Toward a Critical Pedagogical Theory and Practice in Art Education: An Autoethnographic (Re)Vision of Criticality in Initial Teacher Preparation

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complexities and intricate nature of Critical Pedagogical theory and practice. Using an autoethnographic methodology and a framework of Critical Pedagogy, I reflect upon my own notions of criticality throughout my student teaching experience. These reflections are in relation to three key elements of Critical Pedagogy: Critical Consciousness, Dialogue, and Student Power.

I also respond to these experiences in an effort to more thoroughly understand these notions, their implications, and how they have changed throughout the course of this research. The purpose of this research is to engage in a self-examination of my thoughts and actions as a critical educator, both past and present, and to (re)envision these in an effort to promote transformative pedagogy.

This document suggests that Critical Pedagogy is and ever-changing and ongoing process of self-reflection, exploration, and invalidation. It also suggests that Critical Pedagogy can be/is a site of struggle, as well as of personal and pedagogical growth.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Growing up in a middle-class, predominantly white suburb of Columbus, Ohio, I attended a high school, which consistently received superior academic ratings, according to the No Child Left Behind standards. As I recognize the privilege that this provided me to succeed, academically, I also reminisce upon various circumstances, which were less than extraordinary. Many critical pedagogues can describe events in which they have been told to let go of their ideals and strive for something a bit less “ambitious,” (radical) and my experience was no different. In the foreword to Donaldo Macedo’s (2006) *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*, Joe Kincheloe informs us that Macedo’s high school guidance counselor told him to be a television repairman, Kincheloe, himself, was informed that he “wasn’t college material,” and Peter McLaren, in graduate school, was “advised” that he, “was too emotionally immature to complete his degree” (Kincheloe in Macedo, 2006, p. xvi). At the age of 18, I was informed by an Advanced Placement teacher that my writing (which was consistently full of questions and a desire to go beyond the textbook) was “D” material. This “D” (supported by a subtext of “good work” and little to no grammatical feedback) was more than just a grade on my report card. It served as an abundantly clear signifier that I was to learn only what
was presented in the text and what the teacher deemed appropriate material for the course. If I did not learn how to ask the “right” questions and write the “correct” way, I would fail the class.

It was at this point in my academic career that I began to question the knowledge and authority of my teachers as well as how the material that we were taught was chosen. Who gets to decide what we learn? How is the material determined? Why am I being educated in a way that does not respond to or even acknowledge my personal realities? And, if I am not able to connect what I’m learning in school to what I am living, is this even an education at all? I wanted to know how my experiences within the classroom were relevant to those outside of academia.

It is my firm belief that the role of educators is not to simply teach rote grammar, history, math, etc., but to instill within students an unquenchable desire to learn about, explore, examine, and view, critically, the world around us. I believe that it is with these desires that I have, personally, developed passion to scrutinize and attempt to change that which can be changed and that which “cannot.” If we are to “progress,” as a country or as a global community, and if the quality of life for all people is going to be improved, then perhaps it is imperative that we are able to think critically and constantly. If we choose not to think “too deeply” about issues and accept the status quo as reality, the status quo will continue to be reality, failing to meet the diverse needs of people and address various oppressive social structures. Education, in general, has the potential to serve the purpose of preparing students to be critical investigators in an attempt to
promote and enhance the quality of democracy. In the foreword to the 30th Anniversary Edition of Paulo Freire’s (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull states,

> Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

If students leave the classroom with an insatiable appetite for knowledge of how to transform reality for the purpose of liberation, as well as the tools (such as discourses and resources) to transform that knowledge into action, they may be better equipped to engage as active citizens within domestic and global society.

Educators must also be held responsible for promoting dialogue from which knowledge can be built from students’ lived experiences. “If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” (Freire, 1993, p. 19). On the contrary, in my experience, education has, overall, seemed to be about being filled with knowledge and being denied the opportunity to make sense of this knowledge through dialogue and action. This type of education is referred to, by Freire, as, “banking education.” “In the banking concept of education, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1993, p. 72). In this type of environment, the student seems to have imposed upon him/her an unfavorable subject position, in the sense that s/he is
considered ignorant and incapable of offering any insight due to a lack of what might be considered “experience” by the educator (Freire, 1993).

While my high school experience seemed to prefer, overall, a banking concept of education, I had hopes that a university education would provide a different experience. On entering the Art Education program, I was provided with many opportunities to explore ideas of democratic educational processes on a variety of levels, and looked forward to employing such knowledge in my student teaching year. It was around this time that I was also introduced to Paulo Freire’s ideas of Critical Pedagogy. I was enamored with the idea that education could serve students in becoming “problem-posing education where ‘men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation’”(Macedo in Freire, 1993, p.12). As time progressed, however, I came to the realization that there were many other priorities for a student teacher. Turning lesson plans in on time, creating engaging lessons, and learning how to navigate the job market took precedence over both my desire to learn how to engage students in dialogical processes in the effort to unveil knowledge and how to understand my own position as a critical educator. I had to meet the demands of the student teaching experience, and this left little time to reflect, examine, and understand my students and myself. As I lost hope for criticality, I began to question whether or not any type of liberating pedagogy was actually practical with the demands of teaching in a public school setting.
As I begin to analyze the information and material that I gained from student teaching, I am able to understand that I was, in no way, underprepared to be a teacher, as the current status quo of teaching requires. I entered the classroom with a basic knowledge of classroom management, an understanding of how to physically create lesson plans, and a strong background in various questioning strategies as well as art techniques. However, I was left in the dark as to how to be the teacher that I wanted to be. I wanted students in the art classroom to engage in art-making that opened up possibilities for dialogue. I wanted my students to relate their lived experiences and personal realities to both their artwork and the larger state of the world, and to use art-making as a vehicle through which to communicate and understand such realities. I wanted to help students create an environment where they were empowered, encouraged, and passionate about art and about the act of living as an experience to be used for promoting quality of life at any degree. When discussing these desires with other educators, I was met with discouraging and disheartening advice. I was told that there was simply not enough time in the student teaching experience to engage in such activities (Is there?). I was informed, also, that I should just try to “get through” the student teaching experience and then apply my passions and knowledge in my own classroom (I wondered: But how will I know how to apply them in the future if I’m not learning now?). In addition, I had been told that there was little room for this type of progressive thought in such structured and developed programs (as the ones I would be teaching in) and I should adhere to the outlines and programs that had been laid out by the cooperating teachers and the schools with whom I would be working. It was at this
point that I realized I would be “on my own” in terms of developing art-making activities that attempted to address the issues I felt were of significance in an art classroom, such as promoting autonomy and allowing students to “engage in dialogue as a process of learning and knowing.” With few examples of art projects that addressed the realities of students’ lives to the extent that I felt my students’ deserved, I tried desperately to negotiate the student teaching experience and all that it entailed. I floundered. While a certain level of difficulty can be expected in this type of initial teaching experience, I found that I was unable to cope with my own inability to be a critical pedagogue. I felt that I had a theoretical framework, which I firmly believed in, but no way to apply this theory to a physical classroom.

Throughout the student teaching year, I attended weekly seminar classes with my peers. This seminar served to provide a knowledge-base for student teaching, an opportunity to turn in lesson plans, and a chance to discuss the various aspects of obtaining a job in public or private school settings. While this information and time in class was helpful to a certain degree, I felt the need to engage in dialogue with my peers in an effort to turn our ideas and theories into action (in the form of lesson-plans and classroom techniques). I wondered: “What are the difficulties that my peers are facing?” “What ideas have they come up with (if any) that address students’ lived realities?” “What types of discussions could occur in classrooms that promote learning and action?” “How are my peers coping with/negotiating their positions of authority in classroom situations where it was insisted that the teacher be an authoritarian?” It seemed, however, that, with the alternate priorities of the seminar (such as creating a professional portfolio),
opening the student teaching experience up for discussion as a process of knowledge-building was not an option, due to time constraints. This added to my distress, as I felt that I knew more about how to become employed by a school district than how to physically teach. I was left, somewhat abandoned and embittered, with no examples or ideas of how to “truly” integrate Critical Pedagogy into a school setting and into my actions as a teacher.

As time progressed, communication with my cooperating teachers remained high and, on the whole, very helpful in terms of mentoring me on how to meet the demands of teaching in public schools. Both women were extremely encouraging and helped me to understand the complexities of being a teacher. I became very capable of budgeting my time in the classroom and creating “age-appropriate” lesson plans, however, I still felt unfulfilled. I found that I had been writing lesson plans for projects that taught students how to make art, but did not seem to teach ways to synthesize experience with knowledge. I was teaching students how to engage in a particular technique and providing some background information regarding the history and culture related to the technique. I was not, however, providing any resources that related to students’ lives, allowing students to engage in meaningful dialogue, helping students to find autonomy within themselves or creating a classroom environment that allowed for opportunities to discover problems and possibilities within reality. In my theoretical framework, I believed in Critical Pedagogy, but as a practicing teacher, I exhibited none of the characteristics that I believed defined a critical pedagogue. I felt distanced from my students, my colleagues, and supervisors and I tried to navigate this ground and find a
way to be radical and revolutionary in a situation which required me to be an “under-the-radar, people-pleaser.”

I was faced with daily contradictions in attempting to please my supervisors, my students, and myself. In the classroom, I struggled with finding ways to ask critical-thinking questions. At one point, I received “high” marks from a teacher-coach regarding my use of questioning strategies and was commended for my use of “higher-level questions.” Still, however, I felt unfulfilled and as though I was doing a disservice to my students by not setting the classroom up in a way that would support dialogue and opportunities to discuss reality. When an opportunity did arise (a fiery conflict regarding punishment issued by a substitute teacher) to hold a democratic discussion, promote self-reflexivity and awareness, and relate a classroom situation to other oppressive social structures, I was unable to configure the class effectively and empower students in a successful way. The discussion became more like a “free-for-all” with students using it as an opportunity to attack one-another as well as teachers in the school building. I became the enemy: the “dumb white girl,” who didn’t understand them. At another site, I found myself so irritated with a student who was struggling with various personal issues, and, thus, “acting out” in class, that I was not able to provide him with an arena to discuss his lived experiences and use them for the foundation of knowledge. I was unable to help this student relate his own experience to other oppressive social realities, as well as find the tools and resources within himself to understand and take action against his own circumstances. The potential in this situation with this particular student was incredibly rich, but I did not know how to tap into the promise that both the
circumstance and the student held. Why was I unable to implement and engage in processes that formed my own theoretical framework?

At the college level, my own classes were not being taught in such a way that exemplified these processes. At one point, I confronted a professor regarding the lack of time for dialogue and building knowledge from the experiences of the class as a whole. It is important to note that, during this meeting, I was in tears due to my overwhelming frustration with both my own practice and the practice of the class. When I asked why no time had been set aside for dialogical practices in class, I was confounded by the answer. I was told that, “We can’t take time out of class to talk about our frustrations because you would cry and bring everybody down.” It was at this point that I knew no sort of critical pedagogical practice could be implemented or understood in this collegiate classroom. My emotions and experiences were not valued as an opportunity to engage in critical and considerable dialogue, and this type of attitude toward such emotions and realities became oppressive in that it I was verbally denied my humanity. I also recognized that I had been labeled with a very unfavorable subject position. I was the over-ambitious and over-emotional student who did not recognize nor understand the realities of teaching. My head was in the clouds and I was too naïve to be a successful teacher. I could relate this experience back to my aforementioned high-school experience. If I did not learn how to teach students the “right way” to make art or learn how to create the “correct” lesson plans, I would, not fail the class, but fail my students as an educator. It seemed that I “needed to understand” that there were set structures regarding what should and
could be taught in an art room, what students were/are capable of achieving, and what my role as an arts educator was/is/should be.

The irony in this situation lies within the greater context of the seminar course. The course was taught relating to the standards set forth by the Praxis series as well as the National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE). The philosophies of these educational organizations are largely rooted in ideals of equality in education and the ideas that “all students can learn” and that educators should, “demonstrate fairness in educational settings by meeting the educational needs of all students in a caring, non-discriminatory, and equitable manner” (NCATE, 2008, p. 7). Is it possible to learn how to be caring in a non-caring environment? Is it possible to learn how to meet the needs of all learners in an environment that refuses to do so?

My intention in seeking practices of dialogue was not necessarily to promote dialogue simply as meaningless (or even meaningful) conversation, as this would be, “hiding the true nature of dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” (Freire, 1993, p. 18). However, a unity between theory and practice must be achieved if we are to, “develop the necessary intellectual tools that will enable [us] to apprehend and comprehend the object of knowledge” (Freire, 1993, p. 19). I, simply (or, perhaps, elaborately), wanted to communicate my lived experiences and interpret the experiences of my peers in order to gain a stronger understanding of the problems and possibilities within the art classroom. This had the potential for enabling and empowering us, as (critical) arts educators, to address such concerns and create a more beneficial and effective learning environment for students. “It is not [my] role to speak to the people
[my peers] about [my] own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose [my] view on
them, but rather to dialogue with the people about [my] view and theirs” (Freire, 1993, p. 96). As I have had time to reflect upon this encounter as well as its implications, I have
begun to understand that I was, in a way, denied a right to learn from my experiences.
This somewhat disguised banking-approach to the collegiate classroom may have
prevented the development (for both myself and my peers) “of the critical thinking that
enables one to ‘read the world’ critically and to understand the reasons and linkages
behind the facts” (Macedo, 2006, p.16) which we were being taught.

As an art educator attempting to be critical, I have begun to examine the ways in
which the aforementioned experiences have informed and challenged my understandings
of the field of Art Education and my own teaching practices. It seems to me that the
potential for critical dialogue contained in various forms of both “Fine Art” and Visual
Culture is overwhelmingly profuse and can provide powerful material for a classroom
environment. The subject matter of a vast majority of Visual Cultural objects also
provides arts educators with compelling material, which students may be able to relate to
their own lives in a variety of ways. How can we tap into the potential that the art
classroom holds? How do arts educators become critical arts educators? How do we
(can we) use the material and content of both Fine Art and Visual Culture to promote
student autonomy, critical thought and dialogue, and the transformation of this dialogue
into emancipatory action? In short, what are the possibilities that Critical Pedagogy holds
for arts education? While I am unable to address all of these questions in this document,
I can reflect upon my own student teaching experience in an effort to better understand my role as a critical educator.

In my own experiences, both collegiate and otherwise (within the arts and outside of), I have come to recognize a need for Critical Pedagogy-based curriculum. As I prepare to begin my life as a teacher, I have begun to examine ways in which Critical Pedagogy can be practically applied to the realities of the classroom environment. I have also had the opportunity to (re)examine and (re)question my own experiences in an effort to understand the problems and possibilities that exist(ed) within my own education and classroom teaching experiences. This document attempts to address and examine the following:

1.) How can I, as a critical art educator, recognize the complexity and intricacies of Critical Pedagogy in both theory and practice?

   a. What are the problems and possibilities that I faced as a critical (art) educator during initial teacher preparation?

   b. How can these problems and possibilities be addressed (through Critical Pedagogy) in an effort to enhance my own ability to teach and to exemplify Critical Pedagogy?

The following will attempt to examine these questions through a lens and framework of Critical Pedagogy. I will attempt to interpret the work of critical educators such as Paulo Freire (1993), Donaldo Macedo (2006), Maxine Greene (1988), Joe Kincheloe (2000, 2008), Amy Lee (2001), and Ira Shor (1996), as well as critiques of Freirean Critical Pedagogy from Patti Lather (1998), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), and Ilan Gur-Ze’ev (1998). These authors have largely influenced my own theoretical framework as well as the field of education in general.
Throughout this document, I will explore issues pertaining to: 1.) Critical Consciousness, 2.) The importance of discourse/dialogue as a process of learning and knowing, and, 3.) Student Power. The frustrations and difficulties that I faced throughout my student teaching experience lie largely, if not wholly, within these four facets of Critical Pedagogy. These concepts are the basis for my personal philosophy as an art educator and, thus, will be imperative in (re)examining the problems and possibilities that existed within my experiences as a student teacher and novice critical pedagogue. Using the work of the aforementioned authors in relation to these three concepts, I will reflect upon my own role as a critical educator. In analyzing data collected through self-reflection during student teaching, I will confront my own criticality. I will explore the ways in which I attempted to implement a critical framework and curriculum, the struggles associated with this, and how my notions and understandings of Critical Pedagogy have changed as a result. I will also explore the possibilities that Critical Pedagogy holds for my future as an arts educator and how I hope to move critically forward.

It is my sincere hope that, by attempting to answer the aforementioned questions, I may help to provide a portion of a theoretical framework for critical teaching of art at a variety of levels, examine and scrutinize my own practices, attempt to understand a variety of concerns associated with being a critical student teacher in a traditional art curriculum, provide an element of hope to those who struggle in similar situations, and uphold the necessity for (art) education to be a mutually transformative act.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

As stated in Chapter One, it is my attempt, within this document, to (re)view and (re)examine my own experiences through a lens of Critical Pedagogy and to explore the possibilities that these experiences hold for redefining my own abilities as a critical art educator. I hope to use a framework of Critical Pedagogy to dissect, analyze, and understand my personal student teaching practices and to begin to examine what possibilities this framework holds for my future as an art educator, while attempting to understand the complexities of the pedagogy, itself. While the focus of this research is my own practice and experience, I also hope that it serves to question art education teacher preparation programs and explore the un(der)tapped possibilities for implementing a critical pedagogical framework and practice in the collegiate classroom.

In this section of this thesis, I will examine the elements of Critical Pedagogy that have informed my own educational philosophy, as this is key to understanding my frustrations within my experiences of teacher preparation and student teaching. These elements are: 1.) Critical consciousness, 2.) The importance of discourse/dialogue as a process of learning and knowing, and 3.) Student Power. Each of these components of Critical Pedagogy are equally important issues within critical pedagogy that have played
a significant role in both my development as an educator and as a member of a global humanity. In addition to “raising” me as an educator, theories within and related to Critical Pedagogy offer methods of interpreting my experiences and observations that both scrutinize and challenge the status quo of modern-day teaching and learning. Because each of the aforementioned issues within a critical pedagogical framework (Critical Consciousness, Dialogue as learning and knowing, and Student Power), are extremely broad and complex, I will not attempt to address every definition of Critical Pedagogy that exists or that could arise from this discussion. Critical Pedagogy as both an academic field and an educational experience is one that is constantly in flux. It is redefined, reexamined, and questionned on a regular basis. It would be quite impossible to attempt a standard definition of this pedagogy. I will, therefore, attempt to concisely interpret a sampling of literature that has been chosen to inform the purpose of this research.

 Critical Pedagogy: A brief introduction

I was not introduced to critical pedagogy in a classroom. My love and passion for this theory stems simply from a serendipitous encounter with fate at a local bookstore. Upon a visit to the store, I found myself aimlessly wandering through the “Education” section. I was in desperate need of something; something that I could not put my finger on and could only manage the most ineloquent of words to describe. I felt disheartened by both the state of education as a whole and by my own experiences in the university classroom. I felt there may have been a disconnect between the theory that was being
discussed in class and the theory (and practice) that I knew had to exist somewhere. There had to be more than the static, undemocratic, compulsory, and superficial curriculum that was so prevalent in classrooms: the curriculum that did not attempt to allow students to make sense of their lived experiences (even as this offers political contradictions of its own); the curriculum, which relied on rote memorization, static and fixed technique, and high-stakes testing. It was in this despondent state that I stumbled upon Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993). I had never heard this name before and learned the term “Critical Pedagogy” simply from a quote by Stanley Aronowitz on the back cover. It read:

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* meets the single criterion of a ‘classic’: it has outlived its own time and its author’s. For any teacher who links education to social change, this is required reading. Freire remains the most important writer on popular education and surely the virtual founder of the perspective known as Critical Pedagogy.

As I read and reread the book, I began to recognize that I was not alone in my hope for education to be democratic, humanizing, transformative, and above all, based in love.

A proverbial fire was ignited inside of me and I became hungry for more of this familiarly unfamiliar pedagogy. The pedagogy presented was familiar and captivating in that the ideas presented seemed to “make sense” in my mind. It had been unfamiliar to me, however, in that I had not yet been exposed to a discourse with which to explore these ideas. I felt that I was able to recognize, albeit not fully understand, the perspectives that were presented as similar to those which I, myself had held. However, until discovering the text, I was unable to engage in effective dialogue due to my lack of a discourse on the topic. It was only at this point that I was able to recognize the lapse in
my “higher” education. Why weren’t we talking about Freire? I had finally found a theory that was able to put into words all that I had been feeling, however, this was never discussed in the classroom. I was unable to understand why a theoretical framework that seemed to be able to benefit so many people would remain unexplored in my education classes. In the introduction to Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993), Donaldo Macedo states:

Even though he has an international reputation and following, his work is, sadly, not as central to the curricula of most schools of education whose major responsibility is to prepare the next generation of teachers. This…is partly due to the fact that most of these schools are informed by the positivistic and management models that characterize the very culture of ideologies and practices to which Freire was in opposition all his life. (pp. 15-16)

The exclusion of Freire’s work in “higher education” becomes even more disgusting knowing that, “students in the Third World and other nations struggling with totalitarian regimes would risk their freedom, if not their lives, to read Paulo Freire” (Freire, 1993, p. 16). It was upon reading this that I began to investigate the possibility that students in teacher preparation programs across the country are falling victim to a censorship of Freire and, in turn, Critical Pedagogy as a whole. The bits and pieces of Critical Pedagogy (and other radical pedagogical frameworks) that are discussed in class (in my experience) are rarely given a name and students are left, blindly grasping at straws, to figure out what it means to “teach for social justice.” While issues of social justice are, at times, discussed, students rarely have the opportunity to develop language for understanding what this means at its fullest and richest extent. Recognizing these
concerns, I was (and am) able to understand a need for Critical Pedagogy and its descendents to be increasingly more accessible to students and educators alike.

For this purpose, I will take a moment to clarify my own perception of this vast and expansive theory as well as its use in this thesis. It is important to note that Freire’s work (as well as that of other critical pedagogues) has been subject to critique for being patriarchal in language and in assumptions. Patti Lather (1998) offers the standpoint that the discourse of and related to Critical Pedagogy can, itself, be “a reinscription of prescriptive universalizing” (p. 488). She also points out the tendency of critical pedagogues to “exhibit the masculinist voice of abstraction and universalization, assuming the rhetorical position of ‘the one who knows’”(p. 488). I recognize that this can be the case in some of the literature reviewed in this section of the document. In the following, however, I will attempt to reflect and elaborate upon some of the interpretations of the issues within Critical Pedagogy that will be the overall basis of this thesis.

I have, since being drawn to Pedagogy of the Oppressed at that unanticipated moment described earlier, defined Critical Pedagogy as existing to serve the purpose of liberation from oppressive social structures (although I recognize the abstract nature of this statement). These social structures can include (but are not limited to) racism, unequal access to education, issues related to healthcare, gender inequality, etc. and are deeply and intricately intertwined in the framework of our “democratic” society. While this is my own interpretation, formed over the course of my “higher” academic career, it is imperative to note, yet again, that Critical Pedagogy is evolving and developing on a
constant basis. Therefore, there can be no concrete definition that could describe and encompass its entirety. In *Critical Pedagogy* (2008), however, Joe Kincheloe describes a few key issues related to this pedagogy. He, first and foremost, views the classroom as a political site that is influenced by “decisions made previously by people operating with different values and shaped by the ideologies and cultural assumptions of their historical contexts” (p.2). In recognizing this, however, it is vital that educators (including those operating from a critical standpoint) recognize their own values, ideologies, and cultural assumptions, as these play a significant role in the classroom structure. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev (1998) states, “Implicitly, Freire contends that the interests of all oppressed people are the same and that one general theory exists for deciphering repressive reality and for developing the potentials absorbed in their collective memory” (Critical Pedagogy: Paulo Freire section, ¶5). While it is impossible not to make assumptions based upon my own ingrained ideologies, I recognize that I must also attempt to critically understand these notions and generalizations.

Kincheloe also states that Critical Pedagogy is rooted “on a social and educational vision of justice and equality” (p.6). He continues to say that Critical Pedagogy is inclusive of (and dependent upon) rethinking common notions of ability, identity, community, power, knowledge, marginalized students, and teacher-student relationships. (Kincheloe, 2008). It is my belief, however, that this “rethinking” cannot be a superficial act. It must be a deep, genuine, and truly curious examination of the status quo and an exploration of the possibilities that exist within education. In an article entitled “Making
Critical Thinking Critical (2000), Kincheloe elaborates upon the notion of critical thinking and rethinking, stating

Authentically critical thinking moves in an emancipatory direction with an omnipresent sense of self-awareness. Moving in an emancipatory direction implies a concern with the development of a liberated mind, a critical consciousness, and a free society. Teachers as critical thinkers are aware of the construction of their own consciousness and the ways that social and institutional forces work to undermine their autonomy as professionals. (p. 27)

It has been my understanding that Critical Pedagogy is rooted in examining the world around us (and supporting our students to do the same) in a way, which could/will question dominant ideologies, political structures, and anything that seems to be “normal” (including our own ideals and practices) (Kincheloe, 2008; Shor, 1992; Tavin, 2003). In other words, both pedagogues and students must engage in these practices of examining dominant ideologies in order for Critical Pedagogy to be reciprocal and transformative. As my interpretation of the theory continues to develop, I recognize that this is not critical inquiry and examination solely for the sake of asking questions, nor is it inclusive of dialogue for the sake of talking (Freire, 1993), although these surely have their benefits. It is, rather, engaging in these processes in an effort to uncover and understand any oppressive social structures, discourses, practices, etc., recognizing them as such, and attempting to discover (and act upon) ways to change them. Ira Shor, in Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change (1992) gives another succinct definition, stating that Critical Pedagogy is inclusive of habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the
deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

It is my understanding that Critical Pedagogy is a constant process in which one must engage in order to more wholly understand her or his lived realities, the complexity and implications of these realities, and ways in which they can/should be transformed to promote liberation from oppressive structures, thoughts, and actions. This pedagogy is not simply a static theoretical framework, but rather a series of ever-changing thoughts, discourses, and actions that work together creatively to overcome social obstacles. Amy Lee (in Alsup, 2001) argues that Critical Pedagogy is a process of “relearning to teach.” This implies that Critical Pedagogy is closely tied to the ability of educators to act as reflective practitioners who are constantly challenging their own perceptions of students, teaching, knowledge, and schools. They (critical educators) engage in the process of “relearning” on a regular basis in order to enhance the learning experience for students in a critical way. Leigh Anne Howard (2002) also argues that Critical Pedagogy relies on the ability of educators to adapt, revise, and relearn teaching strategies.

Although educators cannot solve all problems, they can adopt a critical educational praxis that can help students become more invested in learning, understanding, imagining, and knowing (Howard, 1999). Educators should serve as models who illustrate the importance of community involvement, critical thinking, and public discourse and who help others gain confidence and take risks to do the same. (p. 1126)

Another critical component of this theory/process (Critical Pedagogy) is the idea that thought should always encourage action. “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993, p. 21)
The process of liberation and promoting freedom must always involve action, which is based upon critical thought and investigation. Furthermore, Maxine Greene (1988) states, “…the project of acting on our freedom involves a rejection of the insufficient or the unendurable, a clarification, an imagining of a better state of things” (p. 5). In other words, in order to act upon freedoms or to engage in any liberatory process, individuals must first engage in a process of rejecting and, subsequently, redefining that which is oppressive. Greene interprets the work of Jean-Paul Sartre to argue that it is crucial to the thought/action praxis that we, as individuals and communities, engage in the creative process of imagining “a better state of things” if any sort of transformative action is to take place (Greene, 1988). Greene also initiates another element into the Freirean idea of “praxis.” She argues that it is necessary for individuals to view barriers as physical obstacles to be overcome as part of the thought/action praxis in order to “achieve” freedom.

Freedom can be attained through the refusals and realizations of which Sartre spoke, through the kinds of action and dialogue Dewey had in mind. But the freedom achieved can only involve a partial surpassing of determinateness:…the barriers erected in the way of children trying to create authentic selves. None of these can be considered unreal or merely imagined. All have, as been said before, to be perceived as obstacles, most often obstacles erected by other human beings…if freedom is to be achieved. (Greene, 1988, p. 9)

Developing a “praxis” of thought and action (inclusive of imagination and perception of obstacles) is key to Critical Pedagogy as both a philosophical framework and as a process to be engaged in. In the following, I will examine other critical components to this radical pedagogy. As aforementioned, 1.) Critical consciousness, 2.) Dialogue as a process of learning and knowing, and 3.) Student power each play a major
role in engaging in a Critical Pedagogical process. Although they are described in separate sections in this chapter, each aspect works collaboratively with the others. I do not believe that they exist independent of one-another.

Conscientização/Critical Consciousness

Throughout the majority of Paulo Freire’s works, he argues for a “critical consciousness” across humanity. This term, otherwise referred to as “conscientização” or “conscientization,” “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1993, p. 35, footnote). “Learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions,” as Freire states, means to understand the complexity and reality of these structures and the ways that they interact with our own lives, define our lived experiences and deeply influence our understandings of the world in which we live (Tavin, 2003). Education without the element of a critical consciousness is oppressive and dehumanizing in that it denies students (whether youth or adults) the right to engage in an understanding of the world around them.

While consciousness and the term “conscientização” have been used interchangeably in some texts, it is important to note the nuances that exist between the two. “Consciousness is the presentation to my conscience of the objects I perceive in the world in which I find myself and with which I interact” (Freire, 1996, p. 182). This awareness takes place without developing a true understanding of how and why objects exist. Conscientização, on the other hand, is a critical consciousness (for lack of a direct
translation of the term). In this act, “by perceiving the relationships among objects and their reasons for being, the cognizant subject derives an understanding of the objects, the facts, and the world” and “changes one’s perception of the facts based on a critical understanding of them” (Freire, 1996, p. 182). The criticality of this form of consciousness exists in that the subject reads an object in an effort to understand the object’s place in the world, its implications, and its relationship to the subject. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* (1996), Ira Shor also refers to critical consciousness, but as “critical thinking,” in more than a Bloom’s Taxonomy sense. He defines critical thinking as “a holistic, historically situated, politically aware intervention in society to solve a felt need or problem, to get something done in a context of reflective action” (p. 163). Even still, Stephen Brookfield (in Shor, 1996), defines critical thinking as “imagining and acting on alternatives to the culture we are part of” (p. 163). The key to many progressive definitions of critical consciousness/critical thinking/conscientização is that they almost always involve thought and action, working simultaneously. Paulo Freire refers to this thought-action relationship as “praxis” throughout his work.

Two equally important components of critical consciousness are: dialogue and epistemological curiosity. Dialogue will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Epistemological curiosity refers to ingenuous curiosity, which has become capable of self-criticism (Freire, 1998, p.37). When ingenuous curiosity (similar to the concept of common-sense knowledge) “develops its critical possibilities through a more rigorous methodological approximation of the known object,” it becomes epistemological
curiosity (Freire, 1998, p. 37). In essence, it would seem that this curiosity is the initial step in developing a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is driven and maintained by this “common-sense-turned-critical.” I wonder, however: Once this curiosity has been initiated and engaging in critical consciousness (if it is an act to be engaged in) has begun, is it possible to ever return to “old” ways of thinking? Can we, as humans, be epistemologically curious and, yet, not critically conscious, or are the two interdependent upon one another? As aforementioned, Freire’s definition of critical consciousness implies both thought and action (praxis). Is it possible, then, to be critically curious and not critically conscious? To be thinking critically and not acting critically? Or is this a contradiction of terms? I fully believe that the two elements of praxis can (and do, in most cases) exist in a dichotomous relationship. I have engaged in many rigorous discussions, analyses, and examinations of issues and objects with peers and professors. Rarely, however, does an intense “approximation” result in any sort of action against, for, or with the object.

Donaldo Macedo (2006), recognizes a young boy, nine-year-old Alejandro who, according to the above definition, demonstrates critical, epistemological curiosity. In reference to the George W. Bush administration’s Patriot Act, the boy asked, “Why is President Bush going to war to bring freedom to Iraq and he is passing laws to take away freedom at home?” (p. 187). While we are not aware of the young boy’s cultural and political backgrounds, we can recognize that this boy is operating at a level of epistemological curiosity. He is able to critique the passing of an act that many Americans “have willingly accepted” (Macedo, 2006, p.187). Is Alejandro, however,
operating within the realm of critical *consciousness*? He is perceiving and attempting to understand what is, in his mind, a social and political contradiction, but we do not know if he has been given the opportunity to take action against this reality. While it may be easy to say that Alejandro is only nine years old and should not be encouraged to stage a political coup d'état (while I am not necessarily insinuating that this is what he *should* be encouraged to do), the very essence of Critical Pedagogy (and critical consciousness) implies that *all people* should be encouraged to make sense of their lived realities and take action against the oppressive elements within those realities, with no discrimination according to age, ethnicity, gender, etcetera.

Similar circumstances have been all too prevalent in classrooms as a whole (whether PK-12 or at the university level). Some students may operate as epistemologically curious individuals, able to critique issues of racism, sexism, classism, etc. in classrooms, but given little opportunity (if such an opportunity can be provided) to turn theory to action in Freirean praxis. Thought remains epistemological curiosity. While this curiosity is a necessary step in becoming critically conscious, it must also be met with dialogue (another key component of critical consciousness and of critical pedagogy as a whole) in order to prompt action that will overcome social obstacles.

*Dialogue: A process of Learning and Knowing*

While I could argue that role of dialogue in a classroom environment is key to student success, the extent of this role can be debated from various standpoints. As early as the beginning of the last century, John Dewey recognized the importance of attempting
to understand students’ lived experiences (which can, arguably, only happen through extensive dialogue and a desire to engage in such an understanding). In regards to understanding student experiences, however, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) states,

As I argued above, “emancipatory authority” also implies, according to Shor and Freire, a teacher who knows the object of study “better” than do the students. Yet I did not understand racism better than my students did, especially those students of color coming into class after six months (or more) of campus activism and whole lives of experience and struggle against racism—nor could I ever hope to… My understanding and experience of racism will always be constrained by my white skin and middle-class privilege. (p. 308)

It would be impossible for educators to begin to grasp the lived experiences of students as individuals. “He [Dewey] does hold, however, that it is the child who learns, and any efforts to teach a curriculum in which the qualities of the lives of children and the differences among them are not grasped is doomed to failure” (McDermott, 1973, p. 468). In addition, “It is he [the student] who determines both quality and quantity of learning” (Dewey in McDermott, 1973, p. 471). Although we may not be able to fully empathize with students, through dialogue in the classroom, students may be able to develop their own understandings of the world in which they live and act. This dialogue, however, does not exist exclusive of the critical consciousness explored earlier. Nor can critical consciousness exist without dialogue. Both aspects of Critical Pedagogy inform one another in an effort to promote transformative action within the world. While educators cannot bestow these upon students, they can promote an environment in which these acts are supported.

On the other hand, the process of engaging in dialogue seems to have become, overall, rote and mechanical. Students answer questions with what they perceive to be
the “correct” answer. Throughout my own academic career, I can remember trying to hide in my seat or behind a book in order to escape the teacher’s gaze if I did not “know” an answer. Even if I felt sure of myself (and of my answer being what the teacher was looking for) I would convince myself of my own wrongness, continuing to hide. This fear of “not knowing” soon developed into a fear of expressing. “Students come to class expecting the teacher to do most of the talking, because that’s the way education has been done to them so far. Education, they have learned, means being talked at, and many are simply used to be enknowned with teacher firmly in command” (Shor, 1996, p. 68). I had become acclimated to being “talked at” and remained comfortable so long as I did not have to engage in any discussion throughout the class period. Too often is this the case in contemporary classrooms within the United States, whether at the primary, secondary, or post-secondary level. Students seem to either develop a fear of wrongness or become simply mechanized to engage in rote memorization. Dewey states “…for, we repeat, any way is mechanical which narrows down the bodily activity so that a separation of body from mind—that is, from recognition of meaning—is set up” (Dewey in McDermott, 1973, p. 498). Through the act of choosing (consciously or otherwise) not to discuss students lives, experiences, hopes, etc. in the classroom further initiates them into a dangerous and dehumanizing educational tradition. Richard Shaull (in Freire, 1993) states

Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept “submerged” in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. And it became clear to him [Paulo Freire] that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence. (p. 30)
On the other hand, however, Ellsworth (1989) states, “To the extent that our efforts to put discourses of critical pedagogy into practice led us to reproduce relations of domination in our classroom, these discourses were ‘working through’ us in repressive ways, and had themselves become vehicles of repression” (p. 298). So, even as attempts can be made to engage in dialogue regarding student experience, this can be equally as repressive as not doing so.

Ellsworth’s critique in mind, it is necessary that educators recognize and utilize dialogue as a “process of learning and knowing” (Macedo in Freire, 1993, p.19). Engaging in meaningful dialogue within the classroom setting also may have the potential to partially undo the “student-as-machine” dilemma that is all too prevalent. There is great danger in dialogical teaching and learning, however, in that it has the potential to be turned into a diluted conversation, allowing for little dissent and critical analysis (Macedo in Freire, 1993). In this situation, students and educators use dialogue as a process, not for understanding, but for stating or expressing their emotions in relation to a particular topic. While this is an important aspect of the authentic, dialogical classroom, dialogue can also be used for a.) naming oppressive situations, structures, etc. b.) reflecting upon, understanding, and recognizing such oppressive realities as obstacles, and c.) developing and acting on alternatives/solutions (Greene, 1988). “Such a space [an authentic public space] requires the provision of opportunities for the articulation of multiple perspectives in multiple idioms, out of which something common can be brought into being” (Greene, 1988, p. xi).
Creating an “authentic public space,” as Maxine Greene suggests, promotes a more democratic and humane learning environment in which students are exploring their own lived situations in an effort to enhance quality of life. By beginning to name oppressive realities, students develop discourses with which they are able to understand the implications of such realities. In classrooms that utilize dialogical educational methods, the teacher acts as a co-facilitator and a student among students, which “undermine[s] the power of oppression and serve[s] the cause of liberation” (Freire, 1993, p. 75). This has the potential to remove the teacher from an authoritarian position, as power within the classroom is shared among all members of its community. This type of community, however, is not particularly common among public school settings, as “Rules for speaking in this new setting not only ‘consciously contravene the accepted norms of school discourse’ but they also differ from the discourses prevalent in the teacher’s and students’ home communities” (Shor, 1996, p. 29). Because of this difference, it is crucial that the teacher-as-co-facilitator also acts as a reflective practitioner, constantly reevaluating and reexamining their own facilitation and teaching practices and the classroom environment as a whole.

Helping to facilitate an environment in which students are free and encouraged to express, analyze, and understand realities as well as imagine a more humane and just state of living may enable and empower students to assert their own autonomy. While this does not necessarily need to happen publicly (as dialogical processes can occur introspectively), asserting their autonomy in this type of atmosphere cuts the ties that
bind students to society as it is and opens a superfluity of possibilities for dramatic social and personal transformation (Greene, 1988).

**Student Power: Students as Democratic Citizens**

As previously mentioned, facilitating a dialogical classroom setting requires that educators reevaluate their own roles as “shaper[s] of young minds,” as comedian Lewis Black refers in the film *Accepted* (2006). This type of educator, who may feel it is their duty and responsibility to “fill” students with knowledge may make an assumption (inadvertently or otherwise) that students are “‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’” (Freire, 1993, p. 72) with “knowledge.” This assumption is also dangerous in that it ignores students’ fields of knowledge and understanding that have been shaped by the “outside” world and their lives. On the other hand, however, “Education as the practice of freedom…denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire, 1993, p. 81). To recognize that students’ exist as whole persons outside of a traditional classroom environment is to also recognize that they are human. Recognizing this humanity returns autonomy and power to students. I use the term “returns” in an effort to make the distinction between “giving” students power and allowing them to assert their inherent power. When students enter a classroom, typically, they are required to relinquish their own power to an authoritarian educator who dictates curriculum, knowledge, and experience. In recognizing students’ lived experiences, educators begin to return a portion of this stolen power (which we cling to for dear life) that is rightfully the students’. Educators do not have the ability, in
my opinion, to “create” power for students, nor to “bestow” it upon them. Students exist as powerful and intellectual beings outside of a teacher-student relationship. In a violent act of educational oppression, however, students have been robbed of their voices for the purpose of maintaining a “culture of silence” discussed earlier.

While I am suggesting that it is significant for educators to share power in the classroom, I am not insinuating that the classroom environment become a “free-for-all.” The educator should act as a co-facilitator strictly in an effort to support dialogical processes for the purpose of understanding, building knowledge about, and transforming the world.

“Power-sharing” also exists in “transforming traditional classroom discourse” involving “new speech communities…where teachers and students work to promote educational equity and cultural diversity” (Ellasser and Irvine in Shor, 1996, p. 29). This collaboration further supports the notion that the student is not merely a “vessel to be filled” (Chomsky, 2000) in that students and educators are collaborating on a level of “free association on equal terms to achieve common goals that were [are] democratically conceived” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 39). Again, however, this classroom environment is not common among public school environments. “In the United States, …educators long have supported the merits of actively democratic classrooms; however, little evidence can be found to indicate that this type of education is actually taking place” (Pepper, 2007, p. 54).

Learning environments in which students are considered powerful, intellectual, and whole beings take into account students-as-individuals outside of a school situation.
Again, they do not allow the teacher to view students as “know-nothings,” but, rather, maintain that the educator promote “the conditions in which the normal creative patterns will flourish” (Chomsky, 2000, p. 38). When teachers seek to engage their students in the understanding of the world in general and everyday life in particular both in relation to one another and from as many vantage points as possible” (Kinzeloe, 2000, p. 36), the classroom environment shifts from systematic to critical in a way which recognizes students as intellectual, powerful, and whole human beings. It is in this critical environment that students may be able to name, understand, and transform the world around them.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Parameters

**Method**

As stated in Chapter One, this research is intended to address the following questions:

1. How can I, as a critical art educator, recognize the complexity and intricacies of Critical Pedagogy in both theory and practice?

   a. What are the problems and possibilities that I faced as a critical art educator during initial teacher preparation?

   b. How can these problems and possibilities be addressed (through Critical Pedagogy) in an effort to enhance my own ability to teach and to exemplify Critical Pedagogy?

Essentially, I will examine my own experiences as a student teacher in particular classroom settings through a critical pedagogical lens in an effort to further understand Critical Pedagogy, improve my own teaching/learning practices, and analyze and understand the teaching/learning practices of other educators.

As mentioned, I will be examining the questions above through a lens of Critical Pedagogy. I will use critical consciousness, dialogue, and student power as the filters with which this lens will operate. Because each of these aspects of Critical Pedagogy is interrelated with the others, I will not analyze the data in three separate categories. On the contrary, I will attempt to explore this unified nature in my analyses.
The data I will be using in this research was collected throughout the course of my student teaching experience from January to June of 2009, and it exists in the form of journal entries, lesson plans, teacher feedback, and voice recordings.

Because the method of data collection that I utilized for this research was highly subjective, it is vital to this research that I choose a methodology which will support this subjectivity. There is no arguing that the journal entries exist as a result of my own emotions and that the learning goals I developed for my lesson plans were formed, largely, around what I felt to be crucial to my students’ burgeoning and pre-existing understandings of the world. For this purpose, I will use autoethnographic writing and analyses.

Autoethnography is defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739), and that autoethnography, “make[s] the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation in its own right” (p. 733). My student teaching experience has provided me with a vast array of information, as well as caused me to question my Critical Pedagogical abilities/understandings. Further analysis of these experiences is necessary in order to fully understand their implications. This will be done in an effort to generate new understandings and insights regarding Critical Pedagogy, my own teaching practices, my own learning practices, and the contexts and structures of schools and students.
Rationale

I chose to utilize autoethnography as the method by which to analyze the data I have collected because it has “no pretense of objectivity (Duarte, 2007, Introduction section, ¶4) and is “characterized by ‘confessional tales’ (Ellis & Borchner, 2000, p. 740) that do not figure in more conventional styles of academic writing” (Duarte, 2007, Introduction section, ¶4). This method of research allows for ample self-reflection and contemplation for the purpose of understanding and drawing conclusions about a particular experience. Johns (2004) defines reflection as “being mindful of self, either within or after experience” (p. 3) in order to “view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand, and move toward resolving contradiction between one’s vision and actual practice” (Johns in Duarte, 2007, Introduction section, ¶5). Johns’ very succinct definition reiterates one of my purposes for this research. In addition Duarte (2007) states,

autoethnographic writing begins with a descriptive narrative of events and activities that unfold within a particular culture [or experience] and then develops into a reflective analysis of these events and activities to generate new insights and to enhance the researcher’s sensitivity towards the knowledge gained in the process (Introduction section, ¶6).

Again, the findings of this research will be relative to my own experiences as recorded through various methods. Autoethnography has been used to understand and analyze field experiences (Duarte & Hodge, 2007), as I hope to do. It is a methodology that allows me to explore these experiences and make sense of their implications in an effort to improve my own critical art teaching practice.
Setting, Population, Data Collection

From January to March of 2009, I engaged in a student teaching experience at an urban school in Columbus, Ohio. The school served grades six through eight. According to greatschools.org (on January 2, 2010), 93% of the student population can be identified as “Black,” 5% “White,” and 2% “Unspecified.” The same website states that 98% of the student population is “economically disadvantaged.” During my placement at this school, I taught six, sixth-grade classes each day and saw approximately 200 students per week. From mid-March until June of the same year, I was a student teacher at a suburban elementary school, serving students in Kindergarten through grade six. According to the same website, 57% of students at this school were identified as “White,” 15% “Black,” 13% “Hispanic,” 9% “Multiracial,” and 7% “Asian or Pacific Islander.” 23% of students were identified, by the website, as “economically disadvantaged.” At this school, I taught five classes per day (ranging from Kindergarten through grade six) and would see approximately 400 students each week. Each of the schools differed greatly from the other in many ways apart from demographic statistics and each school provided me with a unique and diverse set of expectations and experiences. These experiences were documented as part of my data collection and will be reviewed in detail later in this document.

As my method for collecting data, I would record my own reactions to daily events within the schools as well as my emotions and connections with students and teachers. I would also record my reactions to events and conversations that occurred in
the weekly seminar class, which all student teachers within the Art Education department were required to take. These recordings were done either on a computer or digital voice recorder. In addition to these documentations, I will be using my own lesson plans as data as well as the feedback given to me for the purpose of improving them. These lesson plans outline the learning goals that I held for each class activity, and will serve as a method of understanding/analyzing my intentions and my teaching practice.

Data Analysis Procedures

As mentioned, my method for analyzing the data collected during my student teaching experience will be a Critical-Pedagogical approach to autoethnography. I will explore and examine each individual artifact (journal entry, etc.) and make my own experiences (or myself) the “very phenomenon under investigation” (Mehan & Wood in Ellis & Bochner, p. 741). I will interrogate myself in an effort to engage in dialogue regarding my own assumptions, ideas, thoughts, desires, and questions.

In viewing each artifact and/or experience, I will revisit the definitions of critical consciousness, dialogue, and student power that were presented in Chapter Two. I will also examine and explore my understandings of Critical Pedagogy at the time of student teaching in reference to these three interconnected aspects. I will investigate how the various experiences that will be described in Chapter Four impacted, changed, or affirmed these notions. Through engaging in this process, I hope that I will be able to further comprehend and make sense of the problems and possibilities that existed within
my own first-hand framework and the implications that these hold for my understandings of Critical Pedagogy.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine my own personal interactions with education. I will not be analyzing any data related to first-hand experiences of other art educators. Secondly, I will only be reflecting upon recorded and documented experiences between January and June of 2009. These artifacts will be the result of my own student teaching recordings during that time period as well as documentation from the required concurrent seminar course in which I was enrolled. This will be the only academic course from which documented material will be examined. Finally, I will be examining only experiences that occurred during my own initial teacher preparation, not over the course of my higher education experience in general.

**Limitations of the Study**

As aforementioned, autoethnography operates under “no pretense of objectivity” (Duarte, 2007, Introduction section, ¶4). Due to the subjective nature of the study, the generalizability and transferability of the findings will be very limited. While some readers of this study may be able to relate to and emotionally connect with the experiences I will be investigating, it is not assumed that the results will be generalizable to a specific population of pre-service art teacher candidates. Secondly, this method is not as systematic as other methods of data analysis. Because I will be discussing the data from my own personal standpoint, I must recognize that the findings will be very
situational. The findings that exist will be the result of a specific set of conditions at a specific moment in time and may not necessarily be apt to recreation. As Humphreys (2005) states, “This narrative is discussed via a consideration of the issues of authenticity, authorial exposure, and reflexivity within autoethnographic accounts and their application in a wider research context” (p. 840).

Significance of the Study

Throughout the course of my student-teaching year, I experienced numerous frustrations and difficulties that challenged my own perceptions of criticality, arts education, and my role as an educator. In an effort to comprehend and make sense of these experiences, I will explore them in this document. In my own experience as a critical pre-service art educator, I felt overwhelmed by my inability to engage in a critical dissection of the day-to-day happenings at both my student teaching sites and in the collegiate classroom. I, therefore, find it crucial to my own development as an arts educator to explore these problems and possibilities now. This research is not intended to be entirely self-serving, however. In addition to enhancing my own individual understandings and making sense of the knowledge gained through personal experience, this research also has the potential to help inform art teacher preparation programs by unveiling some un(der)tapped possibilities for criticality in teacher preparation.
Chapter 4: Story

(Note: Many of the quotes in this section of the document are taken from journal entries that I kept over the course of my student teaching experience. Where applicable, journal entries are denoted by the parenthesized date, marking when the entry was written, and in italicized font. Some of the language may be deemed inappropriate by some, however, I chose not to omit it in order to maintain the integrity and true intensity of the emotions and experiences in which I was involved.)

Introduction

“Teachers are very special people!” is what it says at the top of the handout. This informational packet, given to me in my student teaching seminar course, continues to outline the reasons why “not just anyone can be a teacher…,” as it says. For example, attached to the handout is the list of criminal offenses that would result in educators losing their jobs or licenses, including: kidnapping, rape, promoting prostitution, aggravated murder, and drug trafficking. In addition, I am informed that a state’s board of education has the power to revoke or deny a teaching license to any individual who has engaged in “an immoral act, incompetence, negligence, or ‘conduct unbecoming to the
position.’” As the handout directly states, “the state law assures that only the highest quality people can hold teaching positions.”

On entering my student teaching experience, this was some of the information, which I was provided. My initial instinct was to laugh at the absurdity of classifying any educator not guilty of a felony or “immoral act” as “high quality,” but sitting in my class, I felt it would be inappropriate to laugh at the seriousness of kidnapping and the like. To myself, I thought, “there must be more to being a ‘high quality’ teacher than this.” I turned the page of the packet. “Here it is. The ‘Code of Ethics of the Education Profession.’” Outlining an educator’s professional obligations to their students, it states that, “the educator shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning,” and, “shall not unreasonably deny the student’s access to varying points of view,” as well as, “shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement” (personal communication, January 2009) among other requirements. This, too, seemed like common sense to me. Why would an educator deny a student’s access to viewpoints, or intentionally embarrass a student? I felt that I must have been prepared to be a teacher because all of the guidelines and requirements laid out in the yellow-and-white handout seemed to be natural and common-sensical. I thought, “If this is what defines a high-quality teacher, am I considered high-quality?” I believed that in the coming months of student teaching I would prove to myself whether or not I was of “high-quality” caliber.

Writing this in retrospect, it is difficult to recall the details of the many events that helped to shape my identity as an educator (over the course of student teaching). It is
even more difficult to evoke within myself the intense roller coaster of emotions that outlined my student teaching experience. My roommate, however, could easily attest to the hours of tears and hysterical sobbing that eventually encompassed my day-to-day activities (lesson planning, grading, etc.). This hysteria was a direct result of the fact that I had created a dissonance between the teacher I wanted to be and the teacher I was slowly, in actuality, becoming. While I believed that I still met the definition of a “high quality” teacher, as defined in the above paragraphs, my own expectations of quality were not being met.

What follows in this chapter is the story of my experience: the struggles, contradictions, and experiences that brought me to this point of self-reflection. These are the events that shaped my understandings of arts education and raised, within me, a desire to analyze my experiences in order to deepen my understandings of students, school structures, and the individuals involved in making education what it is. The reflections that follow are the result of journal entries, feedback from various individuals, and paperwork given to me over the course of six months of student teaching. Throughout the quarters, the complexity and intensity of emotions that presented themselves became, at times, so overwhelmingly intricate that it would be impossible to explore their entire scope in this document. Exploring the eclectic and sporadic nature of my journal entries further verifies this. I was feeling, all at once, angry and bitter towards my collegiate classroom environment, rage at the educational system as a whole, unsupported by some individuals, overwhelming support from my cooperating teachers, love for my students, and disappointment and resentment in myself as an educator.
The Beginning

Searching through the abundance of paperwork that was handed out during the first few weeks of student teaching seminar class, I come across the syllabus and list of weekly topics for the class. Winter quarter: Domain D (Teacher professionalism; of the Praxis Domains of Professional Practice), assessment, applying to job fairs, and professional portfolios, with one class dedicated to “Management Issues and Strategies.” Spring quarter: perceiver interviews, interviewing process, and ordering supplies. One class this quarter was to be dedicated to “Examining Teaching Approaches.” I knew what to expect from the course, and yet, I remained baffled when little time was allotted for discussing the realities and difficulties associated with teaching. Perhaps these things cannot be planned for. Perhaps it is impossible to anticipate the amount of time necessary for coping with and making sense of the consequences of eating lunch in the teacher’s lounge. Regardless, there would be one class per quarter used to discuss the physical (and emotional) act of teaching, and I was hopeful that time (approximately 2 hours) would allow for a full examination of these experiences by the entire student teaching class.

I opened to page four of the course syllabus.

The seminar is designed to supplement and enhance your teaching experience. Open-ended discussions and sharing related to field-based experiences will be woven into the content of the seminars. Candidates will be encouraged to dialog about theory to practice applications that they are encountering. Topics and issues of interest to the art teacher candidates will also be used to ground the content of the seminar experience.
I felt peace of mind in reading this. The nervous knot that had formed from not knowing what to expect began to unwind, as I was reassured that the class would be flexible and our experiences would be validated. For whatever validation is worth.

Background Lessons

My peers and I were already aware of our site assignments for the subsequent two quarters of full-time teaching. I was placed in two drastically different schools. I had requested to be in an urban setting, and this request was granted. My first school was in the heart of downtown. It was located near low-income housing projects and dilapidated convenience stores. The population of students was somewhat diverse, as this was a lottery school (meaning that students put their names into a lottery to be selected for admission to the school). After meeting with the art teacher at this site, I was informed that I would be teaching only sixth-grade classes over the course of my ten-week teaching experience at this school. A sort of excitement and mystery surrounded this grade level for me. I was entering the site with an abundance of lesson plans that I had created over the course of my higher education, and many of these were designed to cater to the middle-school learning community. I knew that this was the population that I wanted to permanently teach one day, and so, while I was designing lesson plans for collegiate classes, I had focused most of my energy on developing activities that would be appropriate and challenging for this particular age group.
After discovering that destiny had led me to teaching sixth-graders for a full quarter, I rushed home to dig through all of my course material from the previous year of teacher preparation. I found many units and activities that I was excited to appropriate for this group. The first lesson I intended to utilize was one dedicated to examining power relations and how visual culture can/does manipulate ideas of power. In this unit, I was asking students to explore the world around them and interrogate the visual stimuli in their universe. Students would also be asked to investigate who/what controls visual culture and whether or not this entity also controls citizens. After engaging in assigned readings on the topic of visual culture and reading cultural texts, we would be looking at the work of Barbara Kruger, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg, in addition to studying various visual culture artifacts. Following this, students would learn the processes of screen-printing and collage, which they would use to create an artwork that would respond to the makers of visual culture in a way that would re-establish ownership of their notions of the world. The unit would culminate in a gallery-style exhibit of student artwork and a series of artists round-table discussions, where students would have the opportunity to discuss their learning and newfound understandings with the rest of the school community.

While this unit may sound ambitious to some for a ten-week experience in an unfamiliar classroom setting, I was sure that I would be able to make the content accessible to sixth-graders and that they would find it compelling and challenging. I knew that it would be difficult, but I also knew that I was motivated to make this
experience the most positive that it could be for my student population. The art room had a set of screens and other materials that would be needed for the artmaking portion of the project, and I felt confident that I would be able to find the remaining needed materials at little-to-no cost.

In addition to this unit, I had also designed a second unit that I was extremely excited to teach. This unit, I knew, would require a great deal of technological resources and would, potentially, last the full ten weeks of the experience. This unit, designed to fulfill a requirement for a visual culture class in my undergraduate coursework, would explore the work of Barbara Kruger, Shirin Neshat, Spike Lee, and the music of (and video footage by) Green Day and John Lennon. The purpose of the unit was to investigate the meaning of the word, “terrorism,” as well as the student’s understandings of the word and how an act of “terrorism” occurs. Students would look at historical footage of Edward Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy, political cartoons, different uses of the American Flag, and newscasts. They would then engage in dialogue regarding how terrorism could be both aided by visual culture, and how visual culture could combat terrorism. For the artmaking portion of this lesson, students would be asked to create a music video that responded to or deconstructed a particular event. This video would be asked to employ parody and other language arts elements. A second artmaking activity that I had created for this lesson involved the creation of a false newscast that would deconstruct a current event. These newscasts would be aired to the entire school population as a method of learning about (and engaging in) performance art.
Each of the two aforementioned units was rich with content and addressed a wide variety of the Ohio Content Standards. Students would be looking at social, historical, and political contexts of art; responding to how form and subject matter could contribute to meanings of art; looking at varying viewpoints; developing their own perspectives on current events issues; and exploring the interrelatedness of historical movements and art. In addition, students would be learning new artmaking techniques, developing discourses to engage in dialogue about artmaking, and developing cross-discipline skills. I was excited to teach one of these two units, as I felt that each was innovative and thought-provoking. I also believed strongly that each unit would help students to develop a stronger and more aware sense-of-self and sense-of-world. I recognized that both of my intended units for my sixth-grade student teaching experience were very ambitious. I felt that it was necessary, however, to explore current events with students and help them to engage in empowering and challenging activities. While skepticism from my peers, supervisors, and cooperating teachers remained somewhat high, I remained committed to the hope that these types of units and classroom activities would be possible and successful.

Aside from entering the student teaching experience with lesson plans and a hopeful attitude, I also had strong expectations for criticality. I had expected to be able to engage in critical thought processes with students. I felt that by introducing compelling and out-of-the-ordinary subject matter, they would be encouraged to engage in discussion and extensions of any newfound knowledge. I had hoped to be able to ask “how,” “why,” and “what does it mean,” in an effort to build understandings with my students
regarding how the world functions and the implications behind this. I had also expected to engage in this criticality within my seminar classes. As stated in the course syllabus: “This course is aligned with the following licensure standards…I.D.2.10. Candidates develop an understanding and use of a variety of instructional strategies for developing critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills” (personal communication, January 2009).

Interrupted

It was in this mindset and with these ideals that I began teaching sixth-grade art at my first assigned site. Upon entering the classroom, however, I was informed by my cooperating teacher that she was working on applying for a grant to do a community artwork. In addition to developing this lesson, I was also informed that students would be working on a mural in the school stairwell and engaging in an interdisciplinary and collaborative art project that would involve the language arts, social studies, and science teachers. While this seemed overwhelming at first, I approached it with the same hopefulness for success that I did my own unit planning. I knew that each of these projects contained rich potential for examining powerful content and engaging students in resonant, meaningful learning experiences.

As I began planning for these lessons, something within me changed. I was teaching classes on Fridays as a way to “build-up” my teaching stamina. During one of
my first physical teaching experiences, two students had to be removed from the
classroom for fighting.

Yesterday, I had to suspend two students for fighting. A student elbowed another
in the head and then proceeded to tell me that he didn’t do it…verbal altercation
ensued. I have never heard the word, “Nigger” come out of such small mouths
before. They seemed to be filled with so much hate and rage. Why don’t they
teach us this stuff in school? What the hell am I supposed to do when two
students are about ready to kick the crap out of each other? I simply took them to
the office. But am I turning my authority over to the principal? (2/10/09)

Within the same week, my eyes were opened to the realities of racial tensions between
minority students and white teachers.

I was told by a student yesterday that I was racist. I don’t even know that he
understands the full meaning of the word. I asked him if he “really wanted to
even go there…” His response was, “No, ma’am.” Talk about losing a
 teachable moment…I was just so angry and offended…Racism to some of my
students seems to be simply a term for whenever they don’t like what a white
person does. He called me a racist because I gave the entire class lunch
detention except for four people who were following directions and listening.
Those four students were all black. It’s clear that he doesn’t know what the word
means…or perhaps I don’t (2/10/09).

It was with this experience that I recognized a vital aspect of my teacher identity. It was
one that I had not considered to be dramatically important before this. I am white. It was
clear to me that this was an aspect of my identity that was recognized by my students, and
that I would need to investigate it as well. I wondered: What does it mean to be a white
teacher in a predominately minority school? What does it mean to be in a position of
“authority” and be white? I was forced to confront my own understandings of race and
racial tension at this point. I knew that I had to understand my own ideas of power and
power relationships before I could ever teach a unit on power (such as the unit mentioned
previously).
Shortly after both of the incidents, I was informed that the art program had received the grant to work on a community artwork. The purpose of the community artwork was to honor members of the black community in the area, and I was excited to help develop the idea for the artwork. It seemed to be a relevant artmaking project in honor of Black History Month. I knew that this artwork had the potential to be extremely meaningful for my students, seeing as how their work would become permanently installed and would, quite possibly, receive a fair amount of press. As the ideas for the community artwork began to develop, amongst my cooperating teacher, a grant committee, and myself, I was informed that the work would take the form of “Totem Poles.” While I recognize the potential in making Totem Poles with my students, I also felt that connecting this subject to honoring members of the black community would be a difficult, and, perhaps, dissonant connection for my students to make. In addition, I did not feel prepared or knowledgeable enough regarding the history, context, and content of Totem Poles. I did not want to inadvertently perpetuate any stereotypes regarding American Indian culture and did not want to do any disservice to the true sacred nature and intention of Totem Poles. My solution to the situation was to discuss the history of Totem Poles (with a great deal of research) and introduce “appropriation” to the student population. Again, however, I was met with discouragement. Many of my mentors felt that “appropriation” would be a difficult concept for the sixth-grade students to grasp. “The people giving us the grant want us to recognize prominent members of the black community of Columbus by creating Totem Poles in honor of them…which I would be
happy to do if everyone would stop telling me that ‘appropriation’ is too big of a word for sixth graders” (2/12/09).

I was beginning to recognize a trend in general attitudes toward the ability levels of the sixth-grade students, with whom I was working. Many people were telling me that my expectations were too high. I couldn’t help but wonder: “Are they?” “Is there anything wrong with setting high expectations? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?” “Are the goals that I have in mind for my students actually attainable?”

I proceeded to create lesson plans and power-point presentations for the “Totem Pole” lesson. The lesson-plan outline I was asked to follow, for the purpose of the seminar class, included sections for “performance-based objectives,” “performance-based assessment strategies,” “vocabulary,” and “teacher reflection,” among others. The first lesson for this unit served as an opportunity for students to gather information on the individuals that they would be honoring with their totem poles. One of the objectives was: “Students will demonstrate an ability to find information within a specific time frame and with specific resources.” Students would engage in an “information scavenger hunt” in an effort to familiarize themselves with the individual they had been assigned to honor. For the artmaking process, each student was given a wooden block on which they would draw/paint a portrait of their assigned individual, their own name, the reason for commemorating the individual, and an image that represented a way that they could impact their community. The blocks would eventually be stacked and held together with poles that would be cemented into the ground. I had randomly assigned students to
individuals in an effort to avoid any favoritism by the students for one individual over another. This favoritism could have resulted in uneven instillations.

Once students finished sketches for their four sides of their wooden block, they would need to use carbon paper to transfer the sketch to the block. This process was ground for a lesson of its own for which the performance-based objectives were no more remarkable than in the previous lesson. “Students will use carbon paper to transfer their drawings to the Totem Pole blocks,” “Students will add color, using enamel, to the Totem Pole blocks,” and “Students will complete a community artwork.” In addition, students used a drill (under supervision) to drill plastic bottle caps onto their block in an effort to add dimension. While students seemed to be engaged in this process (and other activities that took place throughout this and other units), I felt a distinct difference between the goals that I was setting for my students at this time and the intentions I had held in creating lesson plans during my undergraduate education. Where had my desire for criticality gone? Would this have even been possible given the time constraints and lesson-plan guidelines that I was given?

At the same time that I was trying to find my missing criticality, I was also being introduced to the difficulties of managing a classroom with which I was not familiar. One could argue that all student teachers experience this struggle, as I’m sure they do. And I am not implying that my experience was any more or less significant or difficult than any other educator’s experience. As mentioned, however, there was very little time devoted to discussing these difficulties in seminar classes, thus, I felt very alone and isolated in my struggles.
I found (and was embarrassed to say) that my methods of managing the classroom were not always effective (nor democratic). I was “writing up” students for “insubordination,” and issues of “respect.” Many times, I would send students to another classroom for a “time out,” of sorts. Some teachers in the building seemed to feel that this method of management was effective, and I began to believe it.

I can remember one particular incident involving management that was so undemocratic (in my opinion) that I was no longer able to recognize myself as a critical educator. In one class, I had a student who would constantly talk over me in class and, I believe, engaged in a struggle with me for power and authority in the classroom. This is not to insinuate that I do or do not believe in mutual respect and shared power. I am simply stating that the dynamic of our relationship was tension-filled. At one point in class, this student, who was “off-task” at the time (for whatever that means), argued that I was disrespecting them and that they didn’t have to respect me if I didn’t respect them. This was a very difficult accusation for me to accept, but I knew that I had to seriously investigate the implications associated with it. This student felt threatened by me and by my level of authority in the classroom as much as I felt threatened by their accusation.

(2/20/09). This student also felt disrespected. Now, whether this was the student’s own way of rebelling against me is irrelevant. Simply the accusation of being disrespectful was enough to make me question my role as a critical pedagogue. I wondered: “Am I not teaching respectfully?” “Am I not recognizing my students as full and complete individuals?” “Am I not walking the critical walk?”
The identity crisis that I began to experience peaked when I had to meet with the principal of the school for a phone conference regarding the student’s expulsion. The student’s parent proceeded to criticize my teaching methods and accuse me of favoritism, as well as directly state that I was not fit to be a teacher and that this parent did not want me near their child. I felt attacked and tried desperately to make sense of these accusations. What did they mean for my future as an educator? Who had I become? Were the accusations accurate? Relevant?

I began to lose faith in the possibilities for democratic and humanizing education.

I can’t help but wonder if democratic educational processes stand even the slightest chance at manifestation. Can teachers truly expect to run a classroom in a democratic manner? What does this even mean, I wonder. Is a democratic classroom one that exists free from disciplinary action? I don’t believe so…but if the disciplinary action threatens or antagonizes a student (even intentionally or inadvertently), then does it become oppressive? Can firm be oppressive? By not allowing a student to speak their mind in class, am I repressing their right as a human being? What if that voice is disruptive and disrespectful? By allowing a student to be disrespectful, am I oppressing the rest of my students? Am I taking away their time to learn by letting another student disrupt class? BUT…if I do address the situation and that student, as a result, becomes suspended, am I taking away their right to an education? And if I’m taking away a student’s right to an education, am I letting them slip through the cracks? And isn’t EVERY CHILD IMPORTANT?!?!? (2/20/09).

In, what I perceived to be, an inability to relate theory regarding democratic education and Critical Pedagogy to my classroom practice, I became embittered and angry as I tried to cope with this struggle on my own. The hope and “wide-eyed” mentality that had filled my lesson planning and journal entries alike began to wither. My fight to create engaging experiences for my students became, simply, a fight to survive. I was no longer able to even imagine a better state of education or an empowered class. Thinking about being in a classroom just made me nauseous.
Trying to write a lesson on graffiti... not too sure how I feel about that. Am I stereotyping my students? Probably. Wish I had more knowledge about street art and could broaden their global perspective by talking about it on a bigger scale... should I talk about gang violence? I’m scared to... when did I become such a sellout? When did I become scared? When did I become such a hypocrite?... Maybe I was just too naïve before... believing that anything in their world was fair game to talk about in school... if they live it, let’s talk about it. Yah right. Can’t talk about anything taboo... causes too many problems. Ruffles too many feathers. Provokes too many questions that I can’t answer. Nobody can answer. Perhaps I just don’t care enough? I feel like I’m nothing more than a babysitter. I’ve been telling people that everything’s okay. Nothing is okay. Freire lied to me. I feel betrayed (2/22/09).

While this overwhelming sadness and disappointment in myself took hold, in seminar classes, we were sharing the products that students had created and discussing lesson plans we had used, as well as moving into discussion regarding creating professional portfolios.

As the initial quarter of student teaching began to wind down and we were preparing for our second experience, I found myself bewildered and left with a wide array of emotions to sort through. I felt grateful to the other educators in the building for their support and mentoring, love for my students, frustrated with my own abilities, unsure of how to create meaningful lessons, and unaware of how to reconcile the hopelessness that I had been feeling. In addition, I wanted to put on a confident face for my students and cooperating teacher. These emotions seemed to fluctuate greatly from day-to-day and it became very difficult to control or predict them.

My relationships within this middle-school setting were very supportive and I was able to rely on many individuals for emotional support. I attempted to respond to concerns of my supervisor and cooperating teacher (regarding lesson plan timeliness, development of comprehensive assessment strategies, etc), and feel that I did so
successfully, which allowed me to maintain positive and helpful relationships with both individuals. In my end-of-quarter feedback, my cooperating teacher stated, “Abby has grown into a very capable teacher. I think that her compassion for her students is her greatest strength…I am very pleased with all of the effort and growth I have seen in Abby during her placement.”

As I was phasing out of teaching, I had more time to make sense of my first quarter student teaching experience. What did all of these emotions and experiences mean? I wondered if, perhaps, the disappointment that I felt in myself was, simultaneously, a disappointment in my educational experience. Was I underprepared because I wasn’t trying hard enough, or was there a more complex issue at hand? A final journal entry for the quarter summed up most of what I was feeling at this stage.

There’s a sick sense of disappointment in the pit of my stomach when I think about my overall student teaching experience. It’s not a matter of my students or my cooperating teacher (they were all wonderful), but rather a matter of dissatisfaction in my education as a whole…

I pay a lot of money to go to school, and yet my education is determined by people in an office somewhere who are significantly removed from the world in which I plan to teach. Other people decide what is important for me to know in order to be successful. I have no say in what I am education on, even though I’m the one who is actually in schools all day.

Because the fact of the matter is…I don’t know how to manage a classroom. I don’t know how to connect with my students. I don’t know how to teach studio techniques. I don’t know how to create meaningful lesson plans. I don’t know how to fight the good fight. I feel exhausted. I feel burnt out. I feel hopeless. I’m so fucking damn tired of hearing that I don’t know how to teach inner city…I don’t know how to teach studio…fucking duh.

The thing is, I have to remain committed to my students. I can’t give up on them.

I think that you have to be a type of con artist to be a good teacher. You have to be able to walk the walk of administration, of other teachers, of people who have
control of your career. You have to be able to convince them that you are doing the things they want you to do and teaching the things they want you to teach, all while living a life and teaching in a classroom where students are learning valuable information that will help them in the real world…

This was the mental and emotional state in which I concluded my first three months of student teaching. I was in a bitter condition, blaming and pointing fingers at various people (whether justly or not) for my perceived unpreparedness to teach. The anger I was feeling continued to grow over the course of conversations with various individuals, both inside and out of the education field. I was beginning to feel like I had to walk a tightrope on a daily basis, with no safety net underneath. I had to balance looking and acting like the teacher I was told to be with the inner educator/inquirer that I was.

A second chance

As much as I would like to say that I was able to put the events and emotions from my first quarter of student teaching behind me, this would be a blatant lie. My former wide-eyed and enthusiastic persona had been disrupted; forced to lie dormant behind a callous, stern, even sad individual. I entered my second student teaching site completely unsure of myself. I was shaken by the events of the previous quarter, therefore, attempting to suppress my passion for criticality (and critical subject matter). Eventually, however, I simply laid down my critical arms.

A great deal of my frustrations exist in that I cannot figure out how to fit critical pedagogy into a modern classroom environment. I feel like there is no room for progressive thought in the traditional school system. Perhaps this is true. But it is beside the point.

I have been trying to fit theory into my experiences. I have based my idea of success around whether or not I can successfully integrate this theory into my
practice. I began to feel that I was not successful...that I was a lie as a teacher...that I wasn’t smart or good enough to teach. But success cannot be measured this way. If I spend my time trying to serve a theory...trying to make manifest an abstract ideal and thought...then I am not focusing on my students the way that I should be. You cannot serve a theory. You can only serve people.

It is not at all that I plan to teach without a theoretical framework or without any frame of reference. I just feel like maybe if I spent less time trying to force this theory into my practice and more time just letting the theory find its way, there would be a great deal less of frustration...

I am terrified of making a mistake or of unlearning what I know (if that’s even possible). But is that so bad? I don’t know (2/25/09).

A sense of calm overwhelmed me in this newfound sense of self-awareness. At the same time, however, I knew that I could not, in all actuality, renounce critical thinking and the philosophies associated with it. I simply had to let go of these for a while in order to survive. I felt that, in the upcoming quarter, I would try harder to focus on my students, their experience in the classroom, and their emotional well-being (as well as mine). I knew that, certainly, being an irritable, discouraged, angry teacher could not provide students with a positive experience. At the same time, however, I also began to question my own commitment to criticality and to my students. I asked myself: “When, if ever, is it okay to sacrifice the exigent and complex demands of criticality for the emotional stability of oneself and one’s students? Or can the two coexist?” “Are critical pedagogues forever condemned to a life of maddening obscurity? Or have I just not understood this pedagogy in its entirety?”

In denying this aspect of myself, I was able to begin creating lesson plans that met the standards and purposes outlined by the state content standards without complete and utter self-loathing. As a result, I thought that I would be able to enjoy my time at the
school, form rapport with students, and maintain a close, supportive, and positive relationship with my cooperating teacher (which was, in fact, the case). I felt that it was necessary to wipe criticality from my vocabulary in order to be successful in the coming quarter. Although this rejection of myself provided an element of ironic hope, I also began to feel the emptiness that was simultaneously created.

*When did I stop finding possibility in impossibility? When did I stop caring?*

*I think that I have been searching for something.*

*There is an emptiness that exists. I’m not sure how to even begin to quench it. I keep thinking that I’m getting closer and closer to it…How exhausting it is to never feel fulfilled! To never feel satisfied!*

*There was a time in my life where there was a passion for this field; a time when I had a fire inside of me…a time when I came alive through Art Education. But it seems as though this passion has dissipated…dissolved. It’s simply gone. And the worst part is that I don’t know where to go from here.*

*It is the most excruciating pain I have ever experienced…to have known passion and then to lose it. Because I can remember how it felt (3/31/09).*

The quarter began, and although I still felt plagued by mediocrity and “average-ness,” I wasn’t so busy hating and feeling disappointed in myself. I was, therefore, able to survive and, at times, thrive.

While I knew that the lesson plans that I was creating were not, particularly, extraordinary students seemed to enjoy them. In one grade level, we created artworks after studying the depictions of community by artists Aminah Robinson and Charles Burchfield. Once again, average objectives (such as: “Students will recognize the style and subject matter specific to three Ohio Artists”) did not allow for a great deal of criticality or intense exploration. They did, however, meet the standards set forth by the
State of Ohio [such as: “Distinguish the artistic style and subject matter in the artworks of two or more visual artists from local, regional or state history” (Visual Arts Content Standards, 2004, p.212)]. Following a discussion and introduction to Aminah Robinson and Charles Burchfield, students created drawings that depicted their own communities using oil pastels, which were later covered with watercolor to create resist-style artworks.

In another grade level, students learned about Batik methods and created a landscape on fabric. Safety precautions and time constraints, however, did not allow us to utilize traditional methods of Batik. Instead, we used a paste mixture, painted over it, and peeled off the mixture once it had dried and cracked. Performance-based objectives were as follows: “1. Students will use their sketches to create glue lines on their piece of fabric. 2. Students will recognize the style of Batik. 3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of foreground, middleground, and background as well as contour lines.”

Throughout the course of these activities (among others), students worked collaboratively in groups, built relationships, and remained actively engaged. I felt strongly that students were leaving the classroom with some valuable information. Students were learning about new artists, new styles, and making art. While I knew that there was a certain element (critical thought) missing from my lesson planning processes and classroom discussions, I also knew that students were engaged, seemed happy, and were learning something. At the same time, I did not feel as frustrated with my own hypocrisy because I chose to simply ignore the part of me that was demanding criticality. In this denial, however, I also felt a loss. I had to grieve my own intellectual bereavement.
At this point in the quarter, my collegiate seminar class decided to create an online blog as a space to discuss issues related to student teaching. This gave us the opportunity to explore difficulties and personal experiences without taking up too much class time.

_We were asked, today, what our goals were for the quarter. I said that I would like to have a solid support structure within the cohort because I felt like I knew more about how to get a job than how to teach. My peers seem to feel the same way. We’re exhausted, wiped of our social lives, burnt out, overworked, and unpaid. And now, we don’t even have time to support each other._

_We started a blog online. I don’t know if that will help. Quite frankly, I don’t think that it’s good enough. I don’t give a shit that sharing time is consuming. We have to do it…to restore our sanity. Some would say, to ‘renew’ us._

_Maybe I wouldn’t fucking need to be renewed if I didn’t feel this way in the first place…I just need someone to listen. I need someone who understands…and I don’t think that someone exists sometimes. I’m still making lesson plans that seem inconsequential…at least, I think they are…(4/13/09)._  

As spring quarter progressed, so did my understanding of the interview process, and eventually, I lost all hope both for engaging in dialogue in seminar and in finding my “true” identity as an educator. So, I simply continued to implement classroom management methods, lesson planning strategies and utilization of technology that I had learned about in some of my university classes. Friends, family, and supervisors stopped excessive worrying because I seemed happier on the outside. Deep down, however, with every day that passed, my new, external, “teacher” persona silently asphyxiated my critical soul. And I knew, at heart, that this was no one’s fault but my own.

And so, I proceeded with my lesson plans. I smiled in class. I played games with students and tried to make the most of my time at my second-quarter school site. Internally, however, I knew that I had missed out on the rich potential that much of the
subject matter we were studying could have provided. I wondered if there was even a way to engage in critical activities with students in such limited circumstances?

As the quarter began to wind down and I was no longer teaching in the classroom full-time, I began to re-embrace my own criticality. My final journal entry from the quarter provides a summary of my emotional state at this point in time.

The school year is winding down and I’m beginning to reflect upon the experience as a whole. I feel so much frustration in thinking about the quality of artworks that I have had students produce and the lessons that I have taught. Were they interesting? Were they conducive to developing the whole child? Were they captivating for students? Were students invested in them?

I can’t help but wonder: When is this [student teaching experience] going to make sense? Or will it?

I feel discouraged and annoyed. Did I make the wrong decision for what to do with my life? Was I seduced by things that I can’t understand? Will I ever understand? Will I ever be an effective art teacher? Will that even be fulfilling to me? Will I always feel entirely insecure? Will there always be, just, something missing?

My gut tells me: Probably. Probably, there will always be a missing piece…

I feel like I will constantly want something different than what I have. I don’t know that I will ever be fulfilled or happy. I’m kind of okay with that, but it’s scary.

It’s like in that movie [History Boys, 2006], “I’m not happy, but I’m not unhappy about it.”

Adventures await, I suppose (5/25/09).
Chapter 5: Discussion

When I finished student teaching, I had thought that I would use my summer break to make some sort of sense out of the experience. Instead, however, I chose not to look at my journal entries again. I had concluded the quarter on a metaphorical “high-note” and did not want to relive the complexity of emotions that I had felt, for fear of confronting myself. In fact, it was not until writing the previous chapter that I have revisited both my journal entries and the overall experience. What follows, in this section, will provide an analysis of the content discussed in Chapter Four using the critical pedagogical framework outlined in Chapter Two.

It has been difficult to “come to grips” with the reality of analyzing my autoethnographical data. I have come to recognize that this means using a critical pedagogical framework to analyze and interpret my own position as a critical educator (or one attempting to be critical), as well as critiquing my own ideas of criticality. Even in looking back at my previous writing, I begin to ask an abundance of, perhaps, unanswerable questions, the scope of which could mean an eternity of searching, writing, and contradicting. I have become attached to criticality (or it has attached to me), and I am just now beginning to comprehend the complexity of its implications.
As stated in the Review of Literature, I will attempt to revisit the events and emotions described previously using three key elements of Critical Pedagogy: Critical Consciousness, Dialogue, and Student Power. Still, as I write this, my understandings and definitions of these terms are (r)evolving, simultaneously making this a very difficult task and implying that Critical Pedagogy is in a perpetual state of fluctuation, as are the individuals who attempt to acquaint themselves with it.

I, myself, am not immune to this constant fluctuation. Trying, perhaps in vain, to understand and apply Critical Pedagogy to my own teaching practices during student teaching felt more like running in circles. No matter how fast, how desperately I tried to comprehend and relate it, I always ended back in a state of desolate confusion, weary with fatigue. I was/am tired, but the journey, itself, has made me different.

I am beginning to wonder if, perhaps, in order to develop knowledge, pain and struggle are both necessary. In my own personal experience, the frustrations and identity crises that were results of my student teaching experience and the interruption of my ideal pedagogical framework have brought me to new understanding. I don’t know that I can necessarily say that I am more knowledgeable, or better, but I am, again, different. My understanding of Critical Pedagogy and how it can be intertwined with practice is vastly different from what it was prior to my student teaching year.

Pre/MisConceptions

At the outset of student teaching, I had very strong convictions about Critical Pedagogy. I had believed that it was the only way to teach. I wanted students to explore
the political, social, and economic implications of various structures through artistic exploration. I believed that this would empower them to use their own lives to act as agents of change and bring justice to/with the abundance of people who have been victims of oppression while recognizing their own roles as oppressed oppressors. In my classroom, students would be free: free to explore, free to be angry, free to imagine and act on peace, and so on. One might say that I felt it was my “duty,” even, my “right” to “enlighten” students about the social injustices in the world and their responsibility to act on those injustices. Contradictory as it may sound, this was what I believed. I felt that I was going to change education, and I was going to do it using Critical Pedagogy. Ergo, my notions of Critical Pedagogy and my place in it (or its place in me) were highly idealized, and, perhaps, a bit naïve.

In addition, I became irritated and angry with people who did not agree with my ideals for education. This frustration manifested itself in feelings of embitterment toward my educational institution. Again, Critical Pedagogy was the only pedagogy. Even more ironic than my frustration with those who didn’t agree with me was the fact that I became very protective of my Critical Pedagogy. Because I was one of few students in the Art Education cohort who was aware of it, I did not want to share Critical Pedagogy with my peers. For some reason, I thought that it made me “better” or “smarter” to have a conceptual framework based in something that few others were conscious of. It made me different from everyone else, so I thought. These mindsets are some of the first indicators that I still had/have a great deal of growing left to do as a critical pedagogue.
While I recognize that my stated intentions for the art classroom and my somewhat pretentious views have political and contradictory implications of their own, the goal of this chapter is not to critique those intentions—yet. I do, however, accept that my own perceptions of education are formed by a particular set of experiences that have defined my ideas of the world, how it operates, and what is fair,” “right,” and “good.” In addition, I am not an individual free from influence or agenda, and am acknowledging the subjective, political nature of the information shared thus far, and of the analysis that follows.

In Chapter Four, I mentioned that I had “lost all hope for engaging in dialogue in seminar and in finding my true identity as an educator.” At this point in my collegiate career, I was intent on “finding myself.” I maintained the notion that my identity as a critical pedagogue was fixed and waiting to be discovered, and that my education was responsible for providing the means of discovery. I was under the impression that I had a divine destiny as a critical educator. After much of the reading that I had done, I had developed my own idea of a “recipe” for being a “true” critical pedagogue. I believed that I had to be critically conscious of the world, bring this critical consciousness into the classroom setting through dialogue, and teach lessons that revolved around social justice, which would empower students to discover their own power. While I did not know what these would look like as application of theory, I thought that if I successfully did all of these things, I would achieve critical status.

At the beginning of my student teaching experience, I considered critical consciousness to be little more than critical thinking. I understood it to be a process of
asking questions that dug into the implied or underlying meanings of things. I was under the impression that this “digging” would then lead students to reject their previously-held notions of the world and how it functions. I think that I assumed that this critical questioning would prompt students to recognize their own oppression as a result of political, economic, and social structures. As part of this critical consciousness, students would engage in dialogue about their lived experiences in an effort to understand the world around them and how it informs/controls their lives. This new knowledge would make them powerful because they would be aware of the subversive nature of social, political, economic, and educational structures. The process of being enlightened by obtaining critical consciousness through dialogue would culminate in a neo-Marxist revolution with students, newly attuned to their own power, firmly in control of their education and their world. This was how I viewed critical consciousness, dialogue, and student power upon entering student teaching. These understandings also served as expectations that I set for myself to meet. I expected a revolution. I expected a transformation.

*A different kind of transformation*

In the first few journal entries shared in chapter four, I mention being made aware of the racial and power tensions in my first student teaching placement site. In one event, two students were fighting and ignored my requests to sit down and try to collect themselves. In the second, I was labeled a “racist,” by my student and became extremely defensive, ignoring the opportunity to engage in dialogue. I think that a lot of my
frustration with these events occurred because I did not use the situations to broaden my students’ perspectives of the world. I did not enlighten them in any way. I felt that I had lost “teachable moments.” I was told by a student yesterday that I was racist. I don’t even know that he understands the full meaning of the word. I asked him if he “really wanted to even go there…”…Talk about losing a teachable moment (2/10/09). I didn’t ask any critical thinking questions that enabled my students to see the social and political influences in their perceptions of the world. These were all things that I had expected myself to do, as per my own “recipe” for criticality. In my reflections of these incidents, I alluded to my failure to bring critical consciousness to my students. Racism to some of my students seems to be simply a term for whenever they don’t like what a white person does…It’s clear that he doesn’t know what the word means…(2/10/09). And: Wish I had more knowledge about street art and could broaden their global perspective by talking about it on a bigger scale (2/22/09). I think that a major flaw in my perceptions of these events, however, was that I was internally blaming my higher education, the school I was teaching in, the students in the classes, and myself for lost “opportunities” as opposed to revisiting and revising my own classroom strategies. Why don’t they teach us this stuff in school? (2/10/09) And: It’s not a matter of my students or my cooperating teacher…but rather a matter of dissatisfaction in my education as a whole (3/20/09). In addition, I was attempting to live up to my own (mis)conceived notions about critical consciousness, dialogue, and student power.

As mentioned in chapter two, Amy Lee (in Alsup, 2001) believes that educators must constantly “relearn” to teach, as part of engaging in a Critical Pedagogy. We must
revise and (re)envision our ideas of schools, students, teaching, and knowledge.

Therefore, while I was blaming various institutions and my own inability to bring about a critical consciousness within my students, perhaps I should have been revisiting my own teaching methods, assumptions, and ideas about education. Being critically conscious of my own practice may have better prepared me for engaging in critically conscious, empowering, and dialogical practices in the classroom.

For example, in the first incident, the two students were fighting and ignoring my efforts to get them calm and collected enough to engage in a discussion about the problem. I became upset with my teacher preparation program because I was not aware of how to “deal” with this situation in a way that did not turn my power over to another authority figure. I simply took them to the office. But am I turning my authority over to the principal? (2/10/09) While this frustration was/is partially grounded in the historical and curricular context of teacher preparation, perhaps the issue was less about my perceived failure of my education and more about my perceived notions of authority. In retrospect, I can recognize that my intention, at the time, was to get my students “under control,” therefore limiting possibilities for dialogue and revoking any power that each student had in the situation. While I don’t know what solution would have kept these students from hitting one another, I do know that asserting my perceived role in the classroom as an authoritarian educator was not successful. At the time, I saw a missed opportunity for myself to “enlighten” my students by utilizing critical questioning strategies. I felt that I should have helped them work through their disagreement with one-another through dialogue, which would bring them to a mutual understanding of each
other and promote group cohesiveness. Although I cannot say what would or wouldn’t
have “worked” in this situation, I do believe, now, that this over-simplification of the
built-up anger that the two students were both feeling would have excluded the true
complexity and historical/political nature of their struggle. In addition, I was upset
because I felt like I was left with no choice but to “turn my authority over to the
principal” in this situation. While, at the time, I was upset by the idea of losing my
autonomy in the classroom and sending my students to the principal’s office where they
would, undoubtedly, be suspended from school, I now wonder if I even had any authority
in the classroom in the first place. Why did I assume that students should adhere to my
requests? Why did I assume that I had any power at all? Whereas before revisiting this
incident, I did view the teacher’s role in the classroom as a given, I now understand that
this assumption can undermine student autonomy and power in the classroom.

Similar revelations have occurred in revisiting the second incident as well. I was
so offended by being called a racist by the student in this class that I snapped at him,
exclaiming to myself that he was just ignorant of the true meaning of the word “racism.”
Upon revisiting this experience in my journal entry, I see that I was frustrated with
myself for not using this opportunity to ask “critical” questions that would “enlighten”
this student to, what I perceived to be, the true meaning of racism. I felt that I should
have found some way to help him understand that racism was more than “when he
doesn’t like what a white person does.” I don’t know how or why I thought that this was
implementing a Critical Pedagogical framework. I had a definite concept that I wanted
this student to “get to” and thought that by leading him in that direction (without just
giving him the answer I wanted), he would feel in control. I thought that I would use
dialogue to bring this student to a “critical consciousness” of the world. My world.

Looking back, it is difficult not to laugh at the ridiculousness of my
misconceptions of dialogue and critical consciousness in this situation, however the
thought of how this may have impacted the student is quite sobering. In my response to
the student’s perception of racism, I completely ignored any definition that he may have
developed as a result of a cultural pedagogy. I feel that I devalued his personal
experience and replaced it with a textbook definition that was a bit less uncomfortable for
me. By using the “standard” definition of racism as the only definition, I could deny any
racial oppression on my part. In this act, I was not acting in a critically conscious or
dialogical way, nor was I encouraging these possibilities with the student. I also revoked
any power that the student had, as per the framework in Chapter Two. My idea of
dialogue, at the time, was simply two or more people engaging in conversation for the
purpose of building knowledge. While I did recognize that this dialogue should be
transformative, I don’t know that I fully understood the importance of this transformation
being mutual. By dialoging with the student in the manner mentioned above, it is
possible that neither party would have been transformed in any way. I may have
maintained my own definitions of “racism,” and the student may have had to change his
understandings to fit into the framework I set up. His personal experiences could/would
have been invalidated by my patriarchal and condescending manner, as I would have
been ignoring lived realities that interrupted my comfort zone. While this is all
speculative, I firmly believe that my understanding of dialogue in this situation was anything but critical.

As I cannot say, again, what I should have done in this situation in order to engage in transformative dialogue and come to a state of critical consciousness, I do know that the event, itself, has brought me to new understanding of these elements. First of all, creating a space in which individual lived experiences are valued (no matter how disruptive they are to my own identity) helps to create a “new speech community” that is democratic and where students are powerful. Secondly, Dialogue is not about me asking questions of the student, who I want to respond in a particular way. Dialogue is not about using conversation to lead a student to a pre-set conclusion. And Critical Consciousness is not about me proving to a student that he/she has been “misguided” in his/her understandings of race and racism by the world around him/her. In this sense, I now wonder if an educator can be part of the process of dialogue in an effort to empower a critically conscious classroom. Even as someone who embraced the idea of criticality, I was unable to abandon my own colonialist perspective in an effort to benefit my students. I did not, in addition, take into account the political implications of my role in the classroom (as a white, middle-class, female teacher) and the insinuations and contradictions of my own social/political agenda. I think that, as an educator, I will have to be relentlessly critically conscious of my own perceptions of critical consciousness, dialogue, and power if I ever hope to empower students to do the same.

The Totem Pole project brought about a different set of confusions, contradictions, and conflicts to my perception of Critical Pedagogy. To recap: for this
project, students were assigned a prominent member of the black community to honor by painting a wooden block with various images. The wooden blocks were then aligned vertically, held together with a steel rod, and cemented into the ground. The products completed by the students were extremely impressive, and students spent a great deal of time and energy working on their blocks. In an effort to begin a critical discussion, I introduced the word “appropriation” into the discussion about Totem Poles. I had been having a difficult time reconciling the notion of using a sacred American Indian tradition as a method of honoring Archie Griffin. While I felt that it was important for the students to honor the individuals we had decided on, I did not know if this was appropriate method of doing so. However, no matter how many times I changed the name of the project, it always ended back at Totem Poles. Therefore, I chose to discuss with the students how we were appropriating this tradition for our own purpose. The people giving us the grant want us to recognize prominent members of the Black community of Columbus by creating Totem Poles in honor of them…which I would be happy to do if everyone would stop telling me that “appropriation” is too big of a word for sixth graders (2/12/09).

A great deal of my struggle with this project focused on my notions of power. I felt that, as an educator, I had little autonomy in developing the framework for the project. In addition, I felt intimidated and uncomfortable by the thought of raising my concerns with the individuals who were giving us the grant. I did not want to offend them by usurping their intentions for this project. In addition, I knew that I was limiting the power of my students in that I was assigning them individuals to honor. It would
seem absurd and entirely inauthentic to tell someone that they are required to honor an individual, about whom they may know very little. Even at that time, with some misconceived notions about power, I was able to recognize that. However, the importance of creating even sculptures preceded notions of democracy, which was reflected in my performance-based objectives for the project. At this point, I really began to question my own criticality. I think this was largely because I was not giving students choice, encouraging discussion, or promoting any sort of criticality. I can’t help but wonder if democratic educational processes stand even the slightest chance at manifestation (2/20/09) and: A great deal of my frustrations exist in that I cannot figure out how to fit critical pedagogy into a modern classroom environment. I feel like there is no room for progressive thought in the traditional school system (2/25/09) are both examples of journal quotes that describe my mental state. In reflecting, I would have liked to engage in more discussion with both the grant committee and my students about the intentions for the project. Perhaps students could have even designed their own community artwork plan. Regardless, student voice was largely absent from the design and intention of this project. However, my intention is not solely to critique the grant committee, the project, or even myself. This lesson gave me new insight into my own ideas of power. I had initially viewed power as “control” and “ownership.” In reviewing this experience, however, I am beginning to recognize that I struggled with the power of the grant committee over my own autonomy. However, I would have willingly given up this power in order to allow my students to develop the project. I think that I am starting
to believe that the most democratic of classroom environments are ones in which students are in control.

The Totem Pole project also raised a great deal of questions regarding my understandings of multicultural arts education, and challenged my notions of community. I realized that I was silencing/ignoring one minority group (American Indians) in order to honor another. In retrospect, I cannot help but wonder if, with the constraints placed upon this project, perhaps it would have been quite impossible to be 100% critical. There was some level of success with the community artwork, and I do believe that students felt empowered through doing this project, even though it may not have been the most critically aware of activities. I had to negotiate the levels of criticality and the various voices of power within the guidelines of this project. While I still feel very frustrated, almost sick, in thinking about the voices that were silenced and/or minimalized, I also have to recognize the implications and potential benefits of an empowering community artwork.

The next journal entry discussed in chapter four was in response to an incident in which a student labeled me “disrespectful.” As one may imagine, this is a particularly harsh term, for someone who views themselves as critical, to accept. My struggles then spiraled into doubt of the reality of democratic education. I felt that I had been critically conscious up to this point because I was questioning the contradictory nature of my lesson plans. I thought that I had been aware of how I could have made my lesson plans more critical and democratic. As soon as the student and their parent assigned me the label of “disrespectful,” something within me shattered. The struggle that followed, I
now believe, was a result of the fact that I thought I had been critically conscious in reflecting upon and changing my lesson plans, my classroom management, and my intentions for the classroom (thus being respectful of the students’ needs). In retrospect, however, I can accept this label with a melancholy hope for transforming it.

As I moved on with the Totem Pole project, following this incident, I began to feel disheartened, as described in Chapter Four. At this point, I had given up on Critical Pedagogy and was renouncing Paulo Freire, so it is difficult for me to say what theoretical framework I was operating with. This trend continued throughout the remainder of my student teaching experience. There was a time in my life where there was a passion for this field; a time when I had a fire inside of me...But it seems as though this passion has dissipated...dissolved. It's simply gone (3/31/09).

In creating lesson plans for my next student teaching site, I attempted to ignore my own criticality. I believe, however, that I was denying this pedagogy (as I understood it at the time) because I was not successful in implementing and/or utilizing it within a physical classroom experience. Again, I had developed my own “recipe” for criticality and, when it didn’t work, I threw it out. Perhaps the reason I was not successful, however, was simply because I did not fully understand the scope and complexity of the framework with which I had been operating. I now think that it was much more beneficial to my own criticality that my pre-conceived notions of it were, somewhat ineffective in the classroom. I was so preoccupied with implementing my Critical Pedagogy that I was unable to see the abundance of possibilities that I had excluded. My new understanding is that it is a framework that cannot be abandoned at
the first barrier. I also now believe that reflection is a major component in adopting a Critical Pedagogical framework. Again, critical pedagogues have to constantly “relearn” to teach. My static interpretation of the pedagogy did not allow for this “relearning” but only promoted abandonment of the theories.

In Chapter Four, I inquire about the nature of being a critical pedagogue. I wondered if criticality and emotional stability could ever coexist. Even now, I’m not sure that they can. As a critical pedagogue, once more, I have to constantly (re)examine and critique my own techniques, pedagogy, and intentions in an effort to remain critical. This could very well be an exhausting and daunting task that would lead anyone into eternal frustration. One thing that I have learned about myself in the process of writing this document, however, is that in this instability, I find tend to find stability. As a critical pedagogue, instead of fighting the unknown, the scary, and the unsuccessful, I have to learn to embrace them.

At the onset of the second student teaching quarter, the seminar class decided to create a blog as a method of engaging in dialogue with one-another. This dialogue was not critical dialogue in that it served to act more as a group therapy session without taking up class time. *We started a blog online. I don’t know if that will help. Quite frankly, I don’t think that it’s good enough (4/13/09).* Even as I could recognize this type of dialogue as non-transformative, I did not recognize my own understanding of critical dialogue as the same. Perhaps this was because I was not critically conscious of my own critical consciousness or dialoging about dialogue. Although I professed this type of therapeutic dialogue to be counter-critical, I also believe that I secretly yearned for it. I
needed a place to vent, feel frustrated, express my anger, and feel validated. What I did not account for, however, was that perhaps the process of understanding criticality is meant to be disruptive. If dialogue, as defined by Maxine Greene (1988), is supposed to name, understand, and reflect upon oppressive realities, then perhaps it is only natural that this process would be difficult, disruptive, and complex. Dialogue-as-therapy gives educators/students an environment in which they can feel that their concerns are legitimate. Equally as necessary as this therapeutic environment, however, is the dialogical classroom in which obstacles are able to be named and understood. *I need someone who understands… and I don’t think that someone exists sometimes (4/13/09).*

Critical Pedagogy, as it pertains to notions of power, critical consciousness, and dialogue, was much less complex to me when I began my student teaching experience. I understood it to be a fixed pedagogy with fixed components. When my understandings of these components were interrupted, I simply denied that Critical Pedagogy was a valid pedagogical framework. To come full circle, however, I now believe that this is what Critical Pedagogy is about. It is about embracing the interruption of our consciousness. It is about invalidation through dialogue of our perceptions of social realities. It is about recognizing inherent power through lived experiences. Finally, and in conclusion, it is about continual transformation.
Chapter 6: Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have explored and investigated the complexity of engaging in a critical pedagogical practice in the visual arts classroom, using my own experience as a stimulus for reflection and self-examination. In writing, I have begun to contemplate the ever-changing nature of Critical Pedagogy in both theory and practice, recognizing its complexity and intricacies. While my conclusions are, in my opinion, a bit ambiguous and intangible, I have a newfound peace in accepting and embracing this uncertainty as acknowledging Critical Pedagogy as a series of in-flux ideas and experimental applications.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, I had intended to use student teaching as a means to discover how to implement a Critical Pedagogical curriculum in Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade visual arts classrooms. I wanted to have a physical outline for this type of curriculum so that I could appropriate it and use it in other classroom situations. I wanted the “recipe” that I had created to be affirmed. What resulted, rather, was an invalidation of my previously-held notions and understandings.

My conclusions are saturated with irony in that they are remarkably inconclusive. While I still don’t know how to “solve” the difficulties, contradictions, and confusion
associated with Critical Pedagogical practice, this research has led me to believe that this uncertainty is necessary in exploring possibility. As a critical pedagogue, I now know that I must humble myself by welcoming ambiguity, accepting that nothing is definite. Students cannot simply be “plugged in” to my “recipe” for criticality, both because this recipe does not exist and because this would not account for the vast political, historical, and economic contradictions that permeate their daily lives as they (both the conditions and students) constantly shift shape. Secondly, ambiguity must exist in exploring my own notions of the world. My life has been laden with its own set of contradictions and, while I must attempt to understand these, I must also accept that these circumstances are not concrete, nor transferrable. My understanding of the world is not the understanding of the world. While I thought that I had understood this concept, this research has forced me to explore the ways in which I was/am, as a critical pedagogue, subconsciously acting from a somewhat patriarchal perspective.

Just as my notions of the world are not the notions of the world, my Critical Pedagogy is not our Critical Pedagogy. As a critical pedagogue, I must recognize that Critical Pedagogy is a framework based in service with people (myself included, but not exclusively). I cannot expect to prompt students to understand the world in the ways in which I attempt to understand it, nor can I expect a revolution of thought. I can, however, hope that through dialogue, students will begin to build their own critically conscious views, opinions, and ideals.

I had previously thought that this dialogue would occur in the form of me asking questions of my students in an effort to bring them to a pre-determined and universal
understanding. This dialogue, however, can be messy. I don’t know if there is a set structure or format, which dialogical processes should (or could) follow, but I do know that this dialogue can be disruptive, controversial, and argumentative. I cannot expect to avoid confrontation and help my students become critically conscious in a sterile environment, falsely ignorant of the world around us. Any situation in which our notions of the world are disrupted would naturally be one of frustration and controversy. As a critical pedagogue, I must also accept this as a natural and necessary part of the process of developing new understandings.

In this thesis, alone, I discussed the difficulties I faced as a critical educator due to a disturbance in my ideas of Critical Pedagogy. The process of analyzing these experiences and writing this document was, itself, one of disruption as well, in that I revisited and attempted to understand the implications (for my understandings of Critical Pedagogy) of my student teaching experience. This process of revisiting past experiences has not been neat, orderly, and precise. It has, rather, been difficult, upsetting, and, at times, dissonant. I have had to change myself in the name of criticality, which has not been simple, and must continue this process daily in order to become a more critical and aware individual.

I would encourage other pre-service art educators to embrace self-reflection and revision as a necessary (and recurring) step to engaging in critical practice. I would also encourage them to allow themselves to be amoebic individuals, constantly engaging in processes of transformation. In viewing criticality in this way, I imagine that we might become more open to the ongoing fluctuation that is necessary for criticality to develop.
While much research focuses on validating beliefs or developing re-creatable results, this research has led me to understand the importance of invalidation. In the process of invalidating (although building upon) my pre-conceived ideas of both Critical Pedagogy and the world, I have developed a more holistic sense of what it may mean to be a critical educator. In addition, part of the value of this research is that it is not re-creatable. I cannot recreate the same settings, circumstances, emotions, or understandings that existed throughout my student teaching experience. I have, however, learned from them and hope to continue to do so through each unique set of circumstances.

While I still believe in the importance of exploring the political, social, and economic contradictions of the world through educational processes, this thesis has led me to understand that this does not have to occur (nor can it) by one particular method over another. In addition, because I may desire students to arrive at particular conclusions through the processes of dialogue and becoming critically conscious, I must also learn to differentiate between my own political agenda and students’ developed understandings. While it is impossible not to bring my own socially constructed views of the world into a classroom setting, I must be critically aware of the ways in which I am doing so in order to promote the development of authentic, individual understanding.

As I must be critically aware of my own notions of the world and question dominant ideologies, maybe I must also learn to accept that I will rarely (if ever) be 100% critical. I believe this is part of the nature of criticality. As mentioned, everything that I do and say has political, social, and economic implications. Perhaps it is an
awareness of these implications (and attempts at acting upon them), however, that is important. As with the Totem Pole project, maybe it is vital to maintaining hope that I also recognize the ways in which criticality may have been engaged in classroom projects, however seemingly small, while also recognizing the ways in which criticality may have been lost.

In conclusion, this thesis implies that as a critical pedagogue, I must be continuously critically conscious of my own role as an educator as well as of the world around me. This critical consciousness includes the thought/action praxis of which dialogue is a vital component. This research has led me to believe that I must be simultaneously critically conscious of the world of which I am a part, my individual identity, the implications of the classroom structure and dynamics, my role as an educator, and my own understandings of criticality all while engaging in a comparable discourse with students. This critical consciousness (through dialogue) has the potential to encourage the action of revisiting and revising the aforementioned notions in an effort to more thoroughly understand the political, social, and economic connotations associated with them. It is my hope that by engaging in this type of Critical Pedagogical practice, I may become more able to realize, as Freire wrote, “education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1993, p.81).
Bibliography


