

Chapter 4

Critical Pedagogy in the Everyday Classroom

4.1 Power Games

Imagine your favorite pastime is baseball. You *love* the sport, watch it on television religiously, attend an occasional stadium game when you can, and get out on the field Wednesdays and on weekends to play in an adult league for fun. Now imagine you meet a professional baseball player—someone you have heard about and know to be a *master* of the game. Though you might both play the same sport, there is a vast difference between what you do and what the pro does.

How would you feel if you looked to this pro for some tips and instruction on the finer points of hitting or fielding and he quickly lost patience with you or, worse, wouldn't deign to work with you in the first place because of your amateur status? Probably wouldn't feel very good right? How might such an attitude on the part of the professional ball player make you feel about the game of baseball itself? Could it conceivably dampen your enthusiasm for the sport?

Further imagine that you don't know much about baseball to begin with but have no choice and are being forced to play. On top of this you don't take to it at once and maybe the interest really isn't there. Again, the pro looks at you with disdain, makes derogatory comments, and showers his attention on the better players. Yet here you are forced to stick it out, showing up practice after practice, game after game. What effect might this have on your self-esteem? If a love for the sport wasn't there to begin with, what are the chances this situation will engender it?

What has baseball got to do with teaching and critical pedagogy? Okay, well now imagine you're a different type of pro, say, for instance, a math teacher. You enter your classroom in September and there are 30 somewhat bright-eyed and bushy-tailed kids waiting for you. Some of them have excelled at mathematics in previous grades while others have learned to rue the subject. How will you treat each type of kid? How will you treat the kid who just "gets it" and is able to solve complex equations after being shown how to do so but once? How will you treat the kid who practices it two-three-four times, but still doesn't get it? How will you react when that kid sees his peers succeed while she doesn't and she starts to get frustrated and upset? Part of the reason you became a math teacher is probably that you like math and are good at it. Will the message you strive to send your kids be that

mathematics is an esoteric field, one some will just understand and others won't? If so, what effect do you think this will have on the kid who has come to see math as an obstacle in his educational path? Or will the message you send be that although not everyone can be math whizzes everyone can improve their mathematical abilities? Will the examples used in your classroom to teach concepts be tied to the lives of your students? If students on the fence about mathematics don't see the value and applicability of tangents, cotangents, and cosines to their lives, what are the chances they'll remember anything about them after the exam?

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was visiting a Chilean farming community where he engaged in an impromptu dialogue with a group of peasant farmers. Freire remembers how at first the conversation was just that, a back and forth, a give and take between himself and the farmers. But Freire had been in situations just like this in other parts of the world and he knew what was coming up. A silence descended among the farmers, a silence Freire did not challenge. Finally one farmer spoke up. He asked for Freire's forgiveness, explaining that he and his neighbors were mere peasant farmers, that they should be the ones *listening* while Freire, a cosmopolitan university-trained Ph.D., did the talking. "You're the one who should have been talking, sir," they told him. "You know things sir, we don't" (Freire, 1992: 36).

Freire replied by asking the farmers to play a little game with him. They would ask each other questions, he of them and they of him, and each time one or the other could not answer, Freire or the farmers would get a point. They proceeded to alternate questions. Freire asked academic questions such as "What importance did Hegel play in Marx's thought?" and "What is an intransitive verb?" The farmers asked Freire questions about their work and things of importance to their daily lives like "What's green fertilizer?" and "What's a contour curve got to do with erosion?" The farmers couldn't answer Freire's questions and Freire couldn't answer theirs. The game ended in a tie, ten to ten.

What was the point of Freire's game? What did this game teach the farmers about Freire and Freire about the farmers? What did this game show about the nature of knowledge, about education and learning? How did this game reveal the machinations of power? What did his willingness to engage in this game say about Freire the man, his philosophical stance, and his view of education? As I hope to show, this beautiful anecdote encapsulates a good deal of what critical pedagogy in the everyday classroom should strive to be about.

4.2 Teacher Movies

Up to this point this has been a book about relationships. It has been my hope that each succeeding chapter and section bring us closer to the everyday classroom. Thus we started discussing concepts like dehumanization and power abstractly before situating them structurally. This chapter will look at the relationship of teachers to their students, of students to their teachers, of both to knowledge, as well as of

teachers to the art of teaching. It is my hope that this chapter and those following will provide greater and greater practical advice. As I warned earlier, this *cannot* be a how-to. Our discussion of the banking system of education versus critical pedagogy below will show why a “how-to” of critical pedagogy is something of a contradiction in terms. That said, suggestions and examples from my own experience and that of others are provided to stimulate your praxis.

One thing that is going to come up quite often in this chapter is film. This section will present and dissect “teacher movies.” I’m going to be very critical of these films at times, so I should state up front that despite flaws—including the messages conveyed about teaching—there are several of these films I really enjoy. *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and *To Be and To Have* come to mind as favorites, as well as *The 400 Blows*, though none is spared criticism if the criticism helps me make a point.

Take *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (d. S. Herek, 1996). In the film Richard Dreyfuss plays Glenn Holland, a musician who aspires to compose a symphony. The real world intrudes, as it often does, and Holland, who’s last employment was as an itinerant musician playing bars, clubs, and bar mitzvahs, has to find a job—job to pay the bills. Glad he got that teacher’s certificate “to fall back upon,” Holland lands a “gig” teaching music theory and orchestra at the fictional John F. Kennedy High School in 1965. Teaching isn’t what he thought it would be—“I made thirty two kids sleep with their eyes open [today]” he tells his wife early on—nor is it the cushy job with lots of free time he’d expected.

Composing the great American symphony remains his avocation as events conspire to rob Holland of the time and energy necessary for creativity. From having to teach driver’s ed over the summer for mortgage money to being volunteered to lead the high school marching band, from thousands of hours spent studying sign language in order to communicate with his hearing-impaired son to staying before and after school to help individual students with their music, Holland never gets to composing the way he’d hoped. The job takes a toll on his personal life. Early on Holland just isn’t there for his family. He misses his son’s science fair. When John Lennon is killed Holland derisively and dismissively tells his deaf son Cole that the teenager wouldn’t understand why Lennon’s death has upset him so. At one point Holland is tempted by an attractive and talented high school senior who wants to hear his music and invites him to move to New York with her where she is intent on pursuing her singing career, of following her dream where Holland feels he has forfeited his.

At the end of the movie, when the high school’s music, art, and drama programs don’t survive the latest round of budget cuts and Holland is forced to retire, he is surprised on his last day of work by an assembly celebration where thousands of his colleagues, students past and present, and his family celebrate his years of dedicated service. A former student who has gone on to become governor of their state announces “We are your symphony, Mr. Holland.” Holland conducts the school’s orchestra as they play his long-worked upon masterpiece.

Teachers who suffer personally for their students and their teaching is a recurring theme of teacher movies like *Mr. Holland’s Opus*. In *Freedom Writers* (d. LaGravenese, 2007), Hilary Swank’s Erin Gruwell teaches high school, sells

bras at a department store, and works as a hotel concierge to buy her students books and take them to the movies. Her personal life suffers and her marriage fails. The real life Gruwell spent less than 5 years in the high school classroom before leaving to teach college, write books, and start her own educational foundation. In *Dead Poets Society* (d. Weir, 1989) John Keating's unorthodox teaching methods are one of the reasons he is scapegoated for a student's suicide and sacked at the end of the film. We don't see it on-screen but in the movie *Lean on Me* (d. Avildson, 1989) principal Joe Clark's divorce is alluded to, possibly due to his commitment to his job or maybe just his intense-bordering-on-berserk personality. In *Stand and Deliver* (d. Menendez, 1988), Jamie Escalante's wife complains her teacher husband is not home to spend time with her and their children. Indeed, how could Escalante be when he's (according to the film) working 60 hours a week, teaching night school for free to immigrants, and visiting junior high schools in his free time. Escalante suffers a heart attack in the film 2 weeks before the statewide AP calculus exam. Michele Pfeifer's Louanne Johnson pays for her class' trip to an amusement park and takes class winners of her Thomas Dylan–Bob Dylan contest out to eat at a fancy restaurant in *Dangerous Minds*. On his deathbed after 58 years of teaching at the Brookfield School, Robert Donat's character in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (d. Wood, 1939) overhears his colleagues discussing how sad his life must have been, the tragedy that befell it when his beloved wife died, and the pity that he never remarried or had any children. Mr. Chips musters up enough life to assure his fellow teachers that his has indeed been a very blessed life, that he has had thousands of children, "And all boys"—the thousands of young men who attended the school. Teachers in movies suffering for their students and their jobs . . . Believe me, I could go on.

There *are* teachers who regularly go above and beyond. Given their relatively low pay and lack of institutional support it is easy for teachers to want to do so or to just so do without even wanting to. But what does it say about Hollywood that so many films depict teachers suffering personally to deliver professionally? Is this the message *audiences* want to see? Crucifixion is not a part of the job description. You don't need a martyr complex to enter the teaching profession. In fact, if you do enter the field because you want to "save" people I'd suggest you re-examine your presumptions and read on about the teacher–student relationship. An ethic of care encompasses the self, and despite systemic factors that often make teaching more demanding than rewarding, you should never make it a situation where it's you or the job, teaching or your family. Teaching, like any work, should complement who you are, make you more of a human being, not less. You shouldn't expect to come to your golden years and find that your marriage and family have fallen by the wayside, that you never wrote that novel or symphony you always wanted to, or that the job itself has left you impecunious. If you don't care about yourself and making your life enjoyable and worth living, how can you expect to adequately care for other people, including your students? This is the gist of Emma Goldman's quip that "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution."

4.3 The Banking System of Education

Institutional, personal, financial, and other barriers facing teachers, schools, and students are very real and cannot be discounted. No amount of personal sacrifice will make them disappear. These barriers constitute “limit situations,” conditions that stand in the way of greater humanization. Limit situations are the “concrete historical dimensions of a given reality” (Freire, 1997: 80). We live our lives in realities that appear to us predetermined, as given. Rarely are we aware of our own socio-historical role in making and remaking history. What *is* appears as what *always has been*. Part of the trouble is we often don’t recognize that what *is* is someone’s *ought*, that situations and circumstances limiting us *benefit* others. Oftentimes we inhabit limit situations without being aware of them. Limit situations confront us as static realities. Even when we recognize situations that negatively impact us we often feel there is no alternative, that this is just the way things are. This is a form of fatalistic thinking (Freire, 1997: 66).

The everyday classroom is the site of innumerable limit situations. One of the biggest limit situations confronting teachers and students on a daily basis in the everyday classroom is what Freire called “the banking system of education.” The banking system is aptly named and well known to everyone involved in formal, institutionalized schooling. This model of education sees students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with information by knowledgeable teachers. Students are viewed as passive sponges waiting to soak up facts, and the more facts they soak up and the more passively they do so the better. Students are seen as deficits waiting to be filled (Shor, 1992: 32). Freire referred to teachers in this model as “bank-clerks” who make deposits into otherwise empty students. Students “thirst for knowledge” as if such were Kool-Aid concocted by teachers. The pitcher is tipped by teachers through narration, through lectures, sating student hunger. The banking system of education is a mechanistic conception of education (Freire, 1996: 111). It fits well with the assumptions of behaviorist learning theories.

Freire (1997: 54) provides a list of “attitudes and practices” indicative of the banking concept of education. For example, in the banking concept “the teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing” and “the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly.” It was exactly these attitudes and practices that Freire’s ten-question game with the Chilean farmers challenged. Freire wanted to show them that yes, he knows things, but *they* know things too. The things they know are no less important to their lives working the land as the things he knows are to his work in academia. Freire was encouraging the farmers to value their knowledge and to actively take part in their conversation.

There are a lot of good teachers who really care for their students, their subject matter, and the art of teaching but in their daily practice perpetuate the banking concept of education. Freire notes that “there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize” (1997: 56). Glenn Holland chews his students out when they fail his music theory test. He’s

as angry at himself as he is at them, knowing that his methods of teaching theory up to that point—usually one-sided discussions of textbook readings—just aren't working. In *The History Boys* (d. Hytner, 2007) the headmaster of the prestigious boys prep school assures the temporary contract teacher Irwin that he is “corseted by the curriculum.”

Given everything it *doesn't* have going for it, given that we as teachers see it fail day in and day out in our classrooms, why is it that the banking system of education persists? Several reasons help explain its perseverance. First and foremost, the banking concept of education is usually the model we teachers were exposed to as students. We learn that it's the “right” way to teach and we teach the same way. Further, in the classroom the traditional lecture format rooted in the banking concept of education provides teachers “a safer, more reassuring way to teach” (Shor, 1992: 102). We all have had or have known teachers who hammer out a lesson plan and stick to it year after year with little revision.

Because enough students accommodate themselves to the banking concept this further legitimizes it. Curriculums and lesson plans are developed taking for granted that a transfer-of-facts banking concept of education will be the means of dissemination. Teachers, “corseted by the curriculum,” often have their hands tied and find institutional mandates infringing on and limiting their creativity. “The curriculum here is set,” the headmaster of Welton Academy tells Mr. Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, “It's proven. It works. If you question it, what's to prevent them [students] from doing the same?” “I always thought the idea of education was to lean to think for yourself,” says Robin Williams' Keating, a teacher who encourages his students at one point to climb atop their desks for the sake of a new perspective. “At these boys' age, not on your life,” is the headmaster's reply, telling Keating that “tradition” and “discipline” are the most important things for young men.

Students themselves are socialized from their earliest experiences in school to expect some manifestation of the banking concept of education in their classrooms. This is why Freire faced farmers and peasants and other people who told him things like, “You're the one who should have been talking, sir. You know things sir, we don't.” Teachers that attempt to bring more democratic methods to the classroom may face not only institutional but *student* resistance. If education is *supposed* to look a certain way but doesn't, students can get antsy. I think this applies more to the upper grades including college and graduate school than to the lower. If you're a child in kindergarten or elementary school you're probably going to trust that the way the teacher is running the class is the way the teacher is supposed to run the class, whether that's in an authoritarian manner or an open, democratic style. When you've been in school for many years, say by the time you reach middle and high school, you've got an idea of how education should be done and if it isn't being done that way the teacher can be viewed as incompetent, or, hopefully, innovative and humane. By college and graduate school, when you're paying to go to school, any form of education that deviates from “the norm” is suspect as it is a possible waste of your own and your parent's money.

4.4 Teacher Against Student, Student Against Teacher

The banking system of education pits teacher against student and both against the joys that education can and should bring. It fosters antagonistic relationships between teachers and students. Teachers know stuff worth knowing and students don't. In this way "the teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence" (Freire, 1997: 53). Cognition is denied students in a banking concept of education. A teacher "cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lesson in his study or his laboratory" after which "he expounds to his students about that object" (Freire, 1997: 61). Students don't have to explore, investigate, and learn themselves. They need to show up and memorize whatever it is the teacher tells them is worth knowing and memorizing.

Students have to accept the epistemological certainty of the teacher, the subject matter, and the curriculum. It should come as no surprise when the subject matter of schooling is reduced to an "alienating intellectualism" for these students, what with the things they learn in school and the ways they learn them divorced from their everyday lives. Student resistance often manifests as disruptive behavior in class. Students may file in, heading for the areas of the room where they think the teacher is least likely to visit. Ira Shor (1997) calls these areas "Siberia" and makes it a point in his college classes to circulate his physical presence around the classroom, sometimes sitting in the back of the room, sometimes off to the sides. A "culture of silence" may descend upon a classroom as passive students who have had it drummed into their heads that teachers are the source of all knowledge in the classroom expect teachers to teach. Students may adopt a form of false consciousness, thinking this the only or best way to learn.

Having taught in America and other countries I have seen the different attitudes students in various cultures bring to school. A common lament of American teachers I know is how *bad* their kids are, they don't listen, they don't respect anyone, they misbehave. I've had rowdy students. Fortunately I have found with most if you set limits and boundaries and are consistent with those while you're according the student respect, almost all can be brought into line. I do wonder if students today are somehow different than students when I was a kid. My students use language and talk about things I never would have imagined using or talking about in front of adults, *especially* my teachers. I've seen students who walk around with perpetual bad attitudes from whatever is going on in their home lives, students who go at it verbally with teachers and a few who, when pushed, have gone after them physically. Maybe I was sheltered in a Catholic school in my elementary years but if a teacher raised her voice to me I remember getting all upset, on the verge of tears even. I don't see that with the kids I work with today. Where students once seemed to respect and defer to authority figures like their teachers or principals the attitude I see today is one of "show-me," as in show me you're worthy of my respect and deference and then *maybe* I'll respect and defer to you. This is an attitude I am ambivalent about. On the one hand, I've written in this book that we should always question authority and its legitimacy, that doing so is healthy and a democratic necessity. On the other,

I think this needs to be done in a respectful, non-belligerent way. Most of the kids I know who challenge authority today do so in a loud, abrasive, disrespectful manner.

Compare these kids to the students I taught in South Korea. There it's the exact opposite problem. I had Korean students who were so deferential to authority and so passive they bordered on catonic. They were in school to have education done to them. School and hogwan (after-school private institutes for English conversation, math, and computer study) were ways of preparing for competitive entrance to university. I had students who were "well behaved" to the *n*th degree. Even here in America I'll have students born of traditional Korean parents who sit quietly and sometimes meekly in class. I'm not complaining. I don't want a bunch of unruly, pugnacious punks who make education impossible in my classroom. But I don't want students who respect me solely because I am an adult. There are adults unworthy of respect. Respect me because I respect you, because I know my stuff and treat you as a fellow human being, not just because of my age or title or some degree.

The banking concept of education supports the structural status quo. It works to change the *consciousness* of the oppressed, not the concrete *situations* that oppress them (Freire, 1997: 55). For example, in *Dangerous Minds*, a well-intentioned teacher like Pfeifer's Louanne Johnson tells her class that "There are no victims in this classroom!" when in fact hers is a classroom *full* of students victimized by socio-economic and gender inequality. Johnson's message—she let's her high school students know she is a former Marine and teaches them to hip toss one another her second day of English class in order to get their attention—amounts to *toughen up, don't whine, stop making excuses*. A banking concept of education ignores the structural realities that give rise to inequalities in our lives, treating students as individual cases, as "marginal persons" when in fact what usually happens is we find ourselves on the outside looking in as no one *asks* to be marginalized (Freire, 1997: 55). The banking concept of education is not humanizing or liberatory. It is a dehumanizing and reactionary pedagogy that domesticates students.

There is an ontological position implicit in the banking concept of education well worth considering. The banking concept of education sees people *in* the world, not *with* the world (Freire, 1997: 56). Knowledge is out there, knowable, immutable, independent of the knower. Such knowledge manifests itself in canons and curriculums and is not contestable. Students are objects of the educational process, not subjects. They are objectified, *thingified*. When Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970 he criticized the banking concept of education in which "the teacher is the Subject of the learning process" because the teacher creates lessons and explores topics "while the pupils are mere objects" (1997: 54). With a proliferation of "teacher-proofed" materials including scripted lesson plans and lockstep official curriculums, teachers are increasingly objects in the learning process as well. Freire remained adamant that the banking concept of education, this "standard, transfer curriculum . . . implies above all a tremendous lack of confidence in the creativity of the students and in the ability of the teachers!" (Shor & Freire, 1987: 77).

Critical pedagogy's chief concern is the humanization of students and teachers. As Ira Shor always points out critical pedagogy is a liberatory pedagogy through

critical education and action. All forms of critical pedagogy respect the context in which knowledge creation and transmission occurs. Knowledge in critical pedagogy is situated and context specific. Thus Freire's culture circles with illiterate Brazilian peasants will look different than Shor's composition classes at a working class college on Staten Island, but both are examples of critical pedagogies that start with students' lived realities (Freire, 1997; Shor, 1997). When possible, critical pedagogy attempts to organize the program content of education *with* the people, not *for* them. I have been a student in Shor's graduate-level classes where he has come into class with a syllabus and by the end of the class a whole new syllabus had been negotiated between him and we students.

At the graduate and even college level critical teachers like Ira may have opportunities of negotiating syllabi and curriculums with their students that high school and primary teachers may lack. But don't get the wrong idea. The institutional setting, be it kindergarten or college, presents teachers with limit situations that threaten to dampen critical practices. So where an elementary teacher may find himself spending hours a week decorating bulletin boards as per principal orders when he could be planning, a college teacher may have a department- or university-approved reading list she *has* to work from.

4.5 Problem-Posing Education

One form critical pedagogy can take is problem-posing education (Shor, 1992: 31–54). In such an education “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves” where “they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1997: 64). A problem-posing education encourages critical learning. Such learning “aids people in knowing what holds them back” and imagining “a social order which supports their full humanity” (Shor, 1980: 48). One of the teachers' roles in a problem-posing education is to “problematize situations” by presenting to students situations with which they are familiar but in a manner that gets them thinking about those situations in new ways (Freire, 1985: 22). Ira Shor describes this as “extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary” where students “re-perceive” the reality they know (1980: 93).

Freire gives an example of this from his work with the same group of Chilean farmers mentioned earlier. One need not be religious to appreciate how the Christian Freire encourages the Christian farmers to “extraordinarily re-experience” and “re-perceive” their daily lives. Shortly after the farmer apologizes to him—“You're the one who should be talking, sir. You know things, sir. We don't”—and their ten-questions game, Freire, for the sake of argument says, okay, “I know. You don't. But *why* do I know and you don't?” “You know because you're a doctor, sir, and we're not” he is told. To which he replies:

“Right, I'm a doctor and you're not. But *why* am I a doctor and you're not?”

“Because you’ve gone to school, you’ve read things, studied things, and we haven’t.”

“And why have I been to school?”

“Because your dad could send you to school. Ours couldn’t.”

“And why couldn’t your parents send you to school?”

“Because they were peasants like us.”

“And what is being a peasant?”

“It’s not having an education . . . not owning anything . . . working from sun to sun . . . having no rights . . . having no hope.”

“And why doesn’t a peasant have any of this?”

“The will of God.”

“And who is God?”

“The Father of us all.”

“And who is a father here this evening?”

Almost all raised their hands, and said they were.

[Freire asks one of the farmers how many children he has and the man answers three]. “Would you be willing to sacrifice two of them, and make them suffer so that the other one could go to school, and have a good life . . . ? Could you love your children that way?”

“No!”

“Well, if you . . . a person of flesh and bones, could not commit an injustice like that—how could God commit it? Could God really be the cause of these things?”

A different kind of silence [ensued]A silence in which something began to be shared. Then:

“No. God isn’t the cause of all this. It’s the boss!” (Freire, 1992: 38–39).

Freire’s example is illuminating. In one conversation the farmers go from a fatalistic acceptance of reality to questioning the necessity of that reality and who it benefits. Freire engages in dialogue with the farmers, letting them draw their own conclusions, believing what they will. He poses as problems worth considering the facts that he is a university-trained professor while they toil on the land. What does this example have to do with the everyday classroom? There are students and teachers who don’t like aspects of school but accept that this is the way school is. Throughout this book I have hoped to illustrate that no, this isn’t just the way it is. The ways our schools work, what it means to be a *family* or a *man* or a *woman*, the structure and function of economies and political systems, these all work the way they do because some people benefit from them the way they are. None of their current manifestations were inevitable. The only ones who say it is so and encourage fatalistic thinking are those who benefit or those who have been clobbered into submission. When and where possible in our classrooms we should problematize situations and encourage our students to extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary. This is a skill,

an ability we want them to take out of the classroom and into their lives, much as we must in our own.

The Chilean farmers attributed their status in life to a supernatural deity. I hear a lot of this kind of talk in America as well, with people noting that everything from success or failure in school and life is “all part of God’s plan,” a “test” from “the Lord.” Sometimes they wear their religion or denomination openly, other times recourse to an unnamed higher power or causal mechanism is invoked, as in “I believe everything happens for a reason.” Still more often, however, I hear people ascribe success or failure to their individual selves or other individuals. They succeeded or they failed because of something *inside them*, to opportunities they did or did not pursue. Structural inequalities are taken as givens, beyond cognition or criticism. Things are the way they are and we are told we must learn to deal with them.

That’s my biggest gripe with “teacher movies.” Aside from the fact that many of them are interminably long, nearly all of them preach a gospel of self-help and rugged individualism. “If you do not succeed in life,” *Lean on Me*’s principal Joe Clark (played by Morgan Freeman) tells his assembled high school students, “I do not want you to blame your parents. I do not want you to blame the white man. I want you to blame yourselves.” This right after expelling from the assembly and the school 300 of the worst behaved students, young men and women smoking cigarettes and marijuana and free-style rapping on the stage in the middle of the school day. Individuals in classes and individual classes in schools usually succeed in these films, be they *The History Boys*’ Oxford and Cambridge scholarship recipients or all 18 students in Jamie Escalante’s AP calculus class. Again, the notion that success or failure is rooted in the individual is one of the messages driven home by these films. It’s not that this *isn’t* an accurate reflection of the reality facing us, but come on directors, let’s dare to dream as you ask us to suspend disbelief anywhere from an hour and a half to two and a half hours or more.

I do not mean to discount the place of individual agency. But crack-smoking high school rejects like *Lean on Me*’s character Sams have the deck stacked against them from birth. All their lives kids like these are surrounded by circumstances and situations that work to bring out the worst in them and then they get to us for 6 hours a day and we expect they’re going to make good decisions. Of course, understanding where these kids are coming from and how they get to us does is not making excuses for them or for bad behavior.

When possible our subject material should be rooted in the lives of the students. I know this sounds like a tough order, maybe not as easy in fifth grade as in graduate school, maybe not as easy in a state university as in a non-formal literacy circle. I know you’re thinking this might be easier to do in English and social studies classes and harder to do in mathematics and physics classes. I know I did and I have thought so but I am realizing more and more from my reading that any limitations I perceive are mostly those of my imagination stemming from my lack of knowledge in the content area and my lack of creativity, both on my part (see for example any issue or publication of *Rethinking Schools* and Shor, 1987). Not that I’m blaming this individual, mind you.

4.6 Themes in the Academic Classroom

Critical pedagogy demands a lot of teachers. Once you get your credentials, land a spot in a good school and get tenure, it's easy to go along and get along. Critical pedagogy demands engaged and imaginative teachers who aren't afraid of leaving their "comfort zones" and taking risks in the classroom. Critical pedagogy demands teachers who are committed to their fields, teachers who will follow developments inside and outside their subject matter. Critical pedagogy demands teachers who will not knowingly fool themselves and their students, teachers who will face the relations of power in their classrooms, their schools, and their societies.

At the same time critical pedagogy provides teachers with many tools with which to work. I should rephrase that. It's not so much that critical pedagogy creates these tools and gives them to teachers to use. These things are there by dint of our being human. Theorists and practitioners of critical pedagogy merely suggest how these things can be used in favor of the humanization of student and teacher.

What kind of "things" am I talking about? Well, for one, the topics we discuss, explore, and study in our classrooms. Ira Shor differentiates between generative, topical, and academic themes (1992: 55). Their suitability in our classrooms will depend on the specific contexts of our classrooms, including grade level, subject matter, and other institutional constraints. Yet it is my belief that some or all of these can be used in the everyday classroom some of the time.

Generative themes are probably most often associated with Freirian literacy circles in Latin America. Generative themes are "provocative themes discovered as unresolved social problems in the community, good for generating discussion in class on the relation of personal life to larger issues" (Shor, 1992: 47). Freire called these *generative* themes because "they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled," new avenues of study, reflection, and action to be explored (1997: 83). Shor clarifies that generative themes are to be found "in the unsettled intersections of personal life and society" (1992: 55). Generative themes are contextual, drawn from the everyday lives of students. Such is one of their main strengths for a critical pedagogy, as generative themes serve as "student-centered foundations for problem-posing" (Shor, 1992: 55).

Generative themes are introduced as codifications to the class. Freire and his colleagues used sketches and photographs of everyday experiences familiar to the lives of their students (often illiterate farmers) as codifications. For example, a codification Freire may have started with might show a farmer with a book in one hand and a farming tool in another in a field. In the background a woman and child stand near a well before a house as birds fly overhead. In the "decoding" process that ensued between teacher and students, the differences between the natural world and culture, the concept of necessity and that of work, the relationships of human beings one to another as subjects emerge (for examples see Freire, 2005).

Freire was pretty clear that codifications be made visually (2005: 42). However, I think it's entirely plausible that codifications can be presented in other forms, from drama to rap. The idea of the codification is to present a lived situation to students,

a situation they inhabit but rarely question critically. The codification of generative themes should be pretty straightforward to students. There's a difference between a picture of a farmer under a tree with nature and the tools of culture about him versus a metaphorical poem or an abstract painting.

Topical themes are “social question[s] of key importance locally, nationally, or globally” (Shor, 1992: 55). Topical themes are not generated by student discussion in class. The teacher brings topical themes to the students. They then, all together, discuss the particular topical theme and how it impacts their lives and the subject matter of the class itself. The idiom in which it is introduced needs to be something the students can grasp. For example, once I was teaching a class of adults in the special education field in the West Indies. I brought in a reading I thought was interesting and pertinent from a weekly magazine (*The Nation*). I don't know if the students found the reading not interesting, not relevant, or—as I suspected at the time—too dense and wordy. Either way, this attempt at a topical theme flopped.

But I have had other experiences where topical themes have worked, as both student and teacher. In graduate classes I took with Shor for instance, Ira always comes in at the beginning of the class with stacks of photocopied articles from newspapers and journals. He'd pass the clippings around and we'd discuss their pertinence to what we'd been studying in class or what was coming up for study that day. I really can't say enough good things about Ira Shor and his classes, which is why his scholarship and my experience in his classes are cited so frequently throughout this book.

Unlike generative themes, topical themes often bring students to uncharted territory—uncharted by the students that is. (Actually a more apt metaphor is that of topical themes bringing the uncharted territory to the students.) Generative themes, on the other hand, add “*critical* discussion about things students already know and talk about *uncritically* every day” (Shor, 1992: 58). If I bring a graph comparing US government expenditures on the Iraq war, health care, and education to one of my classes there will be kids in that class who had no idea the amounts of money spent on these things. They know about the war, they know about Michael Moore's film *Sicko*, and they know of schools where programs have been cut, but they haven't put it all together.

Academic themes are also introduced in class by the teacher. Academic themes are what we as students are most used to being exposed to in schools. The academic theme is “a scholastic, professional, or technical body of knowledge which the teacher wants to introduce or has to introduce as a requirement” (Shor, 1992: 73). Academic themes are structured knowledge in specific academic disciplines. Their political import may not be apparent. And any possible political significance may not be the guiding reason teachers introduce academic themes in class. Nevertheless, a creative, critical teacher can tie together academic and topical themes. For example, Jessica Klonsky (2007) uses the Iraq War to prepare her high school students in Brooklyn for the NY State Regents exam.

The question arises, can a teacher committed to critical pedagogy, to the humanization of her students, herself, and her world, can this teacher ever use the methods *of* a banking concept of education *against* a banking concept of education?

Can the forms and techniques of banking education be used for liberation? At one point Freire is adamant that such methods cannot be so used (1997: 59). Elsewhere, however, he and others draw distinctions. Lecturing, for example, would appear to be the epitome of the banking concept of education. In the Charlie-Brown animated specials Charlie's teachers are always presented as droning indecipherable *blah-blah-blah* adults who's heads are never seen. Despite such stereotypes, Freire and Shor maintain that critical lecturing is possible. "The question is the content and dynamism of the lecture, the approach to the object to be known," specifies Freire. "Does it critically reorient students to society? Does it animate their critical thinking or not?" (1987: 40). A critical lecture should be eye-opening and thought-provoking for students where, Freire only half jokingly describes, "they listen to you as if you were singing to them!" (Shor and Freire, 1987: 40). I remember my freshman year at Queens College, John Gerassi pacing the classroom with one hand in his shirt lecturing on US foreign policy and his experiences at *Newsweek* and the *Times*. These class sessions were *never* boring. Almost all the time they were incredibly informative and even entertaining. Critical pedagogy can make use of the lecturing format *so long as* the teacher remains critical while lecturing.

Critical pedagogy is wary of existing canons in any field. Who decided which works belong in the canon? For example, what makes the so-called *great books* great books? Who's points of view are expressed in a canon? Who's interests are served? For example, are the characters in a literary canon all upper middle class heterosexual white males? Which works aren't represented in a canon and why? For instance, in economics departments why are neoclassical approaches favored over political economy? Why has quantification trumped theory? These are all concerns of critical pedagogy. Yet canons can—and sometimes, when dictated from above in institutional settings, *must*—be used as part of a critical education (Shor, 1992: 35). Students can approach the texts in a canon and the canon itself critically, seeking to ask and where possible answer the very questions raised above and to formulate others.

Contextual skill-development is a must for liberatory teaching. Contextual skill-development stresses that cognitive skills like reading and writing be developed through problematic study of real contexts (Shor, 1980: 104). Reading primers with stories of Dick and Jane and Spot aren't going to be as interesting and thought-provoking to students as selections that bear on their everyday lives. Things get done in a classroom where critical pedagogy is going on. It's *not* a gripe session with the teacher airing a laundry list of societal grievances to his students. That's an abuse of the authority of the teacher in the classroom. Critical pedagogy is an approach to education that doesn't take anything (including itself) as hallowed but examines even our everyday assumptions critically with an eye to the ways any subject matters to our lives.

4.7 Neocolonialism in Teachers' Movies

How can the relationship between teacher and student in critical pedagogy be described? Progressive education gets a rap for being permissive, as too warm and fuzzy, with teachers coddling students and wanting to be their friends. This often

seems like an easy way for critics to attack the field. In fact, critical pedagogy recognizes differences between students and teachers. Perhaps the largest difference is that the teacher is an authority figure in the classroom and must use that authority in her subject area and for classroom management. We will talk below of critical pedagogy's conception of teachers and students being partners, but this partnership doesn't mitigate the responsibility of teachers as power wielders and authority figures in classrooms. The idea, as Shor and Freire make clear, is not to allow very real differences between teachers and students to become antagonistic (1987: 93).

In a banking concept of education these differences are exactly that, antagonistic. The banking concept of education conceives of teachers who know and students who don't, of teachers who think while students are thought about, of teachers who act and students who comply (Freire, 1997: 54). Partnership is not possible in a banking concept of education. What is possible is a form of condescending charity, what Freire called "assistencialism." This is seen clearly in several of the "teacher's movies" brought up in this chapter.

These films often evoke neocolonial themes centering as they often do on white females teaching classes of non-white students. In *Dangerous Minds* Louanne Johnson walks into a class of students chattering loudly one to another and rapping. "White bread!" someone yells at her from the back of the classroom. Instead of showing anger when an Hispanic student, Emilio (who just so happens to be the lightest skinned of the Latinos in the class), menaces her sexually—"I'll eat you," he tells his teacher—Pfeifer's character makes light of the situation, laughing and drawling on in her bad southern accent. Erin Gruwell shows up for class in *Freedom Writers* with a lesson about the rapper Tupac Shakur and the kids call her on it, "White girl gonna teach us about rap?" Instead of situating their education in generative themes drawn from her student's lives, Gruwell introduces the class to the Jewish Holocaust, which no one in class knows anything about except the sole white kid who throughout the first third of the movie begs Gruwell at every turn to get him out of the class. "What are you doing in here that makes a goddamn difference in my life?" an Hispanic female student demands of Gruwell. The message of the film is that Gruwell is doing a heck of a lot, that it's the students who don't see it at first but eventually come around and appreciate the good intentioned, hard-working little Caucasian girl. Hilary Swank is an amazing actress, but personally I prefer her chewing her tongue off in *Million Dollar Baby* to the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed masochistic eager beaver of this film.

Even when it's not a white female teacher the neocolonial taint is often there. The director of *Lean on Me* makes sure we see that Joe Clark was a *real* radical complete with an afro in the 1960s, willing to go down for the teacher's union. In effect he does, transferred from the mostly white high school to an elementary school. During the film's opening credits *Guns and Roses'* "Welcome to the Jungle" plays as the camera shows us how Eastside High School changes once Clark leaves. We cut between graffitied hallways; a fight breaking out in school; trash strewn throughout the corridors; a girl jumped in the bathroom, her shirt torn off; drug dealers in suits visiting the high school during school hours to deliver narcotics; a gun-sale in the building; a teacher getting brutally beaten; and a student stuffed and sealed inside

a locker as a security guard walks by ignoring his pleas. Of course almost all the students are non-white. Welcome to the jungle indeed.

Returning to Eastside, Clark refutes any radicalism he may have once harbored and is accused of being a race traitor by some parents at an emergency parent meeting following his expulsion of the 300 trouble makers and his demotion of the black football coach to assistant coach. “[I]f you want to help us fine,” Clark tells the parents, “Sit down with your kids and make them study at night. Go get their fathers off welfare.” When a student pulls a switchblade on him in the cafeteria, Principal Clarke kicks his ass and disarms him. Sometimes savages just have to be dealt with that way.

The Substitute ups the neocolonial violence as white substitute teacher Shale (Tom Berenger) beats, pummels, and blasts all the bad non-white students in his school. Shale is a mercenary filling in for his girlfriend, a teacher who has been kneecapped on the orders of Juan Lacas (singer/actor Marc Anthony), leader of the Kings of Destruction gang. “I’m in charge of this class,” booms Shale. “I’m the warrior chief. I’m the merciless god of anything that stirs in my universe. Fuck with me and you will suffer my wrath.” Fuck with him they do, and within the next minute of the film Shale has caught a soda can thrown at the back of his head in mid-air, pitching it back and nailing the kid who threw it in the face. He then bodily disarms another student of an ice pick. In its defense, *The Substitute* is first and foremost a B-action movie. It wasn’t contending for Oscar glory as a feel-good teacher movie. The climatic nighttime battle in the school halls with bazookas and submachine guns erases any doubt as to what *The Substitute* was going for as a film.

Now, it’s not that there aren’t white female or white male teachers who teach classes of majority non-white students. There are plenty; teaching is still a very white profession. Are there non-white (and white for that matter) kids who act terribly in schools? Of course there are. My wife can tell you horror stories of her days teaching in the South Bronx straight from Korea. Myoungmee was a New York City teaching fellow and jumped at the first job opportunity available to her even though everyone (including me) told her not to go and teach in the South Bronx. Children are children wherever you go, she replied and despite the nobility of the sentiment Myoungmee soon found how badly behaved many of the children in her impoverished urban middle school were. Needless to say, these kids were unlike any she’d taught in South Korea. Unlike a Hollywood teacher movie, my wife didn’t stick it out at that school and single-handedly turn its misbehaved children around. When one seventh grader attempted to expose himself to her the district transferred Myoungmee to a different school, a high school that was tough in its own ways but better than the middle school. Stories like my wife’s and others aside, there are also studious and diligent non-white (and white) kids who put their noses to the books, who *want* to do well and *do* do well in school.

One fault of these films is that even when they show you the environmental factors influencing these “bad” kids, the message is still that the kid has a chance to make it out of this, to bootstrap herself to proper behavior and superior academic performance. Do such things happen? Certainly. But as the drop-out and other attrition statistics attest, we lose a lot of these kids in these environments. These films

are condescending and paternalistic. They often demean minorities and smack of racism, subtle or otherwise. They present problems and solutions in individualistic terms when in reality the problems we face are systemic in nature though they often manifest themselves individually. The solutions to such are collective but rarely presented as such.

4.8 Teacher–Student Mutuality

Whether it's fantasizing about blowing bad students away with automatic weapons or condescending put downs like the teacher grading papers in *Dangerous Minds* remarking as he goes, "What a fuckin' idiot. Another fuckin' idiot," none of this has a place in critical pedagogy or, for that matter, in any daily classroom. Critical pedagogy demands of teachers that we be confident practitioners and theorists of subject matter while at the same time remaining humble enough to know we don't know all things, that our students are going to know things that we do not, that the path of exploration and knowledge is laid and traveled alongside our students with them and with our own teachers (whether we're in graduate classes ourselves or keeping up with the literature on a topic). A banking concept of education cannot conceive of student–teacher mutuality, of a partnership between teacher and students (Shor, 1992: 87).

I always like to think of Socrates in this context and where he went wrong. The oracle at Delphi told Socrates he was the wisest man of his time and he couldn't believe it. Socrates was one of those guys who, the more he learned and knew, the more he realized he had more to learn and know. Now, on the one hand this is something of a humble attitude and one that any scholar would do well to adopt within reason. But Socrates grew irritated with people around him, especially the well-regarded scholars and statesmen of his time who were self-assured of an ultimate knowledge he knew they lacked. Instead of keeping quiet and taking satisfaction with the thought that the gods had him pegged as the brightest cat in Athens, Socrates used his knowledge and his second-to-none skills as an interlocutor to unmask the ignorance of these supposed intelligent men, humiliating them publicly along the way. Socrates made many enemies and was eventually put to death. Refusing to flee prison when he had the chance so as not to undermine the Athenian state is another bad idea on his part, but one beyond the scope of this discussion.

Here's one way to think about the bond critical pedagogy promotes between teacher and student. Contrasting the relationship of elites to the people versus revolutionary leaders to the people, Freire explains that the leaders of revolutions "give of themselves to the thinking of the people"; that the thinking of the elite "is the thinking of the master" whereas the thinking of the revolutionary to the people is "the thinking of the comrade" (1997: 113). This "thinking of the comrade" is the attitude teachers in the critical pedagogy tradition should have of our students. The thinking that recognizes we're all in this thing together, whether by "this thing" we mean life in general or life under structures of dehumanization like schools and

economic systems and positivist science that condition and limit us. The thinking that understands we all get in our pants one leg at a time. The thinking that recognizes where you *are* I once *was* and where I am you may one day be. It's not a self-flagellating or self-deprecating mindset. It's a recognition and respect for the accomplishments that have gotten us where we are (jobs teaching, mastery of subject content, advanced degrees, etc.) and the potential of our students and ourselves to grow together as human beings and reshape the structures we all inhabit.

In this vein Freire speaks of the transcendence of the "teacher-of-the-students" and the "students-of-the-teacher" to "teacher-students" and "student-teachers." Through dialogue with his students, "the teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (1997: 61). There are several meanings to this. For one, teachers often come from different neighborhoods or socio-economic conditions than their students. Exploring subject matter together allows the teacher to see how it effects her students' lives, the ways it is relevant to their experiences. Maybe you're a middle class teacher in a school with mostly middle class students. Or you could be in my position, a middle class teacher in a school with many students from upper middle class and wealthy homes. When you grow up one way you quickly learn others live differently than you do. If you're middle class you realize the lifestyles of the rich and the poor both differ from yours. I remember one student in a class I was in wearing an Antigua baseball cap. "Antigua, nice island," I remarked to the kid, having spent time there as a Peace Corps volunteer. "Yeah, my family has a house there," replied the student matter of factly. He wasn't showing off or rubbing it in. Second homes on tropical islands are just a part of his life. Where I grew up only a few people had "second homes," usually time share condos in the sometimes tropical clime of South Carolina's Hilton Head or Myrtle Beach.

More likely you're a middle class teacher in a school where children come from impoverished neighborhoods and poor families. If you didn't grow up this way you might not understand things like the monthly renting of furniture and appliances, lay-away plans, and spending your tax refund check *before* you get it back. My point is our students have lives outside of the school building and these lives may be radically different than anything we can imagine.

Students can become aware of their teachers as journeymen in school and life, as ones who walked the path they are walking now *with* them *before* them. Further, certain subject matter is more often made and remade in the classroom than others. For example, the same poem or piece of literature may mean different things to the teacher and students in a class, just as the same poem or literature may mean different things at different times to the same individual at different points of his or her life. Understandably, the goal of a high school science class may not be to "rethink" evolution in the sense of proving it or disproving it, but in a critical classroom the religious, political, and existential stakes around evolution can be studied across cultures and historical periods. The everyday classroom is the site of "mutual effort" between teacher and student (Shor, 1980: 113).

Dialogue is key to the implementation of critical pedagogy in the everyday classroom. Dialogue implies an I-Thou relationship, mutuality between teachers and students (Freire, 2005: 45). Dialogical education reflects an epistemological

position, “the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study” (Shor & Freire, 1987: 100). The traditional lecture format represents a transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students. Dialogue represents a give and take, a creation and re-creation, a process of risk and reward. Further, dialogue is an existential necessity between beings who are first and foremost social. Dialogue and the willingness of the teacher to engage in dialogue with the students bespeaks a horizontal relationship between teacher and students grounded in empathy whereas lectures and uncritical teacher-talk are mere authoritarian communiqués (Freire, 2005: 40–41).

Because we are “corseted by the curriculum” much of what we introduce to students in the everyday classroom are academic themes reflecting existing knowledge and opinion on a subject. One might think the lecture format lends itself better to such an education than dialogue. To boot, dialogue is risky. It’s easier to develop a lecture on a certain subject, deliver it semester after semester, year after year, all the while honing your delivery. The amount of “stuff” teachers need to teach during a course or year is overwhelming and dialogue may seem an unaffordable extravagance. Nevertheless, dialogue is *always* possible, though it may call upon the creative powers of the teacher to determine where and how it can be used in class. That said, dialogue is not some catchy technique or tactic. Recall from our discussion of Vygotsky the ways in which language and communication contribute to our development as human beings. Dialogue is an ontological and ontogenic *necessity*.

Dialogue reflects a democratic commitment to our fellow human beings as it occurs *between* people. It bespeaks a love of our world and the people in it. Dialogue reveals the love “of responsible Subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination” (Freire, 1997: 70). Dialogue bespeaks humility on the part of its participants as no one attempts to dictate for all. Dialogue allows for the free exchange of opinions, the airing of differences, the reaching of consensus, and reflection upon action. An ethic of care stresses the need for teachers to be attentive. In part this means teachers must be active listeners who take what their students say seriously, are able to read between the lines, and hear what is not said (Shor, 1980: 101).

In oppressive classrooms dominated by a banking concept of education a “culture of silence” prevails. In these classrooms students feel what they have to say isn’t or won’t be considered important. These are classrooms where voicing an opinion or answer that is not parroting the teacher can carry dire consequences. This may lead to the “mutism” Freire refers to where students in classrooms “denied dialogue in favor of decrees become predominantly ‘silent’” (2005: 21). Mutism and a culture of silence signify oppression and dehumanization in classrooms.

4.9 Authority Versus Authoritarianism

In the 1974 musical *Mame* (d. Saks), Lucille Ball stars as that “peculiar duck,” the eccentric Mame Dennis. When her estranged brother dies, Manhattanite Mame becomes guardian of her orphaned nephew Patrick. Mame enrolls Patrick in headmaster Ralph DeVine’s “School of Life.” The school of life is everything progressive

education was accused and vilified of being if it seldom actually ever was. Visiting the school for the first time, Patrick (though not his aunt) is nonplussed by the goings-ons: students in various states of undress as Indians chase one another around; paint each other and depant and battle one another with toy swords; a mannequin has dress and breasts painted on; students drop water-filled bags out the window onto passersby on the street below; headmaster DeVine himself, naked, sits amongst the ruckus oblivious to the cacophony, reading a broadsheet newspaper which he uses to cover his genitals as he stands to greet Mame and his new student.

A commitment to democratic forms in our classrooms, to problem-posing education and dialogue, to teacher–student mutuality and co-exploration of themes, none of this lessens the authority of the teacher in the classroom. Let me be clear: the teacher *is* and *has to be* the authority figure in the classroom. To abrogate her authority in favor of permissiveness is a dereliction of duty. Why is this necessarily so? For one, the teacher has spent more years in school than her students and has a specialized working knowledge of one or more academic subjects. Further, the teacher must be a master of classroom management able to “lay the smack down” when necessary to create a climate where all students feel safe and where pedagogy is possible. A teacher must enforce discipline when it is required, but always in a humane way that doesn’t seek to embarrass or demean an offending student. The teacher must constantly walk the line between authority and authoritarianism and always strive to stay on the side of the former even when the temptations of the later beckon.

Where and what is the difference between authority and authoritarianism? Consider the depiction of Principal Joe Clark in *Lean on Me*. Noting that “discipline is not the enemy of enthusiasm,” Clark is clear when he scolds teachers and students that they should “forget about the way it used to be. This is not a damned democracy.” Clark refers to himself as the H-N-I-C (the head nigger in charge) at staff meetings where he chews out staff over “the task which you have failed to do—to educate our damned children” and introduces the new head of security as “my avenging angel.” When crack-smoking student Sams begs Clark to be allowed back into school after being expelled with the 300, the principal takes him up on the roof of the building and tells him, “Now I say if you want to kill yourself don’t fuck around, go ahead and do it expeditiously. Now go and jump.” Sams promises to do his best should Clark give him a second chance and Clark reluctantly does, promising Sams he’ll be looking for him to mess up, noting “you still a baby and you don’t know shit.” Nice way to talk to students, huh?

It gets better (worse). Clark takes to parading around the school halls with a bullhorn and then a baseball bat. He pulls hats from heads, publicly humiliates students including Sams (as an “example of how not to dress”) and forces students to sing the school song on the spot, telling them, “You will sing the school song upon demand or you will suffer dire consequences.” Clark berates staff in front of students, suspending the former football coach (who he’d already demoted) for picking up trash in the cafeteria after ordering that no one move, and fires the choir teacher when she stands up to him over his decision to cancel the choir’s New York City concert. The Clark portrayed in the film is an out-of-control nut, an effective

but authoritarian autocrat. The film depicts formerly unruly students warming to Clark's methods—"Mr. Clark don't play" they say admiringly—and even the former football coach comes around to view Clark as more a force for good than bad. But just because we acquiesce to our abuse doesn't legitimize it.

In the film Joe Clark crosses the line between authority and authoritarianism. Authority *needs* to make itself respected in our classrooms and schools (Freire, 1996: 150). Respected does not mean *feared*, although the very Machiavellian Clark seems to think it does. Freire felt that authority is an invention of freedom that makes pedagogy possible (1996: 150). There wasn't much learning going on in Paterson, New Jersey's Eastside High School before Joe Clark took control. But were Clark and his authoritarian methods the only means of winning respect for authority and ensuring education could follow? If it seems so this is because sometimes limit situations within dehumanizing structures *make it appear* there are no alternatives. Clark's rebuking the teachers when he first arrives in the building was way out of line. These people were part of a dysfunctional setting seemingly impervious to change on their parts. Their hands were tied by higher ups and the institutional structure. Clark came in with his fire and brimstone and bullhorn and took steps that could have (should have?) seen him dismissed. That these steps proved effective may be beside the point when one considers that once a semblance of order had been restored to Eastside Clark's authoritarian ways continued, albeit with a slightly sweeter edge.

Authoritarianism is immoral because it denies freedom (Freire, 1996: 150). Because of his bullheadedness over the choir teacher's daring to question him, Clark loses one of the best staff members in the school. This means that *all the kids* in Eastside lost one of the best teachers, and all the kids who come to that school lost the opportunity to study with that teacher.

Although a healthy questioning of authority is one of the skills critical pedagogy hopes students develop, such questioning that undermines legitimate authority cannot be put up with. For example, there will be times when a teacher has to say in effect, "That's enough of that," and doesn't have the time or the inclination to embark on a drawn-out discussion over the *whys* of such a decision. There are times in class where I have to tell students who pepper their speech with "nigger," "bitch," and "fag" that those are words I do not want in our classroom or school. I can't get into a debate with a student each and every time about why those words are inappropriate for our classrooms and school and how they work against everyone's feeling safe and valued. Students who want to push the issue will and should face consequences, from being asked to stay after class to talk to me to being written up to being removed from the class, all depending on the situation and how it plays out. There have been times I have had to say to a kid, "Listen, I need you to understand that I am willing to talk to you about this, but not here right now" and the student has persisted and punishment of one sort or another has followed.

Seating charts might not sound like such a big deal but they're an effective way for teachers to assert their authority. Unfortunately, my experience teaching in high school has shown me they're an effective means that is often overlooked. Seating charts are a great way of structuring your class. There are students who should not

be allowed to sit near one another. They make pedagogy impossible, which means they interfere with the education of all the students in that class. These students *need* to be separated. I usually implement a seating chart after I've gotten to know the students a bit. This could be after a day or week of class, but there have also been situations where I have had to introduce a seating arrangement to a class half way through or several times throughout the year. Students will arrive to class and as they come in the door I try to be in the hall greeting all, asking each one to find his or her seat which I have labeled with a sticky pad or index card. As a precaution, I always keep an extra copy of the seating arrangement for myself in my Squibbs ledger, because some kids will try and switch sticky pads or index cards to sit closer to someone I inevitably didn't want them next to. Maybe I've just been lucky, but having the desks labeled this way when students come into class has worked well. Aside from the student who purposefully sits where he isn't supposed to and has to be asked to move, the most student resistance I've faced on this matter is a whining "Why do we have to sit like this?" to which I reply "Do me a favor and give it a try. If I see everyone's doing what they're supposed to be doing we can adjust the seating arrangement later on. Okay?"

An easy way for teachers to assert their authority in a classroom is the manner in which they dress. My first or second semester in college when I met Tito Gerassi the guy came waltzing into class with jeans and a plaid shirt looking like the maintenance man or a dislocated lumber jack. As he started to talk some of us looked at one another, *was this our professor?* He was. Gerassi taught us (through his example) that authority and command of a subject don't have to come packaged in a Brooks Brothers suit. At the same time, that was college. I teach in a high school where it's a different story. Professional dress, whether it's a shirt and tie or a suit, marks the teacher as distinct and different from the students. Many students have been taught to respect and defer to suits and ties, so dressing accordingly for at least the first few weeks of school is a must. Then, after students have come to respect me as a person and as an authority on our subject matter, that's when the tie comes off and the short sleeves and tattoos are seen.

Another example of the difference between authority and authoritarianism manifests itself in how we address our students when some form of punishment need be meted out. If we're gloating and rubbing our hands in sadistic glee as we inform the student of the consequences of her action we're going about it the wrong way. Don't laugh—I've seen teachers write students up, assign detentions, call in security, and sometimes they've appeared to *savor* the experience. It's not necessarily that these are sadistic people—although there have been a few. What's usually happened is the situation has escalated out of control. What started out as a student disagreeing with the teacher has exploded into a rancorous back and forth that ends when the teacher flexes those authority muscles for everyone to see. By this point the teacher is usually frustrated and fed up and feeling vindictive and maybe even spiteful. Some teachers feel bad afterwards for harboring such emotions. Other teachers will try and blame the whole thing on the student, re-creating the situation when describing what happened, conveniently blind to what actually transpired.

I've let myself be sucked into these situations a few times in the past and they're *never* pretty. Again, we're there to be *with* the students, to help them help themselves and help ourselves along the way. Bitter arguments and vindictive punishment kills the spirit of mutuality. Try not to get into arguments with your students. You never win. Even when you have the last word, or the kid shuts up/gets detention/gets suspended, how do you feel? The times it has happened to me I've felt bad. Am I a big man because I can win an argument against a middle or high school kid?

That said, there will be times when you will have to tell students to stop doing something. The extreme examples are when they're posing a threat to themselves or other students or when their disruptions are such that they are making pedagogy impossible. Almost always, however, these situations don't just present themselves full-blown. They start out small and escalate. A good teacher, like a good parent or spouse or friend, will see what's coming and work to head it off.

One way I try to do this is by offering students choices. Let's face it, when you *tell* someone not to do something they're going to think about doing it to spite you. If you're ordering a kid not to do something in a classroom setting where he's surrounded by his classmates, he isn't going to want to lose face. Standing up to the teacher and taking his lumps may even increase his cachet in that class. So, instead of ordering and demanding students do something I want, I usually try and dress it up as a couple of different choices, steering the kid to do what I want while allowing her to save face and look like it was her decision. Instead of ordering a student to change her seat *or else*, try saying to her, "Okay, look, you've got a couple of things you can do here. You can change your seat because you can't sit there, you're being too disruptive, or I'm going to have to make a phone call home today that I really don't want to have to make." This example will not work in every situation obviously. You may get a kid who refuses, no matter how you present it, to move her seat. But I'm 100% certain you'll be more successful in getting what you want done if you present it as a choice to the student instead of commanding it.

Another strategy I've used that has proven effective is to throw it back at the student in the context of their peers and make them want to do what I'm asking rather than look bad to their fellow students. So, for example, I might ask Johnny to turn down or turn off his iPod (if they're working individually personal stereos and the like don't bother me) so that others aren't distracted. Johnny sees it as a choice then. Do what I'm politely asking him to do, which will make it look like he's doing the right thing, or continue to blast his iPod, impinging on the education of his fellow students, which makes him look like a jerk. I've also phrased my requests so they look like personal favors, like the kid is being noble in granting *me* something. This puts them in the position of looking bad if they *don't* follow suit. I don't think I am being manipulative. I think I am being creative in avoiding conflict and getting something done that is best for the student and the class. I'm going to draw a paycheck every 2 weeks either way it goes.

4.10 Conscientization and Consciousness

Part of the goal of the teacher–student relationship is to model democracy. Participatory in form, democracy acknowledges the place for expertise while respecting everyone’s right to a voice. Dialogue between teachers and students is part of the democratic form we wish to model for our students. Only through dialogue and critical thought will our students and ourselves arrive at conscientization. Conscientization “represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness” (Freire, 2005: 15). Conscientization differs from consciousness. Human beings are conscious but only critical reflection and action allow for conscientization.

Freire distinguishes between three levels of consciousness. The intransitive consciousness lacks structural perception and is not able to objectify the conditions of its existence. Many of the fatalistic perceptions of reality (e.g., “that’s just the way it is,” “God wants it to be this way”) stem from an intransitive consciousness. The intransitive consciousness attributes phenomena outside of objective reality to a supernatural cause or something that inheres within the self. “I’m just not good at school” or “I’m not very smart” are refrains of the intransitive consciousness. This is a consciousness of inaction, a “static condition of fatalism which rejects human agency” as the person of this consciousness reflects on his own perceived shortcomings or placating the supernatural entities he feels responsible for his lot in life (Shor, 1992: 126). A culture of silence tends to mark classrooms and societies where the intransitive consciousness holds sway. The intransitive consciousness gets up and goes to work or school every morning, throwing up her hands in the face of seemingly inexplicable adversity, hoping for the best or at least for as little suffering as possible.

A second level of consciousness discussed by Freire is the naïve transitive or semi-intransitive consciousness. This is also a dominated consciousness but one that has some recognition of the external forces behind its domination. This is the kid who goes to school in a poor neighborhood and knows because his school is in a poor neighborhood he’s receiving an education markedly different from his more affluent peers elsewhere. However, divorced from action that seeks to change objective structures of dehumanization, the naïve transitive consciousness can be an extremely frustrating position to be in. When Louanne Johnson’s students in *Dangerous Minds* ask her who’s footing the bill for their amusement park trip and she lies to them, knowing *she* will pay but telling them the board of education is, one student asks, “Since when has the board of education done anything for us?” The naïve transitive consciousness may be cynical, but it is not critical. Naïve transitive consciousness views causality as a static fact, not recognizing that the cause of something today may not be its cause tomorrow. If causality is an unchanging fact of life, action to transform reality is ultimately futile. As Shor describes it, such consciousness “is one-dimensional, short-term thinking that leads to acting on an isolated problem, ignoring root causes and long-term solutions, and often creating other problems because the social system underlying a problem is not addressed” (1992: 127).

Freire hoped that through a critical pedagogy based on dialogue and a problem-posing education, students would achieve conscientization. Critical consciousness allows students to “better able . . . see any subject as a thing in itself whose parts influence each other, as something related to and conditioned by other dimensions in the curriculum and society, as something with a historical context, and as something related to the students’ personal context” (Shor, 1992: 127). Such “critical consciousness” is aware of the structural inequalities that condition our lives, implying “the critical insertion of the conscientized person into a demythologized reality” (Freire, 1985: 85). Such a consciousness refuses to fatalistically accept the finality of these structures, recognizing that these structures, *made*, can be *remade*. Critical consciousness represents the fruition of individual agency, although the individual knows her actions alone cannot reconstitute reality, that her actions must be in accord with those of others.

I know if you’re preparing to walk into a math or social studies class this sounds kind of “heavy.” It may, on the surface, appear to have little to do with what goes on in our classrooms. But truthfully it has everything to do with what we do in our classrooms. To return briefly to a discussion of philosophy, the ontology of critical pedagogy sees the self and society as creating and re-creating each other (Shor, 1992: 15). We are in and with the world (Freire, 1985: 68). Unlike other animals, we are capable of objectifying our world and our place in it, of critically examining it in the service of transformation. Our aspirations, our motives, and our objectives are embodied. As such, they’re as historical as we are. In other words, the hopes and objects we have differ from individual to individual from time to time. We are because we are born into situations (Freire, 1997: 90). But we are always unfinished beings capable of socialization to more (Freire, 1996: 146).

The implications of this for our classroom are such: unfinished, capable of greater humanization, we and our students need to understand reality and our places in it. We need to critically comprehend the systemic and structural relationships that infringe on this humanization and collectively dream and pursue alternative humanizing relationships. In our classrooms this means we accord dignity and respect to our students and we expect it of them for each other and for ourselves. Through our actions and discipline we model democratic forms, making it clear that our classrooms—no matter what the subject matter taught therein—are safe places of growth and transformation. Critical teachers must every day strive to balance authority with humaneness and professional competence with humility.