

Teaching 4

Decolonization

Critical pedagogy encompasses all the areas of study that aim to redress biases that have informed ways of teaching and knowing in our society ever since the first public school opened. The two great movements for social justice in our nation that both changed all aspects of our culture and created small but powerful revolutions in education are the civil rights and feminist movements. After the militant push for racial equality led to desegregation and the changing of laws, black power activists were one of the first groups in this nation to call attention to all the myriad ways education was structured to reinforce white supremacy, teaching white children ideologies of dominance and black children ideologies of subordination. For example, they critiqued school children being taught that “Columbus discovered America” (a bias that denied the presence of indigenous native people in this nation before colonizing whites came to the so-called new world), and they exposed the knowledge that

African explorers had traveled to this soil before Europeans. Few people in our nation of any race want to remember the way in which black power activists worked in public schools both to see that children who were hungry would be fed and to offer them what Malcolm X called “new ways of seeing” themselves and the world.

Concurrently, feminist challenges to patriarchy and its concomitant insistence on the primacy of male thinkers and their works was an insurrection that created major changes. When a critique of race and class was added to that of gender, every bias was interrogated. To progressive teachers and students this was truly a revolution, making it possible for many of us to enter areas of study that were previously seen as arenas available solely to privileged white males. Many of us attended colleges and universities that would not have enrolled us had there not been both movements for equality aimed at redressing race, sex, and class biases and a movement for reparations and reconstruction (misnamed as “affirmative action”). It was as though the use of the word “affirmative” deemed that a big “yes” was being bestowed on the underprivileged by the privileged, hence it reinscribed the very structure of paternalistic domination that it was meant to redress. That aside, it did make it possible for many people from exploited, oppressed, and/or disenfranchised classes to seek higher education just at a historical moment where imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy was being questioned on an international front and here at home.

Drawing from the radicalism of militant freedom fighters from Africa, South America, China, and all over the world, radicalized Americans, especially those from disenfranchised groups, were learning a new language with which to articulate our place in the United States. Albert Memmi explored the relationship between the “colonizer and the colonized” and Frantz Fanon looked toward decolonization. Walter Rodney showed us “how Europe underdeveloped Africa.” Léopold

Sédar Senghor gave us “negritude” and Amílcar Cabral spoke of the “decolonizing of mentality.” Everyone was reading Marx. Some folks were working to put together race, gender, and class so that we could truly examine our world from an understanding of the way that difference articulated itself politically in our daily lives.

“Liberation” was a term constantly evoked. And it was incredibly liberating to learn a more complex political language with which to name and understand the politics of our nation. It was incredibly liberating to move past notions of personal prejudices and hatreds to look at systems of domination and how they operated interdependently. The most essential lesson for everyone, irrespective of our race, class, or gender, was learning the role education played as a tool of colonization here in the United States. Of course critics of this term, especially when applied to the experience of African Americans, insisted that it was inappropriately used because we were not indigenous inhabitants of a country we owned, with a distinct language and culture. They refused to acknowledge the link between the political fate of black citizens of the United States and black folks on the African continent.

Significantly, progressive black folks here talked most about the colonization of the mind. That colonization began for Native peoples, for black, brown, and yellow people with the assumption that our history here began with the civilizing presence of the colonizer. In *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, Paulo Freire contends:

The culture of the colonized was a reflection of their barbaric way of seeing the world. Culture belonged only to the colonizers. The alienating experience of colonial education was only counteracted for the colonized at those moments when, in an urge for independence, they rejected some of its aspects.

For many first-generation-to-attend-college black people/people of color, the seeds planted that led us to reject a colonizing mentality were sowed within us prior to entering institutions because we could not have been ready to receive the “gifts” of affirmative action had we not already learned to resist passive acceptance of the pressures of dominator values and perspectives on our identity. Usually we learned a measure of resistance to dominant culture within our homes. That spirit served us well in educational institutions where we faced an onslaught of biased dominator thinking.

Without a decolonizing mentality, smart students from disenfranchised backgrounds often find it difficult to succeed in the educational institutions of dominator culture. This holds true even for those students who have embraced the values of dominant culture. In fact, those students may be the least prepared for the barriers they face because they have so convinced themselves that they are different from other members of their group. A major flaw in all of our nation’s powerful movements for social justice has been and remains the assumption that liberation will take place in one fell swoop. That has been detrimental to progress simply because once certain gains in the direction of equality were achieved, the struggle stopped. And, of course, that is dangerous when one is attempting to construct sub-cultures of self-determination within the framework of dominator culture. We would all have fared better in our struggles to end racism, sexism, and class exploitation if we had learned that liberation is an ongoing process. We are bombarded daily by a colonizing mentality (few of us manage to escape the received messages coming from every area of our lives), one that not only shapes consciousness and actions but also provides material rewards for submission and acquiescence that far exceed any material gains for resistance, so we must be constantly engaging new ways of thinking and being. We must be critically vigilant. This is no easy task when most people spend most of their days working within dominator culture.

Those of us who work in education have been particularly fortunate because, individually, we are able to work against reinforcing dominator culture and biases with little or no resistance. College professors have tremendous freedom in the classroom. Our major difficulty is sharing knowledge from an unbiased and/or decolonized standpoint with students who are so deeply mired in dominator culture that they are not open to learning new ways of thinking and knowing. Recently, I gave a lecture wherein a young white female student boldly stated during open discussion: "I am one of those evil capitalists you critique and I do not want to be changed by participation in your classroom or reading your books." After I called attention to the fact that the word "evil" was not used during my lecture or in any work referred to, I was able to share that in all the classes I teach I make it clear from the start that my intent is not to create clones of myself. Boldly, I affirmed: "My primary intent as a teacher is to create an open learning community where students are able to learn how to be critical thinkers able to understand and respond to the material we are studying together." I added that it has been my experience that as students become critical thinkers they often of their own free will change perspectives; only they know whether that is for the better.

Since there has not been a radical transformation of education at its roots, education as the practice of freedom is still a pedagogy accepted only by individuals who elect to concentrate their efforts in this direction. We deliberately choose to teach in ways that further the interest of democracy, of justice. Since the radical interventions in education that have helped end many discriminatory practices, thereby creating diverse contexts for unbiased learning, have been severely attacked by dominator culture their impact is diminished. Concurrently, many "radical" thinkers often speak radical theory and then engage in conventional practice sanctioned by dominator culture. Certainly, rewards received by the dominant educational hierarchy diminish efforts to resist and transform education. Understanding

that liberation is an ongoing process, we must pursue all opportunities to decolonize our minds and the minds of our students. Despite severe setbacks, there have been and will continue to be constructive radical shifts in the way we teach and learn as minds “stayed on freedom” teach to transgress and transform.