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This essay will discuss one teacher's lived experiences in attempting to define, initiate, refine, and maintain a degree of critical pedagogy in his classes and, in effect, to reconceptualize traditional classroom practice within the structure of a technological institution whose major purpose historically has been and continues to be career preparation. Three areas will be covered in chronological order. First, I want to discuss some of my initial attempts at reconceptualizing classroom practice and, secondly, describe the results of those initial attempts and the students' reactions to them. Thirdly, I will discuss how I experimentally revised my attempts by using dialogue journals as an additional resource, providing a portrait of the ways in which this process is a developmental one.

Initial Attempts at Reconceptualizing Classroom Pedagogy

My first attempts in 1985 at developing a reconceptualized practice were at best haphazard. Having few colleagues with whom I could discuss reconceptualized pedagogy, and at the time only a few volumes discussing it, even my best accomplishments were often unplanned. It was relatively easy to return to a "banking" (Freire, 1971) or autocratic type of pedagogy that manipulates students; if the students did not understand or comprehend they were just stupid and incapable of understanding. During that Fall 1985 semester, I did revert to a type of banking lecture periodically, although I was tempted to pursue this pedagogy much more than I did. I recognized that the students with whom I came in contact would find all the material that we discussed difficult, foreign, and probably "too theoretical." The students were assigned several readings: Maxine Greene's *Landscapes of Learning*, Giroux, Penna and Pinar's *Curriculum and Instruction*, and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, texts I felt would enable a liberating dialogue. It was not quite that easy. The students came back after reading the first few assignments dazed, commenting that "the language was too difficult" or "I had to use a dictionary and then the words weren't even in the dictionary." The language of philosophy and critique is far removed from the students' everyday language, of course, but it is also removed from their perception of academic language. Students in a technologically-oriented university are generally most comfortable with the language of science, technology, and instrumentalism; they feel threatened when they begin a class that dwells in the language of philosophy and critique. They cannot use the learned and alienating language they have become accustomed to in academic settings and they have been constantly

reminded that it is not correct to use their everyday language in academic settings. It became clear in that first cold Wisconsin fall in 1985 how the class could proceed. The material used in the class and the students' difficulty with the readings would become the basis for the dialogue.

The first step was to begin to dialogue in a common language, a language that was not alienating and, above all, a language not of the teacher, but the language in which students perceive and discuss their everyday lives.

Secondly, the students would continue to read the texts, but then we would come to class and basically reread the texts together. We didn't get through all the material that semester, but I do believe they understood the material we worked on as a community of readers. As the semester unfolded, questions arose about the texts and I or other students would answer the questions. After we felt that we had a basic understanding of the material, the students and I attempted to discuss it, but problems continued. Six weeks into the semester students were still afraid to respond; fear and a perceived lack of knowledge were presenting resistance to discussion. We made that resistance a topic of discussion in class. The students began to tell their stories about classroom life, not only at the graduate level but at the undergraduate and high school level as well, stories of pain and dehumanization. They discussed the fact that a majority of their educational experiences were ones in which silence, obedience, and "playing the game" were encouraged, and self-expression, meaning, and discussion were for the most part discouraged. I believe at eight weeks into the semester, as we discussed their lived experiences, that they were beginning to understand their silence and resistance to dialogue.

The students began to ask about other sources for reading and together we chose, during that semester of 1985, some additional reading material for the course. This additional material was not on the original course outline, but the students and I decided that they were crucial for understanding educational experience. Readings in addition to the texts were pursued in feminist analysis of curriculum (Pinar & Miller, 1982), Marxist analysis of schooling (Sharp, 1980), curriculum theory (Tyler, 1949; and Molnar & Zahorik, 1977), autobiographical work (Pinar & Grumet, 1976), and textual analysis (Reynolds, 1988). The students worked on the difficult language in order to master it. As our discussion grew and developed that semester, the students became the teacher and I became the student, especially at times when they were describing classroom experience in particular fields. One additional problem I found to be true for each semester I taught the curriculum course, 1985-1988, was that just as the students were beginning to understand and develop their critical abilities, the course would come to an end. This matter of the semester schedule is also an area for transformative alternatives.

Student Reactions to Reconceptualized Pedagogy

The first two years of developing reconceptualized pedagogy within my classrom (1985-1986) were certainly years of struggle, but they were not without their reward. Student reactions reveal both the struggle and the reward. There were basically three types of student reactions exhibited toward this pedagogy, the same reactions reported both in personal talks and in written form (Freire & Shor, 1987; Shor, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c) by several who have attempted to institute critical pedagogy in their classrooms.

The first type of reaction is a very positive one. The students think that this type of education is the best thing they have experienced in their lives in schools. Some comments that were written (anonymously) at the end of the course reflect this:

1. *I couldn't have taken a better "first" graduate course. It seems so often in life one has to hold back opinions, thoughts, comments, etc. . . . in order to learn, because the "teacher knows best," "boss knows best" idea is so prevalent. It's really a revelation to become aware that there are others who know that other individuals can have relevant pertinent ideas on a subject that may differ from one's own view. It's great to be able to agree/disagree and have it be o.k. versus "sit down, shut up, and just do it". . . . I never dreamed that taking a curriculum course would be taking a course in living, or that it would be an evaluation of the self versus teaching, and an ongoing continuous evaluative position.*

2. *I came into this class with visions of behavioral objectives dancing in my head. . . . This course has caused me to reevaluate my teaching. I have spent much time the last 16 weeks wondering about myself and my philosophy. . . . The class is real.*

3. *This has been the best course I have ever taken, all of us looked forward to it a great deal. We were treated as individuals and able to "dialogue" as soon as we got a base of knowledge which I feel is very important.*

These student comments are illustrative of responding with a certain attitude. The students are also likely, as Shor states and I experienced, to inform relatives and friends of the information and the class. In some cases, they even brought those friends and relatives to the class. This, of course, is the type of response we all hope this reconceptualized pedagogy will engender.

The second type of student response, somewhat less enthusiastic, seems to come from students described by Freire and Shor in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* as "students who showed not much participation and not much resistance, but they would come back for another semester or two, to be around an atmosphere that appealed to them" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 25). These students, to an extent, appeared to withdraw after the first few class sessions in this reconceptualized pedagogy. They were unresponsive in class, did not talk, and I thought were either not understanding what was transpiring or choosing not to participate or both. Their comments were interesting, but much more brief:

1. *Much of this theory cannot be applied to the public schools.*

2. *Too much information.*

3. *The content was pretty heavy.*

4. *I found most of the readings difficult and slow reading.*

5. *I thought that this was a curriculum course.*

These students I found to be the most problematic. I continually sought through the dialogue and through personal discussions to reach them. This characteristic problematic student reaction will be dealt with in the third section of this essay.

The last group Shor describes very adequately:

> *Still others were actively hostile, challenging me in ways to stop the critical thrust of the class. They were committed to tradition and saw the class as a threat to their established values. (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 25)*

There were students who were actively hostile to what was happening in my classes; most were white males and all were older than I. These students saw my class as a threat to their established values (Freire & Shor, 1987). One man, in particular, a retired military officer, was openly hostile and aggressive to the ideas read, presented, and discussed. He began to challenge my personal lifestyle, criticizing the fact that I lived in a house and owned an automobile; in other words, that I had a bourgeois lifestyle and yet I could discuss the oppressed and oppression. Since he was, in one particular class during the 1986 Fall semester, the only actively hostile student, and a large number of students were not rejecting the reconceptualized pedagogy, I continued the critical direction of the class.

A male student in another class in the Spring of 1986 fired off a more interesting criticism. I simply dismissed it at the time, but now that I have reflected on it, it seems to be one of the most important comments made.

> *What are you trying to do? It seems like you are trying to make the class a sewing circle. Are you doing this to discuss criticism and alternatives to the nation's schools? . . . Why do we discuss all this personal crap?*

The allusion to the sewing circle is in actuality quite astute. The student, I believe, meant this comment in the most sexist and negative way possible. Implicit in the comment, I am sure, was the fact that the student perceived the class to be like a "bunch of women sitting around talking and wasting time."

It appears that in his criticism the student has pointed out a very crucial aspect of a reconceptualized classroom practice. It seems that these dialogically-oriented classrooms where lived experiences are shared and discussed in their relationship to education and society begin to break down the walls of patriarchal authority, which is at its height in a technological and positivistically-oriented university. There are several interesting discussions of feminist pedagogy in a text entitled, *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching* (1985) by Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges. In this reconceptualized pedagogy, we begin to deal with people as subjects, not as objects. It appears that the "feminization of pedagogy" is inextricably linked to the reconceptualization of curriculum and educational theory, as well as classroom practice. We should not only look to texts on critical, emancipatory pedagogy, but at work which focuses on gender questions as well. Our attention should focus on such women writers as Martusewicz (1985), Miller (1980), and others. At this historical juncture such work is very helpful in delegitimizing positivistic educational theory and practice.

These three types of reactions that students have to dialogical, reconceptualized classrooms are very similar to the reactions reported by those with whom I have talked and corresponded and the texts I have read wherein writers share their experiences. I have found another interesting phenomenon that occurs with this type of pedagogy. In the case of my particular classes, women students and foreign students for the most part have positive reactions to the classes. The white American male tends to either sit quietly or get hostile to the teacher and the class. It may well be that the students who react very positively to a "reconceptualized pedagogy" are the students who have experienced oppression firsthand. It must be remembered, however, that white working men also have direct firsthand experience with oppression. They are simply more mediated and obscured by their different place in the social framework. This whole subject of the reaction of students to the implementation of an alternative pedagogy needs to be studied in much greater depth and detail.

Revised Experimental Attempts at Reconceptualized Pedagogy

After two years of trying to institute this alternative pedagogy in my classes, in 1987 I came across two sources that have helped me immeasurably. Palo Freire and Ira Shor's *Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987) helped me to realize that others are also trying to create liberating education in their classroom. It is confirming to know that those who are attempting this form of pedagogy are also experiencing some of the same frustrations and successes I have experienced. It seems that many times we are working in isolation, but networks are certainly possible. I have now begun to use this text in my graduate education courses.

The second major assistance I found was an article by John Albertini and Bonnie Meath-Lang entitled, "An Analysis of Student-Teacher Exchanges in Dialogue Journal Writing" (1987) in the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. There, I found a type of solution to the second group of students, those students who do not respond to dialogue in the classroom. As part of my revised experimental attempts at reconceptualized pedagogy, these students are presented the opportunity to respond confidentially through a dialogue journal. All students are encouraged to write reactions to either the class discussions or the articles and books read for class. In a nongraded journal, they write 50-100 words or more for each day of class, and I collect them every three weeks to dialogue with them. It is amazing how closely the pattern of "student language functions" and "teacher language functions" (Albertini & Meath-Lang, 1987, see pages 161-164) parallels those explicated by the authors. Students begin by expressing confusion and next move to asking questions. After that, their comments become more personal so that they are praising and joking. Then they move through a fourth phase, where they are actually philosophizing about education and the issues discussed in class. The students who readily dialogue in class move through the stages very quickly. The students who are usually silent, however, come alive in the journal. Their comments generally describe the fact that even though they are not "talking," they are still seriously thinking about the dialogue in class. The journals have provided me an opportunity to both reach and understand these students who are silent. They have become the major facet of my revised experimental attempts at reconceptualized pedagogy. The students also react very favorably to the journals, illustrated by comments written on anonymous course evaluations:

1. *The journal was a really great idea.*

2. *The journal gave me a chance to think more about the ideas we talked about in class.*

3. *Thanks for using the journal. At first, I thought . . . oh, no! But I grew to really like it. Wow!*

These entries demonstrate that the journal is a viable tool for use in reconceptualized classrooms. It provides an additional way to reflect with students regularly on the slow-burning questions raised in a dialogical classroom.

With these two additional avenues for class discussion and participation, the students and I continue in my classes to work together to create a more dialogical, emancipatory classroom. These two additional sources have contributed a great deal to the progress of a critical education, but there is still much work to be done. We must talk about the possibilities for alternative forms of emancipatory pedagogy at every opportunity. Not only must we talk, but we should also dialogue with practitioners and our students to allow their voices to be heard as well.

It is this reconceptualized pedagogy and classroom practice we must begin to dialogue about. It becomes our language of possibility. In these days of "quick-fix" solutions to complex and crucial educational problems, let us begin to discuss far reaching and fundamental changes for and with the people we educate. It may well be time to make education meaningful and to make that experience the "best years of our lives."

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