

Z Nicolazzo  
Teaching Philosophy Statement  
Arriving at a Critical Collaborative Pedagogy

*We teach to change the world. The hope that undergirds our efforts to help students learn is that doing this will help them act toward each other, and toward their environment, with compassion, understanding, and fairness. But our attempts to increase the amount of love and justice in the world are never simple, never unambiguous. What we think are democratic, respectful ways of treating people can be experienced by them as oppressive and constraining. One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice. The cultural, psychological, and political complexities of learning and the ways in which power complicates all human relationships (including those between students and teachers) mean that teaching can never be innocent. (Brookfield, 1995, p. 1)*

Although I have always known I approached research and scholarship from a critical epistemological stance, it was not until recently that I was able to develop a sense of what that meant for my pedagogical approach. I understood that being a critical educator meant exposing and interrogating the phenomenon being studied through multiple lenses of privilege, power, and oppression. I knew being a critical educator also meant elucidating these constructs as operating on individual, institutional, and systemic levels, and helping the students with whom I was in community with to seek out the assumptions from which they approached the topics we discussed in the classroom, an approach Brookfield (2012) referred to as hunting assumptions. However, I struggled with what Ellsworth (1992) described as the *doing* of critical pedagogy, or the process by which one seeks to promote positive social change through critical pedagogy. Ellsworth (1992) called on critical pedagogues to move beyond mere critical analysis and engage with students in developing “a ‘defiant speech’ that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival” (p. 105). In other words, Ellsworth challenged critical educators to focus on critical education as both an analytical framework as well as an act of resistance that seeks to redress inequity and injustice.

At the same time I was searching for a way to answer Ellsworth's call for a responsible critical pedagogy that worked toward counteracting the injustice it sought to uncover, I was embarking on my dissertation study. For this study, I used a methodology called critical collaborative ethnography (Bhattacharya, 2008). Stemming from the critical theoretical tradition that also serves as the genesis of critical pedagogy, Madison (2012) suggested that critical ethnographic practice meant recognizing, "We [researchers] are not simply subjects, *but we are subjects in dialogue with others*" (p. 10, emphasis added). Bhattacharya (2008) further stressed the importance of being in relationship with others by stating that the collaborative element of critical collaborative ethnography "refers to the notion of doing ethnography 'with' people rather than 'on' or 'about' people" (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 305). Thus, critical collaborative ethnography as a methodology seeks to create an environment in which the traditional lines between the roles of researcher(s) and participant(s) blur and the entire research process is approached as a joint endeavor with the goal of making the lives of those involved better.

Lately, I have thought about the how my methodological and epistemological sensibilities have blended, allowing me to name my pedagogical approach as *critical collaborative pedagogy*. Being a critical collaborative educator means that I seek to work alongside and with students rather educating students on or about subject areas. It also means that I work hard to unseat traditional notions of faculty-as-expert and student-as-novice while also being cognizant of the asymmetrical power relationships that arise from my being marked as an instructor. This means negotiating the myriad ways in which power shifts among all members of any educational setting, being transparent about the roles students and I play in co-constructing learning communities, and being attuned to the educational process as well as the course content.

There is not one specific roadmap I have found to enacting a critical collaborative pedagogy, complete with the ‘right’ assignments or syllabus design. However, I see the first step to my pedagogical approach to be consistent engagement in self-reflexivity regarding the notion of control in the educational process. Specifically, I continue to pay attention to how control shows up in educational settings. Who has control, challenging myself around my feeling the need to maintain a certain level of control as an instructor, and how and when I cede my stance—imposed by myself as well as others—as an authority and expert as a strategy to invite others to increase their investment in our shared learning community are themes that continually arise as a result of such self-reflexivity.

I am also cognizant of how my own salient social identities as a young, gender non-conforming, White, and temporary able-bodied individual who grew up in a lower middle-class household show up in the classroom, making my ability to negotiate power, control, expertise, and authority more complex than merely making a decision to ‘give it up’ or ‘hand it over’ to students. For example, my identities as a young gender non-conforming educator have at times coalesced in students questioning my ability to be an effective educator or their being surprised when they have a positive classroom experience. Additionally, as a White educator, I am cognizant of how much space and time I and other White students consume in classroom settings, and I work hard to attend to our involvement in class discussions in a manner that creates space for the voices of students of color without tokenizing their experiences or narratives.

Rather than my philosophical stance being purely aspirational, I have continued to practice my critical collaborative pedagogical approach throughout my time as an educator. Each time I teach a course, I introduce our classroom as a community in which we all—students

and myself—both have responsibilities for our shared learning. I also continue to provide opportunities for students to provide ongoing anonymous feedback about both the educational process and course content, which I then reflect back to them as we work to make adjustments when needed. Furthermore, I am intentional in reflecting on my own role as an educator, the effects of my engagement, and how my salient social identities might be mediating the educational experience for students and myself. I do this not only by reflecting on my own experiences and investments as a critical collaborative pedagogue, but I also connect with mentors as a way to debrief experiences I encounter in the classroom and gain critical feedback on my ability to promote education as the ‘practice of freedom’ (hooks, 1994).

In closing, I echo the messiness inherent in critical education laid out in the epigraph for this teaching philosophy statement. However, such messiness is not a sufficient reason to withdraw from taking a critical stance to the educational process. Additionally, while I have always engaged in critical collaborative pedagogy, now having a theoretical framework through which to approach my practice as an educator provides a philosophical foundation, grounding my work and helping to hold me accountable to the tenets of what it means to be a critical collaborative pedagogue. Furthermore, it is this philosophical grounding and the accountability it provides me as an educator that will aid in my ability to be good company (Baxter Magolda, 2002) for the students with whom I work along our shared educational journey.

## References

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