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Literacy and Hegemony: Critical Pedagogy Vis-à-vis Contending Paradigms

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Critical pedagogy has become commonplace in contemporary academe. Despite its prominence, the pedagogy continues to face relentless attacks: some scholars have dismissed the pedagogy as essentialist, populist, and unpatriotic, among other labels. The fact of the matter is that these critiques are driven by ideologically masked epistemologies. By adopting a dialectic approach, the focus of this article is to demonstrate that all approaches to literacy are political and that these attacks are anchored in paradigms antithetical to the progressive agenda of critical pedagogy.

The groundbreaking work on critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire, especially through his work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has influenced many scholars and educators across the globe. Intriguingly, the pedagogy not only transcends geographical boundaries but also academic disciplines. Despite this growing influence, the paradigm continues to stoke contention in academe. According to Fischman and McLaren (2005), the pedagogy "has produced one of the most dynamic and controversial educational schools of thought of the past 30 years" (p. 426). With this undisputable popularity, one may be tempted to conclude a paradigm shift has taken place and that traditional pedagogies have finally given way to the more progressive critical pedagogy. Although there is evidently a broad consensus among educators and social critics that traditional pedagogies which de-politicize literacy are unacceptable, contention still exists between traditional and critical pedagogies, the reason why scholars still find it necessary to defend the paradigm (Giroux, 2006; Schrucker, 2006; Thelin, 2005). Using a dialectic approach, defined by Stephen North (1987) as the "seeking of knowledge via the deliberate confrontation of opposing points of view" (p. 60), the purpose of this paper is to analyze the various approaches to literacy in order to not only illustrate the hegemonic nature of literacy but also demonstrate that criticism against critical pedagogy is politically situated, that polemics that characterize discourse on literacy represent divergent ideological worldviews and entrenched political agendas.

What is Literacy?

Literacy is a loaded concept. Contending approaches to literacy exist since there is no one standard or universal definition of literacy; what constitutes literacy varies from culture to culture—differences are dictated by the socio-economic and political structure of any given society. Furthermore, and most importantly, any definition of literacy is ideologically conceived. As Gee (1990) puts it, every approach to literacy, consciously or unconsciously, "incorporates a tacit or overt ideological theory" (p. 27), a view corroborated by Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) who assert that "the concept of 'literacy' is and must always be ideologically situated" (p. 15). My analysis of the concept of literacy highlights five paradigms that, although not exhaustive, do shed light on the different epistemological and ideological perspectives on literacy. These approaches are: The "Great Divide" or "Great Leap" approach; Functional approach; Post-structural approach; Literacy as Discourse approach; and Critical Literacy approach.

The "Great Divide" or "Great Leap" Approach

This paradigm views literacy as a technology—the art of reading and writing. Grounded on the "literacy-orality" dichotomy, the approach attributes the genesis of higher and complex mental functions in humans, particularly logical and analytical thinking, to the invention of the alphabet (Ong, 2002; Daniell, 1999). In fact, Goody and Watt (1968), key proponents of this school of thought, claim that the magnificent ancient civilizations—the Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, and Chinese civilizations, were a direct consequence of the invention of the alphabetic writing system (p. 36) and that literacy was requisite for human civilization.

That formal education plays a significant role in human development is irrefutable, whether it is through scientific innovation, producing skilled manpower to take charge of the various sectors of society, or just

producing informed citizens. However, this paradigm has several flaws. First, Scribner and Cole (1981) have questioned the validity of the claim that literacy alone is responsible for the emergence of higher cognitive skills based on their study among the Vai people, a community in Liberia that had its own unique literacy system before the introduction of Western education. In their study, Scribner and Cole observed that the Vai who were literate in their native system were not necessarily cognitively superior to those who were not.

Second, the "Great Divide" approach individualizes literacy. As Daniell (1999) points out, the orality and literacy hypothesis has for a long time been criticized for conceiving literacy as a purely cognitive process, an inward process, thereby attributing students' poor literacy skills to their "faulty minds" (p. 396). By viewing literacy as merely the ability to read and write, the approach strips literacy of its tacit socio-cultural and political underpinnings; it divorces students' performance from the materiality of literacy. A student's background plays a significant role in the education process, a reality that favors students from mainstream discourse communities (Bizzell, 1992). Granted, by projecting literacy as a neutral, apolitical process, the "Great Divide" approach masks the political and ideological forces that shape and influence pedagogies and educational policies that are responsible for perpetuating marginalization in the education sector. The paradigm demonstrates how perception of "merit" based on standardized testing perpetuates inequalities in education since the concept operates on a flawed premise that students are a homogeneous population, disregarding other variables that determine a student's performance—factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and most importantly, one's economic background.

The Functional Approach

In a nutshell, this approach views literacy as a process of equipping learners with skills they need to fit and operate in a given society. Hunter and Harman (1979) define functional literacy as "the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing" (p. 77). On her part, Sylvia Scribner (1998) uses a "literacy as adaptation" metaphor to capture the pragmatic underpinning of literacy; the possession of "proficiency necessary for effective performance in a range of settings" (p. 73). In other words, the functional approach portrays literacy as a process through which students achieve skills that enable them to function in all aspects of their given society. Given the diverse nature of societies, what constitutes literacy process is bound to differ from one society to another. In the case of North America, Allan Bloom (1987), a renowned apologist of the right wing, recommends the "good old Great Books approach in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts" (p. 344). Hirsch (1988) prescribes a similar approach, what he calls "cultural literacy." These ideologues view a canon-based literacy, tested through SAT, as a guarantee of *merit* and panacea to what they considered a literacy crisis facing the country (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991).

Although the approach acknowledges the social nature of literacy, the functional paradigm suffers the same limitation of masking the hegemonic nature of literacy as the great divide approach does. Embedded in this paradigm is the view that literacy is a neutral, apolitical process. The approach eludes important considerations such as: What is "effective" performance? Who sets performance indexes or proficiency levels? Does every body in society have equal access and opportunities to attain these so-called proficiency levels? In the case of SAT scores, are socio-economic discrepancies emanating from students' backgrounds factored in when ranking students? Standardized testing would work if students were a homogenous population, which incidentally is not the case. Any approach that diminishes materiality of literacy is simplistic since, as noted earlier, it is indisputable there are many variables that determine one's academic performance, factors that transcend the individual such as where one goes to school (an issue that has more to do with socio-economic factors), gender, one's social upbringing, etc.

That one's social background has a bearing in one's performance in school is well documented by scholars and researchers. In her seminal ethnographic work, Heath (1983) narrates how children from two communities living in proximity geographically had different literacy experiences at school owing to their social upbringing. Black children from Trackton, a predominantly black community, were more socialized in oral skills unlike their white counterparts from the neighboring predominantly white Roadville community. The major finding of this study is that teachers, mainly white, considered the black children ill prepared for school, a factor that, unfortunately, destined them to fall through the cracks. On the other hand, the white children who were socialized in literacy practices cruised through the school system, an intrinsic advantage guaranteed by their social background. This crucial finding demonstrates the unfairness of an education system whose curriculum and assessment system are based exclusively on mainstream values and worldviews. In concordance with Heath, Rose (1989) narrates similarly moving accounts of students who

were struggling with conventional writing in higher education due to their non-mainstream backgrounds. These findings put to question the neutrality of literacy and the fairness of the *merit* system, the proposition espoused by traditional paradigms and conservative policy makers.

Furthermore, by problematizing the canon, social critics expose the contradictions that characterize the functional approach. In contention are issues such as: What constitutes a "good" work? Who determines what is canonized? Whose voice is heard and whose is silenced? Whose values are promoted and whose are marginalized? Apple (1993) argues convincingly that no text is politically disinterested: "texts are not simply 'delivery systems' of 'facts.' They are at once the results of political, economic and cultural activities, battles and compromises" (p. 195). Elsewhere he states: "the text is not only an economic artifact, but is through and through political as well. It is a *regulated* commodity...the text is cultural as well. It embodies the visions of legitimate knowledge of identifiable groups of people" (Apple, 1991, p. 7-8). Evidently, a canon-based literacy, and the functional approach in general, legitimizes mainstream voice and values at the expense of minority groups thereby facilitating perpetuation of inequalities in education and society in general. The approach obscures the line between *merit* and *privilege* (Chege, 2008, p. 83).

The Post-Structural Approach

I attribute this approach to scholars like Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron, Thomas Popkewitz, and Louis Althusser. These scholars provide an in-depth analysis of the political nature of literacy. For instance, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) view education as an *apparatus*, to use Althusser's term, through which the dominant group reproduces the social order; literacy as a hegemonic tool that facilitates "the reproduction of the structure of the power relations within a social formation in which the dominant system of education tends to secure a monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" (p. 6). In this matrix, the function of literacy is the production of *habitus,* which they define as "the product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after PA [Pedagogic Action] has ceased and thereby of perpetrating in practice the principles of the internalized arbitrary" (p. 31). Literacy, therefore, is a political terrain. Althusser (2001) makes a similar argument in his Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) hypothesis. He distinguishes these two apparatuses as follows: "the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence,' whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *function 'by ideology'*" (p. 1490). In his view, the school system is the most strategic and effective of all ISAs in propagating the ideology of the dominant group (p. 1491).

Although the post-structural approach exposes the hegemonic nature of literacy, most of its proponents are skeptical and some even dismissive of its transformative power. Bourdieu (1991) argues that the subordinate position of the marginalized renders any "political action" among this group unattainable (p. 127); that they are "dispossessed of the economic and cultural conditions necessary for their awareness of the fact that they are disposed" (p. 131) and, therefore, incapable of any social revolution. Popkewitz (1991) even dismisses the liberatory agenda as "popularist" (p. 230). This skepticism can be traced back to the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this paradigm. Popkewitz and Brennan (1998), for instance, criticize critical pedagogy for "[assuming] that critical interrogations of social conditions will produce a synthesis from the identified traditions" (p. 7). Instead, they prefer the "social epistemology" (p. 9) or "decentering the subject" approach which seeks "to understand how the subject is constituted within a field that relates knowledge and power," an approach that prioritizes "historical specificity to the systems of ideas that enclose and intern the 'reason' and the 'reasonable person'" (pp. 10-11). Accordingly, as they put it:

> The strategy of a social epistemology reverses the interests of the philosophy of consciousness by making the problem of study that of the knowledge that inscribes agents. The terrain of social and educational theory is with a 'critical', problematizing theory that focuses on the construction of knowledge itself and 'reason' as the problems of inquiry. It makes problematic how the 'objects' of the world are historically constructed and change over time. (p. 11-12)

By exposing the hegemonic nature of literacy, this approach makes immense contribution to educational theory. But, the paradigm has significant limitations. Most importantly, by diminishing human agency on one hand and magnifying hegemony on the other, the paradigm negates the role of literacy as an instrument of social change. As Porter (1991) succinctly points out, "the deterministic nature of these theories means that the stronger one argues for the power of the social structures, the harder it is to explain how an individual or group ever escapes their impact or, indeed, how any social change ever occurs. Human behavior is seen to be determined by powerful social

forces…" (p. 12-13). Portraying hegemony of the dominant group as intrinsically insurmountable promotes the impression that social change is unattainable. The paradigm reduces humans as mere creatures of history rather than creators of history, which is definitely not the case. Human civilization is where it is today because of scientific and social revolutions conceived and executed by human beings. The problem with a deterministic ontology is that it promotes complacency among the marginalized demographics, thereby facilitating perpetuation of the oppressive and unjust status quo.

Literacy as Discourse Approach

Closely related to the post structural approach is the discourse approach to literacy. It is worth noting that, like literacy, "discourse" is a loaded and fluid concept leading Lankshear and McLaren (1993) to conclude that discourse is a "large concept" (p. 11). According to Foucault (1972) in his groundbreaking theorization of discourse, "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers…" (p. 216). He points out that the control of discourse "is more a question of determining the conditions under which it may be employed, of imposing a certain number of rules upon those individuals who employ it, thus denying access to every one else" (p. 224). Gee (1990) conceptualizes discourse in a way closely related to Foucault. He defines discourse as "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network,' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'" (p. 143).

Gee and Foucault's theories reveal salient attributes of discourse: discourse as identity; discourse as conventions; discourse as exclusion; discourse as power; discourse as knowledge; discourse as a socially and politically contested field. These properties of discourse intersect with those of literacy, the reason scholars such as Gee (1990) view literacy in terms of discourse (p. 153). Lankshear and McLaren (1993), adapting Foucault's theory of discourse, argue that, "Educational discourses consist in so many structured, ideologically informed, and sanctioned views about what should be done, how, and why it should be done" (p. 12). Like Gee and Foucault, they view discourses as "norm-governed practices and involvements around and within which forms of human living are constructed and identities and subjectivities shaped" (p. 11). In light of this proposition, they reject a simplistic view of classroom discourse, arguing that: "Classroom discourse, then, includes the norms and processes by which authority is established and exercised, discipline maintained, and decisions made about what will be learned, via what media, and how, plus the myriad other ingredients … Discourse, therefore, is often hidden and implicit" (p. 11).

Discourse theory is pertinent to educational theory in many ways. More specifically, it illuminates the political nature of discourse and more broadly the intersection of literacy, discourse, and politics. Of concern in the interrogation of literacy is: If discourse is controlled, exclusive, and rule governed, who sets these rules? Who gets to determine who is qualified or is admitted into these discourses? How equitable is the access to these discourses? As I will demonstrate later in this discussion when addressing criticisms leveled against critical pedagogy, these concerns are crucial in understanding curtailment of intellectual freedom in institutions of higher learning with regard to what and how scholars teach and publish.

However, the major limitation of the Discourse approach is that other than exposing power struggles inherent in discourses, it does not explicitly address empowerment of the marginalized. This is not surprising since the paradigm has its roots in post-structural theory. As a result, the discourse approach is more concerned with theorizing the politics of discourse (and literacy) rather than offering praxis for change, for the empowerment of the "other" to challenge the status quo. Nevertheless, there are some discourse theorists who allude to liberatory discourses. Fairclough (1989), for instance, argues discourses play a role in social reproduction on one hand —how "in occupying particular subject positions, teachers and pupils reproduce [social structures]" (p. 38), but, on the other hand, he argues how subjugation can lead to social change. That "Social subjects are constrained to operate within the subject positions setup in the discourse types…and are in that sense passive; but it is only through being so constrained that they are made able to act as social agents…Being constrained is a precondition for being enabled. Social agents are active and *creative*" (p. 39). Thus, Fairclough, in a departure from most post-structural leaning discourse theorists, identifies the paradox of hegemony: that domination ignites and produces liberation. His position demonstrates the compatibility of discourse theory with critical literacy paradigm.

Critical Literacy Approach

Like the post structural and discourse approaches, critical pedagogy is based on the premise that literacy cannot be divorced from politics, that literacy is, indeed, hegemonic. The political nature of literacy stems from the reality that dominant groups strive to

capitalize on their vintage position to set the agenda for literacy. As Lankshear and Lawler (1989) put it, "schooling is a major structural setting wherein those classes whose interests are already dominant have access to greater power by which to maintain their dominance at the expense of subordinate class interests" (p. 25). In the same token, Giroux (1988) rejects the notion that school knowledge is objective by asserting that "school knowledge is a particular representation of dominant culture, a privileged discourse that is constructed through a selective process of emphases and exclusions" (p. xxx). Literacy always serves an ideological agenda; it embodies the "struggle [for] the control of the whole process of social reproduction" (Mouffe, 1979, p. 5). Granted, critical pedagogy is grounded on the belief that "naming the world," to use Freire's (1987) phrase, is a political enterprise; that, as McLaren and Lankshear (1993) put it, "culture is best understood as *a terrain of contestation* that serves as a locus of multivalent practical and discursive structures and powers;" that "Knowledge is construed as a *form of discursive production*;" that "the process of constructing knowledge takes place within an unevenly occupied terrain of struggle in which the dominative discourse of mainstream research approaches frequently parallel the discursive economies of the larger society, and are reinforced by the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege which accompany them" (p. 381).

But, unlike the post-structural and discourse approaches, critical pedagogy goes beyond recognizing and theorizing the political nature of literacy. The agenda of critical pedagogy is emancipatory, it is liberatory. The pedagogy offers teachers and students a theoretical framework with commensurate praxis designed to confront educational policies and mainstream discourses that consign them to the "other" status. Proponents of this approach are cognizant of the paradox of literacy: that as much as literacy is an apparatus of oppression, it is a tool for liberation; that hegemony requires counter-hegemony; that "It is not only individuals through their active consciousness but subordinate social groups as well which may struggle with dominant groups for hegemony;" that both parties in this divide "are influenced by hegemonic world views, but because they have consciousness, they can and do sometimes resist and develop counter-hegemonic ideas" (Porter, 1991, p. 15). Spring (2005) puts it even more succinctly when he asserts: "In one dimension, *the distribution of knowledge (or schooling) is used to control others.* In the second dimension, *knowledge gives the individual the ability to gain freedom from the control of others"* (p. 56). Granted, critical pedagogy counters traditional paradigms such as the great divide and the functional approach by exposing and challenging the agenda behind depoliticizing literacy. It also overcomes the limitations of post-structural and discourse approaches by adopting an educational theory grounded on situating the education process in the socio-political milieu and, most importantly, providing praxis grounded on empowerment of educators and students to challenge inequalities in education and social injustices in society in general.

Common Criticisms Against Critical Pedagogy

After discussing the various approaches to literacy, it is appropriate to address three common attacks on critical pedagogy: that critical pedagogy is essentialist, populist, and unpatriotic.

Critical pedagogy as essentialist. In her article "The Narratives of Literacy: Connecting Composition to Culture," Beth Daniell (1999) faults Freirean pedagogy for adopting a "grand narrative" approach. As she puts it, "the problem with grand narratives is the unfortunate human tendency to over generalize from them: the Freirean narrative has been used to support a discourse that sometimes seems to assume that all our students are oppressed" (p. 400). Although she acknowledges that inequalities do exist in the American education system, she claims that "by the world's standards, most of the students who enroll in the classes we teach –especially in private colleges and large state universities—are not oppressed. They are not Freire's Third World adult illiterates, and our job is not now, if it ever was, to recruit for a leftist revolution" (p. 401). In her view, "What Freire offers North America is not a method of teaching literacy we can carry from the Third World to the First, but an attitude of profound love for the human beings we teach" (p. 402). Evident in Daniell's critique is the view that radical pedagogies have no place in the American education system, and that Freirean pedagogy is incompatible with postmodern ideals. Gee (1997) seems to concur with Daniell that Freirean pedagogy is monolithic by referring to instances in Freire's book with Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World,* where Freire intimates there is a "correct" way of thinking when he states: "When we learn to read and write, it is also almost important to learn to *think correctly"* (Gee, 1997, p. 237). His concern seems to center around: What is correct thinking? Who determines what is correct thinking?

Of course taken at surface level, critical pedagogy may appear essentialist. However, the claim that the American education system is democratic and, therefore, does not warrant radical pedagogy is a subject that has come under heavy scrutiny not just by radical scholars but social critics in general. Scholars

such as Giroux, hooks, Rose, and Shor have written extensively on how inequalities based on race, economic class, and gender continue to plague the American education system. To argue that the American education system is democratic obscures the enormous disparities that exist in terms of educational opportunities dictated by a student or child's background. The assertion that the education system in America is on a level playing ground depoliticizes literacy, which is typical of conservative based paradigms and ideology. This position negates Daniell's criticism of the "great divide" approach for ignoring the role of social conditions in addressing students' performance. Furthermore, the American school system may not be experiencing the same kind of raw oppression "Third World" students have to endure, but that does not mean the American system is devoid of injustices. As Althusser (2001) points out, hegemonies preserve themselves through different mechanisms—it could be repression, as is common in Third World countries, but it could also be ideological, executed through rhetoric, which is usually the case in developed countries. The problem with the latter is its subtle nature, which usually masks the oppressive forces embedded in educational policy and the mainstream discourses and rhetoric used to legitimize these practices. This is where critical pedagogy derives its legitimacy: to expose the contradictions in mainstream discourses and to offer counter-hegemonic discourses in the pursuit of a more equitable and just literacy system. In fact, the tension between radical pedagogies and traditional pedagogies is an ideological clash that pits liberal agenda against conservative agenda.

Furthermore, the argument that critical pedagogy is not compatible with postmodernism is in a sense misplaced. The two theories have epistemological and ontological differences, but they also have many points of intersection. First, like postmodernism, critical pedagogy is built on the premise that knowledge making is a complex process—that "the natural social world is a conceptual landmine wired with assumptions and inherited meanings;" that every epistemology is "shaped by a community of inquirers and sociopolitical forces" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 13). A major reason why the pedagogy has adopted a dialectic epistemology is the belief in the social construction of knowledge. Second, critical pedagogy's rejection of banking education and the call for a dialogic approach is tandem with post-modern's recognition of knowledge as a social construct, the need for teachers and students to collaborate in the knowledge making process. Third, the paradigm advocates a pragmatic approach to praxis by underscoring the historicity of phenomenon. Responding to the criticism that his pedagogy is monolithic, Freire (1997) clarifies that his educational theory is not a template but a framework to be re-invented depending on teachers' and students' experiences. And in a way that validates Freire, hooks (1994) describes her own Freirean pedagogy as follows:

> This complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives [colonial, critical, and feminist] has been an engaging and powerful standpoint from which to work. Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. (p. 10)

But, aware of the essentialist label, she is quick to provide the following caveat: "Even though I share strategies, these works do not offer blueprints for ways to make the classroom an exciting place for learning. To do so would undermine the insistence that engaged pedagogy recognize each classroom as different, that strategies must constantly be changed, invented, reconceptualized to address each new teaching experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 10-11). hooks' pedagogy and position embodies Freire's call for teachers to contextualize their pedagogy, which is in line with postmodern thinking. It is a position grounded in the postmodern rejection of the notion of a "transcendental subject, to define an essential human nature, to prescribe a global human destiny or to proscribe collective human goals'" (Hebdige quoted by Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p 68), preferring instead "a discourse capable of engaging the importance of the contingent, specific, and historical as central aspects of a liberating and empowering pedagogy" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 81).

But, critical pedagogy and postmodernism have significant epistemological and ontological differences. Rather than de-center the subject, critical pedagogies adopt a humanistic approach informed by the belief that success of the liberatory agenda is dependent on faith in not only the potential of students and teachers to discern social contradictions but also their desire to change their material conditions, their desire to create a just and equitable society. This point of departure is warranted by the inherent paradoxical nature of literacy: the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic potential of literacy. This makes the liberatory agenda of critical pedagogy inevitable. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) capture the dialectical relationship between postmodernism and critical pedagogy vividly in their observation that "Pomo provides educators with a more complex and insightful view of the relationships of culture, power and knowledge. But for all of its theoretical and political virtues, postmodernism is

inadequate to the task of rewriting the emancipatory possibilities of the language and practice of a revitalized democratic public life" (p. 81). Thus, the main difference between the two theories is the central role praxis plays in critical pedagogy. Unlike postmodernism and post-structuralism that are built on theory, the core tenet of critical pedagogy is the belief that theory without praxis is inadequate. The paradigm goes beyond theorizing the hegemonic nature of literacy by offering commensurate praxis, counter-hegemonic discourses designed to deconstruct mainstream discourses and ideologies that the school system reproduces. This theoretical construct informs the paradigm's agenda of empowerment and social change—the belief that students have the capacity to challenge the status quo if well equipped with an education designed to produce what Freire (1993) calls *Conscientizacao*, the "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 17).

That critical pedagogy is *transgressive* (to use bell hooks' term) is warranted given the agenda of the paradigm. Students come to school socialized in traditional pedagogies and, therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect them to embrace pedagogies that push them out of their comfort zones without resistance. For instance, Thelin (2005) reminisces how difficult it was for some of his students to embrace the freedom he allowed them in his class (p. 129). hooks (1994) observes similar findings: "For reasons I cannot explain it was also full of 'resisting' students who did not want to learn new pedagogical processes, who did not want to be in a classroom that differed in any way from the norm. To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening (p. 9). Certainly, the freedom that comes with critical pedagogies demands students take more responsibility for their learning, which is a major cause of student resistance (Inderbitzin and Storrs, 2008). Understanding that breaking this *habitus* is a process, scholars and practitioners who embrace critical pedagogy do not view students' resistance as a vice, but a natural response to a system that contradicts what they are socialized in. That is why Shor (1992) advocates teachers embark on what he refers to as a "desocialization" process; to engage students in "[questioning] the social behaviors and experiences in school and daily life that makes us into the people we are…Desocialization from traditional school conditioning that interferes with critical thought" (p. 114).

But, as Johnson and Bhatt (2003) put it, a teacher's intervention when warranted by the need to push students out of their comfort zones should not be about dominating or manipulating students; rather, it should be motivated by the need to tackle "dominance and for creating inclusive classroom environments" (p. 240). Any attempt on the part of the teacher to impose his or her views on students, even in the name of critical pedagogy, negates the agenda of the paradigm. The practice would be no different from banking education, the antithesis of emancipatory pedagogies. Also, adopting dialogic pedagogies entails faith and trust on both sides (the teacher and the students). Students must see authenticity on the part of the teacher to be able to take the risks that critical pedagogy most times calls for. It would be irresponsible to ask students to share their experiences and reflections, to make students vulnerable, if the teacher is not willing to do the same. "Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (hooks, 1994, p. 21). Thus, attacking critical pedagogy for being transgressive is disingenuous since the teacher's intervention it calls for underlies a humanistic ethos on all parties involved in the learning process. The paradigm confronts ingrained ideologies that necessitate a transgressive and uncompromising approach.

Since "critical thinking" has become a popular catch phrase in academe, one wonders whether every epistemology masquerading as critical approach is really critical pedagogy. Schafersman (1994) defines critical thinking as "thinking correctly for oneself that successfully leads to the most reliable answers to questions and solutions to problems." In his view, critical thinking involves applying "principles of scientific thinking," which is not limited to any academic discipline. There is no doubt many educational institutions have made developing critical skills among students a major goal of their teaching, a move that has its roots in postmodernism; however, there is an apparent difference between critical thinking for intellectual sake and critical thinking that is geared toward social activism. The difference between the two is that by focusing on abstract concepts, critical thinking for purely academic purposes stands the risk of divorcing the learning process from the material conditions in which the education process operates. An educational process divorced from lived experiences, one that cocoons students and teachers from their socio-economic conditions, lacks the capacity to expose the hegemonic nature of literacy and the need to use the learning process to engage entrenched forces that fuel and perpetuate an oppressive status quo. That is why the agenda of critical pedagogies is to motivate and invigorate students to reflect on their experiences and the social conditions that produce those experiences, and to interrogate how those conditions can be transformed (Lu & Honer, 1998); it is a call to critical thinking that is aimed at raising consciousness among students about the world they live in and how the learning process reinforces their experiences; a call to reflect on how they could apply the education process

to transform their experiences. Not all critical approaches fit this mold. Not all critical projects have a social activism agenda. In fact as Giroux (2006) points out, anti-progressive activists have their own version of critical thinking, which is to counter the liberal agenda of critical pedagogies. For them, the call to critical thinking aims at creating "organic" intellectuals, defined by Gramsci (1971) as "the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class" (p. 3), whose role is to demonize liberal scholars and the ideals they espouse.

Critical pedagogy as populism. This criticism has its roots in poststructuralist, anti-humanistic epistemology and ontology. As noted earlier when discussing the poststructuralist approach to literacy, these critics are skeptical of the emancipatory agenda of literacy, which they dismiss as populism. These critics apparently have a problem with the signifier *marginalized*. Note the tone in the following claim: "The agents of redemption in critical traditions are universalized notions of the actor who is defined as being marginalized-workers, racially discriminated groups, and, more recently, women" (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 7). This position is surprising since the same scholars articulate an in-depth analysis of the inherent political nature of literacy—how literacy serves as an apparatus of the dominant group to reproduce social conditions. The paradigm's position on human agency—the notion that the marginalized are incapable of any social action—is by all means problematic. Gramsci (1971), arguably the precursor of critical pedagogy, poses the following probing question:

> Is it better to 'think', without having critical awareness….is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment…Or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labours of one's brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of history of the world… (p. 323)

Humans are not mere spectators of history; they "are not limited to the natural"; rather, they interact with their world to change it (Freire, 1973, p. 4). The goal of critical pedagogy is to nurture this capacity by equipping students with skills that enable them to reflect and critically engage their experiences; to equip them to challenge social conditions that shape and influence their experiences.

Furthermore, the argument that critical pedagogy is "popularist" ignores the underlying premise of the paradigm, that a sound educational theory must be accompanied by a commensurate praxis in order to achieve social change. Liberatory education is not delusional—it is action oriented. According to Freire (1993), the call for social change "is not a call to armchair revolution--true reflection--leads to action…an authentic praxis" (p. 48). His emphasis on praxis draws from Gramsci's argument that praxis is the only way to counter "solipsism" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 346). In other words, the agenda of critical pedagogy is more than just an ideology, it is substantive; it calls for students to "act as self-reflective subjects with an ability to think critically" (Inderbitzin & Storrs, 2008, p. 48). The pedagogy, according to Shor (1991), "involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goals of challenging inequality and developing an activist citizenry" (p. 11). Critical pedagogy derives legitimacy from its fundamental agenda, which is to spur consciousness among students and teachers about their world and even more importantly to instill among them "an unwavering commitment to the struggle against injustice" (Fischman & McLaren, 2005, p. 441). Critical pedagogy offers a counter-discourse to oppressive educational policies and practices designed to perpetuate educational inequalities and social injustices. The pedagogy is not just a slogan—its agenda, as Lu and Honer (1998) assert, is to "[analyze] the social historical conditions shaping one's experience (of desire) and exploring ways of transforming those conditions and thus that experience" (p. 266). It is a pedagogy founded on the reality that it is impossible to divorce politics from literacy, hence the need to formulate an educational theory and praxis capable of empowering students and teachers to engage hegemonic forces masked in educational policy and practices.

Critical pedagogy as unpatriotic. Progressive teachers have in most cases been viewed suspiciously by pro-establishment and mainstream-leaning individuals and institutions. Governments in the Third World are known to censor discourse in education, especially higher education, through harassment and intimidation of scholars and students as a means to curtail dissent and political action. Freire, for instance, was forced into exile after his home government in Brazil accused him of inciting his peasant adult learners—a charge based on the fact that his pedagogy aimed at empowering his students. That he sought to sensitize them about their socio-economic conditions and the need to challenge the status quo put him in direct collision with the political establishment (Freire & Horton, 1990).

Even in the West, teachers who challenge the status quo have always been derided, especially by the Right wing. Giroux (2006) and Schrecker (2006) have written extensively on what they refer to as neo-McCarthyism, a resurgence of anti-liberal agenda in the academe in recent years akin to cold-war era bashing of leftist

scholars. Just as the cold war provided justification for demonizing and exorcizing liberal scholars, the war on terror has provided a strong case for targeting liberal scholars, particularly those who speak out against the profiling of people with Middle-Eastern backgrounds or the enactment of laws and practices that infringe on people's rights (Giroux 2006). As the two scholars put it, neo-McCarthyism poses a grave threat to the academe since, unlike earlier attacks that targeted off-campus political activities of faculty, today's attacks are aimed directly at what goes on in the classroom. Furthermore, in their sustained questioning of inequalities and injustices in the education system and society, radical pedagogues are often seen as catalysts of social dissent. For this reason, these scholars and educationists are depicted as unpatriotic.

There is no question radical pedagogy is Marxist-oriented. As Giroux (2001) puts it, the pedagogy "relentlessly questions the kinds of labor, practices, and forms of production that are enacted in public and higher education" (p. 18). In other words, the paradigm confronts educational policies, practices, and ideologies that seek to legitimize marginalization in education and society in general. Granted, one can safely argue critical pedagogy is not a preserve of critical pedagogues but everybody committed to pursuit of these ideals—all those committed to social or civil activism (Kincheloe, 2007). It is the attack on conservative apparatuses such as the dominance of mainstream discourses and the heavy influence of corporate America in education that sets the agenda of critical pedagogy in collision with conservative paradigms and ideologies. In essence, the polemics that characterize discourse on literacy and educational theory expose a clash of ideologies, a clash of hegemonies. Thus, demonizing the progressive agenda of critical pedagogy is a strategy to mask the pro-establishment's concerted fight against, for instance, affirmative action and intellectual freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent literacy is and will always be a politically contested terrain. Efforts by conservative ideologies to present literacy as neutral, as apolitical, by invoking traditional pedagogies and epistemologies are, therefore, a ploy to mask educational policies and practices that promote "merit" at the expense of marginalized demographics. It is a deliberate effort to disguise and legitimize inequalities in education and a pretext for bashing progressive scholars and civic activists who interrogate these practices. By exposing this agenda, and by offering counter-hegemonic discourses, the clash between critical pedagogy and other contending paradigms is inevitable, which means attacks on the paradigm are not going anywhere. It is a clash of hegemonies as each side of the divide endeavors to dialectically position its stake on literacy to advance its own ideological agenda. What is also clear, though, is that critical pedagogy has gained unstoppable momentum as many scholars and practitioners come to discover the correlation between politics, educational policy, and the role of an empowering education as a tool to confront inequalities in education and social injustices in general. The influence of critical pedagogy in the academy is unstoppable.

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