

*Broadening the Circle of Critical Pedagogy*¹

Adam Renner Education for Social Justice Lecture

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A Tribute to Adam Renner

Adam Renner was my friend, a scholar, teacher, musician, and the Community Coordinator of the Rouge Forum until his sudden death in 2010. Once rooted in Liberation Theology, Adam often told the story of how he became aware of the complicit connections between his own privileged position and the relative consequences for those less fortunate. It was a minimum wage summer job during high school, when he became friends with a homeless man displaced by the new construction on which he was working. It was a simple, familiar, yet powerful story, as he told how that connection with one *different other* awakened his own critical thinking. From traditional Catholic Education to Freirean Liberation Theology, to a real-world human connection, and revolutionary consciousness, Adam Renner devoted the rest of his short life to the power of community. The year before he died, he wrote an article that contributed in significant ways to the conversation started by Paulo Freire in 1970 with his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Pointing toward our broken-down sense of community and dis-connectedness, Renner (2009) argued that rekindling concepts of “community, connectedness, and the collective is central to the thesis of social justice.” That is, “a hopeful path toward justice depends on the

¹ These remarks drawn on the Introduction and Chapter 12, “Broadening the Circle of Critical Pedagogy” of *Working for Social Justice Inside and Outside the Classroom: A Community of Teachers, Researchers, and Activists* (Peter Lang, 2016).

extent to which we can (re)invigorate solidarity and more active participatory democracy” (p. 59). Using a series of early 21st Century “shocks” (e.g., the Iraq War, the genocide in Darfur, Hurricane Katrina, No Child Left Behind Act, and corporate globalization) as a springboard, Renner developed pedagogical possibilities from which resistance to these shocks might emerge and asks: How can educators use these events as part of an effort to build (or rebuild) community? After describing the background of each event he makes connections to a local context and then explores the event’s “pedagogical contexts.” For example, Renner deconstructs the genocide in Darfur as follows.

Genocide in Darfur. As the echoes of “never again” become fainter and fainter; as more and more Darfurians are displaced; as more and more Darfurians are murdered by state sanction; and as the world community drags its feet (and considers who might get Sudan’s oil), one already imagines the horrific narratives that will be written about this era—wondering how it could have happened, why no one stopped it, and what the world community will do to make sure that this time it never happens again. This is the (ultimate) breakdown and disconnect of community, indeed—a world in which the relative wealthy receive the technical bread and circus of reality TV and the latest electronic gadgets, yet thousands of their brothers and sisters are murdered by relatively simple and unsophisticated implements: knives, machetes, and rifles.

Local context. Locally, like many other places, Save Darfur campaigns continue to pop up, lectures and films (at the Jewish Community Center, by Catholic Relief Services, at the Muhammad Ali Center, etc.) are given and shown, and awareness waxes and wanes. Likewise, many refugees from Sudan and from other African

zones of displacement and devastation arrive in Louisville for a fresh start, corralled into the center part of the city and creating an interesting and segregated international camp. Perhaps more interesting, the children of these refugees are educated at a Newcomer's Academy in one of the poorest high schools in Louisville, isolated from the general population by schedule and geography, residing in a formerly abandoned floor of this aging building.

Pedagogical context. Questions for teacher candidates and students in P–12 schools who reside in the city alongside these refugees include: Do they understand the context from which these immigrants come? Can the residents connect the holocaust recalled in the history texts to the subsequent genocides that continue to unfold and progress? Do teacher candidates understand anything about the holocaust on their own American soil? What work can be done to integrate students from the Newcomer's Academy into the mainstream of area schools? As many of these teachers and students enjoy the festivities of the Kentucky Derby festival each year, which includes Thunder over Louisville—a fireworks and military exhibition—can they imagine of what the sound of these exploding munitions and roaring aircraft must remind the traumatized migrants? (Renner, 2009, pp. 64-65)

Where is the hope? Where is the resistance to these shocks; injustices in education? How do we move toward solidarity and more active, participatory democracy in schools and beyond. Renner (2009; Renner & Brown, 2006) offers a framework that focuses on community, praxis, and courage.

First, he argues we need to connect ourselves, our students, and curriculum to communities. This means putting a human face on issues like war, poverty, and exploitation. Asking questions of and exploring connections and responses to “shocks” and their reverberations globally and particularly in our everyday lives. In short, this implies education conceived as community-building (rather than education for economic development), learning how to we can live together and

...finding ways to connect students’ lives together, connecting curriculum with the world outside of school ... and connecting students with real lives/stories/faces in local, national, and global communities [so] that teachers and students can both better understand our privileged positions and work for more level, equitable partnerships. (Renner, 2009, p., 72)

Secondly, along with community we need to work toward more radical understanding of class and injustice, “teachers must consistently seek to craft more nuanced lenses, deepen their consciousness, and develop a discourse of social justice,” what Renner labels praxis (p. 73). Teachers, for example, can craft these lenses through community activity that resembles critical service learning (e.g., Renner, 2011), which asks questions about why such service may even be necessary and then students have the opportunity to “connect heretofore unseen dots.” These activities might lead them toward “noticing the corporatizing trends in education, the privatizing influences in our economy, and threats to democracy (Renner, 2009, p. 73). “Teachers can do this through humanizing pedagogical practices which pose problems for their students, making the world a series of issues to be researched, resolved, and improved, rather than one that is given, static, and unchanging” (Renner, 2009, p. 74).

Thirdly, we have to recognize that teaching community, teaching for social justice and social change, requires great courage, because it demands a new way of being in the world. Social justice requires a revolution of everyday life, a reversal of perspective (Ross & Vinson, 2006). It takes courage to critically examine our everyday life and how practical activities in a capitalist society reproduce capitalism and the conditions of our own (and others') oppression, for example, alienation from self, our work, and others (Perlman, 1969). And it takes courage to explore the possibilities of self-realization, communication, and participation as activities that can transcend the threats of capitalism and fragmented disconnection (e.g., alienation, oppression, and exploitation).

The revolution of everyday life comes with our ability to understand and transform our world—the fundamental goal of social justice education. “To avoid the socially reproductive tendencies of injustice, educators must recognize the tremendous stakes and the pressing nature of the work” (Renner, 2009, p.75). In sum, it requires teaching community and praxis, while becoming visible in the struggle through courageous action: engaging in passionate acts of refusal and consciousness of the necessity of resistance to trigger stoppages in the factories of collective illusion—whether those factories be schools that only offer students alienation, spectacle, surveillance, and training for consumption or a corporate media that offers us fear and perpetual war; responding to the call for a “militant humanism” (Brown 2008) that interrupts dehumanizing trends in education, politics, and elsewhere, and expands humanizing practices; and developing one’s voice (recognizing silence as an act of aggression that denies the disenfranchised their humanity). Wherever these actions are found, the revolution of everyday life is under way. Teaching for community, praxis, and courage is the heart of what working for

social justice means to the community of students, teachers, researchers, and activists that is the Rouge Forum, and is the lesson Adam Renner taught us through his life and work.

Broadening the Circle of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is understood (and misunderstood) in myriad ways. Most often associated with Paulo Freire's (1970) problem-posing approach in opposition to the traditional banking method of education, it is also closely connected with neo-Marxist, critical theory-based analyses of education, schooling, and society. Despite popular perception, and the conceptualizations of critical pedagogy by some of its most well known proponents, there is no single ideological perspective or particular social movement that defines critical pedagogy.

The dominant conceptualizations of critical pedagogy are unnecessarily narrow, both politically and philosophically. As a result, a pedagogical approach that is undeniably powerful has been undermined and its impact blunted. Critical pedagogy has become less a process of students investigating the world and constructing personally meaningful understandings that aid them in the struggle to overcome oppression and achieve freedom and more akin to an *a priori* set of beliefs about the world presented as maps to be followed. In other words, critical pedagogy has met the enemy and it is us, or at least includes us. If critical pedagogy, as process of education, to achieve its aims it cannot exempt itself from the same uprooting and examination of its own underlying assumptions, pronouncements, clichés, and received wisdom.

My aim here is to broaden the circle of critical pedagogy. I will illustrate how we might increase its uptake by teachers and its affects on individuals, schools, and society by adopting a less orthodox conception of what it means to practice critical pedagogy.

Broadening The Circle Philosophically

Critical pedagogy did not evolve from a single philosophical source and its core aims and methods can be tied to a variety of philosophical traditions.

Paulo Freire and John Dewey

The core idea of critical pedagogy is to submit received understandings to critical analysis with the aim of increasing human knowledge and freedom. Ira Shor offers the most straightforward description of critical pedagogy:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor, 1992, p. 129)

Now consider philosopher John Dewey's description of "reflective" thinking.

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support and the further conclusions to which it tends... (1933, p. 8)

While Dewey's philosophy falls outside the realm we know as critical theory, there is significant commonality between these two approaches to understanding and knowing the world. Critical pedagogy is a tool to expose and deconstruct cultural hegemony, the idea that the ruling elite manipulates social mores so that their view becomes the dominant worldview. While Dewey did not use the term hegemony, he recognized the problem and constructed his conception of education in response to it. In *Democracy and Education* (1916) Dewey wrote

... the word education means just a process of leading or bringing up. When we have the outcome of the process in mind, we speak of education as shaping, forming, molding activity—that is, a shaping into the standard form of social activity ... The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on. But the particular medium in which an individual exists leads him [*sic*] to see and feel one thing rather than another; it leads him to have certain plans in order that he may act successfully with others; it strengthens some beliefs and weakens others as a condition of winning the approval of others. Thus it gradually produces in him a certain system of behaviour, a certain disposition of action. (Chapter Two, paras. 1-2)

For both Dewey and Freire education is not a neutral process. Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) opens with a discussion of the way in which all societies use education as a means of social control by which adults consciously shape the dispositions of children. He goes on to argue that education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind. In other words, there is no “scientifically objective” answer to the question of the purposes of education, because those purposes are not things that can be discovered. Similarly, Freire (1970; 1974) described education as either an instrument that is used to integrate people into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” that is the means by which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Dewey's radical reconceptualization of democracy has much to offer critical pedagogy (Bernstein, 2010). It is important to note that Dewey's notion of democracy cannot be found in the electoral democracies of capitalism. For Dewey, the primary responsibility of democratic

citizens is concern with the development of shared interests that lead to sensitivity about repercussions of their actions on others. Dewey characterized democracy as a force that breaks down barriers that separate people and creates community. The more porous the boundaries of social groups the more they welcome participation from all individuals, and as the varied groupings enjoy multiple and flexible relations, society moves closer to fulfilling the democratic ideal.

From a Deweyan perspective, democracy is not merely a form of government nor is it an end in itself; it is the means by which people discover, extend, and manifest human nature and human rights. For Dewey, democracy has three roots: (1) free individual existence; (2) solidarity with others; and (3) choice of work and other forms of participation in society. The aim of democratic education and thus a democratic society is the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality.

For me, there is an easy connection to be made between Dewey and the more traditional roots of critical pedagogy in Freire's work. Additionally, I see threads in these Deweyan roots of democracy that are in sync with at least some strains of anarchist thought, particularly mutual aid and respect and opposition to authority and hierarchical organization in human relations. Dewey was not an anarchist, far from it. But, as Noam Chomsky (2000; Ross, 2014) has pointed out, Dewey's conceptualization of democracy and democratic education can be understood as supportive of social anarchist principles (something I will come back to later). While Dewey's democratically informed education philosophy is quite familiar to folks in education, it has largely been influential only conceptually, its radical potential remains, in almost every respect, unrealized in schools and society and that is a challenge for critical pedagogues.

Dialectics and Critical Pedagogy

From Shor's definition of critical pedagogy we can see reality is more than appearances and focusing exclusively on appearances—on the evidence that strikes us immediately and directly—can be misleading. Basing an understanding of ourselves and our world on what we see, hear, or touch in our immediate surroundings can lead us to conclusions that are distorted or false. As Bertell Ollman has written,

Understanding anything in our everyday experience requires that we know something about how it arose and developed and how it fits into the larger context or system of which it is a part. Just recognizing this, however, is not enough ... After all, few would deny that everything in the world is changing and interacting at some pace and in one way or another, that history and systemic connections belong to the real world. The difficulty has always been how to think adequately about them, how not to distort them and how to give them the attention and weight that they deserve. (Ollman, 1993, p. 11)

Dialectics, Ollman explains, is an attempt to resolve this difficulty by expanding the notion of "anything" to include (as aspects of what is) both the process by which it has become that thing and the broader interactive context in which it is found. Dialectics restructures thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of "thing," as something that has a history and has external connections to other things, with notions of "process" (which contains its history and possible futures) and "relation" (which contains as part of what it is its ties with other relations). Or, as Sciabarra puts it, dialectics is the "art of context-keeping ..."

It counsels us to study the object of our inquiry from a variety of perspectives and levels of generality, so as to gain a more comprehensive picture of it. That study often requires that we grasp the object in terms of the larger system within which

it is situated, as well as its development across time. Because human beings are not omniscient, because none of us can see the “whole” as if from a “synoptic” godlike perspective, it is only through selective abstraction that we are able to piece together a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon before us—an understanding of its antecedent conditions, interrelationships, and tendencies.

(2005, para. 8)

Abstraction is like using camera lenses with different focal lengths: a zoom lens to bring a distant object into focus (what is the history of this?) or using a wide-angle lens to capture more of a scene (what is the social context of the issue now?) This raises an important question: Where does one start and what does one look for? The traditional approach to inquiry starts with small parts and attempts to establish connections with other parts leading to an understanding of the larger whole. Beginning with the whole, the system, or as much as we understand of it, and then inquiring into the part or parts of it to see how it fits and functions leads to a fuller understanding of the whole.

For example, many people of various political persuasions have pointed out the paradox of the growing wealth of the few and the increasing poverty of the many, as well as connections between the interests of corporations and the actions of governments and of being powerless and poor. As Ollman (1993) points out, despite awareness of these relations, most people do not take such observations seriously. Lacking a theory to make sense of what they are seeing, people don't know what importance to give it; forget what they have just seen, or exorcise the contradictions by labeling them a paradox. The problem is the socialization we undergo (in and out of school) encourages us to focus on the particulars of our circumstances and to ignore interconnections. Thus, we miss the patterns that emerge from relations. Social studies education,

for example, plays an important role in reinforcing this tendency. The social sciences break up human knowledge into various disciplines (history, anthropology, sociology, geography, etc.) each with its own distinctive language and ways of knowing, which encourages concentrating on bits and pieces of human experience. What existed before is usually taken as given and unchanging. As a result, political and economic upheavals (such as the revolutions of 1789, 1848, 1917, and 1989) are treated as anomalous events with discreet explanations.

Dialectical thinking, on the other hand, is an effort to understand the world in terms of interconnections—the ties among things as they are right now, their own preconditions, and future possibilities. The dialectical method takes change as the given and treats apparent stability as that which needs to be explained (and provides specialized concepts and frameworks to explain it). Dialectical thinking is an approach to understanding the world that requires not only a lot of facts that are usually hidden from view, but a more interconnected grasp of the facts we already know.

Dialectics is a core method of critical pedagogy. And while dialectics has been called “Marx’s method” it should be noted that most of Marx’s dialectic evolved from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who systematized a way of thinking that goes back to the ancient Greeks, Aristotle’s *Topics*. Additionally, non-Marxist thinkers like Alfred North Whitehead and British Idealist F. H. Bradley developed their own versions of dialectics, while Chris Matthew Sciabarra and John F. Welsh (2007) put dialects to use in the service of libertarian social theory. And as Sciabarra (2005) writes:

What makes a dialectical approach into a *radical* approach is that the task of going to the root of a social problem, seeking to understand it and resolve it, often requires that we make transparent the relationships among social problems.

Understanding the complexities at work within any given society is a prerequisite for changing it. It is simply mistaken to believe that Marx and Marxists have had a monopoly on this type of analysis. It is also mistaken to believe that this emphasis on grasping the full context is, somehow, a vestige of Marxism.

Priestcraft and Critical Pedagogy

Like mainstream liberal educators who believe in the culturally redemptive power of schooling, critical pedagogy has an educational messiah complex that too often turns critical educators into priests, whose aim is to mediate the everyday life of students and teachers. Too often critical pedagogy is conceptualized from above.

Paulo Freire is undoubtedly the key figure in the development of critical pedagogy. His focus on consciousness, critique, utopian vision (the need for imagining a better future before it can be achieved), the critical role of education for social justice, and the necessity of leadership unified with the people, should be seen as fundamental guidelines for movements for social change. Yet as Gibson (2007) points out, there are problems with Freire's work and he and his work have been reified in uncritical praise by prominent academics surrounding his work in the English-speaking world. Gibson writes,

As an icon, Freire indeed became a commodity. His work was purchased, rarely as a whole, but in selective pieces, which could further the career of an academic, propel the interests of a corporation or a state-capitalist "revolutionary" party.

Many of his enthusiasts called his work "eclectic," and let it go at that. But Freire called himself a contradictory man. His politics were often seemingly at odds. (p.

180)

Gibson's analysis reveals two Freires. The Marxist Freire urged the analysis of labour and production, but was unable to resolve the incongruity of human liberation and capitalism's demand for inequality in order to motivate national economic development. The Catholic-humanist-postmodern Freire denied the centrality of class and focused on deconstructing culture and language. In both cases, Freire relied on the ethics of the educator-leader to mediate the tensions between middle-class teachers and profoundly exploited students.

It is impossible to imagine critical pedagogy without the profound contributions of Freire (e.g., his emphasis on the pivotal role of ideas as a material force, his critical method of analysis, his determination to engage in concrete social practice, his democratic and ethical pedagogy, and his insistence on non-hierarchical leadership), however, being true to his legacy requires us to critically re-examine his work and what it means for us today; avoiding reification of his texts; taking care not to strip them of their politics or overlook the contradictions to be found there.

There is no place for evangelists in critical pedagogy because the aim is not to convert people to *a priori* assumptions, beliefs, or knowledge. At the heart of Freire's interactive approach to education, and often overlooked or ignored, is observation, experience, and judgment (as opposed to knowledge that proceeds just from theoretical deduction).

Humans tend to construct beliefs based upon insufficient knowledge and understanding, then cling to them, rejecting evidence to the contrary, as a result, there is no place for "believers" in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy as a process rejects prejudices or prejudgements, that is, thought or belief that accepts superficial appearances. Tradition, instruction, and imitation all depend on authority in some form. A critical pedagogy thrives on scepticism, doubt, analysis, radical inquiry, thus no priests are necessary because the point is for people to think for themselves. Whether the promise of critical consciousness and liberation from oppression can be

achieved by Freire's theoretical stance or his "see-judge-act" system of interactive education is an empirical question.

The Individual, Institutions, Social Change, and Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy as a practice has been critiqued both internally and externally. For example, McLaren laments "the domestication of critical pedagogy," that is critical pedagogy efforts that have been accommodated to mainstream liberal humanism and progressivism and "marked by flirtation with but never full commitment to revolutionary praxis" (2000, p. 98). Identifying postmodernism and poststructuralism as the heart of this problem, McLaren quotes Carl Boggs to make his point:

In politics as in the cultural and intellectual realm, a postmodern fascination with indeterminacy, ambiguity, and chaos easily supports a drift toward cynicism and passivity; the subject becomes powerless to change either itself or society. Further the pretentious, jargon-filled and often indecipherable discourse of postmodernism reinforces the most faddish tendencies in academia. Endless (and often pointless) attempts to deconstruct texts and narrative readily become a façade behind which professional scholars justify their own retreat from political commitment ... the extreme postmodern assault on macro institutions severs the connections between critique and action. (1997, p. 767)

On the other hand postmodernist Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) critiques the critical pedagogy literature as highly abstract, utopian, and out of touch with the everyday practice of teachers. Ellsworth maintains that the discourse of critical pedagogy gives rise to repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination where "objects, nature, and "Others" are seen to be known or ultimately knowable, in the sense of being 'defined, delineated, captured, understood,

explained, and diagnosed' at a level of determination never accorded to the 'knower' herself or himself" (p. 321). In response to critical pedagogy Ellsworth offers her preferred version of classroom practice as a kind of communication across difference that is represented in this statement:

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and 'the Right thing to do' will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (p. 324)

In this argument I tend to agree with McLaren (see, for example, Hill, McLaren, Cole, Ritkowski, 2002; Ross & Gibson, 2007), but Ellsworth's critique identifies an important blind spot within critical pedagogy regarding the individual, the personal, and identity.

In his excellent history of the free school movement of the 1960s, Ron Miller (2002) reassesses and revives the legacy of John Holt. Holt was not a scholar or a theorist, but rather a moralist and reformer, a thinker described as a social ecologist and constructive postmodernist, who became closely associated with the deschooling and homeschooling movements in North America.

As Miller points out, Holt, like John Dewey, was not an ideologue and endorsed no "ism." Holt warned against the quest for ideological purity and "over-abstractness." He advocated an organic worldview, "an appreciation for the living, dynamic, evolving, interacting, and responsive nature of reality" (Miller, p. 83). Holt held several fundamental principles that should be taken seriously by critical educators:

- the dignity and value of human existence and faith in the human capacity to learn;

- concern for freedom and belief that it was being seriously eroded by the impersonality of large organizations and the forms of surveillance and control practiced in social institutions, particularly schools;
- opposing centralized political and economic power that rests on scientific-technological management of natural and human resources;
- the driving concern for the need of each person to find a meaningful, fulfilling sense of identity in a mass society that makes this difficult. (Miller, p. 83)

Holt “sought a thorough renewal of culture that would be as concerned with personal wholeness and authenticity as with social justice” (Miller, p. 85). In the tradition of Thoreau, he saw himself as a “decentralist” who “leaned in the direction of anarchism,” he “did not so much seek to reform social institutions as to circumvent and thus deflate them” (Miller, p. 85). Holt was primarily concerned about human growth and learning, but he focused on the relationship between social institutions and human development. His emphasis on the personal dimension of social reality addresses a blind spot within critical pedagogy, which too often privileges the institutional analysis at the expense of existential authenticity, that is the individual person’s concern that his or her life is meaningful and fulfilling. Holt described his deepest interest as, “how can we adults work to create a more decent, humane, conserving, peaceful, just, etc. community, nation, world, and how can we make it possible for children to join us in this work?” (Miller, p. 86). Miller writes that

Holt emphasized the connection between the social and the individual, between the political and the existential. Human beings could not grow whole in a fragmented or violent culture, but at the same time a decent culture would only

emerge when people personally experienced meaning and fulfillment. (Miller, p. 86)

Miller argues that what distinguishes Holt's position from "progressive" critiques was his insistence that reform of social institutions alone was not sufficient for cultural renewal. For Holt, the source of violence, racism, and exploitation was not in institutions as such, but in the psychological reality people experience as they live in society. The implication for critical pedagogy is that its focus on institutional transformation has neglected the existential dimension of meaning, too often ignoring personal desire for belonging, community, and moral commitment.

To be clear, neither Holt nor I am advocating a perspective that is merely personal or individualistic. Holt was very aware of political forces and expressed his concern that the worship of progress and growth was inevitably leading to fascism. In his 1970 book, *What Do I Do Monday?* Holt suggests that alienation bred by authoritarian education could "prepare the ground for some naïve American brand of Fascism, which now seems uncomfortably close." In a letter to Paul Goodman, written in 1970, Holt says:

I keep looking for and hoping to find evidence that [Americans] are not as callous and greedy and cruel and envious as I fear they are, and I keep getting disappointed. ... What scares me is the amount of Fascism in people's spirit. It is the government that so many of our fellow citizens would get if they could that scares me—and I fear we are moving in that direction. (Miller, 2002, p. 89).

Unfortunately, Holt was prescient about politics in the United States, as well as about institutional, particularly school, reform, as an effective path for social change. In 1971, Holt wrote in *New Schools Exchange Newsletter*,

I do not believe that any movement for educational reform that addresses itself exclusively or even primarily to the problems or needs of children can progress very far. In short, in a society that is absurd, unworkable, wasteful, destructive, coercive, monopolistic, and generally anti-human, we could never have good education, no matter what kind of schools the powers that be permit, because it is not the educators or the schools but the whole society and the quality of life in it that really educate ... More and more it seems to me, and this is a reversal of what I felt not long ago, that it makes very little sense to talk about education *for* social change, as if education was or could be a kind of getting ready. The best and perhaps only education for social change is action to bring about that change ...

There cannot be little worlds fit for children in a world not fit for anyone else.

(Quoted in Miller, 2002, p. 90, emphasis added)

In his 1972 book, *Freedom and Beyond*, Holt grappled with the key concepts of critical pedagogy: social justice, racism, poverty, and class conflict, arguing, as Miller points out, that schools were contributing to these problems rather than helping to solve them. Unlike the social reconstructionists of mid-20th Century (e.g. Counts, 1932), Holt came to see schools (even democratic free schools) not as a potential sources for recreation of the social order, but rather obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of social change. He wonder whether “we are trying to salve our consciences by asking our children to do what we can’t and don’t want to do” (1972, p. 232).

Holt concluded that schools “tend to take learning out of its living context and turn it into an abstraction, a commodity” (Miller, p. 95). Or as he once said, “I’m enough of an anarchist to feel that things are improved in general when they are improved in their particulars.”

And this is the principle that addresses, at least in part, the concerns Ellsworth famously raised in her critique of critical pedagogy.

The question becomes how can we create a better balance between the abstraction (a focus on the general nature of things) and authenticity (a focus on the particulars) within critical pedagogy. Holt argued that attempting to change society through schools was an evasion of personal responsibility because authentic meaning cannot be cultivated en masse. “People don’t change their ideas, much less their lives, because someone comes along with a clever argument to show that they’re wrong” (Holt, 1981, p. 66). So, critical educators, are left with a conundrum.

The Future of Critical Pedagogy

Michel Foucault argued that practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult and his definition of critique has much in common with Shor’s definition of critical pedagogy.

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest...Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. (1988, 154-155)

Critical pedagogy continues to evolve and it is up to us, as critical educators, to continually engage in self-critique, and pedagogical renovation.

People who talk about transformational learning or educational revolution without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about learning,

and love, and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, are trapped in a net of received ideas, the common-nonsense and false reality of technocrats (or worse).

Schools are alluring contradictions, harboring possibilities for liberation, emancipation, and social progress, but, as fundamentally authoritarian and hierarchical institutions, they produce myriad oppressive and inequitable by-products. The challenge, perhaps impossibility, is discovering ways in which schools can contribute to positive liberty. That is a society where individuals have the power and resources to realize and fulfill their own potential, free from the obstacles of classism, racism, sexism and other inequalities encouraged by capitalism and its educational systems as well as the influence of the state and religious ideologies. A society where people have agency and capacity to make their own free choices and act independently based on reason not authority, tradition, or dogma.

Education, as a whole, really is a critical knowledge of everyday life. Genuine community and genuine dialogue can exist only when each person has access to a direct experience of reality, when everyone has at their disposal the practical and intellectual means needed to solve problems. The question is not to determine what the students *are* at present, but rather what they *can become*, for only then is it possible to grasp what in truth they *already are*. (And the same applies to us, as critical educators.)

Studying how people (and things) change is the heart of social understanding and critical pedagogy. For me, perhaps the most compelling element of critical pedagogy is that active investigation of social and educational issues contributes to change. As Mao Zedong (1937) said,

If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself. If you want to know the theory and methods of revolution, you must take part in revolution. All genuine knowledge originates in direct experience.

Mao's position on the role of experience in learning is remarkably similar to those of John Dewey. Both of these philosophers, although poles apart ideologically, share what has been described as an activist conception of human beings, that is the view that people create themselves on the basis of their own self-interpretations. Although, as Marx points out, while people make their own history, they do not make it as they please, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

Reduced to its most basic elements, critical pedagogy should seek to create conditions in which students (and educators) can develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and recognize they have agency to act on the world, to make change.

Critical pedagogy is not about showing life to people, but bringing them to life. The aim is not getting students to listen to convincing lectures by experts, but getting them to speak for themselves in order to achieve, or at least strive toward an equal degree of participation and a better future.

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