Pushing Past the Walls:
Media Literacy, the "Emancipated" Classroom,
and a Really Severe Learning Curve[1]

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When I looked at the class roster, I was a bit concerned. Only four undergraduate students and one graduate student had enrolled in the Media Literacy course I had agreed to teach when I was hired. Typically, when a course has this few students, it is cut. However, because it had never been taught before, or because the department was taking pity on the new hire, the course was allowed to run. On the first day of class, the students and I discussed what they wanted out of this course. I asked them how they wanted to proceed; they were not sure. We stared at one another, then looked around the nearly empty classroom and realized that this could be, well, a unique experience. I asked that everyone come to the next class with some ideas of how to proceed.

Two days later, I walked in with an idea. "Media literacy," I noted, "is as much a body of literature to be studied as it is a paradigm development strategy." Then I presented three options of how the course could progress and added that I was open to their ideas and wanted to make sure that everyone was involved in shaping this course. The three options were:

1) Follow the syllabus as it is written, with lecture and discussion being the primary modes of instruction.
2) Structure the course as a graduate-like seminar, where the students were in primary control of course discussion.
3) Utilize the media literacy literature to construct a media literacy training program for some group or organization.

After we discussed it, the class voted for Option 3. At the next class meeting, we were down one undergraduate student, so the project did not begin on an optimistic note.

This essay's purpose is primarily to document the creation process of the Bethesda Program After-School Media Literacy program via a curriculum inspired by critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, Giroux, Warren). Second, it will conduct a theoretical critique of the project, utilizing the experiences of the

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[1] This essay was originally titled "Picking a Different Gate to Get Into the Class — Moving From Theory to Praxis in the Classroom" and is listed as such in the CSCA 2009 Convention Program.

project advisor (me). Finally, given the first two sections, this essay will offer a discussion of how this project and the pedagogical process could work in the future.

Critical Pedagogy — A Quick Primer

The ideas of Paolo Freire (2005) have permeated curriculum, and by extension, social theory over the past 30-plus years. Reacting to the dominant cultural pedagogical and hegemonic structures that are continually reinforced within traditional classrooms (as representations of the State), Freire and his contemporaries initiated a project that strived to develop a counter pedagogy and hegemony to what was viewed as the institutional conditioning of students as future citizens of the State. "Critical pedagogy," Gruenewald (2003) reminds us, "represents a transformational educational response to institutional and ideological domination, especially under capitalism" (p. 4).

The classroom becomes central to this project as it is the site where conditioning is reinforced by curriculum that does not create critical thinkers and individuals, but, instead manufactures automatons (a la Foucault) out of children, docile beings who have been reared in the same hegemonic system as were their parents and preceding generations, never challenging the status quo, no matter how oppressive. Teachers must remember that "education is always political, and that educators and students" must be capable of "identifying and redressing the injustices, inequalities, and myths of an often oppressive world" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 4). Our present media is the primary conduit of these myths, providing an avenue for these oppressive discourses and texts to be transmitted to and received by various publics.

Aligning critical pedagogy with media literacy is not a difficult articulation. An underlying precept of media literacy is that media organizations (particularly in the U.S.) are motivated by profit, whether it be social or monetary capital or both (Potter, 2008). This underlying drive acts as a primary motivator, directing media toward "texts" (media products) that will produce the largest return on investment, with all other considerations secondary. It is the understanding of these motivations and texts — and the subsequent critical consumption, rejection, or co-opting of them — that is at the heart of media literacy. Critical pedagogues hope that both teachers and students will work to decode these texts, as they are the "images of their own concrete, situated experience with the world" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 5). This was the underlying philosophy I employed as I entered the classroom and began this project.

Creating the Media Literacy Program — Reviewing the Process

Between the first and second meetings for the course, I contacted the Service Learning Academy (SLA) on the campus. Its sole mission is service learning and everything that goes along with it (e.g., liaising with organizations in the area, funding opportunities for projects, implementing new programs on and off campus, or knowing simply what services or products are needed in the area). After a few emails and voicemails, I was able to speak with one of the SLA coordinators. She told me that, just a year or so ago, the SLA had held focus groups in the communities in and around Omaha and had found that media literacy was near or at the top of the list for discussion in each group. Naturally, I perked up. What SLA was lacking, she noted, was the "how" to get the information and training to these populations. My response was, "Well, how can my students and I help?"

After these conversations, I had a weekend to think about what could be done. At the next course meeting, I asked the remaining students (one white graduate student, one black undergraduate student, and one Latina undergraduate student, all women) "Given what was decided last week, here is what I think we should do. What do you think?" It was decided that the course would be based on the following performance criteria: (a) collaboration toward and construction of a media literacy education program developed specifically for middle and high school students; (b) weekly Blackboard (Bb) postings of the current media literacy research, both general in nature and that which specifically looks at various media and audiences; (c) completion of all assigned readings to aid in a general understanding of what *media literacy* actually is; (d) a take-home midterm exam consisting of four short essay questions; and (e) a final critical reflection essay to be handed in at our last class meeting. The first criterion is the primary focus of this essay, though the others should be discussed as well. The weekly Bb postings require that the project authors engage the current research and literature in the field, further informing their own understandings of media literacy at both the theoretical and practitioner levels. The assigned readings utilize the two texts for the class (Potter, 2008; Silverblatt, 1999), guaranteeing a stronger understanding of media literacy foundations. The mid-term examination provides an opportunity to gauge the students' understanding of the literature at an academic level, allowing me to give each an accurate grade at the end of the course (one based on both the creation of the program as well as engagement with the material). The critical essay provides insight into each student's growth. Each criterion also allowed me to see how each student worked within a collaborative environment, how she internalized the information, and how she remained critically aware of what she was doing in this class.

Once the course plan was agreed upon, the students took on the role of primary project experts; I assumed the role of advisor. In a previous life, I had worked as a corporate trainer and also undergone pedagogy training as part of my undergraduate experience, so I was comfortable answering questions regarding formatting curriculum, creating activities, writing talking points, and so on. The most difficult part for me was resisting the urge to take over the project; the students had to be in charge. They would be the ones receiving a grade for the course, and the project was part of the grading criteria. As a new faculty member and one who, up until recently, had been on the other side of the teacher-student relationship for quite some time, I found myself in a strange place.

With the roles defined and the project under way, I arranged a meeting between the students and the SLA coordinator with whom I had been working. She joined us in the classroom and explained what the SLA was looking for. She also served as the coordinator for the Bethesda After School Academy, a non-profit organization that serves the North Omaha communities, where the population is primarily Black. The area is also among the most impoverished in Omaha and the surrounding communities. After our meeting, the students (referred to henceforth as "the team") decided they would work with the seventh and eighth grade students who attended Bethesda every afternoon during the school week. Fine-tuning the audience to this extent via the client meeting provided the team with the additional information it needed to begin research and writing in earnest. It was also decided that the team would survey the Bethesda students to help determine their media usage, what they liked to watch, play, or listen to, and their understanding of the media industry. A few days later, the team constructed a survey and had me send it to our SLA contact. This is just one example of how the team worked to complete the project.

While the Bethesda students completed the survey, the team began determining the format for the curriculum. It was first decided there would be six sections to the program, each concentrating on one media type (this decision was later changed to accommodate an additional section to the program): TV and Movies, News, Music, Advertising, the Internet, and Gaming. As the goal of the program was training and critical skill development, each of the sections would contain terminology, opening and discussion-based questions, activities, and talking points. The format of each section, typically, was two 45-minute sessions. The overall program would run six weeks, with bookend discussions opening and closing the program.

The team adhered to a specific three-step process — research, writing and revision — to develop each of the sections. Before the writing step was engaged in class, the team would complete the required reading step, then locate a minimum of two research articles that looked at the intersection of the particular topic for that section and media literacy, and finally draft a one page synopsis of each article for posting on our Bb site. These articles might include studies, theoretical discussions, or program reflections. Each team member was then required to read the posted synopses before beginning the writing step. Pedagogically, the articles were also to be used during both the midterm and the final examinations as possible evidence for essay responses. The writing step was engaged over a weeklong process where the team would develop an idea for the materials and begin organizing them into a particular format and order. My job in this phase was to record their ideas on the blackboard, take pictures of the notes, then post those pictures on our Bb site. I advised on the document formatting, but the end result was distinctly the team's decision.

Each student became the "section lead" for two of the six sections. After the first writing day, the section lead would take the materials home, format them, refine the initial discussion, and be ready the second day to finish the writing step. We used the second day in the class to also discuss the readings from the course's primary texts. Any questions or uncertainties about the material being created in the classroom could then be compared to both Potter's (2008) and Silverblatt's (1999) ideas as a conceptual barometer. At the end of the class meeting, the section lead would take that day's suggested edits, assemble the entire project into a cohesive section, and begin the revision phase. We tried two different methods for this: (a) Send the document from one team member to the next, with the section lead making final touches and then submitting to me; or (b) the section lead sending the document to the other two team members for revision, compiling the changes into a final document, and then submitting the section to me for review and comment. With schedules continually changing, the second method was adopted. Though perhaps not the most efficient method, the team chose to utilize it to their advantage for the final three sections. Once I approved the document, I would send each chapter to the SLA contact.

The section lead took on distinctly more intensive duties. The trade-off was that this person was not required to complete the research step for the following section (as the development calendars overlapped, this allowed the lead enough time to make final revisions before the section was sent on). Pedagogically, the section lead had to move through several roles rather quickly. As this was an upper division/graduate level course, I felt that this type of leadership opportunity, particularly one that involved working for an outside client, was appropriate for each of the team members, given their professional goals. The lead also acted as my contact if I had questions about material, format, supplemental items, or

team concerns. Essentially, the leads functioned as project managers or middle management between the team and me.

Toward the end of the fourth section, the team determined that an aspect in the literature — a segment devoted to critical implications of the media — was missing. Though each section touched on the concept, constructing an 80-minute section devoted to various discussion topics surrounding critical consumption of the media seemed like the proper capstone to the program. However, to do so meant that other aspects had to be changed, so the two sections on the Internet and Gaming were condensed to one week (two sessions) rather than two weeks. This final section was developed differently, as each team member, including me, was involved in one of four parts to the section. Discussion questions and talking points were developed for a 20-minute time span, each looking at issues of race, class, sex, and consumerism across all discussed media types.   The last 10 minutes were devoted to wrap-up discussions and closing ideas for the teacher to move through.

Understanding the Process — Media Literacy and Critical/Emancipatory Pedagogy

One of the underlying goals of critique is to locate the power structures within a given discourse. Critical pedagogy extends this notion into the idea of praxis, where pedagogical and curricular decisions are weighed against the philosophies of the theory. Power is both overt and elusive in the classroom. The traditional view of classroom power is that it is controlled by the teacher and enacted on the students. This perspective is one that derives from generations of conditioning and disciplining from teacher to student, with some students then becoming teachers themselves. However, we must remember that "power is never a one-to-one relationship — that power is never housed easily in one site . . . power is fluid, flowing through all of us all the time" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 65). It is this fluidity that is embraced within the critical praxis-oriented classroom. To make sense of what happened within our classroom, both philosophically and pedagogically, this essay presents three directions of critique: (a) the attempt to move the power structure from top-down to flat, (b) making sense of the student willingness (or unwillingness) to act as an equal within the classroom, and (c) what it meant to construct the media literacy project and deliver it to the Bethesda After School Program.

Attempting to Shift the Power Structure . . . And Did It Work?

A central tenet of critical pedagogy is the transformation of the classroom power relationship from one end of the spectrum to the other. This typically means moving from a centralized, top-down model, where the instructor is at the head of the class, to one where all power is dispersed equally across all participants within the classroom, regardless of class position. These are the extremes. The reality, as Foucault reminds us, is that power is fluid within all structures; the classroom is no different. Therefore, a balance of power is never static, but always shifting among all class members. This power dynamic "dance" was ever-present within the Media Literacy class and project.

The largest concern for me was balancing the philosophy of critical and experiential pedagogy with the requirements of the university. At the end of the semester, grades were going to be required for each of these students. There was no way around that. Performance criteria would be necessary to assign

a grade. Within the university, the A to F grading system is used. To be fair to all students, some idea of what differentiates "A" work from "B" work and so on must be expressed as levels to be attained. As the instructor, I am the person to determine whether or not these levels were reached and to grade accordingly. This is a core philosophical dilemma and where critical pedagogy, like similar ideological positions, falls short or collapses under its own weight. Ideally, the idea of the truly egalitarian classroom is wonderful. Realistically, it may not be possible, at least not until a cultural shift occurs within the educational structure as a whole.

Within the Media Literacy classroom, a power balance needed to be struck. This power balance sat somewhere between the needs of the student, the teacher, the curriculum, and the project. While trying to hit that moving target, I had to play several roles — curriculum manager, facilitator, arbitrator, or even subordinate — to try to maintain the power balance. For example, the first balancing act involved the students having to determine what information was important enough to include within the program. How would this be done? I assumed the role of curriculum manager to ultimately determine what should and should not be in the program. Assignments and deadlines were constructed and implemented to introduce the students to the literature. These assignments led to requirements, which led to points earned and finally to grades given. Again, the power paradox within the classroom is encountered. Could the literature immersion have happened without my intervention? It is possible. Unfortunately, the class is confined temporally to a single semester and to how often we met. Until educational culture shifts, assignments and requirements become the acculturated motivational structures to which students are conditioned to respond.

I took on other roles throughout the semester, some of them subordinate. For example, I might collect the ideas presented by the students during a brainstorm session for a particular section of the program, and then once the information was recorded on the board, assume a "catalyst" role to help them organize the ideas into groupings that could be developed. Other times, I found myself in an advisor role when some team members would not get work done and the others would ask me if I knew what was going on. Often, I put the question back to them. Had they contacted the particular student? Was there an open dialogue about deadlines that had been constructed by the team to respond to such concerns? Throughout the semester, I strived to create space for the students to occupy the power positions within the course. At times, I found myself falling back into traditional power roles and wondered, "Do these students even want to be empowered?"

Performing the Role of "Emancipated Student" — Do They Want It?

The empowering of students within a system that traditionally constructs the student as powerless is at the center of critical pedagogy. Through the dismantling of traditional power regimes within the education system, the roles of student and teacher are likewise dismantled, replaced by the role of learner, with each class member bringing understanding and knowledge to the group, so that all learners are focused toward a better understanding of a particular subject. Freire (2005) points out that this ideological shift is the only way to deconstruct not just an antiquated educational system but also the broader sociocultural ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2001). There is one catch, though. If the students don't embrace this new power that has been shifted by the teacher to the student (a power move

itself), does emancipation of the student still occur? This limitation at both the theoretical and practical levels is a reality that must be considered.

When the idea of the media literacy project was presented to the class for consideration, the students seemed interested in the idea, but were understandably hesitant. As the idea that they would be in charge of the project began to sink in, the nervousness in the room was palpable. This attempt to empower the students did not elicit new and exciting ideas and discourse; instead, it prompted their concern (perhaps even their fear) about what would be done or accomplished in the class. As the teacher and originator of this idea, I was both concerned and determined by this reaction. Critical pedagogy demands that this empowerment occurs (Freire, 2005), but this demand becomes yet another enactment of power by one group over another, further entrenching the hegemonic structure in power (Gramsci, 1971). This initial experience subsequently raised several observations throughout the semester. First, as much as I strived to actuate Freire's call for a praxis-driven classroom, student concerns surrounding such a potentially radical shift in pedagogy drew me, as an instructor, back into the traditional role of the *power center* in the classroom. As much as I want the students to own their education, this idea is not one that is often enlisted during the first 12 years of educational indoctrination that students experience prior to post-secondary education. Even at the college level, the idea that the student can teach the instructor as well as the teacher can instruct the student is not a typical pedagogical notion.

Second, if we, as instructors, want to work the idea of service learning (itself an extension of critical pedagogy) into our courses, should we not try to open up an emancipatory space within the classroom? That a critical pedagogy be adopted and engaged to allow the full opportunities possible to be realized would only make sense. However, if students have to be coaxed or lured into an emancipatory learning environment — and it could be argued that this occurred in our situation — does this mean that the idyllic form of the classroom cannot be achieved? This was a question with which I wrestled throughout the semester.

The Project Completed — The Product Delivered — So What?

Media literacy pushes for the emancipation of the media consumer by way of them becoming critically aware of the media that they consume daily. Silverblatt and Potter both remind us that, as media consumers, it behooves us to understand what we are taking in and how we are interpreting media messages for our own use. In the past, among the milieu of ideas attached to it, media literacy has presented a *media is bad* argument. Recently, though, there has been a shift to more of a *media is* perspective, aligning with some of McLuhan's foundational observations. The purpose of this project was to embrace two related ideas — the *media is* and *the critical media consumer* — and construct the media literacy program around the ideas. With the project complete, the next question becomes "Now what?"

Ideally, when a project like this is handed off to the client or co-researcher, there will be continual feedback from the client as well as long-term buy-in from the work team. In reality, the lives of students, teachers, and administrators may not allow for the continued work on a project that, in the case of media literacy, will never truly end. Though the project may have been originally received with praise

and excitement, interest can wane as client and work team communicate primarily via email or voicemail. This dwindling of support is not uncommon and should be anticipated by the instructor or project lead.

For this project, the fluctuation of internal (student) interest in the success of the project beyond a course grade or its novelty was also a deterrent. By sticking with a pedagogy grounded in both Dewey (1938) and Freire (2005), this reality could be considered grounds for a change in curriculum by the classroom learners. Paradoxically, working toward the greater end (rather than a course grade) through service learning works in exact contradiction with such pedagogy. In other words, agreements were reached and an end product (a grade) is part of those agreements. Because interest occasionally waned, I had to assume the teacher role more frequently toward the end of the semester. Once the hand-off to the client was effected, the ties for the students were, for the most part, cut. Those who stated they would be interested in continuing the project (mainly the lone graduate student) will be contacted again. My hope is that the project, now that it has been handed off, will be engaged, and, in turn, the course will be able to play a central role in the project for the long term. With the reality of life intervening at times, though, one cannot be sure this will occur.

A unique reality to long-term service learning projects conducted in the academic classroom is that this course receives a new writing team, with new students and new expectations (from their perspectives) every time it is offered. This was and will be the case with the Media Literacy Program. The course is slotted every Fall semester, as long as it meets its enrollment quota. This reality results in a few pedagogical concerns. To start, student desire to continue their affiliation with the project (once it is completed, handed off to the client and grades are posted) may be affected by the intermittent interest of the client contact (as I believe occurred in our case). Furthermore, as this project's intent was to establish a long-standing relationship between the writing team (which will be rotated in as the course is offered through the department) and the SLA, a longitudinal approach to curriculum development has to be constructed. As critical pedagogy philosophically must be fluid and malleable to theoretically be achieved, this may prove to be difficult. These two results point toward a final concern: that of institutional memory. In retrospect, it will be important for me as the course instructor to ensure that the project's progress is recorded appropriately. This may be best done through reflection essays completed throughout the semester and submitted electronically to ensure ease of storage and access by all involved. Though this curriculum requirement goes against the guiding pedagogical philosophy of the course, the reality of the situation demonstrates the delicate balance between a theoretical ideal and a pragmatic reality.

The goals of this essay were two-fold: First, record and critique the decisions made regarding the Media Literacy class — that the course should be centered around a service learning project and the curriculum should be designed and revisited by the students, using the instructor as an advisor — and the results of those decisions and, by extension, the class; and second, utilize the same philosophical positions used to make the decisions listed above to critique and make sense of the course after its completion. For the first goal, decisions are never made in a vacuum. Often, they are made in the moment, reconsidered later, perhaps found to be less than ideal, but still needing to be worked with and through. From this teacher's perspective, though, the course did not run as ideally as I would like it to have, yet I could not be happier with the end results. The students accepted the challenge, experienced

ups and downs, dealt honestly with those experiences, and delivered a very real and usable product to the client and the served population.

The critical reflection offered here presents the ideal/real and theoretical/practical dialectics that exist within our work, both as teachers and researchers. With the increasing support that exists for service learning, experiential education, and moving curriculum outside of the classroom, developing sound and progressive curriculum is important for the student, the campus, and the surrounding community. By critiquing our own pedagogy, from the initial decision-making process to the final post-class evaluation, we, as teachers, can ensure that the populations we serve are served well, and that the ways they are served help to dismantle the pedagogical methods that have been used for some time and that might very well be harmful to the very students they were developed to aid.

At the end of the day, the media literacy project was a success, though not without its pitfalls. When the semester closed, the served population received the agreed-upon product and have, at the writing, not only begun implementation but are hoping to expand its use throughout the metro and greater area. The students completed a project that moved them past the classroom into the community, hopefully inspiring them to continue this type of work. As instructors, teachers, researchers, and activists, it is up to us to allow the potential of these spaces to develop within our classrooms without forcing it. It is also up to us to ensure that the ever fragile balance between the requirements of the status quo and the egalitarian classroom is maintained to the benefit of our students.

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