

## DISCUSSION-BASED CRITICAL/ENGAGED PEDAGOGY: TEACHING TO QUESTION

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### *Introduction*

My Ph.D. is in cultural anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995. My primary topical area of interest is new social movements, and how people united in grassroots-based organizations are working to effect the basic structural changes necessary to transform society to be more participatory and inclusive, democratic and equitable. I consider myself very fortunate to be in a position to introduce Japanese university students to socially relevant topics that help them to start to question the accepted dogma and engage in critical analyses of pressing social issues. In this essay, I will offer some thoughts concerning the use of a critical/engaged pedagogy in the classroom. I'll be using the term critical/engaged pedagogy (or pedagogies) not as some prescriptive set of practices, but rather as a heuristic around which those of us who share certain pedagogical and political visions can group.

### *Critical/Engaged Pedagogy*

As a broad and loosely linked area of educational theory and practice, critical/engaged pedagogy can be described as education grounded in a desire for a recognition of the status quo and how maintenance of the status quo primarily benefits those in positions of power in society, as well as an engagement with alternative visions of what society can be. Viewing schools not as sites where a neutral body of curricular knowledge is passed on to students with various levels of success, critical/engaged pedagogy takes schools as cultural and political arenas where different cultural, ideological, and social constructs are constantly in struggle. The question then becomes how to construct a theory and practice of education that can, on the one hand, account for why some students fail to “succeed” in school and, on the other, develop ways of teaching that offer greater possibilities to people of color, ethnic minorities, working-class students, women, gays and lesbians, and others, not only in order that they might have a better chance of “success” in the ways traditionally defined by education but also in order that these definitions of success, both within schools and beyond, can be questioned and changed. Broadly speaking, then, critical/engaged pedagogy aims to change both schooling and society, to the mutual benefit of both.

Whatever visions of democracy we may hold, most critical educators would probably agree that education plays an important role in the construction of student subjectivities and that

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in order to change society, we need a vision of how students, as future (or present) adult citizens, might act in different (and well informed) social, cultural, and political ways. Ethics needs to be understood as central to education since the issues we face as teachers and students are not just questions of knowledge and truth but also of right and wrong, of the need to struggle against inequality and injustice as well as the need to identify perspective and interpretation associated with social phenomena.

As critical educators we need to recognize the importance of opposing the notion of curriculum knowledge as a sacred text in favor of an understanding of how different types of culture and knowledge are given precedence in schools to produce individuals who will not question the status quo and accept their place within it as a given.

The crucial issue here is to turn classrooms into places where the accepted canons of knowledge can be challenged and questioned, their construction seen not as a process of discovering universal and inevitable truths but rather as a very particular process of knowledge formation and truth claims. Critical/engaged pedagogy should seek not only to critique forms of knowledge but also to work towards the creation of new forms. By opposing knowledge as it is canonized in school subjects and academic disciplines, by making a critique of the everyday and the particular (i.e. student culture and knowledge) part of a school curriculum, and by developing forms of critical analysis, it should be possible to encourage the emergence of alternative forms of culture, knowledge, and interpretation of social phenomena. Any concept of reason that makes particular claims on truth needs to be reformulated. This means, among other things, rejecting claims to objectivity in favor of more partial and particular versions of knowledge, truth, and reason.

A critical/engaged pedagogy must include not only a language of critique but also a vision of a better world for which it is worth struggling. Such a vision involves a certain degree of optimism, a belief in alternative possibilities, and a way of moving beyond the despair into which a critical and ethical view of the world can often lead us. Teachers need to see themselves as, in Gramsci's phrase, "organic intellectuals" working with others for social justice. Teachers, as organic intellectuals, exercise forms of intellectual and pedagogical practice that attempt to insert teaching and learning directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. This view of teaching aims to oppose the way teachers are today often positioned as classroom technicians employed to pass on a body of knowledge, and in its place offers a version of teaching that removes the theory-practice divide and stresses the significance of working towards social transformation that benefits the majority and not the privileged few.

Such an approach to education raises many issues for those of us engaged in teaching English (or in my case, *in* English) to speakers of other languages. First, and most generally, it brings to the fore basic questions about education, social inequality, and progressive social change. It is essential that as teachers teaching in a foreign language, we have not only ways of thinking about language and language learning but also ways of thinking about education and inequality. As teachers, we need to ask ourselves what sort of vision of society we are teaching towards. Are we merely attempting to fulfill predefined curricular goals or do we have an ethical understanding of how education is related to broader social and cultural relations and that therefore there is a need to teach towards a different version of the curriculum and a different vision of society? Do we understand the syllabus we engage our students with as a canonical truth to be handed on or is it something to be negotiated, challenged, and

appropriated?

One difficulty in discussing critical/engaged pedagogy emerges from challenges to one's right to engage in pedagogies that appear disruptive to the status quo: "Just who do you think you are, pushing your political views down your students' throats?" is a criticism that is often expressed. Although it may be a criticism worth listening to if it forces you to reflect on your teaching style, it is important to appreciate some of the misconceptions about a critical/engaged pedagogy embodied in such a challenge. First, since I would argue that all education is political, that all schools are sites of cultural politics, then it cannot be claimed that more traditional or standard forms of education are neutral while the critical approach is "political." No knowledge, no language, and no pedagogy is ever neutral, objective, or apolitical. To teach critically, therefore, is to acknowledge the political nature of all education; it is not to take up some "political" stance that stands in contradistinction to a "neutral" position.

Also, to assume that a critical approach necessarily implies a dogmatic preaching of a political standpoint is not only to fail to appreciate the political nature of all education, but is also to make unwarranted assumptions about both the political and the pedagogical in critical/engaged pedagogy. Since I have argued that all education, culture, and knowledge is political, this is not a liberal humanist version of politics as governmental and policy-making processes that are argued over by people from different political parties. Rather, I am arguing for an understanding of politics as infused into everyday life as we struggle to make meanings for ourselves and about others: reformulating self-identities, creating new cultural values, establishing redefined social relationships, effecting basic structural changes. Thus, a critical/engaged pedagogy does not advocate the teaching of a fixed body of political thought but aims to help students to deal with their struggles to make sense of their lives, to find ways of changing how lives are lived within inequitable social structures, to transform the possibilities of our lives and the ways we understand those possibilities.

Finally, as critical educators, we need to see ourselves not as isolated individuals but as people engaged with a community of other cultural and political workers involved in similarly critical and socially relevant projects. Thus, we can see ourselves engaged on the one hand with local and global specificities around the impact of the accelerated pace of capital accumulation associated with corporate globalization, and, on the other hand, with struggles around culture, language, and knowledge that are being confronted by other people in different domains. Connections can be made between, for example, educators and writers, artists, environmental activists, people involved in alternative development projects, human rights activists, grassroots-based movements opposing the type of corporate globalization pushed by the G7, WTO, IMF and World Bank, or members of different groups engaged in struggles over gender, class, or race exploitation. This is where the critical educator as organic intellectual needs to understand the cultural politics of her or his educational context, trying to understand, for example, the significance of discussing issues of race, class, and gender, war and peace, environment, human rights, social justice, and economic and political power, and the need to give students the opportunity to be introduced to differing perspectives and alternative interpretations of complex and multi-faceted social phenomena.

As a cultural anthropologist specializing in anthropology of human rights and anthropology of new social movements teaching content-based courses in English here in Japan, my primary aim is to give students an opportunity to be exposed to various perspectives and interpretations of social phenomena in order to discuss socially relevant issues by developing and utilizing

their critical thinking skills. I have found that students truly enjoy exchanging opinions with classmates in small group discussions, thereby broadening their own perspectives and increasing their awareness of diverse pressing social issues.

In the 1970s, a paradigmatic shift occurred in the social sciences in which the previous paradigm that stated that social science research and writing could, and indeed should, be objective and value free was overturned. The new paradigm recognized that social science research and writing cannot be objective and value free and that they are, by nature, subjective and value laden. It was recognized that our personal biases and political beliefs as well as our theoretical orientations and methodological approaches influence our choices in what questions to ask or not ask and in what materials to use or not use in our classrooms and in our writings.

As educators, particularly in the social sciences, I believe that we must be ethically responsible by not pretending to be “objective and value free”. We must clearly state our own theoretical orientation and ideological biases, and explain that the readings we choose to expose the students to reflect our own personal and professional interests and concerns.

### *A Personal Note on Classroom Procedure*

In the very first class of the courses that I teach, I inform the students that I will be exposing them (and that they themselves will introduce their classmates and me) to the perspectives, not of the government or corporate elite whose voices are repeatedly heard, but of people whose voices are seldom heard in the mainstream media or mainstream education system — e.g. the voices of family farmers struggling to survive as farmers, of workers fighting for a living wage, of women and children demanding basic human rights, of participants in a variety of grassroots-based NGOs, or of social movement activists opposing corporate globalization. I tell my students that I support, for example, activists working for gay rights, children’s rights, worker’s rights, peace, environmental sustainability, Third World solidarity, and social, economic, and political justice. I let the students know that I support the feminist movement, as defined by the feminist writer bell hooks, as a movement to end sexism, sexist oppression, and sexist exploitation. My students are fully aware that I strongly oppose the so-called Third World development strategies pushed by the World Bank and IMF that have led to an extraordinary increase in poverty and misery throughout the world. They also know that I strongly oppose U.S. military interventionism and the U.S. creation of and support for military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes throughout the world. Just as we want to instill in our students a belief in the freedom of inquiry in university and help them to build the confidence needed to express critical and dissident opinions, I believe we must be bold enough to set the example ourselves.

I strongly feel that exposure to socially relevant, critical analyses of history, contemporary society, and international relations is an important component in quality university-level education, in language studies as well as in the social science disciplines. I find it very encouraging that the universities I have taught at here in Japan in the past 12 years (including Waseda, Keio SFC, Hitotsubashi, International Christian University, Chuo, Tokyo Gakugei, Tokyo Gaidai, Shibaura Institute of Technology, Tsuda College, and others) have provided me with the opportunity to teach a broad range of interdisciplinary courses in English that not only improve students’ English language skills, but challenge them to search for new horizons.

By the end of the courses that I teach, students question the validity of the dominant culture's values, social assumptions, definition of self in relation to others, and interpretation of historical and contemporary social phenomena. They start to question the ways in which we are conditioned and socialized to accept as "objective truth" what we're taught in school and what we're told is "objective analysis" in mainstream media. And, hopefully, they come to realize that they can become involved in helping to create history, to create a better future for all based on such universal principles as peace, human rights, and social justice.

Although all of my classes involve students in small group discussions, a major pedagogical divergence exists between the classes I teach in what I will label "Group A" and "Group B" courses. In Group A classes, I choose the assigned readings for the students, but in group B classes the students themselves choose the assigned readings (a much more student-centered approach).

In Group A classes, I require the students to prepare for the following week's class by reading the transcript of the documentary video to be shown (provided on my website: <http://www.dgmoen.net/>) and writing a half-page to one-page comment with related follow-up question in English regarding the points made in the content of the video transcript. After watching the film documentary (20-30 minutes), I put students in groups of three or four and they exchange opinions in Japanese or in English, depending on the university I am teaching at (15 minutes). I then ask each group to work together to create a group comment in English summarizing the main points raised in the group discussion (15 minutes) and any related follow-up question they may want me to respond to. In the last 30 minutes of class, each group shares their discussion summary and question with the class as a whole and I give my responses to their comments and questions.

In Group B courses, each student has the opportunity to choose two articles for discussion (during the course of the semester) from the websites of NGOs, grassroots-based organizations, or alternative media that they find interesting (links provided on my website). After careful preparation, the student e-mails the article to everyone one week in advance of the discussion. In addition to the article itself, the student prepares a vocabulary list and two discussion questions in English. The student, as discussant, goes to the front of the class and gives the reason why he or she chose this particular article and summarizes the main points raised in the article. The student then puts the class in groups of three or four to discuss the article (10-15 minutes in Japanese or in English, again depending on the university) and formulate a group response to the discussion questions in English. The student leading the discussion then offers her or his response to the discussion questions and any comments he or she may have regarding the group comments. After the student rejoins the class, I offer my own responses to the discussion questions and group comments. In this type of class, we have time for two student-led discussions per class (most university classes in Japan are 90 minutes in duration).

### *Content-based English Courses*

In the mid-1990s, a broad consensus was reached among university educators in Japan that reliance only on the grammar-based (language-based) approach to English language studies, although of benefit to Japanese students who had experienced at least one year living abroad in an English-speaking environment or those students who were truly interested in improving their

English language skills, did not lead to an improvement in English language competency on the part of the majority of students. It was found that the focus on grammar led to an increase in dislike in the study of English for many students, and the end result was that the majority of Japanese university graduates were functionally illiterate in English although they had studied English since junior high school.

In order to develop interest on the part of students in actually using the English language they had passively acquired over the years, since the mid-1990s an increasing number of English Departments as well as English programs embedded within other departments and faculties at Japanese universities incorporated into their curricula a “content-based” approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language. By 2000, most Japanese universities, including Shibaura Institute of Technology (SIT) where I am tenured, offered both “language-based” courses and “content-based” courses in their English language curricula (for a description of the Content-Based English Program at SIT in Japanese and in English, visit the Faculty of Systems Engineering website at: <http://www.se.shibaura-it.ac.jp/english.php>).

The academic boundaries in the social sciences and humanities are no longer clearly defined, and the increasing recognition of the overly fragmented state of academic disciplines offers a much needed counter balance to a previous preference for narrowly defined specializations. The “content-based approach” to English language instruction in Japan offers an excellent example of how previously closed academic boundaries are now being innovatively crossed, so that social scientists can utilize their expertise in the humanities as well as in other social science disciplines. Thus, at many universities in Japan, social scientists with doctorates from universities abroad are provided the opportunity to teach a broad range of interdisciplinary courses in English that do not require the ultimate goal of English language skills acquisition.

That said, in content-based courses, all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) are fully integrated, and not artificially separated, in order for students to gain confidence in all areas of language acquisition. Students are able to gain English language skills in an intellectually stimulating and content-rich learning environment, and are exposed to “authentic” English texts (readings targeting native English speakers) with the focus on content and communicating ideas using university-level material that is socially relevant and offers a diversity of perspectives. Thus, this approach is a major departure from the previous focus on grammatical accuracy using English for Foreign Learners textbooks, substitution drills, translation exercises, patterns in daily conversation, and comprehension quizzes.

### *On Critical Thinking*

Critical thinking, one of the most important skills for college work and beyond, seeks the meaning beneath the surface of a statement or “text.” Using analysis, the critical thinker separates this text into its elements in order to see meanings, relations, and assumptions that might otherwise remain buried. Critical thinking underlies reading, writing, speaking and listening — the basic elements of communication — and helps to uncover bias and prejudice, offering a path to freedom from half-truths and deceptions.

Consider the five steps of critical thinking: (a) What am I being asked to believe or accept? What is the hypothesis? (b) What evidence is available to support the assertion? Is it reliable and valid? (c) Are there alternative ways of interpreting the evidence? (d) What

additional evidence would help to evaluate the alternatives? (e) What conclusions are most reasonable based on the evidence and the number of alternative explanations?

Students should be taught “how” to think (evaluation and analysis) and not just “what” to think (rote memorization of “objective” facts). This is the basis of helping students to develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is disciplined intellectual analysis that combines research, knowledge of historical context, and balanced judgment. Critical thinking entails the careful and deliberate determination of whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim. A large part of critical thinking goes beyond informal logic and includes assessment of beliefs and identification of prejudice, bias, propaganda, self-deception, distortion, misinformation, etc. Good critical thinking is skillful and responsible thinking in which you study the problem or issue from all angles, and then exercise your best judgment to draw conclusions.

Critical thinking means self-reflective thinking in the pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world. Another way to describe it is reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or what action to take. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable one to live and act responsibly in it. True critical thinking is higher-order thinking, enabling a person to, for example, responsibly judge between political candidates, determine if corporate globalization is conducive to peace and social justice, evaluate society’s need for nuclear power plants, or assess the consequences of global warming. Critical thinking enables an individual to be a responsible citizen who contributes to society, and not be merely a consumer of society’s distractions. Developing critical thinking skills helps to increase social and political consciousness.

Critical thinking can be described as the scientific method applied by ordinary people to the ordinary world. This is true because critical thinking mimics the well-known method of scientific investigation: a question is identified, a hypothesis formulated, relevant data sought and gathered, the hypothesis is logically tested and evaluated, and reliable conclusions are drawn from the result. Critical thinking is the ability to think for one’s self, and reliably and responsibly make those decisions that affect one’s life. Critical thinking is also critical inquiry, so such critical thinkers investigate problems, ask questions, pose new answers that challenge the status quo, discover new information that can, for example, be used to help promote peace, human rights, and social justice, question authorities and traditional beliefs, and often challenge received dogmas and doctrines. It may be that patriarchal, militaristic, elite-controlled societies can tolerate only a small number of critical thinkers, so that learning, internalizing, and practicing scientific and critical thinking is discouraged. Most people are followers of authority: most do not question, are not curious, and do not challenge authority figures who claim special knowledge or insight. Most people, therefore, do not think for themselves, but rely on others to think for them. Most people indulge in wishful, hopeful, and emotional thinking, believing that what they believe is true because they wish it, hope it, or feel it to be true. Most people, therefore, do not think critically.

### *In Conclusion*

Although the topics of discussion, class procedure, and methods of evaluation will vary from teacher to teacher, the primary objective of a critical/engaged pedagogy is the same: to help students develop and use their critical thinking skills by cultivating the ability to identify the perspectives being offered in analyses of social phenomena and to help them start to ask the important questions that need to be asked in order to recognize the urgent necessity for everyone to become involved in working together to create a more economically and socially equitable society. Importance is placed on helping students become broad-minded, critical thinkers able to process information in the most skillful, accurate, and rigorous manner possible, in such a way that it leads to the most reliable, logical, and trustworthy conclusions, upon which they can make responsible decisions about their lives, behavior, and actions with full knowledge of the assumptions and consequences of those decisions.

A critical/engaged pedagogical approach will often, but not necessarily, involve students in small group discussions in order to allow them to express their opinions and hear the opinions of their classmates on topics ranging from environmental issues and human rights to issues of war and peace or corporate globalization. Students need to be given the opportunity to broaden their own perspectives and bring in examples from their everyday lives to relate to the issue under discussion; in my own classes, I have found that students' enthusiastic response to critical yet constructive analyses of social issues that concern them directly or indirectly have clearly indicated a felt need on their parts to develop and exercise their critical thinking skills. Often, the material introduced to students reflect the perspectives of social activists or dissident scholars, or of indigenous peoples or Third World poor with completely different world views from their own, so students are encouraged to confront and critique their own biases and interpretations of social phenomena based on what are commonly-held cultural values and assumptions. Hopefully, they will be motivated to read more articles concerning socially relevant topics of interest to them, thereby further broadening their own perspectives and enabling them to become engaged citizens, willing and able to help work for a brighter and better future for all. And if that occurs, my attempt to engage students in socially meaningful discussions by means of a critical/engaged pedagogy is rewarded, and I find that both personally and professionally fulfilling.