Radical pedagogy in action:
A case study of a Chicano/a autobiography class.

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Abstract: This ethnographic case study explored, from the perspective of the participants, the instructional experience in an adult higher education ethnic literature course taught through the lens of radical pedagogy.

A re-evaluation of our current value system is prevalent. As this process influences the field of education, pedagogical questions abound: What is knowledge? Whose voice is being heard? What is the role of authority? How is learning best facilitated? In order to contribute to these discourses, it is the purpose of this study to explore, from the perspectives of the participants, the instructional experience in a higher education ethnic literature course taught through the lens of radical pedagogy.

RELATED LITERATURE

In response to the continual unveiling of social disparities, radical pedagogy has burgeoned forth. As the term is used herein, this pedagogical theory contains the distinct but overlapping strands of critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy and some of the more radical strands of multicultural education. Aiming at producing a pedagogy of liberation, critical pedagogy focuses on educating the subject to think, reflect, and to act in order to create a more democratic, egalitarian society. Although influences of poststructural thought have become increasingly evident in the more recent discourses surrounding critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Mohanty, 1994; Simon, 1992), the primary underpinnings of these literatures have remained rooted in structuralism -- as seen in their emphasis on rationality, their universal assumptions in relation to enlightenment, and their construction of unified subjectivities. Feminist pedagogy, varying in theory and practice according to the model of feminist theory by which it is informed, has traditionally focused on the construction of relational knowledge, coming to voice, dealing with difference and the dichotomies of authority (Tisdell, 1995). As poststructural thought has seeped into these discourses, the multiple dimensionality of truth, positionality and difference have been forefronted. Thus, while keeping gender central to its analysis, postructural feminist pedagogy calls for a practice founded upon the epistemological standpoint that knowledge is created between the multiple positions of ourselves and others (Tisdell, 1995). Multicultural education is primarily concerned with equity and diversity. Although the practices attributed to this pedagogy are as diverse as its theoretical underpinnings, the more radical strands advocate calling into question what remains centered and marginalized in the curriculum (Hayes and Collins, 1991) and the explicit deconstruction of discourses of power (Sleeter & McLaren, 1994).

While there is a plethora of literature surrounding radical pedagogy and adult higher education, the majority of these pieces have been theoretical and/or reflective in nature (Brookfield, 1995; Hayes & Colins, 1994; hooks, 1994; Shor, 1992; Welton, 1995). There is, however, a paucity of data-based studies (Shor, 1996). This study is an attempt to fill this void.

METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic case study was chosen for this research project. In its theoretical framework and underpinnings this study was critical in construction; however, in that no concrete action was taken to effectuate change it was interpretive in nature. The class chosen for this study, "Chicanos/as Themselves: The Autobiographical Narrative" was taught by a Chicano in his late forties at a major university in the Northwest. This course was composed of 26 students from incommensurate positionalities -- seven women of color, nine men of color, nine white females and one white male. The selection of this class was based on the criterion that the theoretical and practical framework of the instructor be founded in critical pedagogy. The primary means of data collection were that of audio-taped participant observations of the class and the Borderlands group, an on-going small study group whose task it was to meet bi-weekly with the ultimate goal of presenting the autobiographical text Borderlands/La Frontera:The New Mestiza (Anzaldua, 1987). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the instructor, the five members of the Borderlands group, and four other students chosen for the disparate localities they appeared to locate. Documents were also analyzed. Data were analyzed throughout this study using the constant comparative method. To increase validity and reliability, the techniques of triangulation of data methods, long term observations, as well as member checks with some of the participants of this study were employed (Lather, 1991).

FINDINGS

Multiple and interconnecting strands were observed while exploring, from the perspective of the participants, the instructional experience of "Chicano/a Autobiography: The Autobiographical Narrative." The instructor of this course was the son of Mexican immigrant laborers. Often teaching out of his own history, Dr. Gonzales (all names used in this study are pseudonyms) grounded himself in Freirean pedagogy and positioned himself as a social constructivist. Through multiple ways of teaching and learning, Dr. Gonzales implemented both a teacher and student centered pedagogy. Within this context, the classroom experience consisted of teacher lecture, teacher-led class discussion, student-led small group dialogical sessions, and membership in an on-going small study group that met throughout the term. As the participants interacted in this context, the following findings emerged: 1) Dialogue: Dominance, Silence and Patterns 2) The Importance of the On-going Small Study Group, and 3) Limitations and Possibilities of Student-Led Dialogical Sessions.

Dialogue: Dominance, Silence and Patterns

Dialogue was often centered within this class; however, as within the adult higher education literature, what constituted dialogue (personal experience, theoretical knowledge, etc.) and/or how knowledge was to be constructed through this process was not discussed. During the dialogical sessions in this course, several students could be identified as dominant speakers in

terms of the number of utterances made during discussions. These students appeared to remain dominant in every context -- whole class teacher-led discussions, small group student-led discussions, and in the on-going small study groups. This tendency for the conversations to be dominated by a few was commented on by Richard, a nineteen year old Anglo/Chicano, "The same people are the one's who get their opinion out their all the time, so you get only one perspective." However, within alternate dialogical contexts, others also emerged as dominant speakers. This indicated that the size of the group and/or the context of the discussions influenced who spoke.

Several students spoke about the relationship between their cultural backgrounds and their participation in dialogical sessions. According to Melinda, a twenty-two year old Filipina, "Sometimes it is too personal and you were taught not to talk about personal things." The style of communication was also mentioned as a factor which inhibited many students of color from participating in discussions. As Martin, a thirty-two year old Chicano remarked, "They are used to cutting in, overlapping, and talking over people from their up-bringing. Where I was taught to be kinda quiet and allow a person to finish." Being silenced by a white member of the class and/or a member of the class who could "pass" was also noted by several students of color. According to Josey, a twenty-six year old Chicana, "I think it is really easier to be questioned by a Chicana than by a white girl, and when the whites challenge it really silences the Chicano/a." Several means of silencing were employed by white females in this context. These methods included dismissing a student of color's dialogical contribution and/or immediately accepting a statement of personal experience by a person of color, followed by "me too" and an elaboration of their own experience. In attempting to resist these silencing techniques, several students of color spoke of either becoming "aggressive and pushy" and/or "just giving up." Neither of the white females interviewed in this study viewed silence as component of this course. According to Mary Lou, a middle-aged, white female, "Everyone felt really supported in this class, as far as speaking. Probably the kids who didn't speak, wouldn't speak under any circumstances." These views were juxtaposed by many of the students of color who felt silencing was a factor in this course. Furthermore, many students of color mentioned a desire to interrogate issues at more in-depth levels. This frustration was not noted by either of the white females interviewed. As the above indicates, there appears to be cultural factors in relation to the phenomena and perception of speech and silence.

Patterns were also observed in the construction of dialogue. The pattern to follow the leader of any dialogical session was apparent. Participants in whole class teacher-led discussions inevitably addressed their comments directly to the instructor. This pattern was also noticed as participants in small student-led discussions directed their responses toward the most dominant facilitator. Additionally, the construction of dialogue itself appeared to follow an identifiable pattern. There appeared to be five main types of dialogical contributions -- questions, personal experience, opinion, bringing in other resources or knowledge, statements of truth. Following the type of dialogical contribution preceding it, a single type of dialogical contribution would continue for between four and twelve separate utterances before a different type of response was interjected. Once an alternate type of response was inserted into the conversation, a new pattern would emerge and again continue for the same duration. As dialogue was observed within this context, it became evident that without intervention dialogue exhibited its own configuration.

The Importance of the On-Going Small Study Group

The Borderlands group, the on-going small study group that met throughout the term, was composed of five members -- two Chicanas, a Chicano, a Filipina and a Anglo/Mexican male. This group experience appeared to provide the context for its members to develop a sense of group solidarity. This was evident as the members were observed gathering before and after class, calling each other on the phone, and engaging in occasional group hugs. This context also provided the space for these students to construct knowledge at more in-depth levels through dialogue. These discussions often provided a sense of disequilibrium as well as support for some of the members as they discussed their identity, gender and culture.

Limitations and Possibilities of Student-Led Dialogical Sessions

The knowledge constructed during student-led small group discussions was commensurate with the knowledge and experience of the group's members. In other words, it appeared that a group could only go where at lest one of its members had been before. Thus, a participant possessing oppositional knowledge and/or experience was often able to facilitate the deconstruction of ideologies held by other group members; however, when no participant possessed this location, much time was spent discussing issues at a superficial level and/or being "bored." Additionally, those issues which were not dealt with in class or only received superficial mention continued to be resisted in student dialogues. Although many issues appeared to received mention without interrogation, no issue was resisted as strongly as that of sexual-orientation. Eventhough two of the five autobiographies read in this class were written by homosexuals (Gloria Anzaldua and Richard Rodriguez), this topic was primarily ignored. When sexual-orientation was raised, it was strongly resisted by the participants. This resistance is evident in Melinda's response to Borderlands: La Frontera, "I say darm, you have to look at it from a perspective of a lesbian, and I can't think like that. I can't read it."

DISCUSSION

In light of these findings, several implication to the theory and practice of radical pedagogy in adult education may be observed. Within the context of this course, one's views appeared to be directly influenced by one's location. This was especially noted in relation to speech and silence. While many students of color understood silence as a factor in their experience during this course, both white females interviewed perceived all participants as feeling free to speak. Furthermore, all of the students of color who self identified as coming from working-class backgrounds, articulated their fear that they may have silenced others. This was not mentioned by the students of color from middle-class backgrounds. These students did mention the phenomena of being silenced, yet did not speak of their role in the process. The white students, on the other hand, as they did not mention silence as a factor in this class, did not acknowledge their role in the process. Thus, it appeared that not only race, but class affected the perceptions of these students. Positionality also appeared to affect the depth of analysis one desired. Although many students of color mentioned wanting more interrogation into the issues discussed, neither of the white students interviewed expressed this desire. This yearning was mentioned by students of color from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds.

Secondly, as dialogue is a central feature of radical pedagogy, it appeared that the skill to participate in a conversation specifically focused at constructing knowledge may need to be taught. It is noted that explicitly teaching students how to dialogue is problematic, as it implies the notion that there is an ideal dialogical construction, thus positioning dialogue as an essentialist notion. Yet, I still find myself, at this moment, believing that dialogue which interrogates the textural and the personal while problematizing the voices that create the discussion (Ellsworth, 1992) is more inclined to facilitate the construction of in-depth knowledge and disrupt the hegemony than a conversation, left untouched, which emerges in its own organic form. Furthermore, it may prove advantageous to provide deeper interrogation into what is said and by whom (Giroux, 1994). As it appeared that many of the white students were unaware of their dialogical patterns which silenced other students, perhaps directly addressing these concerns could increase the benefits of this process. Additionally, an instructor's use of authority to control who speaks and how often may ease the tensions surrounding the issue of dialogue being dominated by a few. It also appeared that if it is desired for the students to delve into a topic, this issue must first be dealt with by the instructor. And finally, making available a variety of dialogical contexts appeared to increase the number of students who are able to participate in this process.

Although group work is often suggested within radical pedagogy, this practice appeared to have both it limitations and its possibilities. In practice, an on-going small group was needed to create the space for both solidarity and in-depth discussions. However, it was also noticed that students needed support within both group contexts (on-going small study group and student-led dialogical sessions) for dealing with issues. Although this may prove problematic, for any outside influence interferes with the group process, lack of support left the students unable to deal with those issues which they did not have the framework or experience to handle.

And finally, it became evident that all three strands of radical pedagogy were essential to the instructional experience in this context. Components of critical pedagogy were accessed as this course was set within the framework of a participatory, dialectical, and dialogical practice (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). Aspects of feminist pedagogy were observed as dialogue went beyond the public and the rational to include the personal and the subjective. Additionally, influences of feminist pedagogy were visible as the tendency to measure truth against one norm was reduced by forefronting that knowledge is a social construction produced in the interactions between multiple positions (Lather, 1991; Sheared, 1994). And finally, some of the more radical strands of multicultural education were apparent as marginal discourses were centered (Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Mohanty, 1994; Sheared, 1994).

Although the findings of this study are limited, their implications indicate that further research and practice within the field of radical pedagogy may continue to lead us toward a more equitable pedagogy.

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