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Expression of the Oppressed: Using Critical Pedagogy in Arts Education to Disrupt Systems of Oppression

By

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Abstract

*In 1970, Freire introduced critical pedagogy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Since that time, critical pedagogy has been widely applied in general education and has slowly integrated into music, theater, dance, and visual arts education. Rooted in the critical examination of power, critical pedagogy is a way of critically examining how we conceptualize, navigate, and reimagine the relationship between teacher, student, and the established knowledge being taught in the classroom. Critical pedagogues argue that selectively teaching knowledge representing certain viewpoints while omitting other viewpoints fosters hegemony—dominance of one group over another—in the classroom. Such educational inequities and exclusion are tied to disaffection, social fragmentation, and conflicts. Arts education is not exempt from curricular hegemony. The longstanding practice of grounding arts education in definitions of artistic value as determined by dominant social groups makes the field resistant to critical pedagogy. By applying critical pedagogy, arts educators can break the cycle of hegemony and instead foster the principles of equity, recognition, and inclusion.*

Keywords: Paulo Freire, problem-posing, critical pedagogy, arts education, oppression, hegemony, pedagogy of the oppressed

In 1970, Paulo Freire introduced critical pedagogy through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Since then, critical pedagogy has been widely evaluated and applied in general education (Giroux, 1997; McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000; McLaren, 1994; Shor, 1992) and has slowly integrated into music, theater, dance, and visual arts education (Abrahams, 2005; Allsup, 2003; Boal, 1985; Heiland, 2016; Lamb, 1996; Peters, 2016; Regelski, 1998, 2004). Rooted in the critical examination of power, critical pedagogy is “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (McLaren, 1999, p. 51).

Critical pedagogues have argued that teaching the selective viewpoints of one group while omitting other viewpoints fosters *hegemony*, or dominance of one group over another, in the classroom. Often, educators select curricular knowledge to reproduce dominant cultural and social values. Once such values are entrenched in the interpersonal and institutional settings, they permeate society, are assumed to be common sense, and go unchallenged (Kranenberg, 1986; Litowitz, 2000). This becomes problematic when the values infiltrating social norms are ones that uphold oppressive, hegemonic ideologies.

The cost of hegemony in the classroom is personally and societally steep. Students who receive differential treatment in the classroom are more likely to drop out of school (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). When such individuals lose access to education, they are less likely to secure jobs that adequately support their future families and are more likely to face jail time as adults (Noguera, 2003; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). Those students who manage to stay in school and resist a hegemonic environment often cope through disengagement and defiance (Miron & Lauria, 1998). On a societal level, systemic

inequities and exclusion are linked to disaffection, social fragmentation, and conflicts (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2012).

Arts education is not exempt from curricular hegemony. The longstanding practice of grounding arts education in definitions of artistic value as determined by dominant social groups makes the field resistant to critical pedagogy. In the United States, for example, there exists a historic campaign to rehabilitate the musical tastes of poor social classes from low culture to high culture (Seeger, 1957). The United States' strong preference for funding curricula based in Western European orchestral, band, and choral traditions, despite an increasingly diversified population reflects this mindset (Jones, 2004; United States Census Bureau, 2010). By applying critical pedagogy, arts educators can break the cycle of hegemony and instead foster the principles of equity, recognition, and inclusion.

Systems of Oppression

Oppression occurs when people are repeatedly denied equitable access to freedom, opportunity, justice, or other elements of human experience based on facets of their identity. Bell (2013) identified the four Is of oppression (ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized) as a systemic framework of interrelated parts that cannot exist independently. *Ideological oppression* forms the foundation and stems from “the idea that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group” (Bell, 2013, p. 1). *Institutional oppression* occurs when ideological oppression becomes “embedded in the institutions of society – the laws, the legal system, and police practice, the education system and schools, hiring policies, public policies, housing development, media images, political power, etc.” (Bell, 2013, p. 1). *Interpersonal oppression* results when ideological and institutional oppression “gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally disrespect or mistreat individuals in the oppressed group” (Bell, 2013, p. 2). Finally, when individuals of an oppressed group

internalize ideological inferiority, observe it reflected in their institutions, and endure interpersonal mistreatment, *internalized oppression* can result (Bell, 2013, p. 2).

Systems of Oppression in Education

The knowledge selected for curricula sets the front line example of what, and who, matters most in classrooms. Biased knowledge selection often privileges the values and practices of the dominant culture. Because hegemonic values are often ensconced into societal norms (e.g., this is what we have always taught), they can become insulated from critique and evolution. Basing an education system on knowledge shielded from interrogation puts our curricula at risk of social and cultural obsolescence.

Holding the position to select curricular content imbues the institutional power to oppress through omission and misrepresentation. Curricular representation can impact the lives of learners and communities by endorsing cultural biases and transmitting patterns of prejudice. Koza suggested that the authority of textbooks makes them especially influential over the development of ideas and behavior (Koza, 1994, p. 29).

Since teachers operate as agents of the education system, failing to address inequities in curricular knowledge and pedagogies can constitute institutional oppression by omission. In such cases, the intention or awareness of the teacher does not matter. The power institutions imbue to them makes their actions and omissions complicit. Such correlations imply an ethical imperative for educators to create an inclusive learning experience for all learners. Teachers must ask questions of all curricula: Who selects knowledge? and Whose voices are represented?

Systems of Oppression in Arts Education

Like general education, arts curricula are often hegemonic. Such bias not only harms individuals against whom a curriculum shows prejudice, but also communicates ideologies of inequity to their classmates. For example, when music curricula neglect or stereotype

females, they not only create an inequitable experience for female students who do not see themselves accurately represented, but also damage male learners who absorb systems of gender inequity (O'Toole, 2005, p. 297).

Arts education traditions demonstrate a history of avoiding the type of critical examination that challenges social systems of oppression. Regarding music education, Horsley (2015) pointed to the “historical avoidance of issues related to politics, citizenship, and social justice” (p. 63). Regarding visual arts education, Peters (2016) highlighted the lack of critical study, “particularly as it relates to politics, agency, and social justice” (p. 1).

The subjective nature of artistic value compounds the challenge of incorporating critical pedagogy into arts education. When an art form originated by a dominant group is classified as better (ideological oppression) and receives media exposure, state funding, and community support while artists from marginalized groups are denied access to opportunities (institutional oppression), the trajectory from subjective artistic value to oppression is clear. In the United States, for example, the ideology of White supremacy fuels the institutionalized prioritization of state funding for the performance of European opera over rap and hip-hop, two musical traditions of the marginalized Black community. Amazingly, this institutionalized hierarchy persists despite the gradual decline of opera attendance and rap and hip-hop emerging as the dominant genre for United States listening consumption (National Endowment for the Arts, 2017; Nielsen, 2018).

Challenging Systems of Oppression in Arts Education

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) proposed a metaphor to illustrate the traditional education model: *banking education*. In banking education, teachers deposit knowledge into students' minds. Learning is a one-way transaction where students passively accept knowledge. Counter to banking education, Freire developed *problem-posing education*, a critical pedagogy where the teacher poses problems about the knowledge and

prompts students to scrutinize it in relationship to their own world experiences. Learning becomes a critical investigation and students actively participate in the education process. (Freire, 1970).

Arts educators can challenge systems of oppression and take steps to disrupt hegemony by using problem-posing to critique power structures. Since this is a pedagogical approach rather than a curricular revision, educators can begin applying it to any existing curriculum. For example, if studying Romantic European composers, say, Beethoven, Brahms, and Liszt, a problem-posing teacher might prompt, Why are all of these composers male? Who decided that we should study these composers and not others? What might have led to this group of composers gaining reverence while others are lost to history? How well do you think this group of composers reflects the society of that time? or How does it impact our current society when schools prioritize the works of male European composers?

One of the benefits of problem-posing is that by exposing curricula to healthy critique, curricular knowledge can expand and evolve. For example, after asking these questions, teacher and students might decide to research female and racially diverse Romantic composers to include alongside Beethoven, Brahms, and Liszt. This ensures future students benefit from a curriculum that dignifies the artistic works of a diversity of individuals.

Abrahams (2005, pp. 3–4) summarized five descriptive principles of problem-posing pedagogy:

1. It is a conversation between learner and teacher involving problem-posing and solving;
2. It expands the learner's understanding of reality;
3. It produces conscientization, or mature understanding beyond basic knowledge retention;

4. It reshapes the viewpoints of both teacher and learner; and
5. It is political and demands critical examination of power structures in all levels of local and global society.

Abrahams posited that successful problem-posing will reflect each of these five principles. For example, our hypothetical Romantic composer class interaction demonstrates each of these principles, and so we might deem it a success.

As Bell (2013) noted, the four Is of oppression are interrelated; impacting one disrupts them all. Consequently, by using problem-posing, arts educators can disrupt oppression in a combination of ways. For example, critiquing exclusionary curricular knowledge undermines ideological oppression by making dominant social and cultural assumptions visible. Using questions to evolve a more diverse curriculum disrupts institutionalized oppression by creating inclusive representation. When ideological and institutional oppression are disrupted, students from the dominant culture are less likely to absorb hegemonic ideologies and initiate interpersonal oppression. Meanwhile, students from marginalized groups see their identities institutionally reinforced, making them less susceptible to internalizing oppressive ideologies about themselves.

Conclusion

Critical pedagogy has a strong legacy in general education, and there is still opportunity to expand its use in arts education. The institutionalized power imbued to arts educators carries with it the responsibility to address hegemonic inequities. Failure to do so can result in disengagement and defiance in the classroom; student attrition that reduces earning potential and increases risk of incarceration; and social disaffection, fragmentation, and conflicts. By applying critical education, arts educators create the opportunity to affect the interrelated systems of ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression.

The literature would benefit from intentional examination of how ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression specifically impact arts education. Additionally, those in the field of arts education need to continue critically examining its traditions and assumptions for hegemonic ideologies. Such knowledge would equip arts educators with a better understanding of how to pose meaningful questions that disrupt the foundation of oppressive systems, enable knowledge to expand and evolve, and ensure future students benefit from a curriculum that dignifies the artistic works of diverse individuals.

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