Critical Communication Pedagogy and Assessment: Reconciling Two Seemingly Incongruous Ideas

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Many critical educators struggle with the idea of assessment, viewing it as a practice that stifles a critical communication pedagogical agenda. However, assessment is a necessary part of education, because it helps instructors to determine how well students are meeting course goals. In fact, I argue that assessment can be a positive tool to help critical educators to work toward conscientization, thus, determining whether students are developing a heightened awareness of hegemony, identifying avenues for praxis, and developing means to respond to hegemony when they discern its presence in society. By providing examples of how critical educators can help students reach conscientization, this article examines the relationship between two seemingly incongruous terms—critical communication pedagogy and assessment—to enable critical educators to facilitate a critical agenda.

Critical Educators' Perspective of Assessment

Critical educators believe that the goals of a critical education should be to empower students to "break down barriers, to overcome obstacles, to open doors, minds, and possibilities. It aims at something deeper and richer than simply imbibing and accepting existing codes and conventions, acceding to whatever is before us" (Ayers, 2010, p. 185). These goals separate critical education from many tenets of traditional education. One specific tenet of traditional education with which critical educators often struggle is assessment. To many critical educators, assessment is antithetical to the goals of a critical education because it stifles a critical communication pedagogical agenda in the classroom.

As evidenced above, proponents of traditional education and proponents of critical education hold very different views about education and assessment. To understand the differences in ideology, I will first discuss the central tenets of traditional assessment procedures. Second, I will discuss critical scholars' criticisms of traditional assessment.

Traditional Assessment

Traditional modes of assessment are designed to verify what students have learned (Bintz, 1991) and often occur after the learning has taken place (Anderson, 1998). Traditional ideologies about assessment follow a positivistic epistemology; therefore, they are designed to teach students "truths"

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about the world (Glasson & Lalik, 1993). Educators who hold positivistic views of the world believe "that the vast majority of what is to be learned is already known, digested, and organized, and there are acknowledged correct responses to the curricular questions which are to be asked" (Short & Burke, 1991, p. 60). Traditional modes of education rely heavily on lecture as the means by which to communicate information to students. Students are required to memorize this information to perform well on assessments (Anderson, 1998). To best measure how well students have memorized the information, traditional assessment procedures include closed-ended tests that are often standardized. These objective tests often include multiple-choice questions, true/false questions, short-answer questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and essays (Dikli, 2003). Because of the objective nature of traditional assessments, essays are usually graded by using a rubric with a criteria-rating scale (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2011). Similarly, short-answer questions are often phrased in a way that requires students to recall what they have memorized and to write it in a blank space that has been provided for a brief answer (Simonson et al., 2011).

Critical Views of Traditional Assessment

Critical educators hold a vastly different perspective of assessment than proponents of traditional education. Barros (2011) explains this difference in ideology: "Proponents of traditional forms of assessment assume that students can be tested fairly in uniform ways, thus disregarding issues of socioeconomic dominance and cultural subordination that are intrinsically tied to any process of learning" (p. 79).

Critical educators feel that traditional forms of assessment serve to marginalize students and prevent them from learning to think critically. To critical educators, such assessment leads to "the perpetuation of schooling as a mechanism of social engineering, which ultimately sustains the validity of dominant ideologies" (Barros, 2011, p. 79). Smith (1995) elaborates upon this critical view of assessment:

> It is discriminatory, and it stigmatizes and disempowers individuals for life. It doesn't encourage anyone to read, write, learn, or think, though it does leave students and teachers frustrated, confused, despondent, resentful, and angry. I don't think assessment has any redeeming features, but, if it has, we are paying an exorbitant price for them. Assessment spawns difficulties faster than they can be dealt with. We don't need more tests or better tests; we need to extricate ourselves from tests. (p. 587)

Thus, critical educators see assessment not as a tool that promotes learning but a means of control by outside agendas dictating that learning should be done in an objective, prescriptive way. To critical educators, traditional forms of assessment align with Freire's (1970) notion of the banking concept of education. In this system, Freire describes how the instructor:

> expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are

detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. (p. 91)

To Freire, traditional forms of assessment are part of an oppressive educational system in which students are first "filled" with information and then are assessed through objective testing measures designed to demonstrate how well the students have memorized the information. Such assessments do not determine how well the students can analyze, interpret, and critique ideas, but rather only measure the degree to which students have memorized and can regurgitate the information. These assessment measures determine how well students have internalized the "gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Freire opposes assessment that does not provide students with "opportunities to consciously develop a critical framework in which they confront the validity of their acquired evaluative system against other systems" (Barros, 2011, p. 83).

Influenced by Freire and the banking concept of education, critical educators have had a contentious relationship with traditional forms of assessment. Today, critical educators continue to struggle with assessment based on the banking concept of education, which is presently manifested through neoliberalism. Although all tenets of the banking concept of education and neoliberalism are not identical, the two systems are similar in that they both serve to marginalize and control learning. Thus, it is important to examine how the current neoliberal ideology further entrenches the idea that assessment must be objective, prescriptive, and promote a corporate agenda in the classroom.

The Influence of Neoliberalism

Critical educators today encounter neoliberalism, an ideology that epitomizes the banking concept of education. This current economic ideology is antithetical to a critical agenda in the classroom, because it promotes the idea that "the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions" (Giroux, 2005, n.p.). Neoliberal society emphasizes profit above all else and, thus, possesses the economic means of influencing government to enact policy that benefits corporations, namely in education.

Critical educators are concerned about the expansion of neoliberalism from the market into government and into schools. Thus, to critical educators, neoliberalism pushes education away from critical thought toward a corporate agenda. Following neoliberal thought, the university's role in society is not to educate the whole person, nor is it to cultivate critical thought about subject matter. Instead, neoliberalism treats employment as the primary evidence of learning, and instructors are forced to align course content with job market demands (Champagne, 2011).

Neoliberalism and Assessment

Neoliberalism advocates a movement away from a progressive pedagogical model in which instructors are seen as facilitators of learning to a performative model in which strict controls are placed on learning, such as standardized testing. In this neoliberal model, instructors' roles are changed from

facilitators to technicians, and assessments are produced that result in only superficial learning (Broom, 2012). For critical educators, neoliberal assessments have negative consequences for students. For example, students tend not to become lifelong learners; students learn to be competitive, which reduces collegiality; and students lose confidence in their abilities as learners (Broadfoot & Pollard, 2006). Finally, neoliberal assessment has the effect of increasing differences between classes, races, and genders.

Apple (1999) explains that "Freire himself clearly saw the dangers associated with the development and widespread acceptance of neo-liberal beliefs and practices" (p. 15). First, Freire recognized the negative consequences of neoliberalism because of its alignment with the banking concept of education, saying that "Today the resistance to progressive pedagogy is manifested, above all, in neoliberal discourse" (1996, p. 114). Second, Freire (1996) also recognized the negative effect neoliberalism has on assessment, arguing that the dominant class in society advocates only objective, technical training. Thus, neoliberal ideology furthers the banking model of education and lends itself to assessment procedures that are antithetical to a critical agenda.

Neoliberal assessment procedures suppress the very learning outcomes that critical educators embrace. Namely, when assessment is driven by neoliberalism, it does not advocate assisting students to critique society by examining hegemony, injustice, and oppression. Instead, the university "serves as corporate power's apprentice" (Giroux, 2011, p. 11). Further:

> In a market-driven . . . university, questions regarding how education might enable
> students to develop a keen sense of prophetic justice, promote the analytic skills
> necessary to hold power accountable, and provide the spiritual foundation through which
> they not only respect the rights of others . . . become increasingly irrelevant. (p. 11)

In this statement, Giroux demonstrates how neoliberal pedagogy stifles a critical agenda, because it keeps students from learning to how dominant groups in society hold the power to marginalize others. Prior to the policies of neoliberalism and corporate influence, educational institutions used to be places of "critical education, public dialogue, and collective intervention" (Giroux, 2005, n.p.). Now, as in the marketplace, neoliberal influence has reduced teacher-student interaction to merely transactions. Students are the customers, and teachers are the suppliers (Giroux, 2005). Giroux (2011) argues:

> Neoliberal public pedagogy strips education of its public values, critical content, and civic
> responsibilities as part of its broader goal of creating new subjects wedded to the logic
> of privatization, efficiency, flexibility, the accumulation of capital, and the destruction of
> the social state. . . . There is no talk in this view of higher education about shared
> governance between faculty and administrators, educating students as critical citizens
> rather than as potential employees of Wal-Mart, or affirming faculty as scholars and
> public intellectuals who have a measure of both autonomy and power. (p. 10)

Giroux's statement resonates with critical educators because it describes well the impact of neoliberal policies in their classrooms. These policies prevent critical educators from guiding students to become the "critical citizens" that Giroux describes. Such a system epitomizes Freire's (1970) description

of the banking concept of education, in which teachers are all-knowing and students are passive receptacles waiting to be filled with knowledge. In this hegemonic system, students are not afforded the opportunity to critique knowledge or examine society's impact on their lives. Rather, it prepares students for corporate life. Thus, students are not challenged to think critically about corporations' role in promoting injustice in society, but instead are taught to view knowledge as capital—something to be used only to gain profit for the individual (Giroux, 2005).

A New Perspective on Assessment

Given the prevailing neoliberal goals of assessment, it is understandable why critical educators continue to view assessment as something that stifles a critical communication pedagogical agenda in the classroom and something that is incongruous with the goals of critical communication pedagogy and its goal of empowering students. As a scholar of communication, I envision a new perspective on assessment through a critical communication pedagogical lens. To further explain this perspective, the following sections will discuss (1) critical communication pedagogy and (2) how it can be used as a guide to create assessments that meet critical educators' goals for the classroom.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

Critical communication pedagogy is a relatively new perspective that situates itself at the "intersections of communication, critical theory, and instruction" (Warren & Fassett, 2010, p. 283). Critical communication pedagogy is built upon the foundation of critical pedagogy and the work of Paulo Freire, who argues that "educational processes are not neutral; they can either domesticate or liberate" (Allen, 2011, p. 104). For this reason, communication scholars who work in the area of critical communication pedagogy draw upon critical pedagogy to inform their work (Simpson, 2010).

Because of the foundational similarities, critical communication pedagogy shares some tenets with critical pedagogy regarding power and hegemony. For example, both ideologies view teachers as "transformative intellectuals who are located in a position to radically transform culture" (Sprague, 1992, p. 17), and both share the goal to change an imbalance of power in society by developing students' and teachers' critical consciousness of how power benefits some and marginalizes others (Allen, 2011). Similarly, both ideologies share the belief that pedagogy should empower students by examining questions of hegemony, class, and privilege.

However, critical communication pedagogy extends critical pedagogy by viewing language and meaning as central to all social interaction. Thus, critical communication pedagogy examines the important role of language in the dissemination of power and hegemony in society. Because critical communication pedagogy views power as arising from social interaction, critical communication pedagogy scholars study social interaction to understand power (Allen, 2011; Deetz & Mumby, 1990).

Critical communication pedagogy focuses specifically on the study of language to understand how power functions and how people can work against its imbalance. Therefore, critical communication pedagogy's first concern is the way that language serves to privilege or oppress. This specific focus on

language demonstrates how critical communication pedagogy expands upon and contributes to critical pedagogy. Allen (2011) explains that, because everyday language has the potential to either empower or oppress, critical communication pedagogy contributes to critical pedagogy "by acknowledging how everyday interactions help to (re)produce knowledge, (re)construct identities, and (re)iterate ideologies" (p. 108).

I draw on the work of both critical pedagogy scholars and scholars of critical communication pedagogy to enhance my argument. The assessment procedures that I advance follow critical communication pedagogy by focusing on how language and interaction can help students strive for conscientization.

Critical Communication Pedagogy and Assessment

Regarding the scope of this article, critical educators at all levels may find value and applicability in the alternative assessment procedures discussed here. However, the focus of the new perspective on assessment will be at the university level.

In contrast to the prescriptive, objective tenets of neoliberal assessment, I argue that alternative assessment procedures that reflect the goals of critical communication pedagogy can be developed to assist educators in reaching critical goals in the classroom. Although critical educators do not want to be bound by neoliberal assessment measures, they do want to determine how well they and their students are meeting critical course goals. Cooks (2010) elaborates, stating that educators "constantly question if and how the educative process is working" (p. 307). Shor (1992) also recognizes the importance of assessment in all types of classrooms. Keesing-Styles (2003) explains Shor's thinking, noting that he "does not suggest that assessment should be removed from democratic classrooms. He acknowledges that it is still a necessary part of higher education and it should be frequent and rigorous and high standards for student development should be set" (n.p.). However, unlike neoliberally driven standardized assessment measures, Shor (1992) believes that critical assessment should be different. He argues:

> The instruments used to test and measure students should be based on student centered, co-operative curriculum. This means emphasizing narrative grading, portfolio assessments, group projects and performances, individual exhibitions, and essay examinations that promote critical thinking instead of standardized or short-answer tests. (p. 144)

I must clarify that the new perspective on assessment that I advocate is not simply the use of the "student centered, co-operative curriculum" that Shor (1992) outlines. Rather, I advocate viewing assessment through a critical lens as a means to mitigate the influence of neoliberalism. Critical educators tend to reject assessment in part because of its tie to objective, neoliberal ideology, preferring that course learning be subjective and as free from objective assessment as possible. The new perspective that I advocate is the realization that, although current assessment practices are driven by neoliberal thought, critical educators can still embrace assessment, based upon these types of student-centered curriculum.

In so doing, critical educators can overcome predominant neoliberal thinking that appears to stifle their pedagogical agenda.

In contrast with the goals of neoliberalism, critical educators promote critical thinking by engaging their students in society by acting as problem-posing educators. In problem-posing education, the vertical patterns of interaction are broken, and "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 1970, p. 80). Additionally, problem-posing educators work to make their students aware of hegemony in their classrooms and society.

Critical educators whose pedagogical goals go beyond filling students with knowledge view assessment as incongruous with the goals of critical education. Thus, the prevalent objectivist models of assessment do not fit the goals of a critical agenda. Critical educators often experience difficulty in assessing their students' comprehension of and response to hegemony in society. Gore (1992) concurs by arguing that critical education often becomes abstract and that it does not provide "tangible guidance for that work" (p. 66).

The following sections offer a new perspective on assessment that fits the goals of a critical agenda. I argue that critical educators can reframe their views of assessment and can develop alternative assessment procedures that fit a critical agenda in the classroom. Developing a new perspective on assessment is a positive move because creating assessments that are critical in nature can allow critical educators to better discern the degree to which students are learning to be more critically engaged in society. I contend that well-developed and critically minded assessment procedures can be used to provide tangible evidence that students are becoming more critically engaged in the classroom. These critical assessment procedures can help critical educators meet the goals of problem-posing education.

Using Assessment to Facilitate a Critical Agenda in the Classroom

Understanding the Benefits of Assessment

Assessments are designed to determine the degree to which students are actually learning what instructors want them to learn. Assessment literature regarding the discipline of communication asks: "How do we know that . . . instructors are doing a good job? Similarly, how do we know that the instructional strategies that they employ and the assignments they require are effective? (Sellnow & Martin, 2010, p. 36). Because assessments define academic success, assessments themselves are not inherently problematic. In fact, some proponents of critical communication pedagogy ask for scholarship that investigates how to assess a critical agenda in the classroom. For example, in their discussion of ways in which critical communication pedagogy scholarship will expand in the future, Warren and Fassett (2010) state:

> We will see explorations of assessment, of how we can know efforts toward critical
> communication pedagogy are, indeed, successful in, for example, cultivating reflexivity;
> critical communication educators are also likely to examine and ask incisive questions

regarding the nature and politics or and underexplored approaches to assessment. (p. 289)

I challenge critical educators to reframe their views of assessment. Because of prevailing neoliberal assessment procedures, many critical educators tend to view assessment as inherently negative. Instead, I challenge critical educators to view assessment as a tool that can be used effectively or ineffectively to measure learning. The problem is not the use of assessment; rather, the problem should be how to develop assessments that fit a critical communication pedagogical agenda. I argue that problem-posing educators can use assessment procedures to their advantage, developing assessments to determine whether their implementation of critical communication pedagogy is successful. Thus, well-developed assessment procedures, which will be explained in the following sections, can assist instructors in moving from critical communication pedagogy as ideology to critical communication pedagogy as praxis, because they are able to more readily discern whether students are becoming more aware of hegemony in society. Additionally, instructors who develop critically minded assessments will avoid a potentially serious problem. Knight (2011) explains:

> One of my greatest fears as an educator has been that if we don't develop our own measures for ensuring that what we do works and why, then surely someone else will do it for us—and most likely someone without our expertise. (p. 246)

Goals of Critical Assessment

In her discussion of linking critical pedagogy and assessment, Keesing-Styles (2003) states that "A critical pedagogy of assessment involves an entirely new orientation—one that embraces a number of principles that may not be familiar in the generic assessment literature" (n.p.). In other words, assessment of critical communication pedagogy should look very different from traditional forms of assessment. Unlike neoliberal assessment procedures, which only assess students' ability to memorize information on objective tests, critical communication pedagogy attempts to accomplish a very different agenda. I argue that, for instructors to determine whether critical communication pedagogy is working, their assessment procedures must follow the tenets of critical pedagogy and critical communication pedagogy.

My goal in this discussion is not to offer prescriptions of what instructors should do or what their assessment procedures should look like, but rather to describe general principles of critical forms of assessment. For guidance, I look to Freire (1970), for whom critical pedagogy involves conscientization—the process of becoming aware of hegemony and working to respond to it. Specifically, for critical pedagogy to be effective, it should help students (1) heighten awareness of hegemony in the classroom and in society, (2) identify avenues for praxis, and (3) take steps toward praxis (Freire, 1970). These broad categorizations of critical pedagogy can be applied to the classroom as assessment measures to discern whether and how instructors are engaging their students in critical communication pedagogy and to discern what their students are learning about hegemony in society.

The following sections explain each of the three assessment criteria and provide examples of how instructors could apply the criteria to develop effective critical assessment procedures. The application of these critical assessment criteria can help instructors facilitate critical communication pedagogy more effectively in their classrooms. Although numerous ways exist to facilitate this process, including involving students in the creation and implementation of these assessments, I will provide one example of assessing conscientization by placing it in the context of a service-learning project in a small-group communication class. I have chosen a service-learning project as an example to be assessed, because service learning is a useful way for students to take their knowledge about hegemony beyond the classroom and to explore social justice in their communities (Kahl, 2010). Because these assessments are intended to meet a critical agenda, I challenge instructors to not only make adaptations but involve students in their creation and implementation as much as possible.

Critical Assessment as Conscientization

Preassessment: Creating Syllabi

The process of conscientization should begin before course material is taught. Specifically, this process begins with syllabus creation. I advise that instructors design course syllabi to reflect the critical nature in which the course material will be examined and assessed. From the outset, students need to be made aware that the course will be approached differently–from other courses. To do so, the critical agenda should be made evident in the course goal and objectives. I suggest that instructors develop goals that demonstrate to students that they will not be engaging in objective memorization of material, but instead will be engaging in analyzing and evaluating ideas to determine whether and how those ideas serve to empower some and marginalize others. Instructors should inform students that to meet the course goal, they will be engaging in the evaluation of knowledge to develop a heightened awareness of hegemony, identify avenues for praxis, and learn to take steps toward praxis. Thus, course objectives should reflect the goals of conscientization.

It is important to realize that, although hegemony as an area of study can be discussed in all communication courses, instructors must be cognizant of students' backgrounds and their prior knowledge of the concept. As I will discuss later, not all students will respond positively to such discussions and critical goals in the classroom. Thus, instructors must always consider how to connect instruction to students' experiences—where they are in their lives (Freire, 1970). I believe that instructors can make such a connection in all communication courses and at all levels. However, the assessment procedures that I address focus on a mid- to upper-level small-group communication course in which students are at least somewhat familiar with the concepts of hegemony and marginalization. I address a specific class to provide a specific example of how conscientization can be used to assess learning. Instructors can adapt and apply these examples to their own courses to assess their own students.

1: Heightening Awareness of Hegemony

After critical course goals and objectives are developed and outlined in course syllabi, critical educators can develop assessments that meet the first goal of conscientization: heightening students'

awareness of hegemony in the classroom and in society. Thus, assessment procedures should evaluate students' understanding of how communication functions within society to create power relationships that privilege some and marginalize others. The assessments will give students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of course content and how it relates to power, hegemony, and privilege. The assessment development process is crucial, because instructors need to determine how well students have learned to critically examine the concept of hegemony in relation to course content. Although instructors could assess students' knowledge about hegemony in a myriad of ways, the most important criterion for assessments is that students be challenged to understand and analyze course material in critical ways.

Students should be assessed in the same way that they learned about hegemony and subjugation in society. For example, if instructors teach concepts through dialogue, assessments should also be dialogic. Freire (1970) emphasizes learning through dialogue. Keesing-Styles (2003) states, "To achieve a critical approach to assessment, it must be centered on dialogic interactions, so that the roles of teacher and learner are shared and all voices are validated" (n.p.). Thus, if instructors taught the concept of hegemony in relation to small-group principles by dialoguing with the class, instructors should assess students' knowledge of hegemony through the same method.

Assessing for a heightened awareness of hegemony. To determine whether students have gained a heightened awareness of hegemony, instructors may wish to engage in a dialogue with individuals or small groups of students to determine the depth of their understanding of hegemony as a course concept. Unlike traditional objective assessment measures, instructors could ask students to discuss hegemony in their own terms. To do so, instructors may pose open-ended questions, such as: What does hegemony mean to you? How do you believe that hegemony functions in society? Have your views of covert power in society changed since learning about this concept? How have your views changed? Because this hypothetical course is centered on small-group communication, instructors may wish to ask questions regarding the relationship between hegemony and small-group concepts. For instance, instructors might ask: How do you see the relationship between hegemony and leadership roles that group members assume? How do power and status as small-group concepts breed hegemony? What can be done to ameliorate this? How do defensive and supportive group climates create or lessen hegemony? How does power impact conflict resolution?

Alternatively, instructors may challenge students to gain a heightened awareness of hegemony by completing reflective journals. For example, students may be asked to reflect upon examples of hegemony that they have become aware of in society that they were not previously aware of before learning about the concept. To assess the degree to which students have gained a heightened awareness of hegemony, instructors may review the journals and/or ask students to dialogue about what they witnessed and explain how what they witnessed constituted hegemony. Instructors may also ask students to respond in writing to open-ended questions about the role of hegemony in the context of small-group communication to discern students' depth of knowledge and how communication can be used as a tool to oppress or empower.

No matter what assessment procedure instructors use to evaluate students' awareness of hegemony, two concepts are important to consider. First, the assessment should be free of prescription. Freire (1970) argues:

> One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is *prescription*. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness. (pp. 46–47)

The assessment procedure should allow students to present their knowledge and to elaborate on what they learned and why it is important. Students should be able to provide evidence that they comprehend the small-group concepts and how the concepts relate to hegemony. Students should recognize how hegemony functions in society to marginalize groups that are not of the majority. Such assessment procedures help students realize that multiple interpretations of hegemony exist, as hegemony can be experienced in many different ways.

Second, although the assessment procedure is free of prescription, it needs to allow the instructor to discern the degree to which students have actually learned the material. The critical assessment procedure should help instructors determine the depth of students' comprehension of the concept. Often, instructors believe that subjective assessment measures mean that no student response is incorrect. On the contrary, students may not have put effort into their learning of the concept, or they may have an incomplete understanding of small-group communication concepts or hegemony. When these instances arise, instructors should evaluate the students accordingly. However, in these cases, I also challenge instructors to reflect upon how they might help students have more affect for the subject and learn the material more effectively. Although critical educators might view grades as antithetical to learning, most institutions of learning require grades. Thus, I contend that grading can be a subjective measure, linked to affect for the subject. Kohn (2010) explains:

> The best evidence we have of whether we are succeeding as educators comes from observing children's behavior. . . . It comes from watching to see whether they continue arguing animatedly about an issue raised in class after the class is over, whether they come home chattering about something they discovered in school, whether they read on their own time. Where interest is sparked, skills are usually acquired. (p. 179)

2: Identifying Avenues for Praxis

When instructors have assessed students' knowledge of course concepts regarding small-group communication and how these concepts relate to students' awareness of hegemony, they can assess students' ability to identify avenues for praxis. In doing so, instructors can determine how students' awareness of hegemony and their introductory work in their service-learning projects have contributed to the identification of means to reduce hegemony that they encounter.

For students in the critical communication pedagogy classroom, praxis is using course content knowledge and knowledge of hegemony to "function as a synergy of theory and action" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 112). In this case, students are engaged in a critical examination of small-group communication through a service-learning project. Thus, after students have gained an introductory knowledge of small-group communication and its relationship hegemony, they can begin to use their knowledge to work toward praxis. Instructors will assess the ways in which students use their knowledge of hegemony to determine how to respond to the hegemony they encounter.

During this initial phase of the small-group projects, groups will begin to interact with their chosen community organization to determine an appropriate course of action to meet the needs of the organization and the residents. Using an example of a homeless shelter, students may begin by meeting with residents, hearing their stories, learning about their lives, and getting to know their needs. Although the small groups will assist the shelter throughout the semester, these initial meetings are crucial for learning about hegemony and for witnessing its effects firsthand. For students to assist the shelter and its residents, students must gain an understanding of how hegemony has influenced the residents in the past and how it influence them today.

Again, many options exist to assess the ways that students use their knowledge of small-group communication to determine how to assist those who experience hegemony. One option is to ask students to engage in autoethnography while interacting with the homeless. Autoethnography "is a reflexive accounting, one that asks us to slow down, to subject our experiences to critical examination, to expose life's mundane qualities for how they illustrate our participation in power" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 103). Additionally, autoethnography reflects "the local and immediate context of members' experiences and situate(s) those experiences in relation to larger social (cultural, economic, historical) circumstances" (p. 48).

The primary component of autoethnographic writing is reflexivity. Reflexivity is not synonymous with simply being reflective. Reflection, the type of writing done in a journal or diary, "suggests a mirroring or accounting of the past" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 48). Reflexivity requires one to consider how past actions will affect future events. Such reflexivity, not simple reflection, is useful for students who wish to consider their own roles in hegemonic structures.

Autoethnography is useful in such a project, because service learning itself does not require reflexivity. Thus, without asking students to write reflexively, students might complete a project "believing they have assisted the marginalized in society without critically examining the underlying hegemonic forces that maintain economic and social status in society. Therefore, the addition of autoethnographic writing encourages students to engage in such an examination" (Kahl, 2010). Autoethnographic writing gives students an opportunity to work toward identifying ways to respond to hegemony.

Autoethnographic writing as an assessment tool. Although autoethnography is an individual process, some general principles will help students focus their writing. Instructors should discuss with students the five general principles of autoethnographic writing: (1) critically reflecting upon prejudices that the student brings to the situation, (2) examining the effect that the student has on the marginalized group, (3) evaluating the role of ethics in the student's writing and interactions with the marginalized

group, (4) discussing the impact that the student's writing has on himself/herself and the marginalized group, and (5) reflecting on what the student has learned about power in society through his/her interactions with the marginalized group (Engstrom, 2008). Thus, autoethnography is a focused means of assisting students to learn more about hegemony in society, consider their role in it, and examine what they can do as individuals and as a small group to move toward praxis.

Autoethnographic writing is a useful form of assessment, because it allows instructors to see how students internalize what they have learned in the course about small-group communication and how it can be used to work toward praxis. Through autoethnography, students can critically reflect on what they have learned about hegemony and how they can use their knowledge to assist those in the community who could benefit from their work.

If instructors ask students to engage in autoethnographic writing throughout the initial stages of their projects and ask students to follow the five general principles of autoethnographic writing, instructors have a guide for assessing students' autoethnographic writing. Such an assessment procedure is beneficial for two reasons. First, it facilitates engaged, critical learning through reflection that leads to action. Second, it allows instructors to read students' written thoughts to determine how well students have internalized the knowledge of small-group communication and hegemony and how students have engaged in reflexivity to develop avenues toward praxis. Through autoethnography, students put themselves in the situation and come to realizations about how they are part of a hegemonic society and part of a solution to ameliorate hegemony for a group of people. Autoethnography allows for an assessment of how to respond to hegemony—something that cannot be assessed through an objective multiple-choice test. After the instructor has assessed students' learning about hegemony, their role in it, and how they can use that knowledge to move toward praxis, students can put their plans into action. In taking steps toward praxis, critical educators gain another means of assessing the outcomes of the small-group projects.

3: Taking Steps Toward Praxis

Conscientization is the third and final step toward praxis. At this point, students have already engaged in autoethnographic writing about the marginalized group, which can be a useful tool to facilitate a move toward praxis (Kahl, 2011). After discerning how to best assist this group, students will organize their service-learning project to accomplish the goal of praxis. One example of a project would be to collaborate with the local homeless shelter to raise awareness of the shelter and its residents through the creation of an advertising campaign. Additionally, the group may raise funds to benefit the shelter by soliciting donations from local businesses. The group experience might conclude with a dinner that the small group provides with the funds and materials that the group has collected from local businesses. In undertaking this service-learning project, students have accomplished two important goals. First, students have put small-group communication concepts into practice as they accomplished a semester-long service learning project. Second, in keeping with the goals of critical communication pedagogy, students have worked through the steps of conscientization. Thus, students have put into practice their awareness of hegemony and plans for action.

Assessing praxis. To Freire (1970), praxis is the culmination of all learning. To engage in praxis, learners must have developed a heightened awareness of hegemony in society and must have identified avenues for praxis. Thus, students who embody the principles of conscientization are empowered to apply and transfer course material to empower the lives of others. In doing so, they empower themselves. Wink (2011) notes that "Conscientization moves us from the passivity of 'Yeah, but we can't do that' to the power of 'We gotta do the best we can where we are with what we've got'" (p. 57). To assess students' steps toward praxis, students may develop a group paper and presentation for their final course project. In these assessments, critical educators may ask students to discuss the intersections of small-group principles, concepts, models, and theories in relation to students' movement toward action in their projects. A group-developed paper and presentation are useful, because they allow students to collectively reflect on their experiences, their learning about small-group communication, and their autoethnographic writing. Compiling these assessments gives students the opportunity to again act reflexively. For example, students may discuss what they learned about hegemony through their experiences, how they identified avenues for praxis, and how they put their knowledge and experiences into action to assist a marginalized group. Instructors might invite shelter residents to the final presentation or hold the final presentation at the shelter so that residents can offer their perspectives.

Students also may examine how they can work to respond to future instances of hegemony in their lives when they encounter it. To assess these papers and presentations, instructors may examine students' writing and their presentations to determine whether and how students' have gained a deeper understanding of hegemony in society through their interactions in the community. At this stage, instructors can discern whether students have provided only superficial understandings of power based only on readings and discussions or have internalized the information and have gained a deeper understanding of how power works to marginalize certain groups in society through their experiences with these groups. This important distinction allows instructors to assess the degree to which students have become critically engaged.

Possibilities and Challenges of Critical Assessment

Possibilities

Critical assessments provide numerous possibilities for instructors who wish to confront neoliberal influence in the classroom. Critical assessments provide instructors with ways to help students strive toward conscientization while also providing a means to assess students' knowledge about the course and hegemony in society. By following the critical tradition, students can gain a heightened awareness of hegemony, identify avenues for praxis, and take steps toward praxis. Through these critical assessments procedures, students express their knowledge through language, not through prescriptive tests. Thus, these types of assessment procedures encourage students to gain knowledge about communication that they can use to make a difference in society.

Because these assessments are designed with a critical communication pedagogical focus, they encourage students to consider how communication, language, and social interaction play a role in

fostering and perpetuating hegemony. Additionally, critical assessments ask students to think about how they can use communication to foster change. Following critical communication pedagogy, I believe that assessments that call students to engage in dialogue; write reflective journals, autoethnography, and group papers; and make group presentations provide a means by which students can become more aware of hegemony and the power that language holds.

Challenges

Critical assessments face several challenges as well. Critical assessments are a pragmatic means of opposing the constraints of neoliberalism; however, critically minded instructors may encounter challenges in working to facilitate critical communication pedagogy. Two major challenges exist. First, some students may resist a critical approach to pedagogy and assessment. Second, some scholars criticize a critical approach to pedagogy and assessment.

Challenge 1: Students may resist critical communication pedagogy. Students who have been exposed solely to traditional modes of education may resist critical pedagogical approaches (Kahl, 2011). Students, especially White males, may have difficulty recognizing that marginalization occurs for minority groups in society. Yep (2007) discusses this problem, noting that students may react to discussions of power and hegemony in a variety of ways. Students may (1) remain silent, (2) argue that marginalization is merely a problem of the past, (3) argue that all cultures demonstrate racism, (4) try to place the onus on marginalized groups by asking why they feel anger, (5) argue that oppression is an individual experience and, therefore, not generalizable, or (6) display shock that hegemony even exists at all. For many students, questions of privilege, language, and power are uncomfortable.

Traditional, neoliberal methods of pedagogy and assessment create environments in which students do not have to consider these questions while simultaneously allowing hegemony to continue. Therefore, it is understandable why some students may resist such a classroom environment. Specifically, some students may have difficulty examining questions of hegemony in society and may not agree with critical educators' positions on social justice. Critical educators should recognize that students do not have to assume critical viewpoints for critical assessment to be effective. If that were necessary, critical communication pedagogy would have the same marginalizing effect as neoliberalism, because it would impose knowledge on students. However, instructors must able to discern whether an assessment procedure is effective. I argue that critical assessments can be seen as effective if students comprehend the course content, the concept of hegemony, and the application of this knowledge through the process of conscientization. Overall, critical assessments should not force students to become critical. Rather, a critical approach should challenge students to consider their preconceived notions of power. Without forcing students to adopt a critical worldview, a critical communication pedagogical approach has the potential to encourage students to question their own ideologies, often for the first time.

Challenge 2: Some scholars criticize a critical approach to pedagogy and assessment. Progressive education, which includes critical communication pedaogogy, has been criticized by some scholars who argue that it is primarily designed to benefit White students. Some scholars argue that certain minority groups, especially Black students, fare better pedagogically under traditional, more rigid

assessment procedures rather than under progressive approaches such as critical communication pedagogy. For example, Lisa Delpit (2006), a proponent of this idea, argues for traditional educational methods within a progressive educational system. Although she advocates a multicultural approach to education, which she shares with progressive educators, she argues that progressive pedagogical approaches are more effective for White students than for Black students. Delpit argues that Black students need and respond more effectively to authoritarianism and structure that is present in traditional forms of education because they are raised in an authoritarian system at home. Other scholars hold similar viewpoints about this pedagogical perspective. For additional examples, see Gwaltney (1993), Heath (1983), and Snow et al. (1976).

As a critical scholar, I believe that it is important to consider this argument in relation to critical communication pedagogy. Some students may benefit from the structure that traditional education provides. However, the assessment procedures that I articulate, which follow the tenets of critical communication pedagogy, provide students with structure as well. In fact, it is because structured critical assessments tend to be lacking in critical education that I have proposed a critical approach to assessment that challenges students to examine privilege and hegemony in society in ways that traditional approaches to education do not.

Viewing assessment through a critical lens has the potential to enhance learning for all students, not just certain groups of them. Progressive and critical approaches to education are designed with the purpose of understanding "our students of any color or culture" (Mayher, 1997, p. 341), not just students of one background. For this reason, "Educators and the schools they work in have a responsibility to meet students where they are even if there is unfamiliarity and discomfort in reaching this goal" (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011, p. 344).

Conclusion: Reframing Our Views of Assessment

Critical educators view the current neoliberal agenda in education as antithetical to the goals of critical communication pedagogy. Neoliberal ideology epitomizes Freire's (1970) description of the banking concept of education, in which students are seen as passive vessels who can be filled with knowledge that can be objectively known and regurgitated on objective exams. Neoliberal models of assessment do not encourage critical thought or the examination of ideas, but instead only prepare students for careers in corporations. Thus, critical educators whose pedagogical goals go beyond filling students with knowledge to be regurgitated on objective assessments understandably view traditional forms of assessment as incongruous with the goals of critical education.

In this article, I have argued that assessment does not have to be antithetical to a critical communication pedagogical agenda. On the contrary, assessment can assist critical educators in facilitating a critical communication pedagogical agenda. Assessment can assist instructors in: (1) determining whether they are helping students to become more critically engaged in society and (2) determining the degree to which students are learning course content and gaining an understanding of how that content can be used to respond to hegemony that they witness in society. If critical educators apply Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization to their assessment procedures, assessment can become

a tool to help students meet the following goals of critical communication pedagogy: (1) heightening awareness of hegemony, (2) identifying avenues for praxis, and (3) taking steps toward praxis—determining how to respond to instances of hegemony when they discern them.

In sum, like Warren and Fassett (2010), I believe that an examination of the relationship between critical communication pedagogy and assessment helps critical educators facilitate critical communication pedagogy in their classrooms. Therefore, I challenge critical educators to work toward developing innovative means of assessing their students' comprehension of and response to hegemony in society. Doing so will allow critical educators to form a link between critical communication pedagogy and assessment that will facilitate a critical communication pedagogical agenda in the classroom.

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