

The Act of Reformation through Pedagogy

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Author Note: I pledge that I have not received any unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Since before America's independence in 1776, social hierarchies have been present in this country. These hierarchies have taken root in every institution from the workforce to the classroom. People near the top of the hierarchal chains are persistent in their efforts to disempower any and every one below them. While some individuals have tried to fight against their oppressors, many have become complacent with their positions and "try to make the best of it." This default complacency was intentional by those in power to hinder those being oppressed from being motivated enough to resist. Nevertheless, motivation can be sparked within the classroom if the right tools are used to "uncover the ways in which dominant ideology is translated into practice" (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, 32). Paulo Freire talked about how revolutions and change must start with the oppressed as a unit, so that it can be effective (Freire, 1972). Teachers are given the privilege to work with the oppressed early on, which can be beneficial in helping the way that those students think about their position within society. Hierarchies are influencing the current pedagogical practices that are being used to teach students. However, by incorporating newer, more effective pedagogical practices that move away from hierarchical design and focus on empowering every person, especially the oppressed minorities, society has the potential to provoke a revolution that will lead to a more just society.

This paper will use critical theory--a theory that examines the current structure of society and the ways people resist and make advancements in it--to examine the racial and class hierarchies within the United States, define what pedagogies are, give examples of current pedagogies and their flaws, give examples of more effective pedagogies and how they will be useful, and offer a few things to consider. The overall analysis will prove that the usage of newer pedagogical practices within schools will allow for reformation of the mind.

Review of Literature

The sources used in this paper contain both quantitative and qualitative data. While many are web sources, there are a few print sources that serve as foundational evidence to support my claim. Furthermore, many of the sources used referenced prior studies or interviews to support their claim, which has allowed for the reemphasis of their credibility.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) examine historical events, primary sources, and prior research to expose the role race plays in the organization of political life within the United States. Michael W. Kraus and Jun Won Park's article (2015), a psychological lens is used to examine how the structure of society has impacted social class within the United States. In another journal article by Martin Haberman (1991), classroom observation is used to define "good teaching." Classroom observation can also be found in a book by John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking (2004) to showcase methods of good teaching and understand how people learn. In a journal article by Abiola Farinde-Wu, et al. (2017) new studies as well as prior studies are examined to showcase how to make learning more effective within the classroom. Although there are many other sources utilized in this paper, they all use similar tactics to the ones listed above.

Racial and Class Hierarchies Within the United States

The word "race" holds a lot of weight in America because throughout history it has been intentionally used for the justification for oppression of minority groups. While the word itself may mean different things to different people almost everyone will agree that race, regardless of how it is defined was constructed to create division. Author Paul Lehman (2009) notes that "every time the term race is used, an undertone of superior and inferior is present" (Lehman, 3). Evidence of this superiority and inferiority can be seen when people began immigrating to the

United States. There were qualifications to determine whether one was white or non-white. Even the faintest of ancestry of being non-white would be enough evidence to classify you as such because it was important that the white race remained “pure,” which allowed for the long-term segregation of schools. Whites held, and still hold, a position of superiority whereas everyone else was, and is, seen as less competent and therefore inferior. This superiority allowed them access to what is now called “white privilege.” According to the Washington Post, white privilege is “the level of societal advantage that comes with being seen as the norm in America, automatically conferred irrespective of wealth, gender or other factors. . . . it’s something you would barely notice unless it were suddenly taken away — or unless it had never applied to you in the first place” (Emba, 2016). This privilege reaffirms the structure that allows non-whites to be hindered and looked down upon by the whites and other members of their own society who have internalized the racist beliefs. Since there is this line of division within the non-white races, the oppressors, the whites in this situation, can maintain their superiority. Many people have tried to combat racial arguments by saying that we live in a post-racial society. It is true that the “most overt forms of racial discrimination have been outlawed, but racial inequalities pervade every institutional setting” (Omi & Winant, 2). These settings include, but are not limited to, the government, the workplace and schools around the nation which utilize racial profiling and tracking to ensure people of color are disadvantaged. Another argument used against race is claiming to be colorblind. However, ignoring race does not make the construct or the inequalities that go along with it disappear. Thandeka Chapman (2013) says, “[c]olorblindness is a false premise because the conscious avoidance of the topic of race, and the unconscious actions based on race, contradicts the notion of racial blindness” (p.613). Race is a construct that one cannot really separate themselves from due to the way it took root in history and branched into present day. Therefore, teachers must embed the uplifting of, what society views as, the “inferior” races

into their pedagogical practices, so that the students can feel empowered to resist conforming to societal pressures.

Another major hierarchy within the United States is social class, which is closely related to race due to monetary inheritances that were limited in the past. According to Ritzer, there are four defined levels of class within the United States: the upper class also known as the top one-percent of society which includes large scale entrepreneurs and investors, the middle class which includes a variety of professionals such as teachers and firefighters, the working class which includes service workers, and the lower class which includes part-time workers and the unemployed (Ritzer, 2017, p. 204). People who are near the top of this system often have a lot of power. This is very evident within large corporations and school boards. The CEO's of the larger corporations are usually apart of the top one percent and make the decisions that impact those near the bottom who are employed by the corporation. Given this wealth imbalance, the people near the bottom are often believe that they must comply to the ideals of those at the top to maintain their source of income to survive. The hierarchy has blindsided them leaving them to feel powerless and trapped in a cycle that leaves them in their current tier.

Furthermore, social class often influences the area that one lives in and the resources available in that area. Kraus and Park note that,

Those at higher levels of social class contend with environments of, on average, more abundant economic resources, alongside socialization into influential networks, clubs, and business opportunities that build their social and cultural capital. In contrast, being at a lower level of the social class hierarchy exposes people more often to reduced resources, fewer connections with powerful groups, and increased contention with social

and environmental threats (e.g., classism and discrimination, food insecurity, underemployment, reduced health coverage) (Kraus & Park, 2017, p.55).

This hierarchy is rooted in access and the issues that come along with access can be detrimental to those who are not benefiting from it. It is easy to tell someone to work hard, so that they can achieve better, but Kraus and Park emphasize how even still there will be a gap (Kraus & Park, 2017, 55-57). People who are in the lower class will potentially never be able to compete with their upper-class counterparts who have received inheritances. This will add to the mental strain of constantly feeling like one is less than because of their financial status, which like race is not in one's control due to systematic measures that force movement between tiers to be rare. Since there is no present way to close the gap, teachers must educate deeply about it and the inequalities that cause it. Then, they can encourage the students to question its existence, so they can fight for a change to create a more equal society.

What is Pedagogy?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary pedagogy is defined as “the art, occupation, or practice of teaching...” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, n.d). The word comes from Greek origins that refer to an attendant leading a boy to school, which makes the usage slightly controversial in America given that we now promote equal gendered education. (Mortimore, 1999, p.1). Given this controversy, it is common to hear pedagogy referred to as the science of teaching or the art of teaching depending on the context. Pedagogy is composed of both curriculum and methodology used to effectively teach the curriculum. However, the word itself usually refers to the latter since the former is not usually decided by those leading the instructions. There are many things that influence pedagogy, but one of the most obvious is that of the education system which outlines what the teacher must do. This system often measures

teachers based off the performance of their students, which can be problematic because often what is being evaluated may not be reasonable depending on the students that make up the class being taught. The system can also vary from state to state, which can often make the evaluations unequal because the pedagogies are expected to remain the same despite location.

Current Pedagogies

In our current society, the usage of effective pedagogy is rare due to system standards that teachers are held to. These standards are developed by people near the top of the hierarchal ladder who have often times never stepped into a classroom since they themselves were students. For example, the Common Core State Standards, which was launched in 2009, were developed by governors and state commissioners of education with some teacher involvement for feedback on the process (Development Process, n.d.). The government website emphasized the consultation with “experts” on the content. However according to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking being an expert in an area of content does not mean that you are fit to teach the content, which is where another major gap forms (Bransford et al., 2004, p.49). The creation of the gap through usage of experts is intentional to keep the teachers/instructors of the content from questioning its value. However, it is this questioning of the content’s value by teachers that will allow for students to be able to apply the knowledge in ways that will benefit them to fight for reform.

Since the people making these decisions are at the top of the hierarchical chains they get to decide what is considered worthy knowledge to be taught, and they can alter it to fit their beliefs if they see fit. An example of the alteration can be found in history textbooks created to fit some of the state standards, which minimize the racial and class issues of the past. NPR did a study of the AP US History Textbooks in 2015 noting that the books omit the positive, but

includes things like the persecution of minorities (Kamenetz, 2015). If teachers do not conform to these ways of instruction, not only will they be penalized, but the students as well because if they do not perform well on the AP testing it hinders them from the small chance they have at being equal to their “superior” peers. By intentionally presenting minority groups information that clashes with their pre-existing knowledge that is rooted in their daily actions, the top one-percent damages the opportunities that they have to prosper and try to corrupt their minds by invalidating their experiences. So, the students are too busy fighting identity crises to fight the system that forced these crises to happen.

Given the potential danger of having students not be seen as equal, teachers are forced to implement strategies for learning instead of understanding. Some of the learning strategies include but are not limited to “...direct instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, individualized instruction, computer-assisted learning, behavior modification, the use of student contracts, media-assisted instruction, scientific inquiry, lecture/discussion, tutoring by specialists or volunteers, and even the use of problem-solving units common in progressive education” (Haberman, 1991, 290). These strategies become a hinderance for the students because they are not learning to grasp the information on their own. It is all handed to them in the form of one of these methods, which makes them constantly dependent upon someone and the dependence is not useful during standardized tests when one has to rely on their own understanding of the material and apply it to various situations. The dependence becomes embedded into their lives and they then become dependent upon the “superiors” for survival. Also in encouraging the memorization of information deep analysis is often discouraged, which could have allowed room for the complete story to be developed. This is especially useful in history and science, but can also be applied to math and the reading. It puts a pause on the students thinking and does not acknowledge their interpretations of the material. A tool that would have allowed them to

question society is intentionally stripped to keep them blind to the numerous oppressors and their origins.

Since there is often no room for student input in materials, teachers may often deal with the issue of disconnect and struggle to get the majority of the class engaged. Common Core does not acknowledge the current outside influences of the student because it is focused on the “college and career expectations” that society has given to the student for the future, which for the numerous minority students around the country does not include being a CEO (Development Process, n.d.). In essence, their futures are being decided for them at an earlier age. A major example of this decision can be seen in the school to prison pipeline. The standards designed by the “experts” do not acknowledge whether the child has eaten, so it may be difficult for them to perform on the given day, nor does it acknowledge whether the questions are culturally relevant to the child. It uses a “colorblind” and “class blind” approach and assumes that everyone is on an equal level in every area of life, while secretly upholding an agenda that will minimize the motivation of those who have the potential to resist. This is where the teaching pedagogy of the current day fails because it must take these assumptions and while teaching the students the factual content, it must also teach them the expected cultural knowledge that is embedded within. This is even more difficult when one considers the time constraints of the school year which typically lasts between 175 to 180 days depending on the county (Hull & Newport, 2011).

More Effective Pedagogies

Despite all the issues going wrong with current pedagogies there are a couple of things that can be done within the classroom that will benefit both the student and the teacher. The teacher can acknowledge the stereotype threats present in the environment, encourage metacognition and transfer, and create an environment that is learner-centered.

Before true learning can begin teachers must acknowledge the often-invisible oppressors that impact student learning. One of these oppressors is known as stereotype threat. Claude Steele defines stereotype threat as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999). Students who are lower in the racial and class hierarchies have labels placed upon them before they can even determine their own fate within the classroom. These labels have been proven to affect their performance within the classroom. Steele notes that “according to the theory, black students internalize negative stereotypes as performance anxiety and low expectations for achievement, which they then fulfill” (Steele, 1999). This also showed true for socioeconomic status. The students froze out of fear of conforming to a label that society had placed upon them. When the threat was acknowledged, and students were told to simply do their best, they performed just as well as their higher hierarchal counterparts. So, if teachers will make these kind acknowledgements regularly, assuming that every other level of understanding about the content has been met, the student may be more likely to perform at level or above standards. Once the students begin to have these conversations openly and realize that they are just as capable of performing well, they have potential to be motivated to fight for reform so that society will view them as equals. They can also begin having these conversations with others because, as mentioned earlier, Freire emphasizes the importance of unity among the oppressed before revolutions for change can be effective (Freire, 1972).

Teachers must also promote student behavior of metacognition and transfer. A huge issue with current pedagogy is that it promotes dependence on the teacher, technology, or classroom community, which in the long run promotes dependence on the oppressor. Students are not taught how to think for themselves or be able to apply the information to various situations beyond the classroom. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking define metacognition as “people’s

abilities to predict their performances on various tasks and to monitor their current levels of mastery and understanding” (Bransford et al., 2004, p 12). Simply put, it is being able to comprehend how well one is doing in a given area without receiving a grade. In order to do so, teachers must encourage students to partake in self-assessments that force them to take control of their own learning, which when applied to outside the classroom will allow them to take control of their own lives. Examples of this may be encouraging students to complete the guided reading questions at the end of a chapter without referring to the text. While the teacher may not collect this for a grade the student is able to see what they didn’t understand. The student will then cultivate study habits that will allow them to effectively teach themselves the material. Also by recognizing their limits, the student will be better able to formulate questions that could better guide the lesson. Metacognition also influences transfer. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking define transfer as “the [student’s ability] to apply what was learned in new situations and to learn related information more quickly” (Bransford et al., 2004, p 17). If a teacher can help the student to track what they do and don’t know, they will be better able to track their limitations within problem solving. The student will also be able to understand the newer concepts better because they will have a better grasp on the intricate details of the piece prior. Now while most of this work seems to fall on the student, it is the teacher’s job to design assignments where students will have to use these tools. An example of an assignment may be putting historical events in a logical order based off the bigger picture or adding an extra step to a math word problem that might involve using something learned prior. Outside of the classroom, the knowledge of knowing limits and applying information will allow the student to know when to get assistance from another member of the oppressed group to get assistance with fighting for freedom and apply the things learned from that member to another situation if it occurs again. This knowledge

will also cut some of the ties of reliance on the oppressor, and possibly allow for restructuring of the numerous existing hierarchies.

The two previous pedagogical practices have one large thing in common; they are learner-centered. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking defines a learner-centered environment as “environments that pay careful attention to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting” (Bransford et al., 2004, p 134). While it is important to acknowledge stereotype threat and promote metacognitive and transfer behaviors in students, if the student is not the focus in the classroom, learning cannot truly happen. Teachers must allow students the space to express themselves and bring their misconceptions in to be addressed. For the students to express themselves, there must be open and honest communication between them and the teacher. This means that the teacher has to explain the strategically placed cultural barriers that may be preventing the child from understanding the required content by relating it to something the student understands or allowing the student to make those connections and correcting them if necessary. To correct students, teachers and parents must be willing to give them constant feedback. It is not enough to simply place a grade on an assignment or discipline the child for their “wrong-doing.” Teachers and parents must explain why the student received the grade or the discipline in plain terms and offer room for correction, so that they can learn from their mistakes. Through correction, the student also learns how to properly engage with society because they have had people lining them up for success that may have otherwise been withheld due to their ascribed status.

Although the teacher must still incorporate the standards within the classroom, they must do it in a way that the students can relate and in a way where they are being honest about all sides of the story, so that the students are not ignorant of the truth being withheld by the oppressor. This means encouraging diversity within race and social class to show that everyone

has a role to play, instead of only talking about who society views as “important.” Teachers can do this by giving students an overview of weekly content and challenging them to go home and find connections and generate questions so that they can fill in the gaps that might otherwise go unnoticed due to the original design. One must not forget to acknowledge that “many teachers face the cumbersome challenges of managing student behavior and creating a classroom environment conducive to learning, which is often seen as a balance of concern” (Farinde-Wu et al, 2017, 280). The task, although “cumbersome,” is not impossible. Farinde-Wu et al. discuss the importance of implementing RACCE into teaching: “respect, act immediately, communicate, celebrate, and encourage students” (Farinde-Wu et al, 2017, 280). By using RACCE a learner-centered environment is created that promotes success regardless of a student’s location on the hierarchal ladder. Also, since each aspect of RACCE encourages cultural relativism, the students are more likely to take pride in their own identities and be inspired to help others see the important role they play in society beyond what the current structure says which will allow for the unity needed to progress and fight for reform.

A Few Things to Consider

Oppression, inequality, and discrimination make up the foundation of the United States. Even before the foundation of the colonies, people were fighting to be treated as equal, and the battle is far from over. However, with the help of educators within the classroom using newer pedagogies, future generations will become empowered and learn that they matter too. By acknowledging the stereotype threats present in the environment, encouraging metacognition and transfer, and creating an environment that is learner-centered, United States citizens that are bound by the laws of Common Core State Standards and rank lower on the numerous hierarchal ladders will become empowered life-long learners who are ready to fight for reformation of the current structure of society. Since they will have learned and been impacted by these pedagogies

they themselves will be more well-rounded. The labels that society has placed on them, while they still exist, will be likely not to be as controlling. If the methods are repeated for generations, the labels may only be talked about in reference to history and eventually better material and standards will be created that make it slightly easier to promote learning and equality in the same realm. Lastly, since the learning never ends due to the promotion of metacognition and transfer, the constant ability to analyze will allow people to begin to find flaws within whatever new hierarchies develop and tear them down along the way. One must acknowledge that this change will not occur over night because the system was designed in a way that will force people to adapt and conform to the ways of those at the top, but if implemented nationwide for numerous years the results will be exceptional.

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