When Resistance Becomes Reproduction: A Critical Action Research Study

Gary Cale
National-Louis University, USA

Recommended Citation

When Resistance Becomes Reproduction: A Critical Action Research Study

Gary Cale
National-Louis University, USA

Abstract: This paper explores how adult learners in a college composition course resisted pedagogies and teaching strategies designed to critically examine student and teacher assumptions about classism, racism, and sexism as well as other oppressive structures and discourses.

Purpose of the Study

Despite the vast amount of theoretical literature in adult education and in other disciplines on critical pedagogy (Brookfield, 1995; Ellsworth, 1992; Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992, 1996; Welton, 1995), feminist pedagogy (Gore, 1993; Hart, 1992; Tisdell, 1993, 1995), and multicultural pedagogy (Banks, 1993; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Sleeter, 1995), there is a clear lack of empirical studies examining what "radical pedagogy" looks like in the adult education classroom and how that pedagogy affects classroom interactions and attitudes. The general purpose of this critical action research study was to examine the ways that power relations manifested themselves amongst the teacher and students in a class that foregrounded race, class, gender and multicultural issues and that intentionally attempted to disrupt traditional hierarchical power relationships between teachers and students through the use of radical pedagogy. In particular, I explored, from the perspectives of the participants (both myself, as the teacher/researcher and the students) what we experienced in a sixteen-week community college freshman composition course that emphasized oppression and privilege and democratic teaching practices such as a negotiated curriculum, direct challenges to hegemonic culture, and bringing to voice marginalized students. Major questions that guided this study were as follows: 1) How will the overt curriculum, especially course content, challenge or reinforce structured power relationships? 2) Will radical pedagogy effect positive attitudes towards social change in individuals? 3) What teaching practices or curriculum will students resist and why?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This was a critical action research study of a freshman level composition class of adult learners who studied racism, classism, and sexism. I both taught and researched the class. The course was designed with five main units: 1) two introductory weeks on social constructionism, oppression models, social group memberships, the interlocking nature of oppression and privilege (Tisdell, 1993), hegemony, and socialization cycles, capped by the students writing a cultural history that detailed how they viewed themselves as classed, gendered, and raced persons; 2) four weeks on classism, a unit which included readings and discussions on class, poverty, and unemployment and involved activities developed by United for a Fair Economy and teachers in the Social Justice Education program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, as well as other activists; 3) four weeks on racism, a unit that included readings and discussions on

cultural/symbolic racism, institutional racism, and involved activities adapted from Paul Kivel (1995), the Social Justice Education program, and other anti-racist activists; 4) four weeks on sexism, which again involved readings, discussions and activities developed by activists to combat sexism. At the end of each unit, students were asked to develop individual action plans to combat the oppression they noticed in their own lives, as well as to write a short paper on some aspect of the issue being studied. Each of these papers were rewritten multiple times; 5) two weeks of student presentations on topics of their own choosing. All four presentations in this class dealt with sexism.

Seventeen students were enrolled in the class; four were Black, the other thirteen were White. Fourteen students were women; three were Black women. The other three students were men, including one Black man.

The study was informed by a critical action research theoretical framework which included elements from critical, poststructural feminist, and multicultural educational literature. As a critical action research project, I attempted to document how the students and I interacted and our ways of constructing, reproducing, and resisting knowledge as the class evolved. Since the research was action-oriented, I focused on ways of improving practice while teaching across the boundaries of race, class, and gender. As a teacher/researcher, I used Carr and Kemmis's (1986) four stage cycle of action research (planning, acting, observing, and reflecting). Each subsequent class session was planned based upon data collected during the prior class. Furthermore, at the end of each class session, a group of volunteer students met with me to discuss and critique the class session and to plan the next sessions. Data collection in general consisted of daily audio-taped class sessions, field notes, journals and memos, daily critical incident questionnaires that student filled out at the end of each session, student notebooks, students essays, and audio-taped after class critique and planning sessions. Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method.

Findings and Discussion

In regards to the guiding questions listed above, several findings emerged from this study. I will briefly outline some of those findings-especially those relating to race and class issues-in the paragraphs that follow.

1) Although in class discussions, readings, and lectures, I emphasized the institutional and symbolic/cultural levels of oppression and privilege, many adult learners remained committed to the position that racism in particular, but also sexism and classism, is an individual phenomenon. They consistently resisted the concept of asymmetrical power relations and denied that the dominant culture exerted any control, let alone hegemonic control over their lives. Perhaps more significantly, they argued that oppressed people of color could be racists, regardless of the clear power differences. Despite the many class periods spent on discussions and activities that attempted to make visible the many embedded racist and classist discourses, symbols, representations, and institutions that help to form our worldviews, many of the White adult learners in particular resisted identifying racism as a problem that merited any discussion in class or remedy in the greater society. They expressed surprise and dismay that I insisted a problem

existed, telling me to "get over it." They also said they felt that I was blaming them for problems they were not responsible for.

To allay my White adult learners' suspicion that I was somehow blaming them for slavery, a complaint that had been made earlier in the semester when we were discussing class issues, I used an activity designed to foster a sense of racial/ethnic identity and pride (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 1997). I did not want White people to feel guilty for being born White (Helms, 1992; Tatum, 1992) any more than I wanted males to feel guilty for being born male. As Helms (1992) notes in her short guide to being a White person, I too believe that "a race is a nice thing to have." I did want, however, to make clear that I felt that racism is a White problem. I informed students of my belief that "for racism to disappear in the United States, White people must take the responsibility for ending it" (Helms, 1992, p. 1). Furthermore, I informed them that I refused to accept the belief that prejudice and racism can be used interchangeably. I referred them to the work of Wellman (1993) who argues that limiting racism to mere prejudice does not explain the persistence of racism or excuse it. In other words, just because some Black people have treated some White people meanly, does not that they are racists. We discussed the concept that racism can be best defined as prejudice plus power. Both White and Black students resisted this formulation throughout the semester, seemingly preferring to set aside asymmetrical power relations and the multiple levels of oppression model for individual and psychological explanations for racism. As I noted above, most of the White students, but also one of the Black students, continued to argue that any one who used a race-based slur should be considered a racist.

2) Many White students resisted talking about racism because they argued that either they had never encountered it in their lives or that they were convinced that the playing field was now level. When they participated in small group discussions on the topics of race awareness and when they first recognized that race was a factor in personal decision-making, White students remained quiet. Except for one White, male adult learner from the South, and later a White female student who described an epiphany she had about racism while at work, the White students complained that such exercises were a waste of their time. They agreed that they had nothing to say and that they had never noticed any acts of racism in their lives. When asked if they had ever heard racist jokes, a number of them said that they had not, and the ones that had, felt that these jokes were not harmful. Affirmative action programs were dismissed by almost all the White students as either unnecessary or a clear-cut case of reverse discrimination. Even when confronted with information that suggested that White women were one of the biggest benefactors of affirmative action programs, White female students in general continued to reject such programs. White students continued to write in their papers about "colored people" even after we had discussed the history of such terms and the reasons why most people had quit using terms such as "colored" or "Negro." White students were silent most often during discussions about race, preferring as one White female student said, to hear about racism from the ones who were affected by it. When I suggested that racism affected us all, many White students again claimed that the only time they had been affected by racism was when they had been called "whitey" or "honkey." The concept of white privilege was totally dismissed. As a result of such discussions, at least one of the Black students found it discouraging to talk about race in class and stopped out until we finished the unit on racism. (For more on this situation, see below.)

3) Working class and lower-middle class White adult learners and working class adult learners of color tended to look at those below their own socio-economic class as the cause for their own economic problems. In other words, they blamed impoverished people for their economic problems, stating that poor people received too much and they too little help. During the four weeks we spent discussing classism, we spent several class periods critically examining the concept of meritocracy, the individualistic, bootstrap ideology that many Americans hold as well as a quick review of capitalism and its relationship to poverty, lack of health insurance or quality health care, unemployment, and welfare as we used to know it as well as how we know it today. In our discussions of classism, almost every student came into class with the belief that poverty existed due to individual deficits; they named such defects as laziness, ignorance, promiscuity, drug and alcohol dependence, and lack of self-control as the chief factors for poverty in the United States. Although the readings and discussion challenged this way of thinking, my evaluation of student papers at the end of the semester revealed that not one of the students who wrote on classism mentioned capitalism as a contributing factor or explanation for why poverty exists in this country. As one student noted on the end of the semester evaluation: "Nothing you can say or show me as far as statistics go can convince me that poor people are poor because of something that our society does. It's their own damn fault!" Working class students of color in the classroom agreed with this assessment. In one of our discussions, one male African-American student stated that people, both Black and White, were bums because they wanted to be bums. The two African-American women students present agreed with his statement, despite their acknowledgment of the deleterious affect of race on their own economic conditions. One of these female students herself had been a welfare recipient.

4) On the whole, adult learners who believed or had come to believe that oppression operates on multiple levels (including the institutional and symbolic or cultural levels) tended to be silent in class and did not publicly challenge the more vocal students who held the opposing view. This was particularly true for White adult learners. On several occasions White students waited for me after class or chatted with me on breaks about how upset they were by comments made by other White students during class discussions. Similarly, a number of the papers they submitted for my critique reflected an understanding that racism permeated our society, albeit at the individual level, but they did not offer these critiques as part of the public discussions on racism. This was especially disturbing to me because I repeatedly asked for their assistance, requesting that they voice their opinions during our plenary discussions and act as allies for the students of color (Tatum, 1994). In most discussions, these students either remained silent or if they did speak they considerably softened their critiques. In one striking incident, when I asked a White male student who had written a historical paper on how African-American jockeys had been pushed out of the profession by White track and horse owners to report on his research, he mentioned that Black jockeys had lost their jobs, but failed to mention that the White supremacists who controlled the tracks had forced this change.

5) Perhaps most significantly, student resistance to class content and radical pedagogy tended to reproduce power asymmetrical power relations and social inequalities. Although Ellsworth (1992) discusses this phenomenon, there is lack in the literature that addresses this issue fully. Student silences, student absences and production strikes (Shor, 1996), and authoritarian lectures characterized a number of class sessions as the students and I attempted to navigate these controversial and contested issues. For instance, throughout the semester, White students through

their unrelenting gaze on the "Other" effectively silenced some of the Black students. Several White students routinely interrogated the Black students present. Their questions often seemed to me to be racist and certainly critical in a patronizing way. At the very least, they betrayed an ignorance of our country's racist history. As a result of the discussion about one of the student complaints on the weekly critical incident questionnaire-that is, that the teacher focused too much attention on the "colored students"-one of the Black female students skipped her only class. She told me privately that she was no longer interested in talking about race or her experiences, and she did not come back to class until we had moved on to a discussion of sexism. In the only direct confrontation I witnessed during the entire semester, the Black male student in class and one of the most outspoken White female students in class clashed over whose life experience had been the most terrible. At least two other White female students joined in this conversation to chastise the Black male student. Although there may be many reasons why the Black male student did not return to class for the rest of the semester, at least one explanation is that he had been silenced by these White students.

At various points during the semester my desire for creating and nurturing a democratic classroom were upset by student resistance of various kinds. Student silence and lack of preparation often forced me back into the role of information disseminator, and I sometimes found myself delivering authoritarian lectures instead of holding discussions. Student reluctance to participate in or outright resistance to planned activities often left me scrambling to come up with new exercises. Frequent student absences made group work nearly impossible at times. These various forms of student resistance often forced me to act like a traditional teacher: I ended up far too many times making all the important decisions. Even when I specifically asked the after-class group (the group of students who met with after class to co-plan and critique the previous class) to contact me before the next class with their vote on a key decision, they all chose not to call or email me. They simply avoided me.

Although I have focused this paper on the many ways students resisted radical pedagogy and reproduced societal inequities, I do want to mention that students also resisted the hegemonic culture. Black and White female students wrote devastating critiques of patriarchy as did one of the White male students who finished the course. Several White students reported that they had begun to challenge the thinking of their parents and friends regarding sexism primarily, but also racism and classism to lesser degrees. Each of the group presentations at the end of the semester attacked sexism and patriarchy. One group challenged media stereotypes about women's bodies; another made visible the epidemic of domestic violence against women in this country; still another confronted the glass ceilings many women face in the business world. But they clearly struggled with the issues of race and class preferring, I would argue, myths over reality.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Radical pedagogical theories inform many adult educators' practice, yet very few empirical studies exist which examine what happens when a teacher puts these theories into practice in adult education classes in higher education settings. Radical pedagogy is much touted, but little studied and critiqued. In general, the findings from this study will provide other adult educators with information to help them structure their own classes and design activities which promote social justice and social change. More particularly, some of the implications for adult education

practice include the importance of 1) acknowledging and discussing classroom tensions, 2) challenging hegemonic assumptions when they occur, 3) providing adult learners with multiple activities designed to make various forms of oppression visible, 4) providing multiple sources of information on various forms of oppression, 5) providing outlets for emotion and suggestions for activism, 6) providing alternative assignments to meet course objectives.

References

Adams, M., Bell, L, & Griffin, P. (1997). Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook. New York and London: Routledge.

Banks, J. (1993). Approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. In J. Banks and C.

Banks (Eds.), Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives (pp. 195-214). Boston, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore: Allyn and Bacon.

Brookfield, S. (1995). Becoming a critically reflective teacher. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986). Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research. London and Philadelphia: The Falmer Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), Feminisms and critical pedagogy (pp. 90-119). New York: Routledge.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Seabury.

Gore, J. (1993). The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth. New York & London: Routledge.

Hart, M. (1992). Working and education for life: Feminists and international perspectives on adult education. London and New York: Routledge.

Hayes, E., & Colin, S. (Eds). (1994). Confronting racism and sexism. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Helms, J. (1992). A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a white person or understanding the white persons in your life. Topeka, Kansas: Content Communications.

Johnson-Bailey, J., & Cervero, R. M. (1998). Positionality: Whiteness as a social construct that drives classroom dynamics. Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, San Antonio, Texas.

Kivel, P. (1995). Uprooting racism : how white people can work for racial justice. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.

Shor, I. (1996). When students have power. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press

---. (1992). Empowering education. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. Sleeter, C. & McLaren, P. (Eds.). (1995). Multicultural education, critical pedagogy and the politics of difference. New York: State University of New York Press.

Sleeter, C. (1992). Resisting racial awareness: How teachers understand the social order from their racial, gender, and social class locations. *Educational Foundations*, 6(2), 7-32.

Sleeter, C. and Grant, C. (1987). An analysis of multicultural education in the United States. Harvard Educational Review, 57(4), 421-441.

Tatum, B. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1), 1-24.

Tatum, B. (1994). Teaching white students about racism: The search for white allies and the restoration of hope. *Teachers College Record*, 95, 462-476.

Tisdell, E. J..(1995). Creating inclusive adult learning environments : Insights from *multicultural education and feminist pedagogy*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education., & Ohio State University. Center on Education and Training for Employment.. Columbus, OH.

Tisdell, E. (1993). Interlocking systems of power, privilege, and class oppression in adult higher education classes. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43 (4) 203-226.

Wellman, D. (1993). *Portraits of white racism* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Welton, M. (1995). In defense of the lifeworld : critical perspectives on adult *learning*. Albany: State University of New York Press.