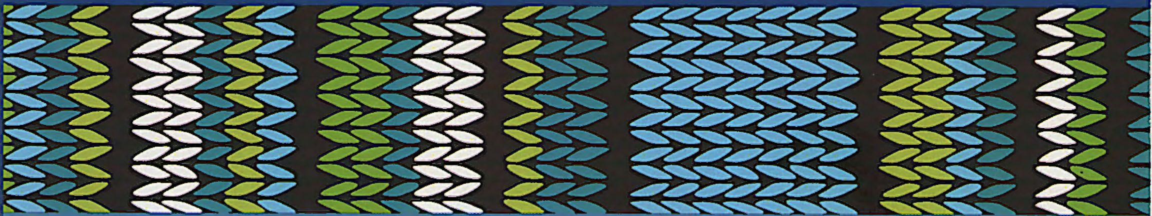
ROUTLEDGE

The Importance of Teaching Social Issues

Our Pedagogical Creeds



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acquisition by being aware of, and capitalizing on, students' experiences and culture for initiating, conducting, and interpreting classroom processes. Educators are a powerful means for students to acquire the knowledge needed to transform themselves.

- I believe learning, teaching, and education are not always comfortable. Discomfort and disequilibrium are incumbent in the transformative process of learning and incorporating new and unfamiliar concepts—especially when culturally different perspectives and realities are involved. Whereas children are instructive in helping educators negotiate this terrain, as evidenced by my experiences counseling students in St. Thomas, this is a personal journey that continually evolves when working with students of color and/or poverty.
- Like Dewey, I believe that educators are invaluable in the knowledge-acquisition process, which is a lifelong endeavor. The results of our efforts are not readily visible but can be realized and developed over the course of students' lives. The ultimate indicator of success is their use of knowledge to ensure a more equitable world. As with the baobab tree, the tree, when mature, returns nutrients to the soil—our society.

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FROM VOICING TO NAMING TO RE-HUMANIZATION

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My Pedagogic Creed: Biographical Interlude

My story of coming to a decolonizing pedagogical framework is deeply rooted in my own personal biography growing up as a Chicano in southeast Los Angeles. Yet, my personal biography is intertwined with the collective experience of my family and the broader Chicano community in the southwest. Both of my parents migrated[1] to the United States from Mexico during the 1960s and joined the ranks of *Mexicano* industrial workers in southeast Los Angeles. Some family members eventually moved to other areas, toiling the fields as migrant farm workers in California and Texas. On both my father's and mother's sides, we trace our histories to the indigenous peoples of central Mexico—a history that has been denied, erased, and eventually forgotten. The exploitation, institutional racism, and marginalization my families have endured are a living memory that greatly impacts my commitment to collective struggle. This struggle continues to this day as *Raza*[2] communities find themselves under attack by draconian and racist policies that have positioned us as "ontological foreigners" (Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez, 2003). It is this very experience of struggle, of economic survival, and family efforts to learn how to navigate oppressive education, legal, political, and economic systems, that has become the greatest resource for making the study of social issues central to my teaching and organizing.

Yet this history of family struggle has been enriched in ways I could not predict vis-à-vis my own involvement in grassroots organizing. Since 2005, I have been immersed in various grassroots organizations and have assumed an active role in both in their development and the political work that grows out of these. Precisely because grassroots organizing places scholar-activists in the midst of community struggles from below, my own involvement in these organizations

has led me to think and operate in ways that prioritize community issues and social problems. Thus, my involvement in the local struggle to transform racist education policies in those schools in which our members teach, the wave of neo-liberal privatization impacting urban communities, the deportation raids against Raza families, etc., has transformed my own pedagogical praxis and has shaped my ideological perspective. More recently, I have written about the possibility of popular, grassroots education and the lessons that can be gleaned from indigenous struggles in Latin America and New Zealand (see Zavala, 2013). Reflecting on grassroots popular education, I have been investigating the processes by which popular education is mediated within grassroots organizations (see Zavala, 2014). As a teacher educator in a major public university (California State University, Fullerton), I continually strive to make social issues central to my teaching. In my literacy work with urban and migrant youth, literacy is infused with historical and sociological analysis. I believe a pedagogy informed by a decolonizing framework is meaningless without making colonized peoples' survival and recovery central to it; this requires a critical re-framing of their lives and an understanding how to transform the neo-colonial situation that limits their development. In sum, a critical study of any subject matter must ultimately address the very social issues that impact the peoples' lives, with the goal to reclaim their cultural histories and thereby lead to community self-determination.

Decolonizing Pedagogies: Standpoint and Tenets

I cannot separate my own lived experience as a Chicano from my own pedagogical praxis. While I attempt to articulate general principles of a decolonizing *pedagogical* framework, my own political and ideological stance grows out of a collective experience that I shall name a *Chicano standpoint*. Much like feminism as a standpoint (Harding, 2009), a Chicano standpoint represents a collective, political achievement and vision by and for Chicanos. This standpoint is emergent; its internal contradictions are ongoing and to be resolved by Chicanos themselves. The principles articulated here in my pedagogic creed need to be reinvented in the context of working with non-Chicano communities. *I believe that, for Chicanos, the question of colonialism is central to the curriculum and its investigation should emerge as an expression of Chicano communities' self-determination.*

Decolonizing pedagogies (Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Nakata, et al., 2012; Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez, 2003) represent an expansion and departure from critical pedagogical strands. Decolonizing pedagogies—distinct from critical, feminist, anti-racist, and humanist pedagogies—begin with the assumption that colonialism and imperialism are central to our oppression. Although other pedagogical approaches can be integrated within the broader framework of de-colonization, a distinguishing feature of decolonizing pedagogies is their explicit engagement with the question of colonialism at all levels of education. The extant curriculum

that I am talking about here interweaves reading and writing the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987) against neo/colonialism, guided by concepts that assist colonized people in an understanding of how colonizing discourses and practices are lived today. Similar to Red/Indigenous Pedagogies (Grande, 2004), Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez (2003) have made a call for this general decolonizing strategy, with its emphasis on the study of colonialism:

> We contend that developing a critical consciousness of our internal neocolonial condition and its possible transformation is fundamental to what teachers and students do in decolonizing pedagogical spaces. This requires explicit attention to the history and contemporary manifestations of internal neocolonialism in a manner that clearly explicates their social origin and rejects their historical consequence. It also introduces students to robust theories and conceptual frameworks that provide them the analytic tools to excavate history and examine the present.
>
> *p. 30*

From the standpoint of the colonized, the goals, processes, and outcomes of decolonizing projects are to be struggled for and placed within the spatial-historical process of *survivance* (Grande, 2004). Colonized peoples and historically dominated groups are caught in the midst of a set of historical contradictions and processes set off by colonialism. Viewed more broadly, decolonizing projects take historical form against the backdrop of colonialism and materialize as part of a broader strategy of community self-determination. Using the metaphor of ocean waves, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has developed a useful framework for understanding these broader geo-political and historical forces as currents set off by the waves of colonialism. Thus, Chicano communities engaged in the processes of decolonization, healing, mobilization, and transformation must view their struggle both spatially and historically.

Thus, within a decolonizing framework, questions of "whose interests?" and "towards what ends?" sometimes precede questions of "how?" The context in which decolonizing pedagogies take form, who undertakes this education, and towards what goals are often more significant in the struggle for self-determination than questions of pedagogical mediation and process.

Healing as a Decolonizing Pedagogical Strategy: From Voicing to Naming Our Colonized Lives

Dialogue

> Dialogue is the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world
>
> *Freire, 1970, p. 88*

> Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it.
>
> *Shor, 1992, p. 86*

Dialogue as a pedagogical process is part of a long tradition in Critical Pedagogy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire iterates that dialogue is a particular form of human communication that involves critically reflecting upon the world. Thus, not all communication is dialogical. Moreover, the term dialogue conjures the image of people talking, deliberating, and discussing. Although this is part of the process of dialogue, Freire comments that dialogical mediation happens "not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action," (Freire, 1970, p. 96). From a decolonizing framework, dialogue amongst colonized peoples is not a given but something that must be struggled for. Although language is a tool for social reflection, language and thinking must be interrogated and reclaimed. It is a mistake to assume that dialogue takes place among equals or that it represents a "safe space" where people come together. In practice, dialogue is imbued with both violence and love. *I believe dialogue is integral to education, yet dialogue is not a given and must be struggled for.*

Naming

> To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it.
>
> *Freire, 1970 p. 76*

Naming is a process that emerges through dialogue and critical reflection. Given the colonial legacies of violence that encircle the lives of historically dominated communities in the United States, naming involves a complex process of reflection, through the use of historical and sociological concepts, on the ways in which our lives are affected by colonial discourses and practices. In my experience working with migrant and *Raza* students from southeast urban Los Angeles, the process of naming grows out of one's lived experience and is transformed into a collective process whereby students bring their often contradictory experiences together within a broader framework generated from concepts derived from social theory/analysis. Such concepts include Colonialism, Capitalism, Patriarchy, Hegemony, and Eurocentrism.

Naming often involves "naming one's pain" (hooks, 1989). Colonialism, Capitalism, Hegemony, White Supremacy, Eurocentrism, etc., seem like abstract concepts but, when internalized and interwoven with personal experience, are powerful bridges that assist students in naming interpersonal and "horizontal" violence as constituted by macro- and "vertical" forms of State violence. Colonized peoples, precisely because of their subjection and domination, experience violence on so many levels: in family settings, among family members; in the workplace, where *Raza* communities are exploited daily; in schools, when they encounter uncaring school administrators, racist teachers, and schooling as decul-

turalization; in public spaces, when they are targeted by the police; and in the media, through stereotypical and dehumanizing representations (Acuña, 1988; Spring, 2012; Yosso, 2006). No social space is left untouched by the colonial legacies of violence.

Naming is not merely a cognitive activity. Although students are apprenticed into academic literacies, and although the readings are derived from sociological, anthropological, and political theory, said readings are used as resources for critically reflecting upon and transforming students' understanding of oppression in everyday life, thus equipping them with tools for understanding the way schools and schooling systems operate and shape their lives. *I believe naming or "reading the world," when accompanied by conceptual tools, is integral to a critical understanding of students' lives and the world in which they live.*

Counter-Storytelling

One of the cultural resources I have borrowed from Black, Chicano, and other historically dominated groups in making sense of our present day realities and the colonial past is counter-storytelling (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Counter-storytelling is a medium for challenging the dominant/master narratives we hear in our society. For example, one of the most pervasive dominant/master narratives about the causes of the deplorable "drop-out" rates for Black and Chicano youth in the United States is grounded in a deficit perspective that overtly reduces a complex, historical process into self-blame, lack of parent involvement, or a "culture of poverty" (Valencia, 1997). Counter-storytelling thus becomes a vehicle for self-empowerment, as students use concepts, readings, and other literacy practices as mediating artifacts for arriving at a critical, reflexive understanding of the problems encountered in their communities (Parker and Stovall, 2004). *I believe counter-storytelling is a rich tradition and powerful strategy for challenging the dominant stories or myths about historically dominated groups.*

Healing

Healing is the social space interwoven throughout the experience of coming to name one's pain (hooks, 1989). Wrought by the violence of colonialism, decolonizing pedagogies seek to generate spaces of healing and community, where students can come together in spaces that are seldom experienced in public schools. In their analysis of schooling, students not only strive to think critically about colonialism and how it is experienced personally in relation to schooling, they speak against this violence and oppression. This speaking against or *naming* generates spaces of self-worth, cultural validation, and a vision of community that involves a love for their peers, families, and broader community.

The development of a political and social consciousness emerges out of this sense of community. Precisely because of colonialism, *Raza* students experience

personal violence, marginalization, and dehumanization every day and everywhere. The development of political clarity among urban *Raza* youth requires that critical educators work toward the constitution of healing spaces. *I believe healing is perhaps the most important goal of a decolonizing pedagogy—education is more than cognitive development, it is about the recovery and healing of the mind, body, and spirit.*

Experiential, Dialogical Approach to the Curriculum

> The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspiration of the people.
>
> *Freire, 1970, p. 95*

I believe in an experiential, dialogical approach to the design and analysis of social issues across formal and non-formal learning spaces. Linear and thematic representations of curricula cannot do justice to the complex, dynamic, and experiential nature of educational encounters. My approach to education is informed by cultural-historical theories of learning (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) that ask us to re-conceptualize pedagogy as both art (creative activity) and politics. Further, an experiential, dialogical approach places dialogue and experience at the center of the curriculum (see Gay, 2010). The object of learning is not so much driven by the mastery of knowledge; rather, the transformation of knowledge, how students and teachers internalize, process, and reinvent what is learned is prioritized. Nevertheless, by placing experience at the center of learning, I am not suggesting that learning, and education more broadly, is "student-centered." The praxis of learning includes students and teachers (who are also caught in the process of conscientization and transformation), but is more than these: the development of a critical social and political consciousness whose praxis is self and social transformation.

From an experiential, dialogical approach to curriculum development, the curriculum can be characterized as constantly moving from the abstract to the concrete and back again, as students struggle to critically understand their individual lived experiences in relation to others, and in relation to systems of oppression. This successive movement from the abstract to the concrete and back again is a general pedagogical strategy that generates and activates a series of interesting contradictions.

Cultural-Historical Approaches to Pedagogical Mediation

The concept of mediation has its origins in Karl Marx's historical-materialism, and was further articulated by Lev Vygotsky in his cultural-historical approach to the formation of consciousness. Mediation describes the historical process that

emerges with the separation between human beings and their world. As historical subjects, Marx had argued, we act upon our world, and in so doing both shape our environment and are thus transformed by it. *I believe that our world and the people that inhabit the world are in a process of historical transformation, and that our struggle as colonized people entails the transformation of the world that oppresses us.*

From a historical-materialist perspective, human consciousness develops with the production of culture, i.e. tools and artifacts, and is carried on by its successive transformation, as it is transmitted across individuals and communities. Paulo Freire's (1985) idea of "cultural action" is useful in understanding the historical character of education as a process whereby teachers and students are engaged in the co-construction of knowledge. A fundamental premise of the concept of mediation is the idea that we are conscious historical subjects, shaping and being shaped by what we do: "Consciousness is generated through the social practice that we participate in" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 47).

The Role of the Educator

Education—as opposed to socialization—is a dynamic, historical process arched towards life and human development. Diaz and Flores's (2001) metaphoric description of the educator as a "socio-historical mediator" is congruent with cultural-historical approaches to learning that define the teacher as someone who works deliberately in the construction of learning contexts. This view is often at odds with commonly held notions among progressive educators who, translating Paulo Freire's work, believe that their role is simply to "facilitate" learning through "dialogue."[3] Facilitation is seen as a political response to the banking model of education, in which teachers impose their knowledge upon students. From a cultural-historical approach to learning, facilitation is one form of mediation, the effectiveness of which should be assessed based on concrete learning situations. *I believe decolonizing educators are never passive, nor are they mere facilitators, but are actively shaping and remaking the contexts that make learning possible.*

Learning as Socio-Historical Praxis

Cultural-historical theory proposes a radical view of learning as a material social practice that is rooted in a dialectical view of humans and their social environment. This view of learning challenges dominant perspectives that assume both (a) that learning is an individual act, and (b) that learning is a purely mental or cognitive process. From a cultural-historical perspective, learning is not individual, but a collective, social practice.

This cultural-historical approach to learning should not be confused with the pragmatist's "learning by doing" perspective. Although people learn through experience, these consciousness-raising oriented experiences are guided by specific goals, and, one would hope, are intentionally built from the accumulated

knowledge of the past. Thus, we are able to learn through the experiences of others, through storytelling, and by observation. These practices, in turn, are not "natural" but are culturally specific, goal-oriented, and make sense within the broader context in which they take form. *I believe that learning is a collective, human activity that is culturally specific.*

Cultural Resources in the Mediation of a Critical Social Consciousness

Cultural-historical approaches see the potential in all cultural knowledge and experience as a resource in the generation of new forms of knowledge. *I believe that the kinds of teaching strategies that are useful in any given learning context will depend on the goals, where the learning takes place, and who is a part of the learning, etc.* Often, progressive educators gravitate to inclusive theories of learning as a way of acknowledging "diversity" and the different ways in which learning happens. However, we must take caution in reducing the richness of mediational means to the popularized "multiple intelligences" or "learning styles," as these stereotype particular groups of students or they delimit the different array of possibilities in which teachers can move creatively in a given learning context. From a cultural-historical perspective, instead of thinking of learning styles we are apt to think of cultural resources; instead of the individual learner, the community of practice.

Finally, I cannot overemphasize cultural mediation in the process of the formation of consciousness. The series of interchanges that are both designed and unplanned are as important as the learning content. Progressive educators have rightly oriented the discussion of education to *what* we teach, but questions of process, i.e. pedagogical mediation, need to be raised along with questions of curricular content. Simply "exposing" students to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, assigning Eduardo Galeano's *The Open Veins of Latin America*, listening to Tupac's Shakur's lyrics, or viewing *Che: The Movie* is insufficient in generating a rich learning experience that mediates political education and clarity in our students. More important is what we do with these mediating artifacts, how we structure activities through lesson-structures, down to the kinds of talk we use to guide the interaction within those activities, and how these are interwoven with the goal of developing a critical social and political consciousness.

Contradictions: The Genesis of Development and Learning

> Utilizing certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action.
>
> *Freire, 1970, pp. 95–96*

One of the underlying principles of historical materialism is that historical transformations emerge in and through "contradictions." The resolution of contradictions or "unity of opposites," in the Marxist sense, generates new historical forms. Contradictions are found in any given activity. Within formal learning contexts, contradictions emerge between the teacher and student, between teachers' and students' cultural worlds, between the individual goals of students and the collective object, etc. Contradictions, in this sense, need not be considered negatively. *On the contrary, I believe contradictions are resources that we should strive to resolve and sometimes generate.* Distancing is a useful spatial metaphor for understanding the generation and resolution of contradictions.

There is yet a third dimension to contradictions—sometimes referred to as 'contrareities' because they are not strict contradictions in the traditional sense—that emerges when the historical conditions that have led to the formation of primary/secondary contradictions are brought to the surface. Literacy, for instance, and academic writing in particular, is a tool that is forged throughout the year as students work their way towards its mastery/appropriation. Given the political economy of literacy and academic writing in the United States, who produces it, and who gets to have access to it, for historically dominated groups such as Black and Chicano/Mexicano communities, (il)literacy has been used as a tool for colonial domination. What happens when students learn to master academic writing yet at the same time become conscious of the oppressive histories of literacy? That is, what happens when students learn to master academic forms of writing while at the same time writing instruction involves a critical appraisal of colonialism and literacy as a form of dis/empowerment?

Conclusion: Why Re-Humanization?

I want to argue for dialogue and collective reflection as tools and processes that assist in the deliberate generation of contradictions. These generative contradictions, from a decolonizing pedagogical framework, should strive for healing, which inevitably leads to the re-humanization of colonized peoples. Contradictions are always present in any given practice. In attempting to create learning contexts that lead to student learning, mastery of knowledge, and self-transformation, it is important to move towards a collective reflection, through dialogue, on the practice itself. In a previous learning situation working with migrant students, this was achieved by bringing together the mediation of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in particular his chapter on Banking Education, with a general reflection on the program itself, opening a dialogue with the question posed during the third week of the program: "Are we banking?" At this point, Freire's text shifted from the object of learning to a tool for reflection on the program. The significance of this kind of strategic reflection is the attempt to transform consciousness and social practice itself; in this case, the ways in which we were engaging around texts and teaching. Thus, learning can be viewed more broadly

as an individual's appropriation of cultural tools or her change in participation within a given practice. Learning also goes hand in hand with the development of historically new cultural practices. What progressive educators and grassroots cadre have yet to resolve is how this dynamic view of learning is reinvented within the context of collective, political struggle, like the kind we are seeing in Indigenous and Socialist movements throughout Latin America. *I believe that, while a decolonizing pedagogical praxis is attuned to the tensions of generating an education by the colonized, how this generative experience is taken up in political movements for oppressed groups is in constant dialectical tension.*

Notes

1 I use the term "migrate" rather than "immigrate" because for Chicanos the Southwest is viewed as an occupied territory; it is stolen Mexican land appropriated by the United States in 1848 with the forced Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
2 By "*Raza*" I mean a sociopolitical identity that encompasses the indigenous-mestizo, working class peoples of Latin America. "*Raza*" is typically used as a signifier for "the people" but my use of the term is akin to Gramsci's (1926) use of "the subaltern."
3 See Paulo Freire's (1993) discussion on "directivity" in the learning process in *Pedagogy of the City*. Also, see Peter Mayo's (1999) *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education*, pp. 67ff. for a thorough discussion on the role of "authority" and interpretation of Freirean education as facilitator and midwife.

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