What Is Critical Pedagogy Good For? An Interview with Ira Shor

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In this chapter Ira Shor discusses Critical Literacy as it takes shape inside critical pedagogy, where teachers invite students to explicitly question the status quo in the name of social justice, democratic rights, and equality. According to Shor, this approach is a “situated pedagogy” shaped by and for specific themes, locations, and constituencies—from multicultural to feminist to socialist to queer to environmental, from K-12 to college to labor and community education, from urban to rural. He adds that Freirean critical pedagogy, of course, involves practices and frameworks derived from the foundational work of Paulo Freire, whose “pedagogy of the oppressed” was a class-based practice, offering dialogic literacy programs to Brazilian peasants and workers through a problem-posing process. The challenge has always been to diversify the singular focus on social class and to reinvent the approach for other times and places outside Brazil.

Ira Shor writes that his notion of Critical literacy is also consistent with Aronowitz’s and Giroux’s notion that “critical literacy would make clear the connection between knowledge and power. It would present knowledge as a social construction linked to norms and values, and it would demonstrate modes of critique that illuminate how, in some cases, knowledge serves very specific economic, political and social interests. Moreover, critical literacy would function as a theoretical tool to help students and others develop a critical relationship to their own knowledge.” With this kind of literacy, students “learn how to read the world and their lives critically and relatedly...and, most importantly, it points to forms of social action and collective struggle.” He continues that this activist agenda was also central to Joe Kretovics’
definition: “Critical literacy . . . points to providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, critical literacy can stress the need for students to develop a collective vision of what it might be like to live in the best of all societies and how such a vision might be made practical.”

Tell Us about Your Recollections of Paulo Freire

Five decades ago, Freire launched his literacy circles in a time of growing popular optimism in Brazil, when mass movements for democracy were afoot. The insurgent political climate propelled the social impact of this activist pedagogy. However, as is well known, his programs were suddenly and violently crushed on April 1, 1964, during a military coup d’état. In our own time, here in the United States, no military takeover, but rather a long conservative restoration, has restricted the space for democratic opposition and for dissident methods such as critical pedagogy. In years of right-wing ascendancy, invitations from critical teachers to rethink the status quo face uphill battles in schools and classrooms. Critical teachers in such times can benefit from reflecting on some advice Freire offered in prior decades, I think. For example, when critical teachers do invite students to radically question the status quo, the process is more likely to work if the language used is accessible and if the subject matter is meaningful to student life and thought. This preferential option for concreteness in speech, texts, and themes had always been a special preoccupation of Freire’s vis a vis classroom practice and teacherly discourse. At the core of Freire’s process was the educator’s discovery and use of “generative themes and words,” that is, situations and language encountered in the everyday lives of students, which teachers re-presented in class as problems for study. The dialogic task of the teacher is to build an unfamiliar critical inquiry around familiar situations while also connecting daily life to larger issues of power in society. We could say that the generative theme approach embedded concreteness in the learning process while positioning the local in relation to the global. The local starting point of a generative theme also helps to discipline the teacher’s tendency to talk at and over students in academic idioms learned at universities. The patient restraint of voice and the patient testing of themes comprise an elegant discipline learned by critical teachers in process, on the job, by doing it. The payoff for this discipline lies in opening the process to student participation.