



From the

AERA Online Paper Repository

<http://www.aera.net/repository>

Paper Title The Radical Academy: Surviving as a Novice Academic on the Educational Left

Author(s) Marc Pruyn, Monash University

Session Title Developing Writers, Researchers, and Critical Scholars

Session Type Roundtable Presentation

Presentation Date 4/15/2012

Presentation Location Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Descriptors Critical Theory, Faculty Careers, Higher Education

Methodology Qualitative

Unit SIG-Doctoral Education across the Disciplines

Each presenter retains copyright on the full-text paper. Repository users should follow legal and ethical practices in their use of repository material; permission to reuse material must be sought from the presenter, who owns copyright. Users should be aware of the [AERA Code of Ethics](#).

Citation of a paper in the repository should take the following form:
[Authors.] ([Year, Date of Presentation]). [Paper Title.] Paper presented at the [Year] annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Retrieved [Retrieval Date], from the AERA Online Paper Repository.

The Radical Academy: Surviving as a Novice Academic on the Educational Left

Purpose (1)

This study sought the advice that respected and established academics on the political educational left – a group of more than 25 members – might offer politically progressive novice academics (graduate students and new faculty members) negotiating the labyrinth of the academy. In this proposal, I will describe the Theoretical Framework, Methods & Data, Results & Discussion and Scholarly Significance of this study.

Theoretical Framework (2)

In this study, I have drawn on several central concepts from the field of critical pedagogy. Primarily, I use the concepts of “hegemony” and the “hidden curriculum” that have been so central to critical theorists and pedagogues.

From my perspective, critical pedagogy has as its goals the liberation of students from oppressive realities they face in their daily lives (Freire 1970, 1996, 1998a); the development within students of attitudes and capacities to view themselves as capable of taking action on their world in order to change it (Freire 1970; Freire & Macedo 1987; McLaren 1989, 1997); and the enhancement of student literacies and academic competencies (Freire 1970; Freire & Macedo 1987).

Critical pedagogy seeks to make visible the political nature of schooling, and the effects of unequal, often oppressive, power relations that characterize schooling and society. It challenges widely held pedagogical truths, with particular emphasis placed on rebuking myths of educational “meritocracy” which attempt to present schooling, and the acquisition of literacy, as individual and neutral processes. And it seeks to uncover who benefits and who is disenfranchised within educational systems steeped in these so-called “meritocratic” practices (Freire 1996, 1998b; McLaren 1995, 2000).

According to Gramsci, it is through *hegemony* that a society’s cultural institutions reproduce and reinforce the economic system—building on Marx’s notion of a cultural superstructure (the state, family, law, media, religion, schools, *et cetera*) that supports the economic infrastructure of capitalism (Marx, 1867/1967). Schools, for example, as one of the many cultural tools of the bourgeoisie, can serve to cement the existing economic/social order in place by presenting these cultural practices as “natural” and “normal.” According to Gramsci, hegemony—social and ideological control and domination—operates at the level of “consent” in “civil societies” (1971). Coercive force is brought to bear only as a last resort, when the dominant ideology enters a crisis. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony provided a new way for social scientists and philosophers to think about the connectedness of economic and cultural institutions and systems.

According to critical pedagogists (Apple, 1990; McLaren, 1997), the “hidden curriculum” is what is actually taught in schools and educational institutions, regardless

of what is represented in the official curriculum. It is the pedagogical extension of hegemony, the norms, rules of behavior and content that support existing hegemonic structures of power and privilege. We, as teachers, have been so socialized—hegemonized—to center ourselves within the pedagogic process (versus centering the students within it), that it has become par for the course in teaching/learning settings. Unless we have gone through a purposeful or organic process of critical consciousness-raising that allows us to see beyond the hegemony, and one of its foot soldieries, the hidden curriculum, we become pawns of the dominant order that keeps the powerful and the oppressed.

For the purposes of this study, I was interested in how the hidden curriculum of higher education—as embedded in and born from web of power and hegemony—might be challenged with the individual and collective counter-hegemony of radical/progressive/left academics.

Methods & Data (3 & 4)

This study took shape after I had been an academic for approximately five years. I began to notice myself repeating certain anecdotes to my graduate students about the process from teacher to academic to tenured professor (a journey they were just beginning at the start of their doctoral studies). When I considered the types of stories I was sharing (the praxis-based lessons I had learned as a teacher, a grad student and now as a professor), especially with my doctoral students, I realized that they all revolved around the “hidden curriculum of graduate study”; the series of lessons they would need to learn beyond the traditional ones of educational foundations, methodology, et cetera, if they were to be successful in the academy. They also needed to learn the lessons of power, privilege and mobility within the academy. Students reported to me that the glimpses into both the official and hidden processes of higher education based on my own experiences were helpful. I would routinely address such topics as: applying for graduate study; choosing a chair/supervisor; being successful on exit qualifying exams; writing a thesis proposal; conducting and writing-up research; defending your work; job hunting; establishing a research agenda; getting tenure and promotion; and, how to do all of this as a leftist, a progressive, a criticalist.

After several semesters of this, however, even though I had much to share and offer, I began to feel the egoistic weight of being someone with male, white, economic and straight privilege passing along this “important” knowledge. How colonialist! And as I started reflecting more deeply on the issue, I realized that it would be healthier to turn to others – those both more eloquent and with more experience than I – to seek their stories, their advice for novice graduate students and academics on the educational left.

So I did. I interviewed over 25 prominent – and a few up-and-coming – colleagues. These included Antonia Darder, Joe Kincheloe, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Wayne Ross, Christine Sleeter and Shirley Steinberg. But this study was not intended to be an homage to “super stars” on the educational left, it was rather an attempt to learn from their

successes and failures; and then to analyze and share this information with those who sought to follow in their footsteps.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. I asked the participants the following questions:

What advice would you give to radical/progressive graduate students and new faculty members as they:

- Apply to graduate school?
- Progress through their studies?
- Conduct their research?
- Seek jobs?
- Build their research agenda?
- Bork towards tenure and promotion?

And, especially, “What experiences have you had, as a leftist/progressive academic that you could share with this population that might help them to successfully navigate their way through the academy?”

This was a tall order, and the interviewees chose to answer all or a subset of these questions in various ways. I left it open to them. These interviews were conducted in person and via recorded telephone interviews over an eight month period.

I then analyzed the hundreds of pages of interview transcriptions using the NVivo qualitative data reduction and processing software. It allowed me to organically code the data based on several concepts I drew from critical pedagogy and many I had not even thought of. My modes data collection, analysis and findings generation followed a qualitative research approach generally (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Oakes, Gamoran & Page, 1992), and a grounded theory methodology specifically (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). My critically-informed analyses of these coded data revealed several areas of findings. These are shared in the following section.

Results & Discussion (5)

Analysis of the data from these 25+ interviews revealed the following thematic findings:

1. Chose a chair/supervisor based on their ideological congruence;
2. Be ready for rigorous psychological work;
3. Seek to understand potential institutional, ideological and methodology barriers to your work;
4. Seek and form progressive peer support networks and communities;
5. Make connections with other scholars;
6. Create more equitable relations between groups; and,
7. Write well

Because of limitations of space, I will not be able to elaborate each of these. But I will share three examples.

Chose a chair/supervisor based on their ideological congruence

Addressing the importance of carefully choosing a Thesis Chair and members of the Dissertation Committee, one participant noted the important role of politics and ideology over identity. She said:

Picking a Chair and Committee? Jesus. In picking a committee, I wanted all women or people of color. I didn't want white men. But when I graduated, almost everyone was a white man. Now this is where you've got to always know, ideology should always trump identity. If you have four white protestant men that are straight on your committee, but they are engaged in issues of social justice and equity, then you pick them over four gay and lesbian, people of color who are right wing. Pick cognitively, pick ideologically.

Make connections with other scholars

Regarding the importance of making connections with others scholars, so as to build larger communities of support and solidarity, another participant noted:

As a doctoral student and then as a junior professor I would walk around, and in talking with people, as a kind of conversation opener, I would ask: What are you working on now? I started realizing the extent to which—although I already knew this intellectually—it started to really become extensive, generally speaking, but not always: white males were getting plugged into mentorship positions in large research projects, into writing a chapter, into this network. If you asked that question to a white female, less often would she be able to report the same preferential treatment. When I would ask this question to women of color, there would be a few minutes of silence, and then something like, “I am so frustrated with where I am.” What I would hear was about frustration that mostly had to do with professional isolation; of being loaded down with a lot of advising and committee work, but not having the academic mentorship that was actually helping people be able to do things professionally. So you need to make it happen for yourself! Here, for example, at AERA, or any professional conference, simply go up to a senior faculty member whose work you've admired and say something about it. You know, like, “I really admire your work.” Tell them, “I'm interested in just talking with you about what I'm working on.” Strike up a conversation.

Write well

A politically progressive former colleague of mine had sign up on his office wall that read, “Writing well is the best revenge!” The senior academics interviewed for this study supported this notion almost to the last person. They argued that, especially on the

academic left, if you were to be successful, you needed to write well and argue masterfully. One participant put it this way:

The best defense against criticism is doing really good work. Good work on the left that passes conventional tests for high quality is extraordinarily powerful. And even though people are experimenting with different methodology, I think that that kind of an experimentation has to be grounded in solid knowledge of what you are moving away from. If you are choosing to move away from it, then you need to layer it on top of something that could be seen as more traditional.

Scholarly Significance (6)

This study holds educational and theoretical importance for several reasons. First, it attempts to bring empirical data from interviews with prominent progressive educationalists to bear on analyses of the key concepts in critical pedagogy of “hegemony” and the “hidden curriculum.” Second, this study is unique. Little research along these lines exists; especially empirically-driven work. Third, and finally, this study will be of personal and professional value to session participants; it allows readers to gain insight into what it takes to be a successful educational academic on the left through glimpses into the professional lives of these unique participants over their many years of practice.

References

- Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my life and work*. New York: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1998a). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998b). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, democracy and civic courage*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Freire, P. (1998c). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder: Westview.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and reading the world*. South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections for the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1867/1967). *Capital: A critical analysis of capitalist production*. New York: International Publishers.
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.
- McLaren, P. (1995). *Critical pedagogy and predatory culture: Oppositional politics in a postmodern era*. London: Routledge.
- McLaren, P. (1997). *Revolutionary multiculturalism: Pedagogies of dissent for the new millennium*. Boulder: Westview.

- McLaren, P. (2000). *Ché Guevara, Paulo Freire and the pedagogy of revolution*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- McLaren, P. (2002). Marxist revolutionary praxis: A curriculum of transgression. *Journal of Critical Inquiry into Curriculum and Instruction*, 3(3), 36–41.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.
- Oakes, J. Gamoran, A., and Page, R. (1992). Curriculum differentiation: Opportunities, outcomes, and meaning. In Jackson, P. (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum*. New York: MacMillan.
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. 1994. "Grounded Theory Methodology." In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y., eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.