Critical Pedagogy, Discourse Tensions, and the Basic Writing Classroom: A Critical Action Research Study

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Abstract: This paper discusses a critical action research study in a basic writing classroom, which made use of critical pedagogy as its theoretical framework, as it relates to one of the findings in relation to fostering writing competency and critical consciousness.

Adult education happens in many contexts, and community colleges are one major arena of adult education in the United States (Kasworm, 2005). Recent economic uncertainty increased community college enrollment by adult students, many of whom are testing into basic writing courses after taking a timed, computer-assessed writing exam. Basic writing, meant to bring struggling writers up to college-level writing, is often taught from a behaviorist orientation that emphasizes attention to grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics, in order to "remediate" the highest number of students the fastest (Shor, 2009). Ignored in the discussion is the potential for basic writing classrooms to colonize the cultures of the students and perpetuate an ideology of production and dominance (Nembhard, 1983; Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2002; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003).

The potentially oppressive nature of basic writing classrooms exists in the tension between dominant and marginalized discourses, and the assumed assimilation of the dominant at the risk of abandoning the marginalized. Critical pedagogy is an alternative approach that attempts to foster a sense of critical consciousness in learners through the use of problem posing and questioning widely held assumptions in the classroom (Brookfield, 2005; Fobes & Kaufman, 2008), with the end goal of creating an education of wonder and emancipation (Freire, 1974).

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how critical pedagogy can foster writing competency and critical consciousness among adult basic writing students in the community college setting. Basic writing in community colleges serves as a gatekeeper, essentially acting as the manifestation of open access. If a student is not "skilled enough" to enter the higher education classroom, the basic writing classroom will remediate him or her to be compliant with standard, academic discourse (Gleason, 2001). It is the unchallenged ideology of the academic discourse that teaching basic writing from a critical pedagogical perspective can help resist.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to frame this study is critical pedagogy, which assumes that all education is political and proposes a new pedagogy of liberation over power relations (Giroux, 1985, xiii) found in educational institutions and classrooms and promotes emancipation through healing and wholeness (hooks, 2003). Within the classroom, the fundamental relationship between teacher and student is often a relationship of goods and services. Central to critical pedagogy's liberation efforts, *conscientization* (Freire, 1970) is the attempt to bring reflection and action together to put an end to ideological reproduction

(Brookfield, 2005), which starts with a core belief in the role of humans in the world as one of engagement (Freire, 1974; hooks, 2003). In the basic writing classroom, the broken system of education manifests itself in the teaching of grammar drills and sentence diagramming, isolating the learner and the language from the larger environment in which they are embedded.

As adult basic writing students come to an understanding of their education as an act of assimilation to dominant cultures and language conventions, they will be able to make a change. By questioning learned behaviors and power relations, the learner is able to uncover the power that produces social forms (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1985), and privileges certain meanings, experiences, and forms of knowledge (Giroux, 1990) by questioning previously unquestioned assumptions.

Methodology

A critical action research method was used in this study, which not only makes use of action research's cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Stringer, 2007), but also looks specifically at ways of resisting dominant ideologies and/or narratives that may be presented within the local practice-based problem. Through resistance, the hegemony bound within institutions comes under scrutiny, and subverts a hierarchical approach to education and administration (Greenwood & Levin, 2008). When approaching the basic writing classroom—an educational environment overweighed with dominant ideologies and tensions, as well as institutional hegemony—a critical action research approach is appropriate as the researcher and participants not only search for a local solution to the tension of remediating adult basic writing students, but also aim to resist and dismantle systemic power and oppression within the field of basic writing and community colleges as a whole.

This action research study was conducted in a 15-week semester-long basic writing course at a community college in the Northeast, with 21 students from diverse backgrounds and academic skills, interests, and goals for enrollment. Through the use of writing assignments, reading and in-class journaling, critical incident questionnaires (CIQs), and group discussion and projects, this study fostered a critical consciousness in participants while increasing writing competency. Methods of instruction and student feedback were taken into account and course content was adapted, as needed and articulated by the students, throughout the semester.

Findings and Discussion

Because critical pedagogy is often criticized as being overly rational and lacking in practical implications without consideration of the role of relationships and social contexts (Ellsworth, 1989), this paper will focus on the second major finding of the study that yielded insight related to practical application of critical pedagogical approaches to the basic writing classroom with the goal of fostering writing competency and critical consciousness.

Fostering Writing Competency and Critical Consciousness

The purpose of the basic writing class is for students to come out prepared for college-level writing. A common critique of the use of critical pedagogy in the writing classroom is that the course quickly becomes about politics and the instructor's ideology rather than writing itself (Hairston, 2003). However, no classroom is free from politics and ideology, and it is with this assumption that this study situated critical pedagogy as the primary teaching method for this basic writing course. Critical pedagogy opens the door to open and honest discussions of the

power and politics embedded within every classroom and gives students an environment for critique and creation, further enhancing their writing competency. It is for this reason that the second major research question of this study was to determine how critical pedagogy could foster both writing competency and critical consciousness. The findings related to this research question indicate that it is through the use of critical pedagogy that a critical consciousness can be sparked that in turn elevates students' writing competency, making them aware of their own desire for formulas, enabling their desire for self-sufficiency (and liberation), and becoming fluent in the discussion of various discourses.

Rejecting formulaic writing pedagogy. It was clear very early on in the study that participants were in search of a formula to crack the academic code, produce writing that would be acceptable to me as the instructor, and move on to their "real" classes. It was a challenge for the participants, throughout the semester, to think of writing competency any other way. Based on their first essay, a personal educational narrative, students identified a number of writing issues that they wished to discuss. The writing issues they identified were predominately "lower order concerns" and, indeed, formulaic.

This focus on "lower order concerns" (grammar, vocabulary, punctuation) at the start of the semester revealed a deeper indoctrination of what good writing should look like. From this perspective, writing becomes a very simple, conformist act when a formula for a thesis statement, subject/verb agreement, or introductions and conclusions are taught. In focusing on formulas, writing instruction becomes less about the language being used and more about a prescriptive method of writing. In fact, what is lost is an investigation of the multiple discourses of the English language in which adult students dwell every day. While the academic discourse was still taught in this course, the purpose of its teaching is not to dominate students' home discourses; rather, learning multiple discourses helps students orient themselves as they navigate the waters between the discourses.

While accepting a formulaic approach to writing may seem an efficient way to pass the class, students give up all hope of critique and admit there is one way to write and other ways are deficient. This acceptance is easily extendable to the classroom environment as a whole. If the instructor is the one with all the knowledge and the student must absorb as much of it as she can, there is no personalized educational environment, and all critique is lost.

Within this study, efforts were made to reject the culture of formulaic writing. This rejection, however, did not take place until participants began to see a spark of critical consciousness, as described above. For example, students were in search of formulas for lower order concerns (as well as higher order concerns, i.e.: "tell me how you want this essay to be written"), and resisted the rejection of formulas I presented to them on day one. It wasn't until we discussed the NCTE's "Students' Right to their Own Language" document that students began to see that they have a voice and a personal writing process that does not fit formulas. Ironically, the document that provided the impetus to critical insight was produced by a large governing body, which can be critiqued itself for ideological dangers. In fact, when the document was shown to students, they questioned who the NCTE was. One student finally came to a conclusion, to the amusement of his classmates: "They're they ones that make up all the rules!"

Coming to an awareness of an official ownership of the writing process inspired Amy, for example, to begin to own her own process. Without knowledge of the variety of discourses in the

English language, she claimed she would not be able to pick and choose which discourse is best for the various writing contexts she encounters.

Searching for liberation. Despite exhibiting a desire for a formula to "good" or "professional" writing, the participants also noted a desire to be self-sufficient, believing they could use learned formulas and techniques to acquire self-sufficiency. Melissa, for example, discussed her acquisition of formulas throughout the semester left her not necessarily needing the Writing Center. Marcus and Danielle reflected proudly on learning how to organize an essay and no longer needing to "bother the Writing Center with low-level concerns." Ronnie's mastery of spelling and grammar brought him and his dad closer as they began communicating through written letters.

Ironically, the participants showed that through working with their groups and conducting writing workshops, they were able to become more autonomous while becoming more dependent on each other as a group. And this is a unique component of critical pedagogy and an outcome discussed by Freire and Horton (1990). Critical awareness cannot come in isolation and necessitates a dialogic relationship (Freire, 1974). Likewise, in writing pedagogy, students are more likely to succeed as writers when they enter into dialogue with others about their writing (Davi, 2006).

The data in the study shows that participants were in search of liberation through a dialogic relationship with their writing group and the class as a whole. On a regular basis, the metaphors used in the biweekly CIQs to represent recent learning showed ideas of growth ("a tree," "a crawling baby," "like a baby learning to walk," "a preschool kid learning ABCs") but also liberation and freedom: "like learning how to ride a bike," "an acorn cracking out of its shell," "flying in the sky," "like a caterpillar and now I am a butterfly," "the kite is now flying in the sky." This liberating dialogue took place in multiple forms throughout the study: writing workshops, group discussions and preparation, multiple drafts of writing assignments, and feedback given on drafts from writing group and instructor.

Dwelling in the tension of the discourses. Basic writers are embedded in multiple English discourses on a daily basis. They are very aware of these discourses as they (literally) navigate back and forth between their home life and their academic life. While basic writers may not use academic discourse to articulate the tension they feel between home and academic discourse itself, they are able to articulate it in their own unique way. Danielle and Amy, for example, discussed it in terms of "quick writing" they do to family members, while Ronnie and Marcus understood their alternative discourse as it relates to flexibility with grammar and punctuation rules. Both Humar and Melissa also discussed the discourse of pronunciation and conveying meaning to an audience. Melissa reflected on purposely using more sophisticated vocabulary in her final portfolio, which she felt was difficult for her being bilingual. Humar expressed the same concern, specifically about being ignored because of her accent, which caused her to feel "angry, ashamed, frustrated."

Despite the various ways the participants understood and articulated the existence of an alternate discourse in the English language, they all knew of its existence and all framed the discourse from a deficit perspective, as something they needed to avoid or fix. Melissa referred to the non-academic discourse as a discourse belonging to "ghetto people;" Amy and Danielle both labeled it as a tendency to use "run-ons" or to "go on and on" and lose track of their purpose of writing; Ronnie described a non-academic discourse in terms related to his own black dialect:

"When you're dealing with certain people you know you have to use certain language. Like when I go to my interview I'm not going to sit in there and be like, 'naw man' and stuff like that."

In fact, in their personal educational narrative and goals, participants oftentimes listed these concerns (mostly lower order) as things they need to work on during the semester. Through the discussions and supplemental readings, participants began to better articulate the existence of multiple discourses, but still struggled to see them as equally valid, rather than mutually exclusive.

Despite being able to understand and articulate the tension, there was a very clear hesitancy to critique the academic discourse; rather, participants chose to embrace the academic discourse as a means to an end. In their second writing assignment, Amy, Danielle, and Melissa articulated that accepting the academic discourse was necessary to "help you with job interviews," "show how well a person is educated," and to achieve "higher paying jobs." Melissa went on to write, "The person with the accent may be more qualified for the position, but with the accent it is harder to understand, resulting in no job."

While the basic writing course itself does not advocate assimilation, there is a subtle assimilative assumption in the course purpose: to prepare students for *college-level* writing. How, then, do the participants come to the assumption that they are "better off" assimilating to the academic discourse? What made Humar, for example, question the existence and need for an alternative home discourse?

A possible answer is the systemic pedagogical emphasis on the deficiency of the student and the superiority of the academic discourse in developmental courses. Students took a writing placement test and were told they needed to take a lower level English class. There is, therefore, an assumption of the superiority of the academic discourse. While it cannot be argued that the academic discourse is necessary at times, the data in this study shows that with a greater understanding of the various discourses, participants were able to increase their ownership of the basic writing learning process and better navigate between the discourses. Humar came to the realization that rather than abandon one discourse for another, treating both delicately and realizing that they are inseparable and can both be used to further their own purposes has long-term benefits:

> The tension is rising, pressure is building up. The desire to improve my academic English grows stronger every day, just like the little girl's desire to have a better house and better living condition in "The House on Mango Street." I want to be accepted. I want to be normal. I want to get a good grade on my paper because good grade[s] provide me with more chance to get a better job in the future. And improving my academic English is the only way to reach that goal. I started to feel ashamed thinking about the moments I spoke the "Home English." But later I realized that instead of hating my "Home English," I should be using it as a foundation for my academic learning. The good thing about my "Home English" is I don't have to start from the very beginning. I can enrich my English based on what I knew to graduate with good grades.

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