BEGINNING WHERE THEY ARE:
A RE-VISION OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Hank ambled into our weekly conference, a few minutes late as usual, and folded himself into the chair next to me. As always, he shook my hand and flashed his easy smile. Older and more confident than most of his classmates, Hank was used to putting others at ease. We began our conference by talking about a piece he was writing for my Intermediate Composition class, "Writing and Reading about Sports." The essay focused on the place of sports in men's lives, how men are expected to know a lot about sports—specifically team sports—and how that just wasn't something in which he was interested, though he was interested in weight lifting and physical fitness, extensions of his tour in the Marine Corps. As we talked, I told him about how sports seemed like one of the few links between my father and me and how that kind of men's talk often seemed like our only common ground. We began to talk about what constituted men's talk and about how it was both a point of commonality and a point of exclusion. During our discussion, he told me that my class helped him to think about his position in relation to the world of sports and the world of men's talk and about how he felt marginalized because of his lack of knowledge and caring about team sports. For the rest of that conference and in subsequent visits, he began to talk about his experience of living between cultures.

Hank is a Marine who has returned to school to get his degree before moving back to the Marines to finish his military

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career. He socializes both with military friends and friends who are, to use Hank’s words, “liberal/alternative”; he feels caught in the middle, as if he always has to explain himself. The people in the military do not understand his interest in literature, language, dancing, alternative music, and theater; around his “liberal” friends he always has to explain the military to people who think that the entire military-industrial complex is pernicious, contributing to a whole assortment of unnamed atrocities. Because all of these interests, from literature and language to fitness and military strategy, are part of Hank’s identity, his entire self-conception is continually called into question by those around him. He went on to say that he expected it from his military friends—not understanding his interests outside the military—but didn’t expect how little his “supposedly enlightened” friends would understand his military career and interests. His notion was that they would be more open and accepting of difference, including difference in career choices and political views, but they were no more tolerant than those in the military. By the time he said these words, the easy smile had left his face and the cool front that he had almost perfected fell away for a few minutes.

In Hank’s attempts to negotiate a space for himself at the intersections of his varied, and seemingly disparate, interests, he leads a very complex life. His story is not unusual in its complexity, though it may be in its particular formulation. Students, like teachers, are individuals, changing and fluid with different roles, interests, and needs. Their identities are rooted in the many different cultural contexts and discourse communities within which they are and have been situated. When students enter our classrooms, they are already existing within a vast heteroglossic web of discourse, with, as Bakhtin reminds us in The Dialogic Imagination, all the overtones, connotations and intentions that inhere in those languages. Hank’s position within the discourses of the military, the university, and his various other interests illustrates this point. Through writing, conferences, group responses, and class discussions Hank became increasingly aware of the political nature of language and its uses in contexts. He was able to see how language is used to make meaning within specific contexts and the
ways that he is implicated in language; he became more self-aware and critical of how he uses language and how it is used around him. In the conference I describe above, he was beginning to articulate his existence at the borders of the various discourses and contexts in his life. The act of locating this position was a political act for Hank and he realized that he was partially constructed and constrained by the cultural contexts within which he existed. Hank was more than aware that every word is saturated with past usages and intentions, and that no word is neutral, that no word can ever be neutral. He was learning to read (and write) the word as he was learning to read (and write) the world.

What Hank and I were engaged in was the kind of critical dialogue that should be at the heart of critical pedagogy. Unfortunately, recent conversation about critical pedagogy, at least as it has been translated into research and practice in the United States, has left us in an awkward position. This is how the arguments go: either we accept a formulation that substitutes the status quo with a new orthodoxy or, as Stephen North argues in "Rhetoric, Responsibility and the 'Language of the Left,'" we throw in the towel because ideas of people like Paulo Freire will simply not work in American higher education. Extending this line of thinking, C. H. Knoblauch, in "Critical Teaching and Dominant Culture" (which appears in the same collection as North's essay), asks if it is possible to have "liberatory teaching in circumstances where there is a powerful self-interest, rooted in class and advantage, that works actively, if not consciously, against critical reflections?" (19). We have landed in a polarized debate: either critical teaching works in the particular translation that has become dominant or we can't use it at all; either we operate from the politics of the right or from the politics of the left. However, in thinking about my own educational experiences, both as a teacher and as a student, I have come to believe that what is important is to focus on specific students within specific contexts, to try to reclaim the term "student-centered," and to realize that we, as teachers, must also be implicated within our pedagogies. I propose that we look to a new formulation of critical pedagogy that calls for an examination and location of our own positions, rather than an inscription of our
students within those positions, and a recognition that the base of learning is formed by the locations in culture and discourse of each class member.

**Beginnings: Freire, Dialogue, and Critical Consciousness**

In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire asserts that students learn to read the word and the world simultaneously, so that their material and cultural histories can never be divorced from their literate histories. He writes, “[s]urveying the word universe thus gives us the people’s words, pregnant with the world, words from people’s reading of the world” (35). It is impossible to separate how each person perceives the world from how he or she perceives the word because humans are language-using animals who make sense of the world through language. It is therefore essential to begin with what students know and with their own languages and idioms. But, as Freire reminds us in *Pedagogy of Hope*, “starting out with the educands’ knowledge does not mean circling around this knowledge ad infinitum. *Starting out* means setting off down the road, getting going, shifting from one point to another, not *sticking*, or *staying*” (69-70). Starting implies movement and a pedagogy that is never static: “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings with a likewise unfinished reality” (*Oppressed* 65).

After all, narrativization, as scholars such as Paul Anthony Kerby, Charlotte Linde, and Judith Fishman Summerfield argue, is the way we as human beings make sense of our worlds and of ourselves; we’re all continually constructing ourselves in story (whether consciously or unconsciously) as a way of dealing with the discontinuities in our lives. According to Kerby, “the self is given content, is delineated, and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions or stories” (1)—narrative provides a way for us to reorder our experiences and to write ourselves and our own life stories from the pre-narrative experiences of our lives. We live in stories and those stories that we tell ourselves and others have to be in some way coherent, though they never tell more than a small part
of who we are. Hank writes essays and poems about the military, alternative bars, his father, his trip to Russia. Samantha writes essays and vignettes about her nightmares, her father, the small town in which she grew up; Jed writes essays and short stories about baseball, his father, college football, being a failure; Meg writes about her sister, getting high, concerts, getting her tea leaves read; Brett writes essays and poems about basketball and his reasons for quitting the game; Joanne writes essays and stories that are so private it is difficult for her to share them with anyone. Each of these students is working through multiple facets of identity in these essays since each piece of writing is, at best, a partial representation of self. Even within a particular essay, students are wrestling with language and representations of self that are conflicted and multiple. In other words, each student is learning to read and write his or her worlds.

As I taught, I began to see the importance of this vision of literacy education; I wanted to teach writing in a manner that would help students to think about their locations in the cultures and discourses in which they reside. In doing so, I hoped that they would be better able to recognize and negotiate their own uses of language and the uses of language around them within specific contexts. I also wanted to resist the “banking model” of education I had experienced during much of my education, which turns students into “‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (Freire *Oppressed* 53). Through my own teaching and learning experiences and through reading Freire, I have come to realize the importance of teachers recognizing and critically reflecting on their own positions; teaching and learning should be viewed as a collaborative and dialogical effort between teachers and students. Through such dialogue, students and teachers can attempt to gain a critical distance from their own circumstances so that they can locate themselves within culture, discourse, and ideology, explore their own subjectivities, and engage with other possible identities or roles. Teachers thus help students to move towards what Freire calls “conscientization” or critical consciousness — “consciousness of consciousness” (*Oppressed* 60). Ann Berthoff, in the “Foreword” to *Literacy: Reading the
Word and the World, further explains this concept: “Teaching and learning are dialogic in character, and dialogic action depends on the awareness of oneself as knower” (xiii).

Critical consciousness, then, involves the ability to ask critical questions of one’s situation and to be self-reflective about one’s location within history and within the cultures in which one resides. Freire emphasizes that teachers need to be critical and self-reflective in order to help students move toward that same kind of critical consciousness and to think in critical ways about the cultures, ideologies, and discourses of which they are a part. He does not, however, imply that such teaching carries a specific ideology, but instead labels this kind of dogmatic thinking as “sectarianism,” commenting that such thinking “mythicizes and thereby alienates” (Oppressed 19). Freire insists that teachers not impose their positions on students because such imposition is antithetical to dialogue. In Pedagogy of Hope, Freire writes, “What is ethically required of progressive educators is that, consistent with their democratic dream, they respect the educands, and therefore never manipulate them” (80). It is, as Freire acknowledges, difficult to resist the impulse to “re-present” students’ worlds not as problems open to dialogue, but as problems to which there is a specific, pre-determined solution. Through dialogue between knowing subjects, however, the generative power of language—the medium through which humans come to know the world—can be harnessed to create the conditions for learning and, ultimately, for a more equitable human dialogue.

A Critique of Critique: Problems with Critical Pedagogy

Much of the work of today’s “progressive educators” has come to be collectively known as critical pedagogy. It seems to me, however, that what Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Peter McLaren and others within the critical pedagogy movement are advocating is exactly the kind of manipulation which Freire so adamantly opposes. What I see in much of the critical pedagogy movement is a challenge to all positions that students hold and to all discourse communities to which they belong, asking them to not only
examine, but to alter their values, and to conform to the thinking of their teachers. Specific positions are masked within the guise of critical pedagogy, hidden within a project that purports to deconstruct the hierarchies and ideologies that inform students’ locations. However, such teaching does so only to align students with the political goals of the teacher, even if those goals have as little to do with student cultures and discourses as the cultural literacy lists of E.D. Hirsch on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Both pedagogical positions serve their own interests and do violence to the cultures of students who enter the classroom. For this reason, I am as much disturbed by some forms of critical pedagogy as I am by cultural literacy.

By critiquing students’ cultural positions, critical pedagogy can force them into a kind of identity bind, a place where none of the cultural intersections in their lives appear to offer acceptable formulations of identity. When students who are already having trouble negotiating their multiple locations and contexts are told by their teachers that none of these locations or contexts are valid and that they must be critiqued, students are forced from the outset to see themselves as lacking. This type of education, as forwarded by Giroux, McLaren, Shor and others, is not at all empowering because student agency is elided as attention is shifted from students to structures, leaving students more disempowered than when they began the class. Student agency is actually stripped away when the focus is exclusively on the ways in which societal structures determine and oppress students. If dialogue, process, and exchange are denigrated, however, the effect is that teachers will not be problem-posers, but will instead impose their own critiques on the cultures of students. For example, in *Life in Schools*, Peter McLaren argues, “[k]nowledge is relevant only when it begins with the experiences students bring with them from the surrounding culture; it is critical only when these experiences are shown to sometimes be problematic (i.e., racist or sexist)” (196). Here he does indeed begin with students’ experience, but does so only in order to show them how it is problematic and in need of change. In this form of critical pedagogy, the teacher explains to students the problematic ways that they have been constructed by their cultures,
but never leaves himself or herself open to the same process. As Jennifer Gore writes of critical pedagogy, there is "a general assumption that the right choices will be clear, that the teacher will/should know which voices to affirm and which to silence, which social movements to support and which to fight" (116). The danger arises when the teacher does not work with the students, but rather works on them by showing them how problematic their experiences have been.

To give another example of this type of pedagogy, let me turn to Shor's concept of "desocialization." Shor defines the term this way: "Desocialization refers to questioning the social behaviors and experiences in school and daily life that make us into the people we are. It involves critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge, and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out" (114). He goes on to describe the teacher's role as providing "a social experience in education that questions previous experiences in school and society and that models new values, relationships, discourse knowledge, and versions of authority" (117-18). The assumption that undergirds this description of desocialization is that the teacher has already been desocialized and can thus model the proper values, relationships, discourses, knowledges, and versions of authority. In other words, in "re-presenting" students' worlds to them, Shor has slipped from the idea of problem-posing into the trap of trying to solve students' problems for them, rather than with them. As well, this definition presupposes that all socialization is negative and that the only function of the school is the reproduction of dominant class values. We could not, however, function as a society without any socialization, just as we could not function without the presence of authority—structures that allow us to live together as a society. Authority is a neutral concept in the same way that power is a neutral concept; both are relational and present in all facets of our lives. It is necessary, I think, to make a distinction between "authority" and "authoritarian," just as it is necessary to make a distinction between socialization and manipulation. In making this distinction and in critiquing Shor's delineation of the term, "desocialization," I am not suggesting that teachers refuse to
help students look critically at their locations and the discourses, cultures, and experiences that make up those locations. Rather, I am arguing against an educational program that manipulates students into a particular way of thinking while simultaneously positing itself as a program of desocialization.

Such a program reinscribes the teacher in an authoritarian position, as possessor and giver of “correct” knowledge—a reinscription of the banking model of education. Students are thus seen as lacking, while the teacher is posited as the agent to fill that lack. The question, however, that this strand of critical pedagogy does not want to ask is Cleo Cherryholmes’: “Which forms of domination are justified in furthering which forms of emancipation?” (165). Mimi Orner writes of critical pedagogy that “the only call for change is on the part of students” (87). It is assumed that critical pedagogues already practice the correct politics and so do not need to practice self-reflection and undergo change and critique, but will instead be there to guide students to the “correct” positions. Though education is undeniably a political activity, it seems to me that such educational theorizing simply replaces one position with another and impoverishes the classroom situation by robbing it of the possibility of open dialogue and articulation. Nevertheless, it is this view of critical pedagogy that dominates, having become, as Gore argues in The Struggle for Pedagogies, its own regime of truth, a reified cadre of knowledge that is no longer subject to dialectic or self-reflective inquiry. As well, despite the implied importance of context, few current theorists in the field address specific pedagogical or institutional contexts, but instead speak at the level of abstraction. It is assumed that no matter what the context, a teacher with the correct orientation will be able to take the situation in hand and perform the kind of desocialization and cultural critique that students “need.”

Critics such as Gore have also charged that the discourse of critical pedagogy has a totalizing and simplistic view that posits power as a commodity that some people have and other people do not. This view of power creates a zero-sum game, while refusing to acknowledge the complexities and contradictions inherent in overlapping relations of power in any particular situation. This
simplistic view exists because of an inattention to specific contexts in favor of a doctrine of ideological critique which is assumed to be applicable to all situations. In addition, the focus of critical pedagogy is narrowed to an over determination of the importance of class—"the reproduction of capitalist relations of production"—that in turn often results in a neglect of other relations of power such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and age (Giroux 112). It is, however, necessary to look at all axes of power, rather than just at the power relations of class and to recognize that emancipation and oppression are not exclusive of one another; power is relational and dependent upon context and the dynamics of each specific situation. In thinking about my own teaching, it is clear to me that there are a myriad of power relations operating in ever changing ways at all times in the classroom. What is important is for me to think about all of those overlapping relationships in a critical and self-reflective way that does not impose my solutions onto those I see as oppressed or subordinated. It's never easy, but the complexity of the classroom demands that I try to do so at all times.

**English 254—"Writing and Reading about Sports"**

As I planned my Intermediate Composition course, I knew that I wanted to design the course in such a way that it would engage students by focusing on a subject that mattered to them. At the same time, however, I wanted to ensure that we would be critical and self-reflective about that subject and our positions in and uses of language. As well, I wanted to avoid engaging in a reinscription of the banking model of education in which my own locations and culture were not implicated. What course theme would allow all of these goals to be realized? Sports—professional and amateur, as it appears on television and radio, as part of high school experience, as part of the fabric of life in the United States—seemed to me to be one of students' primary shared cultural contexts, particularly at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where this course was taught. In addition, sports informs my own history and location and so provided an intersection between my location and those of students. In focusing on sports, I hoped to begin with a generative theme that
would encompass both students’ and my own locations, and then move toward a problem-posing dialogue in which we could examine the many languages that constitute this cultural site. In doing so, I wanted to help students become reflective language practitioners able to negotiate the contexts and intersections of the various discourse communities they inhabit. For this reason, sports seemed to me a logical starting point in learning to read the world and the word critically and self-reflectively.

But the reasons are even more complex. As we began the semester, I was nervous about the course and how it would be received. In the first entry of my teaching journal for the course, I wrote,

I knew that I might meet with some resistance to this idea—using sports writing as a locus for looking closely at writing and reading and how they work together, at the various ways that writers use sports to get their message across, at the different rhetorical situations that are involved in these writings. So I was really prepared to justify why I was doing what I was doing, why I am doing what I am doing, especially on that first day. And I think maybe that I was justifying it to myself as much as to anyone else. The reasons that I chose sports writing go beyond just the reasons above—part of it has to do with wanting to claim sports writing and to thumb my nose at people who scoff at writing about sports. Maybe it’s just to prove a point, maybe it’s just to shock people. But it is more than that, too. I also think that I want students to think critically about something that is so much a part of their lives and something that is so often left unexamined and I also want the students who don’t like sports to look at why and at the place of sports in society—to be able to formulate reasons for their views, I guess. And I think that one of the reasons for me choosing this topic is the central place of sports in my own life and the complex relationship that I have had and still
I did want to begin at a point of convergence for many students, but I also wanted to claim the validity of writing and reading about sports within a university classroom. In that sense, I wanted to move beyond the binary of “high” and “low” culture in education. However, I did not want to move to simple critique that does not acknowledge pleasure, emotion, and desire; I wanted to move beyond the binary of “right” versus “left” politics that seems to characterize most of the debates about education in this country. As well, I did not want to begin with students’ experiences and cultures, only to then critique them from a teacherly position that was outside and situated as somehow above those experiences and cultures. Nor did I want to begin with students’ experience and then never move beyond that point.

I also knew that I wanted to be an engaged teacher because I had come to believe, as bell hooks writes, that “teachers must be actively involved in a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (15). In other words, acknowledging that affect and emotion are part of students’ lived experiences and relations to cultures without a similar acknowledgment about teachers does nothing more than to reinscribe the intellect/emotion binary in which the teacher is once again the broker of knowledge. I therefore wanted to choose a subject that would also implicate me culturally and experientially, thus placing my experiences and location alongside those of students. As I noted in my teaching journal, my own stance towards sports is complex—in many of the same ways it is for my students—and examining sports through reading and writing would involve me not only intellectually in the life of the classroom, but emotionally and affectually as well. I both embrace and resist sports and its different configurations; I both take pleasure in and am critical of sports. Sports is a topic about which I am decentered from the start and, therefore, more open to polyvocality. Since I know that my positions are complex and changing and that I am also inscribed within the culture of sports, I thought this subject matter would make it easier for me to begin with students’ positions and become less the teacher and more one
voice among many in the class. Let me first describe the course and its design.

English 254 was made up of eighteen students (eleven men and seven women) mainly sophomores and juniors, plus a very small number of seniors and freshmen. As a 200-level composition course, it could be taught as a special topics course, which I chose to design as “Writing and Reading About Sports.” The books for the course included John Gierach’s *Even Brook Trout Get the Blues*, a collection of essays about trout fishing, W. P. Kinsella’s *The Thrill of the Grass*, a collection of short stories about baseball, H. G. Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights*, a book about the obsession with high school football in west Texas, and Susan Fox Rogers’ *Another Wilderness*, an edited collection of women writing about the outdoors. We spent two class periods discussing each of the first three books; for *Another Wilderness*, student-led discussions were spread throughout the semester—a total of five classes. In addition, students were required to write every week and to bring a draft essay to workshop in small peer groups each Wednesday. Students were free to choose their own genres and topics throughout the semester, as long as they produced at least five pages that in some way dealt with sports as we had broadly defined that category as a class.

That broad working definition came about as the result of one of our first discussions in class. At the start of this particular session, each of us wrote for fifteen minutes: definitions of sport(s), what “sports” encompasses, our own involvements and/or resistances to sports. From there we got into groups of three or four and began to tell our stories to each other, each listening to the others’ various stories and experiences that related to the general topic of sports. Then we came back to the larger group and began to talk as an entire class. As we talked about our stories and about issues and definitions of sport, many different perspectives arose. Various people in the class spoke about sports as challenge, as industry, as entertainment, as dominating our world, as political, as patriarchal, as empowering, as accomplishment, as exertion, as mass mentality, as affect, as competitiveness, as aggression, as grace, as leveler, as elitist. Individual issues also arose on that day.
that gave insight into the histories of the people in the class, some of whom I have discussed in the section on conferences. Hank told about liking exercise, but hating team sports; Joanne told about loving to watch the grace of figure skaters and gymnasts, but hating what competition did to the children of her friends; Al talked about spending hours watching college football, but being disgusted at the amount of money that professional athletes made; Samantha talked about being bored with sports, but also about how some of her only happy memories of her father involved sports.

As we talked, then and at other times, I tried to point out sites of convergence and divergence among us, the places that we could gather to talk about sports within our lives. For example, discussion might stem from a basic agreement within the class about how money has changed college athletics or a fundamental disagreement about the effect of Title IX on college athletics. As we talked about sports throughout the semester, I also tried to situate myself and my own complicated position with regard to sports as a white Canadian male teaching within a large American university, as an occasional player, as a fan, as a critic. Instead of insisting on a simple critique of the hegemony of sports as cultural capital, I instead tried to begin with the multiplicity of voices that informed the classroom, locating myself not as the authority, but as one voice among many. I am under no delusion that, as a teacher within the institutional context of the classroom, my authority was ever completely decentered. However, by valuing the multiplicity of perspectives that informed the class and implicating myself in the life of the class, I think my position was mediated so that my teacherly authority was no longer the sole focus. By locating my own position, I wanted to allow a more free play of voices and complicate the issues and definitions of sports without imposing my own agenda on my students.

At times, however, especially when I felt passionately about an issue or did not hear a particular side of a debate being voiced, I know that my voice sometimes silenced others. And in retrospect, I can also see that the internal tensions and conflicts that I felt and feel about sports were not always apparent to students so that at times I came off as another teacher who thinks he knows everything.
even about sports. For example, when I perceived that some students were attacking Kinsella and Gierach for their zeal and attention to detail with regard to baseball and fishing respectively, I felt my own position being attacked, and launched into what amounted to a lecture about passion and the expression of passion in writing, even though I could see what they meant both intellectually and aesthetically. Unfortunately, it is only in retrospect that I see how I lectured them; after we discussed *The Thrill of the Grass*, I wrote in my teaching journal, “[a]fter the good discussion in the first part of the class, I really felt like I lectured on the craft, structure, and passion of “The Thrill of the Grass” [a short story in the collection], but I think I said some good things that I needed to say and I think that the writing gave me good examples to draw from and an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up.” In this case, I slid into the “banking model” of teaching and then justified it to myself in my teaching journal, thus obscuring the complexities of my own relationship to sports. On another occasion, I critiqued the University of Nebraska too stridently, even though I am both a fan and supporter; in this case, I slid into a pedagogy of critique that I so adamantly oppose in the critical pedagogy movement. On both these occasions, the complexity of my location was not apparent. Expressing the complicated internal tensions between the intellectual and the emotional, between affect and critique, is difficult and something that I was not always able to do.

There were complex intersections of intellect, desire, and emotion that led many of these students to talk about their conflicted views of sports: being a Nebraska fan, but hating the mass mentality it represents; being an avid football fan, but hating the violence it represents; loving the grace and beauty of gymnastics and figure skating, while recognizing the pain and deprivation that the athletes (who are often still children) endure. Throughout the semester, we discussed these and many more complex issues in class, drawing on our own locations and histories to interact in a collaborative dialogue. As a teacher, it would have been easy for me to intervene and perform a cultural critique of sports, demonstrating the complicity of all sports in the current hegemonic structures of this country. And at times I did feel myself slipping into critique, but
I wanted to avoid the kind of pedagogy which posits the student as an empty vessel that is to be filled by an “enlightened” teacher. Such teaching involves working on rather than with students; it is “sectarian,” a kind of teaching that “always eviscerates” (Freire, Hope 50). I wanted us instead to see the issues involved in sports and the relationship between sports and our lived experiences as far more complicated than a straightforward intellectual critique suggests.

Emotion and desire, then, needed to be viewed as crucial elements of cultural practice and individual subjectivity, always lurking just below the surface. The full spectrum of human emotions and desires must be acknowledged and even encouraged as part of the fabric of a class formed around the multiple locations of all class members. hooks is instructive on this point. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she writes,

If we are all emotionally shut down, how can there be any excitement about ideas? When we bring our passion to the classroom our collective passions come together, and there is often an emotional response, one that can overwhelm. The restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place. Whenever emotional responses erupt, many of us believe our academic purpose has been diminished. To me, this is really a distorted notion of intellectual practice, since the underlying assumption is that to be truly intellectual we must be cut off from our emotions. (154-55)

In what I have come to call an engaged critical pedagogy, I began to understand that it is essential not only to see, but to nurture the connections between emotion and intellect and to avoid the public/private split that characterizes the critical pedagogy movement. In addition, it is equally important to understand that the confluence of intellect, emotion, and desire in each individual subject is complex and is not simply a function of culture, as McLaren posits in “Schooling the Postmodern Body: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Enfleshment.” He writes that the body “is a terrain of the flesh in which meaning is inscribed, constructed, and reconstituted”
and that teachers need to see the body "as a site of resistance to the prevailing cultural and moral hegemony" (150). McLaren’s formulation is no more than a reaffirmation of a pedagogy of critique. The interaction of emotion and intellect, interest and detachment, instead needs to be viewed in more complex terms within each individual’s locations when examining what happened during "Writing and Reading about Sports." It affected not only the dynamics of our discussions, but also the dynamics of students’ reactions to the course as a whole. Throughout the semester, for example, many students expanded their initial stories about sports and re-visioned them, but others, like Joanne, did only the minimum amount of writing about sports while still engaging in our discussions of the readings. Others, like Darryl and Brett, clearly loved to write about sports, but would rarely take part in class discussions about sports and sports writing. Still others, like Meg and Keith, rarely seemed to be very engaged by either writing or reading about sports.

"Writing and Reading about Sports" was far more complex in actuality than I had imagined in designing it. When we talked about the books, for example, the men almost always dominated discussion. Part of this conversational dynamic was due to the fact that there were almost twice as many men as there were women in the class but the subject matter, though not explicitly geared towards men, also authorized more of them to speak. Despite my best efforts, even by the end of the course men still took up most of the conversational space, though the overall awareness of gender in the class had certainly become heightened. And it’s not as easy as simply saying men dominated the discussions, either. In fact, Joanne, perhaps more than anyone else in class, contributed in insightful ways that prompted dialogue among the rest of the class. However, she also resisted writing about sports more than anyone else. In reading she seemed to be able to engage with almost anything a writer had to say, but was committed very strongly to exploring other issues in her writing. Sports was only a marginal interest in her life and she could therefore discuss it on a very distanced and intellectual level, questioning its premises and results, such as what figure skating and gymnastics did to young women or
the place of the football program in relation to the university.

In her own writing, however, Joanne was very emotional, yet shy about exposing her thoughts to others; she could never turn the critical eye she demonstrated towards sports to those issues about which she was writing herself—the death of a close friend, the story of a troubled child with whom she had worked. Writing was very private and, at times, painful for Joanne as she tried to make sense of her world and what had happened to her. Joanne was so close emotionally to these subjects that she could not or would not allow herself to obtain the critical distance she demonstrated with regard to the readings about sports; therefore, she had difficulty in being reflective and critical about her own writing and location. By the end of the semester, however, she told me that she did see a difference in her writing and I did as well. Towards the end of the semester, I wrote,

Joanne is, I think, really coming along in her writing, getting away from abstractions (i.e. contemplations of our existence) and into writing that is very much grounded in concrete reality. Part of this change, I think, is that she is writing for an audience and not just for herself—she told me that she is beginning to see the different uses of writing.

I saw a change in her use of language in writing and making meaning, in the way she read and wrote herself in relation to the world, and in the way she was able to be more critical and self-reflective about the way language mediated her location. Clearly she did as well because in a final learning letter to me, Joanne wrote, I haven’t always written for other people to read, but in the coming months I will keep in mind the need for other people to view my writing projects. I also will keep in mind the need to ask ‘So What?’ This helps me to write things that not only I think are important, but things that other people will think important enough to want to read.

She was still not as critical about her writing as she was about her reading, but she was making some first strides in that direction. She was, in Freire’s words, “learning to learn.” Although I think Joanne
learned and made strides towards becoming a more critical reader and writer, I wonder sometimes if it was because of or despite the focus of the course. The answer, I think, is complex and encompasses both possibilities. It was almost as if she had split the course in half, agreeing in principle to participate in the readings portion, but declining to participate in the invitation to write about sports.

Brett and Darryl, on the other hand, chose to write about sports, but rarely to participate in our discussions of the texts. Brett rarely spoke in class. When we talked in conferences, it was apparent that he was reading and enjoying the texts we read, but he never wanted to go beyond saying that he liked the texts. Brett was not critical about his reading, but was excited that he was finally reading something that interested him. That excitement fueled an excitement about his own writing, though it did take some time for it to take effect. Six weeks into the course, I wrote this entry about Brett in my teaching journal:

Brett has been having some problems writing this semester and always seems as though he may or may not want to be in class—I can't tell. Last week he asked me about sports poetry and so I gave him 5 or 6 of my sports poems. Then in conferences a couple of days ago he brought in this great poem about Larry Bird. Wow! It was one of the better sports poems that I have read and this from a guy that was having all kinds of trouble writing and getting into the class.

The importance of this conference was not that he brought poetry, but that he had started to write and become engaged in his writing. From then until the end of the semester, Brett produced a lot of writing about sports and his position in relation to sports, especially his experiences as a student athlete. He became more and more self-aware in and about his writing, examining his place in culture and his choices in writing, but unfortunately was never able to do so in the same way about the readings. Instead, the readings continued to be an enjoyable impetus for his writing.

Darryl, however, rarely even read the texts we discussed in
class. Though he probably loved sports more than anyone else in class, Darryl was not interested in reading other people’s opinions about sports, but was instead interested in writing and communicating his own opinions to other people. He took so much pleasure in sports and his knowledge of sports, however, that he could not stand to be critical or self-reflective about what he wrote. He was simply not interested in that kind of thinking about sports. While he was excited that a course at the university would focus on sports, he was unwilling to look at sports in any ways that were different than he had previously envisioned. He wrote sports tributes to Cal Ripken, analyses of the Nebraska football team’s season, and sports editorials about money and sports. He did write about his own gambling problem, but was not interested in moving beyond a redemptive narrative of overcoming. Darryl was excited about the course all semester, but I have always been uneasy about what he learned. I had found a way to intersect and begin with Darryl’s locations, contexts, and languages, but not a way to help him move beyond them. Brett, on the other hand, was able to begin with locations, contexts, and languages which were familiar to him in order to move beyond them by becoming more critical and self-reflective about them. While both Brett and Darryl had an emotional and affective attachment to the subject matter of the course, Brett seemed to benefit from that attachment while Darryl was hindered by it. In this way, Darryl and Brett suggest the complexity of and difficulties with implementing an engaged critical pedagogy.

Brett and Darryl in turn make me wonder how Hank came to such a complex awareness of his situation. How much effect did the class and our conferences have on his thinking? It is tempting to chalk up the complexity and self-reflectiveness of Hank’s thinking to his engagement in the class and to congratulate myself on being a successful critical teacher. And to some extent, I do think that some of Hank’s thinking changed as a result of our interactions, his interactions with his fellow students, and the writing he did throughout the semester. Certainly conferences created a space of dialogue that seemed to be missing for Hank prior to that class. However, Hank had already done much thinking about his location
when he entered the class, and his notions about existing within two
cultures demonstrated his ability to ask critical and self-reflective
questions. Hank had many of the critical tools he needed; the class
and our conferences gave him the space to explore these issues in
greater detail. The class, despite a subject matter that did not
exactly fit with Hank’s interests, provided him with the structure
that he needed in order to articulate his location more effectively
and critically and through that articulation to see himself in the
process of becoming, continually making meaning within the
discourses and cultures in which he is enmeshed. Our conferences
added the dimension of dialogue through which he was better able
to think about his multiple subject positions.

By the end of the course I think that many students were able
to look at sports and their connections to sports in new and more
critical ways without, for the most part, having been lectured about
how they should be critiquing the whole industry of sports.
Through a problem-posing methodology and a continual dialogue,
some students were better able to think, read, and write about the
context and place of sports in their lives and to see that every time
they used language they were engaged in the process of making
meaning, whether about sports or another topic. In teaching this
course and reflecting on it since that time, I have had to think hard
about the nature of course content and its relation to my overall
goals of engaged critical pedagogy and about how what actually
happens in the classroom is not always what I had planned. Was a
subject-based course the best way to help students become more
critical language users, especially one focused on a subject as
specific as sports? Some students, such as Hank and Brett, were far
more critical and self-reflective in their writing by the end of the
semester, whether it was despite or because of the focus of the
course. Others, such as Joanne, became much more critical readers,
able to read rhetorically and grasp how texts related to the discourse
communities of which they are a part; they could see how meaning
was constructed in language and how their readings of the word and
the world were linked to their locations within culture and
discourse. There were also students, however, like Meg and Liz,
who were never engaged, and Darryl, who, despite his engagement
in the subject matter, never became more critical. What happened was more complex than I could ever have imagined while planning the course, not only for students, but for myself as well. Thinking about that course won’t give me all of the answers for the next course I teach, but it will help me to continue to question what I am doing so that I can avoid slipping into the trap of thinking that I know exactly what students need.

After the Beginning: Where to Next?

Teaching this class helped me to think more about my pedagogy and about how to foster dialogue, self-reflection, and critical thinking within specific pedagogical contexts. In doing so, I have begun to reimagine critical pedagogy by returning to Freire’s notions of learning and combining them with hooks’s ideas of engagement. The kind of pedagogy I am promoting begins with the notion that human beings are language-using animals who make meaning through language as they interact with their worlds. I need to remember that students are not empty vessels to be filled, but are subjects who are multiply located, informed by their histories and the contexts in which they exist. Teaching within an engaged critical pedagogy involves creating the conditions for a sustained dialogue between all members of a class, recognizing the diversity of locations and histories so that mutual learning can occur. It means becoming self-reflective about our histories and discourse practices; it means critically questioning our circumstances and the ways in which we are situated in and by discourse. Such teaching is difficult because it means attending to specific contexts and allowing each class to move in a direction that is shaped not by a rigid teacherly agenda, but by a dialogue between members of a class. It is hard to open myself up to learning and allow all aspects of my history and locations to inform who I am as I interact with students. Most of all, teaching in this manner is hard because it means attending to both theory and practice, combining them into a mutually informing praxis that is always self-reflective and always questioning of itself.

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Works Cited


