Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?

29, 1988. It was part of a symposium entitled "Reframing the Empirical Feminist, Neo-Marxist, and Post-structuralist Challenges to Research in Education." I want to thank Mimi Orner, Ph.D. candidate and teaching assistant in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UW-Madison, for her insights and hours of conversations about the meanings of C&E 607. They have formed the backbone of this article.

1. By "critique" I do not mean a systematic analysis of the specific articles of individual authors' positions that make up this literature, for the purpose of articulating a theory of critical pedagogy capable of being evaluated for its internal consistency, elegance, powers of prediction, and so on. Rather, I have chosen to ground the following critique in my interpretation of my experiences in C&E 607. That is, I have attempted to place key discourses in the literature on critical pedagogy in relation to my interpretation of my experience in C&E 607—by asking which interpretations and "sense making" do those discourses facilitate, which do they silence and marginalize, and what interests do they appear to serve?

2. By "the literature on critical pedagogy," I mean those articles in major educational journals and special editions devoted to critical pedagogy. For the purpose of this article, I systematically reviewed more than thirty articles appearing in journals such as Harvard Educational Review, Curriculum Inquiry, Educational Theory, Teachers College Record, Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, and Journal of Curriculum Studies between 1984 and 1988. The purpose of this review was to identify key and repeated claims, assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices that currently set the terms of debate within this literature. "Critical pedagogy" should not be confused with "feminist pedagogy," which constitutes a separate body of literature with its own goals and assumptions.


7. Liston and Zeichner, "Critical Pedagogy," p. 120.


13. By the end of the semester, many of us began to understand ourselves as inhabiting intersections of multiple, contradictory, overlapping social positions not reducible either to race, or class, or gender and so on. Depending upon the moment and the context, the degree to which any one of us “differs” from the mythical norm (see conclusion) varies along multiple axes, and so do the consequences. I began using the terms “students of difference,” “professor of difference,” to refer to social positionings in relation to the mythical norm (based on ability, size, color, sexual preference, gender, ethnicity, and so on). This reminded us of the necessity to construct how, within specific situations, particular socially constructed differences from the mythical norm (such as color) get taken up as vehicles for institutions such as the university to act out and legitimate oppressive formations of power. This enabled us to open up our analysis of racism on campus for the purpose of tracing its relations to institutional sexism, ableism, elitism, anti-Semitism, and other oppressive formations.


16. Liston and Zeichner, “Critical Pedagogy,” p. 120.


20. Ibid.


22. Lorde, Sister Outsider, p. 112.


25. For an excellent discussion of the relation of the concept of “experience” to feminism, essentialism, and political action, see Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” Signs 13 (Spring, 1988), 405–437.


27. This subtitle is borrowed from Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman’s critique of imperialistic, ethnocentric, and disrespectful tendencies in White feminists’ theorizing about women’s oppression, “Have We Got a Theory for You? Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for ‘The Women’s Voice,’” Women’s Studies International Forum (1983), 573–581.


29. Liston and Zeichner, “Critical Pedagogy and Teacher Education,” p. 120.
32. Ibid., p. 66.
42. Ibid., p. 227.
45. Ibid., p. 375.
47. Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,” p. 420.
48. Simon, “Empowerment as a Pedagogy of Possibility.”
52. Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism”; Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera; de Lauretis, Feminist Studies/Critical Studies; hooks, Talking Back; Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory.
59. Ibid., p. 237.
61. Ibid.
Diversity and Multiculturalism


64. Discussions with students after the semester ended and comments from students and colleagues on the draft of this article have led me to realize the extent to which some international students and Jews in the class felt unable or not safe to speak about experiences of oppression inside and outside of the class related to those identities. Anti-Semitism, economic and cultural imperialism, and the rituals of exclusion of international students on campus were rarely named and never fully elaborated in the class. The classroom practices that reproduced these particular oppressive silences in C&I 607 must be made the focus of sustained critique in the follow-up course, C&I 800, "Race, Class, Gender, and the Construction of Knowledge in Educational Media."


66. Lugones and Spelman assert that the only acceptable motivation for following Others into their worlds is friendship. Self-interest is not enough, because "the task at hand for you is one of extraordinary difficulty. It requires that you be willing to devote a great part of your life to it and that you be willing to suffer alienation and self-disruption ... whatever the benefits you may accrue from such a journey, they cannot be concrete enough for you at this time and they are not worth your while" ("Have We Got a Theory for You," p. 576). Theoretical or political "obligation" is inappropriate, because it puts Whites/Anglos in a morally self-righteous position and makes people of color vehicles of redemption for those in power (p. 581). Friendship, as an appropriate and acceptable "condition" under which people become allies in struggles that are not their own, names my own experience and has been met with enthusiasm by students.

67. Lorde, Sister Outsider, p. 112.

68. Ibid., p. 112.


71. Lorde, Sister Outsider, p. 113.


73. Ibid., p. 8.

74. Ibid., p. 9.


76. hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," p. 54.


80. A. Selvin, personal correspondence (October 24, 1988).