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Theories of Understanding: Inequality; Positionality and Identity; Change

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*If I had to put a finger on what I consider good education, a good radical education, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first... And then next is respect for people's abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives.*

- Miles Horton, 1990 (p. 177)

While some of the first public schools in the U.S. were founded on John Dewey's vision of schools as cornerstones of a pluralist democracy, the growth of industrial capitalism transformed the dominant mode of schooling into one aimed at producing docile workers. Today, schools remain dominated by Freire's (1972) banking concept of education, where students are viewed as receptacles to be filled with the knowledge a teacher possesses. Youth's experiences, cultures, questions, knowledge, curiosities, and opinions have no place in the classroom. Desks are placed in rows, students are asked to answer yes or no questions and walk in straight lines, because these are the skills of a docile workforce and citizenry. Freire (1972) writes, "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (p. 73). By occupying students with memorization, recitation, and figuring out what the teacher is "looking for," youth don't have the time, energy, or inspiration to ask, "Why are things the way they are?" As Freire (1972) writes, "No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why?" (p. 83).

I believe that schools function largely to maintain the status quo, but that they can also be places of hope and love and act as catalysts for individual and societal change. In *Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology*, Howard Zinn (1991) discusses how "a sophisticated system of control that is confident of its power can permit a measure of dissidence" (p. 4). There are some openings (such as classrooms) for resistance, but, he writes, "The controllers are gambling that those openings will pacify us, that we will not really *use* them to make the bold changes that are needed if we are to create a decent society. We should take that gamble" (p. 7). Sometimes, I worry that schools are just institutions that take potential revolutionaries (both youth and adults) and force them to be revolutionary within the rules. But I'll take the gamble, as Zinn (1991) urges, that as much as classrooms can serve to reify oppression, they can also be cracks in the armor of the status quo.

I plan to work with youth as a secondary history and social studies teacher in urban public schools. I aspire to be a teacher who affirms the discourses and knowledge that youth bring to the classroom, who gets youth asking questions of the status quo, and who works to

support young people in becoming facile navigators of the codes of power. I hope for my classroom to be a space where the binary identities of teacher and student are blurred and where power hierarchies are disrupted through dialogue and the positioning of youth as experts on their own lives.

I am drawn to teaching history not because of a love of dates or of great men and their wars, but because I see social studies classrooms as particularly suited to working with students to ask, “Why are things the way they are?” and, “Where are we headed and where would we like to be headed?” I feel that history education should be based in fostering an understanding of the world as it *was* and *is* but also as it *could be*. I believe that as students come to understand their place in the world and how they came to be there, as well as the histories of others’ agency, they will be able to better navigate the systems that exist and seek to transform them.

There is another, less theoretical reason for my desire to work with youth in schools. I love young people’s humor, complex thought, and lively energy. I love trying to understand what’s going on for students and engaging in a process that I know I will never be good enough at. Young people make me think, laugh, question myself and the world, and be curious; what more could I look for in my work?

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In July 2018, I was in my 7th grade social studies class at Breakthrough Greater Boston, a summer academic program for low-income youth. On July 25th, my classes were doing an activity in which students ranked different jobs according to how much they thought the job should be paid and how important the job is to our society. In our discussion, I listened as working-class youth articulated the belief that CEOs deserve to be paid many times more than workers. “Well, they had good ideas and earned it, so they deserve to be the richest,” one student explained.

The discussion left me puzzled and thinking of social theorist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci introduced the notion of hegemony, which proposes that the status quo is maintained not just through force, but through the oppressed adopting ideas that serve to oppress them. Soldiers do not need to patrol the streets if people believe there is no reason to protest. In my class, I was hearing working-class youth express ideas that serve to oppress the working-class and I, a middle-class teacher, was unsure how to address this. I wanted to work with my students to see how the material we were learning, the stories of workers being oppressed and fighting back, related to their lives in a personal way. However, I hesitated about how I would go about doing this. Was I, as a white, middle class teacher, simply going to be putting my students in a position of discussing topics that might do more to hurt than heal? Largely, I have come to my understandings of systemic oppression through decidedly safe and academic studies. In my social studies course, I wanted youth to confront the realities of class in their lives, but I feared putting them in vulnerable places from my position of power and privilege. One of the main tenets of critical pedagogy is working with youth’s personal experiences and drawing

connections between theory, history, and lived experience. As the above story shows though, I balk at bringing the personal into my class' studies.

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It was 4<sup>th</sup> Period and Camilo<sup>1</sup> was on the move. Some days he was hyper-on-the-move but on this day he was sluggishly-on-the-move; dragging himself across the floor, collapsing over a bookshelf, swinging his bag aimlessly. I knelt next to him on the floor, “Camilo, what’s going on today? I know you’re tired but I need you to focus.” He looked at me and said, “But I feel like a floppy turtle today.”

Throughout the summer I wondered what I could do to help this self proclaimed floppy turtle learn. How could I create a classroom that inspired his focus while honoring his need to flop? When was it helpful for him to roam, and when should I just tell him to sit down? I also found myself thinking about Lisa Delpit’s (2006) remarks about white, progressive teaching discourse. Delpit (2006) notes white progressive teachers’ tendencies to deny their power in the classroom and run a classroom where loose structure translates into a lack of learning for students of color. When I first read Delpit I realized that, with my educational, racial, and class background, I was at risk of being such a teacher. Over the summer, I wondered when I just should tell Camilo to sit down, be quiet, and listen up. When should I follow the advice of a young black man quoted by Delpit (2006) and *make* Camilo learn? (p.37). As I wondered how to use my power in the classroom, I thought, what is the difference between me as a white teacher acting authoritatively versus a teacher of color doing so? We are often critical of white teachers for being too loose and lenient, but are also critical of white teachers who discipline and yell. Where does the balance lie for my teaching and identity?

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In my initial Theory of Inequality and Theory of Change pieces, I focused largely on the structures of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy, and how those systems are reinforced, but can also be resisted, in history classrooms. I focused on many of the ideas discussed in the first section of this paper, elaborating on my theories of change related to the *intellectual work* that occurs in classrooms. As my Praxis Project shows though, in my teaching practice I am just as concerned with the relational aspects of education as I am with the intellectual. Central my pedagogy is a belief in personal relationships and a belief that people act, work, and change because of their relationships and connections, not just because of compelling ideas. As Grace Lee Boggs (1974) writes, “In this exquisitely connected world, it is never a question of ‘critical mass.’ It’s always about critical connections” (p. 44). In my Praxis Project Thesis (2019), I paraphrase Alana, a youth in my 4<sup>th</sup> Period, “it is not just *what* we learn that matters, but the *way* we learn it and *the way everyone works together*” (p. 73).

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<sup>1</sup> All student names have been changed to protect their identities.

Doing ensemble culture work in a social studies course about capitalism, class, and worker resistance helped me to see the connection between relational work in classrooms and a bigger anti-capitalist project. In the conclusion to my Praxis Thesis (2019), I write:

How can we expect a more collaborative and just society to emerge if we continue to emulate capitalist competition in our classrooms and extracurriculars? An ensemble culture provides one notion of how we might go about co-creating experiences within which youth and teachers can strive to enact and experience collective struggle and achievement. As Theater of the Oppressed pioneer Augusto Boal (1985) states, “the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely rehearsal for the revolution” (p. 122). (p. 76)

Doing ensemble culture work in my classroom, and reflecting on it through my Praxis Project, made me think about the importance of teachers collaborating in the creation of our pedagogy with youth. One of the recurring themes in my Praxis Project was realizing that youth were telling me important things about ensemble culture, performance work, and how they thought we should work together. The notion that teacher-students need to be open to learning from and with their student-teachers is not new to me, however the challenge of listening to what youth are *really saying* and being open to taking up their ideas was highlighted for me by working on my Praxis Project.

## References

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Freire writes, “No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why?” True inquiry, or Freire’s problem-posing education, would not just entail asking questions but would then lead to action. “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” (p. 83)

*In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.*

- a. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (p. 49)

*If* youth understand the experiences of others, their own place in the world and how they came to be there, as well as their agency and histories of others’ agency -- *if* their imagination and critical muscles are worked rather than atrophied via worksheets and multiple choice tests -- *then* not only will they be better able to navigate the systems that exist, but will also seek to transform these systems.

Students and teachers alike are blocked from participating in praxis, “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” (p. 79)

*Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. In sum: banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people’s historicity as their starting point.*

Paulo Freire (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (p. 84)