

Considering the Role of Critical Pedagogy in Cultural Studies: A Research Introduction

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The university classroom is a space that can both reproduce and resist uneven power relationships. In this paper, I aim to explore the possibilities of how engaged, critical teaching practices can be used by Cultural Studies faculty members to counter dominant and oppressive forces in academic institutions. Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field that relies on “radical contextualism” to critique, analyze, and understand the complexities of power (Grossberg, 1994, p. 5). Even though hierarchical and oppressive practices rooted in capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism manifest themselves in higher education, engaged and critical pedagogy has the potential to disrupt these norms (Bunjun, 2021). Specifically, engaged, critical pedagogy can be considered as a holistic approach to teaching that encourages learning through practices such as dialogue, critical questioning, and re-learning (hooks, 1994).

These holistic models of teaching can disrupt traditional hierarchies and problematize how only certain (i.e., male and white) voices are privileged in academic institutions (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). Even though substantial theory has been developed within Cultural Studies, multiple large research gaps currently exist in the field’s examination of its teaching practices; these gaps about pedagogy and impact in the research must be addressed and studied further. Therefore, my goal is to explore how the university classroom functions as a space for resisting dominant ideologies and institutionally privileged voices within Cultural Studies education in Canada. I am currently writing my master’s thesis on this topic after completing my data collection in the summer of 2023. In my study, the research questions I asked were: How do university faculty members use engaged, critical pedagogical practices to disrupt institutional hierarchies in Cultural Studies? What impacts do these approaches have on students who self-identify as Indigenous, Black, or a person of colour?

Initial, Brief Literature Review: Challenges & Possibilities in Higher Education

Throughout the literature, several themes emerge related to critical, engaged pedagogy and teaching practices within higher education. These themes include identity, power, coloniality, history, and hope. As a foundational text for engaged pedagogy, bell hooks’ 1994 *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, reflected on teaching methods and classroom experiences to counter hegemonic practices. This book contributes to novel models of learning that employ a holistic approach (hooks, 1994). Because hooks’ work relied upon her experiences within the United States and was published almost 30 years ago, the teaching landscape does not identically apply to an investigation of current practices in Canada. Therefore, my research will further hooks’ ideas within the context of a Canadian Cultural Studies program. Related to this context, in Benita Bunjun’s 2021 edited book, *Academic Well-Being of Racialized Students*, scholars examined themes of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism within the institution. This work connected to hooks’ examination of academic hierarchies by highlighting how the Canadian curriculum is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, relying upon a “pedagogy of displacement” (Bunjun, 2021, p. 9). A major strength of this book was its variety of research methods; authors rigorously foregrounded personal stories, poetry, and reflections.

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Related to the theme of coloniality, Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck's 2017 article, "Settler Colonialism and Cultural Studies: Ongoing Settlement, Cultural Production, and Resistance," addressed my research question's connection between pedagogy and Cultural Studies. The authors astutely examined how Cultural Studies reproduces oppressive practices by contributing to the "erasure of Indigenous genocide" (Rowe & Tuck, 2017, p. 7). Stuart Hall's 1992 article, "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies," reminded us how the field aims to push boundaries and serves as a "point of disturbance" (p. 11). In addition to Hall, Lawrence Grossberg's 1994 chapter, "Bringin' It All Back Home: Pedagogy and Cultural Studies," emphasized how Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field that can represent "a theory of contexts" (p. 5). Therefore, considering gaps exposed by Rowe & Tuck (2017), the purpose of my research has been to explore how Cultural Studies faculty can actualize the critical foundations of the discipline through engaged, critical pedagogy.

Sara Ahmed's 2012 book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, continued the discussion on power and identity. Ahmed (2012) showed how institutional spaces reproduce whiteness and privilege certain bodies. I aim to ensure that my research is understandable and accessible for a wide audience in terms of writing style and not using highly theoretical jargon without clear explanations. Moreover, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1989 article, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," not only made connections between race, gender, and the academy, but also focused on opening spaces of hope. Similarly, Sara Motta's 2013 chapter, "Pedagogies of Possibility: In, Against, and Beyond the Imperial Patriarchal Subjectivities of Higher Education," emphasized how "solidarity, care, and community" are key tenets to combat education's neoliberalism and individuality (p. 90). These strengths reinforce my research question regarding the impacts of engaged pedagogy on racialized students.

Overall, these works provided a brief introduction to key insights on pedagogy and academia. My study expands these ideas to provide a new lens on how power operates in Cultural Studies as well as opportunities for resistance.

Proposed Methodology & Theoretical Frameworks

Institutional Ethnography

The research methodology that inspired the investigation of my research questions is Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography (IE). This approach, originating in feminist and Marxist epistemology, aims to examine how people's everyday experiences connect to larger institutional processes (Smith, 2006). This methodology connects well with my research questions because it can uniquely situate the pedagogical practices employed by faculty (and subsequently experienced by students) within the academic institution. Additionally, IE is appropriate because it allows me to place "embodied actualities" within the larger context of history and power (Smith, 2006, p. 6). Through my study, I endeavour to practice institutional ethnography's focus on "inquiry, discovery, [and] learning" (Smith, 2006, p. 2).

Critical Theory & Critical Race Theory

Related to education, critical theory investigates how certain socio-political ideals and values are embedded within educational practices (Beyer, 2001). In this context, critical theory

enables us to understand how educational policies and practices can reflect larger ideological realities (Beyer, 2001). More specifically, stemming from critical theory, critical legal studies, and feminism, critical race theory can be considered interdisciplinary and applied to the context of higher education (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). Critical race theory asserts that race is socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Critical race theory examines how “unearned advantages directly come from being white” because whiteness is privileged and valued in modern Western society (Savas, 2014, p. 508). Moreover, racism does not only function “at the individual level,” but instead is “embedded in the ... social structure” (Savas, 2014, p. 508). This emphasis on the embedded nature of racism means that it is deeply woven into the foundations of society in subtle, yet insidious ways (Savas, 2014).

Critical race theory also acknowledges how white supremacy includes other, connected components such as class, gender, sexuality, ability, and many others (Savas, 2014). Although race is a central factor in critical race theory, the theory aims to challenge “any other forms of subordination” (Savas, 2014, p. 509). This aspect of critical race theory relates to intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which is a macro-level lens for examining what happens when people’s multiple identities are subject to forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991; Harris & Patton, 2019). Intersectionality acknowledges that identities are overlapping and interconnected, not mutually exclusive (Harris & Patton, 2019). This emphasis reveals that the relationship between race, power, privilege, and oppression does not exist in a vacuum; rather, racism functions together with other forces such as colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, and capitalism to impact socio-political systems, including education (Harris & Patton, 2019). It is crucial to consider the role of intersectionality because its goal, along with critical race theory, mirrors my research’s aim “to work toward transformative and radical social justice” through engaged, critical teaching practices (Harris & Patton, 2019, p. 348).

My research aligns with the goals of critical theory and critical race theory because engaged, critical practices can include pedagogical decisions in Cultural Studies that centralize critiques of structural oppression. I am applying critical race theory by focusing on how these pedagogical practices can impact the lives of racialized students. This focus informs my research because engaged teaching practices facilitate liberatory learning (hooks, 1994).

Moving Forward & Conclusion

Overall, despite the oppressive forces that influence university classrooms, I believe that engaged, critical pedagogy has the opportunity to resist hierarchical practices in Cultural Studies. Looking forward, my completed research will analyze the data collected in semi-structured interviews with faculty members and racialized students. This study will enable me to learn more about the types of teaching practices used in Cultural Studies and how these impact students. Beyond the scope of my thesis research, I wonder not only about the immediate impact of these teaching approaches on racialized students, but also how they can incorporate dialogue, active questioning, and critical thinking in their lives outside the classroom. Ultimately, I believe that my research will reveal the complexities of teaching practices in academia when power and resistance collide.

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