



OPEN WORDS: ACCESS AND ENGLISH STUDIES
Vol. 9, No. 2 (March 2016). DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2016.9.2.01
ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online)
<https://wac.colostate.edu/openwords/>

Editor's Introduction: The Need for Critical Pedagogy

William Thelin
The University of Akron

It is typical in journal introductions for the editors to find commonality among the articles they have placed together in any given volume—a thread that unites what otherwise might appear to be disparate issues in our field. I must confess that I struggled to uncover a theme among the four articles in this issue. The title for this introduction has changed numerous times, and I deleted a previous draft called “Our Outsides Are Inside” in its entirety, something I rarely do, as I thought my words about our differing professional identities seemed too trite. Every attempt felt forced. One particular thread I abandoned covered three of the articles fairly well but did not fit the fourth one unless I really twisted what the author meant. The focus of another attempt I made could have applied to just about any group of articles for any journal, so I stopped writing so as not to be too generic.

So I asked myself, “Why adhere to convention?” *Open Words* in many respects has disregarded convention in some of the articles we have published. At its inception, we did not want to be just another journal. We felt a need for the instructors of open-admissions students and other marginalized populations to have a voice in academia. *Open Words* would be the forum for discussions that might be deemed unpopular in some corners, maybe not theoretical enough for some or perhaps catering to the needs of practitioners over those of professors. We wanted an attitude. I think over ten years, we have achieved that. I decided, then, to write about an issue that has bothered me for years concerning critical pedagogy and open-admissions students, an issue that the four articles made me think about even if the direct connection is weak. I do not want to ignore the particulars of the articles you will read in these pages, but I felt like setting a tone that, ultimately, will unite what you read in ways better than my previous feeble attempts.

Too often, critical pedagogy has been mischaracterized as the imposition of a political ideology onto students. I will not review the literature here, as I am more interested in the lore that has surfaced over the years—the seemingly common sense concerns instructors introduce when the subject is discussed, whether in hallways or conference panels or graduate seminars. Instructors will state that students need to

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).

learn the basics of writing first before we start having them write on political topics. Instructors also feel they are in the classroom to teach writing, not to preach about politics. Further, instructors worry that exposing students to the overwhelming obstacles in front of them, those obstacles that reveal themselves in political discussions concerning ideology and economics, will discourage the students from learning to write and achieving their goals. Yes, I have heard these complaints over and over again. Let me assert here, then, that critical pedagogy is not about forcing politics on students. It is not pro and con debates on current social issues. It is not about criticizing conservatives and Republicans. Rather, critical pedagogy authorizes students to explore the ideologies surrounding them, especially as those ideologies influence, often unknowingly, decisions they make and the culture around them. It embeds the personal into the social. It helps students examine and re-examine the ordinary in society, sometimes to show just how extraordinary it is. But the teaching is handled with an ethic of care, one that sees students as knowledge-makers, not as passive recipients of teaching.

I want to differentiate here between political recognition and political imposition. The former is simply unveiling the ideology underlying discourses our students enter into, merging the personal with the social, ethnic, and economic culture surrounding them. The latter should be avoided and is not part of critical pedagogy. I admit that confusion can occur when making assignments and responding to student papers, especially if the instructor is young and enthusiastic. Lines obviously have been crossed when instructors try to help students wrestle with perspectives with which they are not familiar. But such negative intervention happens in many reading and writing classes. Asking for more detail in a personal narrative, for example, can lead the student to adding descriptions or scenes that have been fabricated, producing a false discourse to please the teacher. I need not mention the many students who simply copy an instructor's interpretation in papers written for literature classes. Our well-intentioned interventions sometimes put our students in difficult positions. That's not unique to critical pedagogy. And it is not unique to at-risk students, either.

Many critics of critical pedagogy question some of the classroom practices associated with it. In critical pedagogy, students should be the co-creators of assignments. The instructor's authority should be shared responsibly with students, whether it be for producing grading contracts, legitimizing nonstandard dialects, or allowing for true student leadership in dialogues. The students' interests and concerns should be frontloaded and the instructor's backloaded (not ignored, as some critics claim). Many of these practices are not dissimilar to calls in the early years of our field for "student-centered curriculum," but too many of those attempts began and ended with sitting in a circle, letting students write about personal experiences, and workshopping papers. Critical pedagogues believe students need to gain control of their education in more demanding ways. These methods produce the very empowerment so many instructors talk about.

Yet, lore tells us that far too many students are not ready for that type of responsibility, that they will sabotage their own education. I cannot recall how many instructors have told me that these ideas are not practical for contemporary students, that they are too immature and need to learn self-discipline before they earn this type of responsibility. My response is "When?" When will this maturity magically occur if they are never given the opportunity to experiment with responsibility? An instructor is not relinquishing power, nor is she or he freeing students to do what they want. Rather, a critical pedagogue demands more of students in this pedagogy. Will students try to undermine the classroom? They sometimes will. But again, that happens to differing extents in just about every classroom. Instructors always complain about students not following instructions, having attendance problems, missing deadlines, not listening in class, being unprepared (especially when reading is required), or resisting learning. Critical pedagogy does not cure these problems for students. But when critical pedagogues invest students in the classroom, the students do have more incentive to improve studenting habits.

Graduate students tell me that some professors urge them not to adopt a critical pedagogy. The reasons vary, but I will focus here on two that have been repeated to me during my stay at my current institution. Apparently, lore informs our field that critical pedagogy is masculinist. I have a difficult time understanding this, as the typical view of the professor lecturing to students and they imbibing on his or her wisdom is a masculinist conception of teaching. The practices I outlined above are more in keeping with a feminist approach to the classroom. I would hope that those labeling critical pedagogy as masculinist are not associating politics with men and the personal or familial with women. Such gender stereotypes would offend me. Such separations of the personal from the political have been critiqued thoroughly in feminist literature. When I have asked for clarification from graduate students, the responses I have received back surprised me. Apparently, graduate students in my department have been told that young women lack the cultural capital to enact a critical pedagogy. I have never heard such nonsense, but it has gone unchallenged, finding its way into some conference presentations I have heard. Such is the way of lore.

Where would I begin to unravel the sexist notions behind such critiques? Authority in the classroom is determined by presence. Yes, such matters as age, garb, height, race, demeanor, and appearance impact how students might perceive an instructor. Certainly, women in our society are judged more by their looks than men, and I am not arguing here that female graduate students do not contend with additional challenges due to the complications that the prevalent misogyny and sexism in our country introduce into the classroom. But graduate students, whether male, female, or transgender, face the imposter syndrome, especially the first time that they teach. They fear that their lack of rhetorical knowledge regarding writing and their inexperience in leading a classroom might be exposed, subjecting them to ridicule. I ask, why pretend to knowledge and experience that they do not have? Rather, why not share authority

right away, letting students choose collective topics to write about, making their collective problems with and critiques of society topics of classroom discourse, and exploring with them the nuances of rhetoric and productive ways to complete writing tasks? I call this the co-creation of knowledge in a non-hierarchical pedagogy. As with all pedagogies, problems occur in implementing it. Things do not always go as planned. In a volume my co-editor John Tassoni and I edited, we referred to this as “blundering” when applied to critical pedagogy. We argued that much can be gained through examining the forces that impact teaching when mistakes unfold. Perhaps they are not even mistakes but different ways of learning. In any case, incidents that impede student learning happen in any pedagogy. The risk that a student might challenge the authority of a young woman new to teaching is the same whether she is teaching traditionally or radically. The only difference is that in a critical pedagogy, the graduate student is being honest. The imposter syndrome fades when an instructor shares the power in the classroom. Hell, she and the students could even make the topic of authority an assignment if it becomes an issue worthy of their study.

Perhaps most unnerving for me—and most relevant to this journal—is the mindset that critical pedagogy harms working-class and otherwise at-risk student populations, that it is over their heads and discourages them from writing. From the discourse I have heard, some of it very prevalent on the WPA-L listserv, I gather that lore suggests that these student populations should engage in the writing of narratives to the exclusion of civic-minded discourses, that the substance of their writing should go unchallenged in deference to pragmatic concerns of presentation and order. Some truth exists in the belief that working-class students need to have their experiences validated in what is otherwise a very strange environment for them of academia. Yet, I see this differently. Education has not served the interests of marginalized populations. We know through studies that K-12 curriculum and delivery leave many at-risk students unprepared for college. Perhaps writing narratives that center on lessons they’ve learned or other matters does comfort these students in their transition to college. But is comfort our goal? It seems to me we further their lack of preparedness by not merging personal concerns with societal and cultural concerns—the type of concerns on which their other general education courses will focus. Further, I cannot see a reason to give students more of the same type of teaching that has marginalized them. Yes, they might not have written personal experience essays before. Perhaps that is different for them. But through unilateral curriculum and syllabi, we domesticate them, not educate them. They do not have a chance to invest themselves in their education.

I have found that critical pedagogy is crucial for the at-risk student populations we teach. I have experimented with critical pedagogy with Honors students and graduate students. They tend to already be invested in their learning, so some of the practices are unnecessary. At-risk populations are not invested. They come to college campuses hoping to improve their life chances. Often, their goals are fuzzy. We do

them little good if we do not combine their individual hopes for success with societal critique. We have a chance to empower their learning if we grant them authority to make decisions and to see what helps them learn and what hinders it. We cannot solve all of the problems they have. These students work too much. Some of them indulge in unhealthy lifestyles to mediate the misery they experience in a culture that deprives them of opportunities. Some have to take care of children or elderly relatives. Most do not like school. But we have a chance to reach them if we start doing education differently.

A critical pedagogue must be an informed pedagogue. As I think about this issue, I see so much in this issue of *Open Words* that might facilitate understandings that would go into a critical pedagogy. In an engaging collaboration, Paul Butler and his graduate students look into the ways knowledge is created in Composition Studies, using and critiquing Stephen North's classifications to reach important understandings about tensions within the field (our editorial work with this article prompted me again to think of North's conception of "lore," which inspired my use of it in this introduction). Sherrie Gradin's "Can You See Me Now? Rural Queer Archives and a Call to Action" blends her personal experience and observations with the queer scholarship in composition, focusing on the visibility/invisibility of queer discourse, especially in rural settings. Rebecca Hallman's contribution to this issue examines writing-center terminology and its impact on the mission and identity of the writing center. Finally, Cristina Migliaccio's article on translanguaging examines the writing environments working-class students encounter in school, looking for ways that digital environments can enable critical discourse for this population. In all, these authors extend conversations in the field, enriching our perspectives and giving critical pedagogues some things to ponder.

This introduction would not be complete if I did not bid farewell for John and I to our readership. After ten years at the helm, we felt *Open Words* would be strengthened with new leadership. We will be turning over control to a new editorial team, starting with the next issue. John and I will still be involved with *Open Words* in some capacity, probably as editorial board members, but our goal is to ensure the vibrancy of the project, which will best be served with fresh eyes to guide it. John and I have enjoyed our time as co-editors. We hope we have impacted the professional conversation about the teaching of at-risk students.

—William Thelin

Theilin

Open Words: Access and English Studies is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal, published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs).

ISSN: 2690-3911 (Print) 2690-392X (Online).