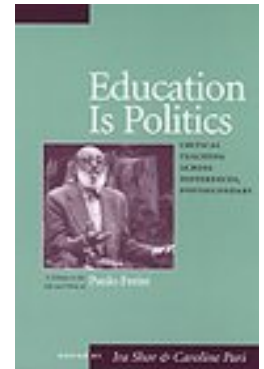




## Education is Politics: Critical Thinking Across Differences, Postsecondary



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Maintaining a commitment to implement the principles of critical pedagogy in the classroom can be a fulfilling experience for educators. At the same time, it can be one of the most frustrating professional challenges an instructor faces. To be sure, the benefits of inviting our learners to critically examine the context in which they learn - and the specific role they play in that context - far outweigh the challenge of how best to use problem-posing techniques in a particular day's lesson plan. For educators using this pedagogical approach, the prospect of encouraging another critically thinking agent of social change overshadows these daily frustrations. And yet, some would argue that critical pedagogy assumes all learners are willing participants and further assumes that each learner wants to be an agent of social change rather than a student who is simply trying pass a course. While this should not deter our commitment to a critical, student-centered pedagogical approach, it provides further proof that implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom can be a difficult task.

In the book *Education is Politics: Critical Teaching Across Differences, Postsecondary*, editors Ira Shor and Caroline Pari present a collection of essays written by educators implementing critical pedagogy in a variety of disciplines. Shor is an internationally respected and recognized authority on critical pedagogy who has worked closely with his friend and colleague Paulo Freire, to whom the book is dedicated. Pari is an Assistant Professor of English at Manhattan Community College, CUNY and specializes in composition, rhetoric and women's studies. The essays demonstrate methodologies that critical educators have incorporated into their classrooms as a way of providing guidance and direction to those of us who, at times, need support from others facing the same successes and frustrations in this collective endeavor.

Shor acknowledges the frustration that accompanies implementation of critical pedagogical techniques in an educational system that is "dominated by top-down authority, bureaucratic testing, Standard usage, Eurocentric canons, rote learning and masculine discourse..." (p. 1). He uses the words of Freire to illustrate another common challenge facing critical educators: maintaining a consistent pedagogical approach while dealing with some students who are more interested in passing the course rather than becoming an agent of social change. "I cannot proclaim my liberating dream and in the next day be authoritarian in my relationship with my students" (p. 1). It is far too easy to revert to old styles of teaching when confronted with learners who are hesitant or unwilling to participate in the structure of the critical classroom. These challenges are common threads throughout the book and each of the essayists addresses them in a different way. Through their experiences, we learn how to cope with the frustration and conflict that can occur when implementing an approach to teaching and learning that looks at the educational system with a critical eye.

The authors demonstrate by example how critical pedagogical strategies can be successfully implemented. For example, in his essay *Teaching and Social Change*, instructor Daniel Solorzano reflects on how he successfully used Freire's 'problem-posing' method in a Chicano Studies classroom at a Southern California community college in the late 1970s. Initially, Solorzano asks his students to critically examine the problem of how Chicanos are portrayed in the mass media. The students determine that Chicanos are portrayed negatively. They also conclude that the media does not accurately depict the lives of Chicanos because Chicanos are more often seen as thugs or gang members, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes. Armed with this information, students explore various options they might use to solve the problem. Enlisting the help of local and statewide organizations, they develop a boycott and public relations campaign against the studios producing the films that perpetuate these inaccurate stereotypes of Chicanos. As a result of their efforts, then-Mayor Tom Bradley refused to attend the premiere of one of the targeted films. In the end, the students fulfilled their original goals: to bring attention to the negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals and to temporarily stop further films from being produced. Solorzano felt that, through this process, learners developed problem-solving skills and gained a sense of personal empowerment. He concludes, "...the Freirean approach has achieved its major goal of empowering students to reflect and act on real-life problems" (p. 20).

Action-oriented learning continues in *Teaching Undergraduates About AIDS*. Kimberly Christensen, an instructor at SUNY College at Purchase, describes how she structured a course using service-learning techniques that focused on enhancing students' awareness of the risks and the biomedical and socio-political issues surrounding AIDS and HIV infection while, at the same time, confronting issues of homophobia, racism and misinformation. Students listened to guest lecturers, participated in role-playing situations and reflected upon their experiences in a written journal. In addition, students volunteered one hour per week on a community service project related to AIDS. As a result, their level of knowledge concerning HIV and AIDS increased. Christensen reports: "the primary reason for this (course success) was our ability to create a sense of community in the classroom" (p. 45).

Perhaps the most powerful, innovative and creative use of Freirean problem posing technique occurs in John Kellermeier's account of how using lesbigay word problem content in teaching statistics increased learners' sensitivity to gay and lesbian issues. Kellermeier constructed word problem situations on quizzes and exams that directly related to gay and lesbian themes. In these situations, Kellermeier used lesbigay populations as a background, used facts about lesbigay populations, and used realistic data about lesbigay populations. At first, Kellermeier used lesbigay word problem constructs in only 1% of all questions. At that point, feedback from students was generally positive, although there were many complaints that there was "too much" emphasis on lesbian and gay situations. Kellermeier wondered if students' reactions would change if he increased the percentage of lesbigay word problems over the course of a semester. He decided to use this technique in two separate courses the following semester. He did not announce in advance that lesbigay content would be used.

At the end of the course, Kellermeier asked students to respond to three questions as part of the course evaluation: "Please comment on the word problems you did as part of this course. Specifically, what do you remember of what the problems were about? What do you think of the word problem content?" (p. 175). The vast majority of respondents who mentioned the lesbigay content reacted favorably; in fact, in the first class 15 students reported positive reactions, 6 were ambivalent and 3 were negative; in the second class, 9 students reported positive reactions, 2 were ambivalent and 3 were negative (p. 175). Kellermeier achieved amazing results. The written feedback indicated that using lesbigay content increased student awareness of the homophobia facing gays and lesbians. In addition, including lesbigay word content provided a much-needed positive perspective for gay and lesbian students who were out or were in the coming-out process. Finally, Kellermeier determined that using a thematic approach to word problems in a statistics course could directly lead to social change. Kellermeier concludes:

"In the end it seems that the best way to deal with students' complaints that lesbigay materials are just "too much" is to integrate more of it into our courses. Once lesbigay issues are repeated often enough, they become commonplace. Then, as the issues become commonplace in the classroom, students may be better prepared to accept, support and appreciate gays, lesbians and bisexuals out of the classroom as well" (176).

These are examples of how critical pedagogical approaches can be successfully implemented in a variety of classrooms across a number of disciplines. The book includes several other essays that outline successes in

the disciplines of disability studies, music, media literacy and literature, providing evidence that this pedagogical approach can successfully be adapted to any course.

The essayists also offer self-criticisms and reflect on how to improve specific aspects of the course design. They express the frustration felt by many critical educators at one time or another. For example, Fred Pincus, an instructor with 30 years experience teaching sociology at the University of Baltimore, decided to implement critical pedagogical techniques as part of his “Social Problems in American Society” course. His motivations were twofold: to encourage his students to become *active* learners and to promote enthusiasm for this general education course. With guidance from Shor, he employed several techniques used in critical pedagogy: students co-developed a syllabus, chose which social issues to cover during the semester, co-developed exam questions and worked in groups to teach individual modules to the rest of the class. As the semester unfolded, Pincus documented areas of frustration he encountered and shed light on the process by which critical pedagogy strategies might need to be adjusted during the semester. Lack of student interest and unwillingness to participate, group members not carrying their own weight and problematic exam questions from students are common problems critical educators face, particularly when incorporating critical pedagogy for the first time. Pincus reported having to spend an inordinate amount of time adjusting certain aspects of the course structure along the way. At the end of the semester, he feels only moderately successful in accomplishing his initial goals.

While this example illuminates some of the challenges facing critical educators, it also demonstrates that educators who employ these pedagogical strategies are in a better position to critique the techniques they use, make adjustments when necessary and engage in self-reflective evaluation of their own work. In other words, the act of engaging in critical pedagogy allows – and in some ways, requires – the educator to critically examine design flaws in course structure and make appropriate changes. It seems logical to conclude that the process of working through the frustrations actually serves to strengthen both the educator and the course structure. As a result, the course structure undergoes continual refinement that benefits both the instructor and the learner.

Viewing critical pedagogy through the perspective of a variety of educators in multiple disciplines is useful. However, the book could have been improved by asking the contributors not only to outline how they applied the pedagogical approaches in their classrooms but also to discuss the implications of critical pedagogy when applied in different disciplines. In other words, it would have been helpful if the editors had gone beyond the “how I did it and what I experienced” stage to a more complete discussion of how these examples of critical pedagogy in action can instruct educators outside of those specific disciplines. This may not have been possible considering the purpose and structure of the book, but that discussion would have made the essays more directly applicable to those who do not teach in the disciplines examined.

The above criticism notwithstanding, the book is a valuable resource for *all* educators. Despite the limitation described above, the essays show how success can be structured and frustrations overcome. More importantly, the personal examples demonstrate that working through the challenges inherent in implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom will, in the long term, benefit both the instructor and the learner. This can provide much needed comfort when those of us who are committed to the philosophy of Freire and Shor -- and who seek to encourage students to be critically thinking agents of social change -- spend long hours analyzing the day's events and asking ourselves, “how could I have done this better?” Perhaps the true mark of a critical educator is the ability and willingness to critically examine him or herself.

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