TEACHING PAST THE TEST: A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL PRAGMATISM

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Existent scholarship in communication studies has failed to adequately address the particular pedagogical context of current public secondary education within the United States. While communication studies has produced a great deal of scholarship centered within the framework of critical pedagogy, these efforts fail to offer public high school teachers in the U.S. a tenable alternative to standardized constructs of educational communication. This thesis addresses the need for a workable, critical pedagogy in this particular educational context as a specific question of educational communication. A theorization of pedagogical action drawing from critical pedagogy, pragmatism, and communication studies termed “critical pragmatism” is offered as an effective, critical counter point to current neoliberal classroom practices in U.S. public secondary schools.
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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION

Education is in many ways a utopian endeavor. The educator toils in the classroom today for the goal of student success in the future. According to Dewey (1938/1998), “The educator more than the member of any other profession is concerned to have a long look ahead” (p. 90). However, teachers (especially public school teachers in the United States) must also deal with concerns that are very much based in their current temporal location. Institutional constraints mediate the choices educators have with regards to instructional style and curriculum. Standardization threatens to punish students that have remained unsuccessful in mastering basic knowledge sets as determined by state and national standards. This is the pedagogical location within which I have found myself situated for the last six years, wanting (as a communication scholar) to “be critical,” but concerned (as a classroom teacher) with meeting minimum expectations of student success as delineated by the state of Texas.

Critical Omissions, Pragmatic Problems, Communicative Solutions

I first came into contact with the works of Freire (1970/2010) and hooks (1994) via my time as a high school participant in competitive forensics. Although I found their theorization of what the classroom should “be” inspiring, their words seemed to ring more and more hollow as I began my own time on the other side of the big desk, as a high school teacher. However, the authors we read in the undergraduate courses that had prepared me for my career in public secondary education (Canter, 2001; Charles, 1999; Wong H. K. & Wong R. T., 2009) seemed not only equally detached, but also quite problematic. I felt quite certain these were the “bankers” Freire (1970/2010) had warned me about as a high school debate student.
As I began my time as a communication studies graduate student, I encountered a much more robust corpus of scholarly work than I had ever been exposed to as either a student in rebellion, or a “banker” in training. I started looking for my critical voice in the pages of the works we read in class. However, the more I began to seek out an active engagement with the relevant literature stemming from both communication scholarship and educational theory, I saw a significant omission across the existent scholarship.

Although Freire (1970/2010, 1975, 1978, 1994, 1998/2001) had provided words of hope and emancipation, I could not conceive of a way to take the words of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and make them speak directly to my day-to-day experience. After all, the TAKS test didn’t exist in the classrooms of revolutionary Brazil, and the adult literacy instructors of Guinea-Bissau had never encountered the refrain (and implicit threat) of “leaving no child behind.” Furthermore, I learned Freire was not without his detractors. While Ellsworth (1989) had called into question the usefulness of “being critical,” I thought teachers in my space needed “some” power in order to meet the rigors of standardization. I read Foucault (1975/1995, 1978, 1981, 1984, 2000) and began to question what exactly “power” was. It seemed disheartening. I desperately wanted to find a way I might harmonize my communicative criticality, with the necessary pragmatic restraints of my pedagogical location.

Although later critical pedagogues (Giroux, 1985; hooks, 1994) had refined Freire’s words, and made them seem more relevant to students in the U.S., they were now speaking from a different location all together: college lecture halls. I was not working in the academy; I was working in a public high school. I desperately wanted to be a “Transformative Intellectual” (Giroux, 1985) and an “anti-racist white person” (hooks, 2003, p. 64), but I wasn’t sure what these trajectories of praxis might look like in my particular pedagogical situation.
I read Dewey (1938/1998) and thought I had found a voice I could place my teaching in dialogue with. Dewey argued some structure was necessary, that complete rejection of dominant forms created acts of meaninglessness. I began to think of my usage of power as necessary to achieve critical goals. But, as I continued reading, I started to question if Dewey and others of his ilk (Rorty, 1989/2007; Biesta, 1994) were too pragmatic, too devoted to praxis, to the neglect of theory. Dewey began to seem dated, perhaps just a more progressive manifestation of the bankers, the agents of cultural reification.

As my engagement with communication studies continued, the questions I was asking seemed to sharpen themselves into particularly communicative dimensions. The work of Fassett and Warren (2007, 2010) and Simpson (2007, 2010) not only stemmed from this communicative episteme, but focused on real engagement, real action. However, though their work seemed more nuanced and generative in many ways, it was exclusively communication education scholarship. While I studied communication scholarship, I taught other subjects (social studies, English language arts) that were rigorously managed from the top down by regimes of standardization.

I wanted to articulate and theoretically ground what I was doing every day in my classroom: teaching within the public high school setting as a critical communication scholar. I was finding ways to infuse my actions with critical reflection, and to mediate my criticality with practical considerations. But most importantly, I began to see the classroom as a particular area of communication; my pedagogy became centered around this locus of constructive communicative action that was properly critical, but necessarily pragmatic. However, I could not find a voice in the communication studies scholarship that reflected these experiences. I needed a way to theorize a pedagogy of communication which was not merely communication pedagogy. I
wanted to find ways to talk about a pedagogy that was neither merely a pragmatism with a critical eye, nor critically minded with pragmatic action, but constituted of critical pragmatism.

The Present Project

In order to address the previously elucidated gaps within both communication studies scholarship and critical pedagogical theorization this project focuses on answering one central question: how might communication studies address the particular pedagogical needs of the current public secondary teacher in the United States in a way that is both meaningfully critical and practically pragmatic? This is in keeping with the recommendations of Fleury (2005), who argued that communication studies ought to return to questions of educational communication, across a diversity of fields and contexts. Fleury reported that far from addressing each of these questions as discrete bodies of communication, detached from communication education scholarship, scholars should seek ways to infuse pedagogy across various disciplines with the insights of educational scholarship and theorization created in the context of communication studies. Additionally, Witt (2012) recently called upon communication education scholars to broaden the research aims of the discipline, “Widening the participant pool to include K-12” (p. 2). Thus, in keeping with these insights, I center this project as a particular question of communication education, within the broader context of communication studies.

I contend that centering this thesis within the discipline of communication studies is of particular importance for several reasons. First, although the role of critical pedagogy in educational scholarship has become relegated to either macro-level questions of educational policy (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004), or lesson planning in the context of the primary classroom (Wink, 2010), critical pedagogy has remained a strong influence upon pedagogical scholarship within the context of communication education (Fassett & Warren, 2010). Furthermore, while
some communication studies scholars have addressed questions of educational communication (Plax et al., 1986, 1990), these scholarly efforts are insufficient to deal with the previously discussed educational situation because they are both centered around higher education as well as predicated upon a mostly behavioralist or social scientific standpoint. Finally, addressing methods of re-humanizing the workable pedagogical possibilities of the standardized classroom are key to a broader critical project. Titone and Dugan (2010) discussed that far from a discrete manifestation of policy, educational standardization within the U.S. might be better understood as a broad cultural force that has/is shaping the way(s) in which young people in the U.S. are beginning to interact with one another as citizens, and with the broader mechanisms of the state. Thus, in order to address the previously described central question of providing a critical, workable pedagogy for the secondary public teacher within the U.S., the present project proceeds in the following manner:

Chapter 2: the standardized status quo

In chapter 2, I address the specific political, historic, and socio-cultural context within which the contemporary public high school teacher within the United States works. To this end, the notion of neoliberalism as the overarching political telos through which educational policy is currently driven is discussed. Moving from a general discussion of neoliberalism, I focus on educational standardization as a particular manifestation of neoliberal culture and political policy. Finally, a brief critique of both the philosophical implications and pedagogical constraints of standardization is advanced via the lens of critical pedagogy.

Chapter 3: current pedagogical theories and limitations

In chapter 3, I focus on the existent theorization of pedagogical action and discuss the limitations of these articulations of pedagogy in the presently considered context. First, the key
tenants of critical pedagogy as a counterpoint to standardization are discussed, beginning with
the seminal works of the field, before focusing with more specificity on particular theorizations
pertaining to the U.S. public high school classroom. Additionally, the corpus of literature
pertaining to critical communication pedagogy and service learning pedagogy are discussed
relative to the presently considered pedagogical context. Furthermore, a counter-critique of
critical pedagogy is offered by extending the particular theories of pedagogy offered by existent
theorists into the U.S. public high school classroom. Next, philosophical pragmatism is discussed
as a possible mediating counterpoint to critical pedagogy. I follow with a critique of pragmatism
as critical action. Finally, three areas in need of re-theorization are offered through which an
alternative pedagogy might be structured: culture and identity, power and agency, and truth and
knowledge.

Chapter 4: a pedagogy of critical pragmatism

In chapter 4, I offer an alternative theorization of pedagogy, in the particular context of
public, secondary schools in the U.S. termed “critical pragmatism.” First, three basic axioms of
critical pragmatism are briefly discussed. Next, this pedagogical standpoint is applied to the
areas in need of re-theorization elucidated within chapter 3.

Chapter 5: teaching past the test

In chapter 5, I offer an autoethnographic telling of my particular experiences as a public,
secondary teacher within the United States engaging in a pedagogy of critical pragmatism. In this
chapter, I offer grounded examples of how this theorization of communicative pedagogy has
been enacted.
Chapter Notes

1 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, the standardized testing regime all curriculum and assessment within Texas public schools are currently based upon. This is discussed in some detail later in the project.
CHAPTER 2

THE STANDARDIZED STATUS QUO

Dewey (1938/1998) characterized the tension between disparate theorizations of educational reform by noting:

Revolt against the kind of organization characteristic of traditional school constitutes a demand for a kind of organization based upon ideas. I think that only slight acquaintance with the history of education is needed to prove that educational reformers and innovators alone have felt the need for a philosophy of education. Those who adhered to the established system needed merely a few fine-sounding words to justify existing practices.

(p. 18-19)

Undoubtedly, any public secondary teacher in the United States would read Dewey’s analysis of the tension between status quo and reform as a truism. Indeed, such professionals have found themselves bound more and more to the practice of “teaching to the test” and have been strongly implored by their educational leaders to follow “research based” methodologies of instruction. It is in this context of educational standardization that I situate this project. Today’s secondary public educators within the United States do not teach in Freire’s Brazil, hooks’ collegiate classrooms, or even the high school lecture halls of Dewey’s United States. Therefore, a reconsideration of previous theorizations of engaged and critical pedagogy must begin with an analysis of the specific context inside of which current public secondary educators operate.

My goal in this chapter is to establish and delineate the specific socio-political context within which public secondary educators in the United States currently find themselves. To that end, the chapter is divided into three parts. First, neoliberalism is discussed as the broader
political and ideological paradigm through which contemporary educational policy is both mediated and influenced. Second, the educational paradigm of “standardization” and the related concept of “accountability” is described both in the context of specific policy actions and as a broader philosophy of education. Finally, a brief critique of educational standardization is offered via the work of Freire (1970/2010) and hooks (1994, 2003) in order to both problematize the status quo as well as to begin the process of constructing areas in need of re-assessment within current public secondary pedagogy theory and praxis.

Neoliberalism

Various scholars (Brown, 2002; Giroux, 2003, 2010; Goldberg, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Hursh, 2001; Rice & Vastola, 2009) have discussed the rise of a political philosophy termed neoliberalism in the later part of the twentieth century. These authors posited that neoliberalism has altered the values and goals of state action pertaining to social issues and foreign policy, as well as ideology and culture in the western world. Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (p. 2)

Giroux (2010) added that another element of neoliberal ideology was “the logic of unchecked competition and unbridled individualism” coupled with policies in which, “the welfare state is dismantled, it is increasingly replaced by the harsh realities of the punishing state” (p. 1). Brown (2002) noted that neoliberalism saw the “extension of market rationality at the expense of social solidarity and democratic discourse” to the extent that discourses of individual “freedoms” were
completely subsumed by economic “rights” of autonomy, production, and consumption (p. 347). Brown (2006) noted that although neoliberal political rhetoric often situates itself in a general anti-statist language of personal autonomy, self sufficiency, and personal accountability the actual policy actions of the neoliberal state have often included a drastic increase in government power in the realm of personal freedoms and corporate support. Thus, the truncation of all rights and freedoms except for the freedom to engage in the market place are justified by increasing the scope of the free market itself. Therefore, Brown (2006) reported, the expansion of the right to be a consumer/producer in the free market comes at the expense of all other rights and freedoms within the neoliberal state.

The rise of neoliberalism as the dominant socio-political ideology of the western world and the chief impetus behind social policy within the United States has had deleterious effects on both the role of democracy and civic engagement across U.S. society, and in particular upon the plight of minority groups in the United States. Additionally, the emergence of neoliberal thought has had a dehumanizing influence upon the crafting of educational policy in the United States, manifesting itself in the rhetoric and policy aims of educational “standardization.”

Implications of Neoliberalism

The rise of neoliberalism as the dominant political paradigm in the United States has undermined democracy and active citizen engagement in at least two important ways. First, according to Giroux (2003) the radical, atomizing individualism neoliberalism is premised upon discourses collective organizing and active engagement with the state. After all, if citizens are merely “consumers” and the sole role of the state is to adopt policies that expand markets via deregulation and privatization, what need is there for any sort of grassroots organizing on the part of the atomized citizenry? Instead, citizens “vote” through the marketplace. Thus,
democratic “rights” are reduced to the “freedom” of one’s relative purchasing power. Second, neoliberal socio-economic policies serve to exacerbate many of the social problems that serve as barriers to active democratic engagement. According to Brown (2002), “Democracy, however defined, presupposes inclusion in a common patrimony: the republic in its conception is res public or ‘everybody’s affair.’ But competitiveness, inequality, lack of solidarity, and poverty mean exclusion” (p. 355). Thus, regimes of neoliberalism serve to stunt social justice by reducing political will to whatever standing economic resources communities have at their disposal. Obviously, such a paradigm of statecraft will always privilege those groups of individuals that have historically held hegemonic power over traditional institutions of economic power, and sought to explicitly and implicitly disenfranchise others.

In addition to a broader assault upon democratic engagement, neoliberalism has had additional negative effects upon the ability of historically disenfranchised groups of individuals to collectively organize and meaningfully construct a discourse of ongoing struggle and emancipation. According to Giroux (2003), by reducing all individuals to supposedly neutral (with regards to social identifiers such as race/gender/class) data points, neoliberalism has erected a “politics of denial” (p. 194) in which discrimination takes on “more covert modes of expression” (p. 191). Goldberg (2009) reported that a particular manifestation of the universalizing logic of neoliberalism is the notion of “colorblindness” with regards to race and ethnicity as the best possible solution to the historical problems of discrimination. Such a conceptualization of social policy purports to “solve” the problems of historical racism by “ignoring” race as a meaningful category. Thus, “colorblindness” conflates anti-race mentalities with an equivalence of anti-racism. However, as Goldberg noted, social policy that purports to be anti-race is in and of itself often racially discriminatory in its outcomes. By claiming that the
discussion of race and the importance of racial difference is the root cause of racism, rhetorics of anti-race, “colorblind” ideology remove discussion of race as a significant social variable while dominant social groups continue to utilize race and other significant social characteristics as a means for identifying and discriminating against minority groups.

In addition to serving as the broader socio-political context in which current secondary public educators in the United States craft and practice their pedagogy, the limitations and implications of neoliberal thought have had particular bearing upon the creation of policy regimes of “standardization” and “accountability” in the realm of federal and state educational policy. Indeed, previous scholars (Boyles, 2000; Hursh, 2001) have argued that educational standardization might best be understood as a particular manifestation of neoliberalism in the United States. Therefore, I will next move onto a discussion of educational standardization in the United States and the effects such policies have had upon individual teachers and their schools.

Educational Standardization in the United States

Over the last thirty years the U.S. public education system has moved further away from older notions of local control toward a new paradigm of standardization of state and national educational expectations. Funkhouser (1996) noted “the observations of the teacher are no longer sufficient in placing the student’s progress in its ‘proper perspective.’ Standardized tests attempt to provide this perspective” (p. 250). Indeed, on both the national and state level, students and teachers within publicly funded secondary schools are now held accountable for their respective abilities to perform in accordance with stated standardized testing goals. In addition, Funkhouser (1996) further observed that commensurate with the creation of standardized testing goals was the standardizing of curriculum. This curriculum standardization mediates the courses that public secondary schools can and/or must offer to students and artificially truncates and homogenizes
the scope and sequence of the year long curriculum and goals of such courses. One of the key implications of standardizing the educational experience has been the emergence of a narrow notion of “accountability,” perhaps best seen in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Accountability and NCLB

According to Vinson et al. (2001) the educational paradigm of accountability places the final “blame” for student “failure” (measured by only state mandated standardized tests) upon the individual classroom teacher and her/his school. In response to such “failure” state governments enact various punishments including, but not limited to, de-funding of individual schools, removal of local school boards, and targeted privatization (Hursh, 2001). Hursh (2001) stated that the combined punitive usage of state power and privatization of social programs manifested within the logic of educational “accountability” is in keeping with the understanding of educational standardization as a particular manifestation of neoliberal public policy. Conversely, according to Biesta (2004), the re-centering of public education policy toward a paradigm of standardized “accountability” has insulated policy makers from liability when schools “fail.” Biesta (2004) argued that in keeping with the broader implications of neoliberal thought, standardization re-aligns teachers and schools as “producers” of educational services and parents and students as “consumers” of said product while the state supposedly relegates itself to a laissez-faire policy of merely regulating the currency of educational excellence: standardized testing regimes. Of important note is that notion of “standardization” as a paradigm of educational policy is quite distinct from a mere creation of basic “standards” in educational excellence. Biesta (2004) reported that while the regulation of minimum standards of achievement might in fact seem progressive in nature (for example, mandating that states adequately fund public education, or ensure that students master basic skills such as reading and
math), standardization and accountability in the U.S. public education policy have always presumed attached sanctions against low performing schools and regulation of what counts as “truth” under such testing regimes.

Orfield (2000) reported that this move toward standardizing public education in the United States could be traced historically to the early 1980s. According to the author, first on the state level, and later federally, educational policy in the United States moved away from policy aims of equality and desegregation toward a goals of mandating the rigorous yearly testing of students, and the schools they learn within, as a means of determining success. Haney (2000) explained that this notion of measuring and testing was taken to its furthest point of implementation by the state of Texas during the administration of governor George W. Bush. Under this administration, the state of Texas began conditioning graduation of high school students, and advancement into higher grade levels on adequate levels of success on end of year standardized, state administered tests. Titone and Duggan (2010) claimed this policy of not merely measuring student success, but using collected testing data to sanction students and their school districts was later credited for the “Texas Miracle,” a quick turn around in both graduation rates and testing results across urban district in the state of Texas during the later part of the 1990s. Smith (2005) argued that this state level success was the primary rationale behind exporting the test/sanction paradigm of standardization into federal policy with the adoption of NCLB.

One of the unintended consequences of these policies was a trend of individual teachers, as well as entire school districts, turning to blatant cheating as a means of achieving the necessary levels of standardized “success.” Giroux and Schmidt (2004) noted that the much lauded “Texas Miracle” could in fact be credited to wholesale cheating and manipulation of drop
out rates and other key statistical points of analysis by some of the state’s largest school districts. Additionally, Titone and Duggan (2010) reported that the trend of individual teachers choosing to cheat to get ahead in the standardized testing regime had become endemic because such professionals were “disempowered, dehumanized” (p. 2) and guilty of “buying into the power of the test” (p. 3). Despite these trends, policymakers seem steadfast in their commitment to educational standardization.

Gunter et al. (2007) explained that beginning with the presidential administration of George W. Bush and the initial passage of NCLB, the notion of educational standardization and the related nomenclature of “accountability” became the de facto educational paradigm of public schools in the United States. According to the Department of Education, the major provisions of NCLB impacting public school instruction were a requirement for states receiving federal funding to create standardized testing regimes, encourage teachers to teach course content utilizing methodologies that had been “scientifically proven,” and provide steps that will be carried out if/when schools failed to show progress via standardized testing results (United States Department of Education, 2003). Far from reversing this course, according to Paulson (2009), the current federal administration of Barack Obama has reified a commitment to standardization and accountability with both a renewed commitment to the goals of NCLB, and the announcement of the Race to the Top (RTT) program. RTT extends the neoliberal logic of NCLB further by giving individual schools and school districts that can prove they have created programs of “excellence” (as defined by a mathematical point system) large cash rewards for their efforts (United States Department of Education, 2009).

Implications
The current standardized paradigm of education is premised upon the assumption that setting artificially delineated minimum benchmark scores for public schools to meet, paired with commiserate sanctions for failure, creates an equitable and “fair” regime of educational policy. Kim and Sunderman (2005) believed that this equivalence could be best exemplified by NCLB. The researchers explained, “The NCLB accountability system requires all schools and students to meet a single mean proficiency level in reading and mathematics. Proponents of NCLB assert that high expectations for achievement are needed to address the learning needs of public school students who are ‘segregated by low expectations” (2005, p. 4). Critics of this policy (Hursh, 2007; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Rentschler, 2006) have argued that far from creating even a facade of “equality” and/or academic “rigor,” such a paradigm of schooling instead creates a race to the bottom in which states are rewarded for setting low standards and focusing curriculum content on standardized tests.

NCLB could be considered a successful policy if measured by the artificial measures and benchmarks established as part of the program, with most states showing a positive increase in student performance as measured by standardized testing regimes from year to year (Hursh, 2007). However, Hursh (2007) explained that such evidence of “success” is deceiving, since most states have achieved better results by adjusting test content and rigor, allowing school districts to adopt implicitly segregationist policies, and encouraging schools to over identify the number of students in need of special education services. Furthermore, Rudalevige (2008) reported that the process of federal measuring of educational benchmarks had become so increasingly politicized and partisan as to make most federal statistical analysis all but meaningless.
Perhaps more concerning are the ways in which the current standardized paradigm of public schooling has further re-trenched the systemic failure of public schools located in the most historically underserved communities. The mechanisms through which standardization undermines public schools are myriad, as Rentschler (2006) explained:

NCLB regulations can create failing schools in a multitude of ways. By breaking out non-aggregated subgroups (such as students with disabilities, distinct minority subgroups, students in poverty) and requiring each subgroup to meet the ninety-five percent participation rate along with the required proficiency score, NCLB will likely doom any school district with diverse populations, such as those located in urban areas, to failure. (p. 650)

In addition to ensuring that certain public schools “fail” according to scientistic measurements of success, Hursh (2007) posited that educational standardization “both directly and indirectly exacerbates racial, ethnic and economic inequality in society” (p. 306). The author explained that such an exacerbation was caused by over focusing on testing goals that were relatively unimportant to the day-to-day lives of historically disenfranchised student groups. Thus, according to Hursh, such students are more likely to fair “poorly” against standardized test content, resulting in higher rates of dropouts, increased likelihood of being held behind, and a higher chance of being labeled and tracked as “at risk” or “learning disabled.” Furthermore, the current educational paradigm of standardization strips teachers of autonomy by relegating these professionals to the role of mere technicians deploying the pre-ordained standardized curriculum in the proper sequence and scope to maximize student “success.” Hursh (2007) reported that standardization of the public educational experience for U.S. students in the wake of NCLB “has
narrowed the curriculum, which has made (and is making) it more difficult for teachers to connect classroom activities to students’ own lives, interests and culture” (p. 298).

Despite the questionable nature of the NCLB legislation, standardization of the educational experience has quickly become normalized as the assumed edifice upon which all future discussions of educational reform must be built. Previous researchers have claimed that NCLB and similar legislation is likely to remain the bedrock of the American public education system due to political concerns, secondary benefits garnered by private schools, a lack of an easily articulated policy alternative, and its ability to consolidate cultural power. Thus, although many scholars, activists, politicians, and educators have rightly advocated for the removal of current standardized policies of public education, within the current political and cultural climate such a radical change does not seem likely. However, these current notions of standardization and accountability in U.S. educational policy have far deeper implications when viewed through the lens of critical pedagogical theories.

Critiques of Standardization

Although various practical and ideological deficits of standardization, and more specifically NCLB could be expounded upon in a variety of directions, this section focuses on two general themes of critique derived from the corpus of critical pedagogy. Simpson (2010) reported that critical pedagogy “focuses on the relationship of knowledge to power and sees all education as inherently political” and “seeks to make more transparent how ideologies and processes of social formation lead to injustice and stresses the importance of working at antioppressive practices in and outside the classroom” (p. 361).

From this theoretical standpoint, I extend two critiques against standardized education. First, Freire's (1970/2010) notion of educational banking as dehumanization is offered as a
critique of the pedagogical effects of standardization. Next, hooks’ (1994, 2003) critique of certain curricular choices as tools of reinforcing cultural hegemony is extended into the particulars of standardizing policy. Finally, the implications of such critiques, specifically on pedagogical praxis, are briefly discussed.

*Standardization as Dehumanization*

Freire (1970/2010) believed that “traditional” education was often steeped in the paradigm of educator as banker. According to Freire, this banking model of education is premised upon a framework of educational excellence that posits “the more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (1970/2010, p. 72). Much like a banker controls a store of money, which is systematically doled out to the bank’s customers in correct amounts, Freire’s banker/educator controls the supply of an epistemic currency of “knowledge” that is dutifully “deposited” in students. I believe that the current framework of educational standardization within public secondary schools in the United States clearly replicates Freire’s concept of banking.

Dantley (2003) reported “The whole notion of standards assumes that one model of pedagogy as well as monitored tests that evaluate the proper execution of that generic pedagogy is the most efficacious way to see to it that no child is left behind” (pp. 284-285). Thus, in the standardized classroom, teachers dole out parcels of “knowledge” that have been precisely defined and delineated by state boards of education to their students who represent nothing more than waiting, empty epistemic receptacles. Hopefully, in the mind of the standardized educator, these carbon based containers of faithfully dispensed lessons will be able to accurately re-create notions of “truth” later in the school year on a bubble sheet in order to pass a standardized test. If
such conditions occur, the standardized educator has banked successfully. This is what passes as meaningful pedagogy in secondary classrooms in the current public school system in the U.S.

Quite clearly such an understanding of the role of both teacher and student is problematic at best, and dehumanizing to both parties at worst. Snowman et al., (2009) explained that more concerning still was the failure of such a paradigm of instruction to achieve success by even its own scientistic standards. The researchers explained this disparity between theory and outcomes was evidenced in sagging test score performance (when results were controlled for factors such as shifting standards of excellence and re-classifying low achieving students) in the United States. Snowmen et al. further reported that this trend was at least in part due to the general lack of a humanizing pedagogical approach. The authors concluded that the tendency of standardized education to treat students as mere data points that represented the successful or failed process of imparting knowledge often resulted in poorer performances on standardized tests. Giroux and Schmidt (2004) extended this criticism further, explaining that contemporary research “demonstrates how such testing schemes have actually exacerbated the problems they originally sought to alleviate” (p. 214). Freire (1985) prefigured these practical shortcomings of standardized curriculum, by arguing that curricula should instead be engaging and generative, even when seeking to meet standards of pre-ordained knowledge.

*Standardization and Cultural Hegemony*

A second concerning element of standardized educational policy is the implicit reification of hegemonic cultural norms. Since the creation of testing regimes requires the regulation/standardization of curricular expectations, the current universalizing aims of educational policy in the United States raise powerful questions about who decides what knowledge is learned, under what context, and at what time; or perhaps more importantly what is
not required, or in some instances banned from classroom discussion. Indeed, Giroux and Schmidt (2004) posited policymakers were “developing standardized curricula that ignore cultural diversity by defining knowledge narrowly in terms of discrete skills and decontextualized bodies of information and ruthlessly expunging the language of ethics from the broader purpose of teaching and schooling” (p. 220). Recent events in the states of Arizona and Texas offer two clear examples of the usage of the mechanisms of school standardization to reinforce cultural hegemony.

Cooper (2010) reported that the Arizona state legislature voted to ban long standing ethnic studies classes in Arizona public schools. These long standing courses had offered a survey of various historical and cultural elements of Chican@ culture in the southwestern United States. Shortly after a United Nations expert on human rights condemned the legislative decision, a spokesperson for Arizona governor Jan Brewer explained “The governor believes … public school students should be taught to treat each other as individuals” (Cooper, 2010). Thus, many students that were now being racially profiled by other questionable actions the Arizona legislature had taken were banned from thinking of themselves as anything other than de-raced subjects in the state’s classroom.

A similar event recently transpired in the state of Texas when the State Board of Education voted to augment textbook and curriculum requirements for social studies education in secondary schools. Huus (2010) reported that the Texas State Board of Education chose to review state curriculum standards in order to “correct” what it described as “pro-islamic, anti-Christian” sentiments within social studies textbooks.

Thus, far from being a neutral conduit of information or curricular “facts,” both of these instances offer distinct examples of the utilization of state standardization in the service of
reification of cultural hegemony. In the former instance, removing discussions of Chican@
culture inside a state that has arguably sought to remove Chican@ bodies from its borders. In the
latter case, quite literally changing history to remove the valuable influence of Islamic culture,
while Muslim students are subjected to an increasingly Islamophobic society. Notably, both
instances have been championed under the supposedly neutral rhetorical tropes of “rigor,”
“standards,” and “accountability.” Thus, exemplifying a curricular manifestation of racial
neoliberalism.

I argue that both of these events elucidate clearly the cultural power of standardization of
curriculum across both the state and national level. hooks (1994, 2003) explained that often,
educational curriculum served as a key sight of reification for hegemonic culture, in which
cultural norms were retrenched not only in the minds of the members of majoritarian groups but
also within the collective cultural knowledge of disenfranchised groups as well. In both the cases
of Arizona and Texas, majoritarian groups have limited the broader classroom discussion away
from supposedly “over-privileged” rhetorics of diversity. This shifting (or “standardizing”) of
curricular content by hegemonic cultural groups has tangible effects on the students within
disenfranchised communities. Carbado (2002) noted that minority achievement in public schools
has failed to rise commensurate with the rhetoric of supposed educational reforms. Instead,
Carbado believed, public schools have developed into a sort of supposedly “colorblind”
meritocracy in which minority achievement is secondary to more standardized notions of
“accountability.” Such an understanding of “colorblind” meritocracy as merely a mechanism of
masking the state’s tools of cultural oppression is consistent with the broader implications of
neoliberalism as described by Goldberg (2009).
Pedagogical Implications

While many educators and activists in the United States have criticized NCLB, RTT, and the standardized paradigm as merely “bad policy,” the implications for pedagogical praxis are far greater. While standardizing of the educational experience is indeed “bad policy,” various scholars (Biesta, 2010; Fusarelli, 2008; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2008; Manna & Petrilli, 2008) have argued that regimes of standardization and accountability have created a new culture of teaching and learning predicated upon the ideas of “research” or “brain” based instruction. Within this context of research and teaching, mastery of pedagogy is measured by solely quantitative, social scientific research methodologies, and behavioralist understandings of both learner and teacher agency. Such reductions of the pedagogical art and experience are deleterious to the classroom experience for several reasons.

One of NCLB’s key provisions for state educational leaders was its edict to utilize “scientifically based” instructional methods in order to receive federal funding. The nature of this phrasing has created several implementation issues that mediate pedagogical choices available to classroom teachers. One of the unexpected outcomes of NCLB was the exponential increase in social scientific research pertaining to primary and secondary education. Thus, the paradigm of educational research shifted from more humanistic methodologies espoused by progressive educators toward strictly quantitative, social scientific methodologies. Goldhaber and Brewer (2008) explained that this rapid increase in a particular research agenda without a commensurate increase in academic oversight has led to a relatively methodologically weak overall body of research. That is, the creation of a system in which validation via “numbers” trumps all policy discourses to the contrary. In addition, Manna and Petrilli (2008) noted that although a large number of educational researchers have produced a plethora of social scientific research
pertaining to secondary education, policy makers have more often than not selectively picked out individual studies or cases that seem to support their political pre-dispositions. Furthermore, Fusarelli (2008) argued that an overall disconnect between educational researchers and classroom teachers has led to an even greater dithering down between research, policy creation, and classroom implementation. Thus, teachers find themselves at the end of a long and inefficient chain of pedagogical production centered on “science” and “research” that leaves few (often relatively poor) instructional choices for classroom engagement.

From a cultural standpoint, the standardizing of pedagogy has led to an understanding of terms like “poverty” and “diversity” that is lacking in nuance and reflexivity. Dunn and West (2008) reported that NCLB created an overly narrow methodology of “measuring” student excellence that will insolate policy makers in the future from litigation on the grounds of racial basis in funding. In addition, the authors noted that the scientizing of public pedagogy has created an overly narrow understanding of “difference” in the classroom.

The production and implementation of pseudo-scientific methods of education have had grave consequences for classroom teachers. Biesta (2010) noted that the rise of standardization as the dominant ideology behind public secondary education in the U.S. has led to the removal of deliberation, democracy, and difference from the tropes teachers are encouraged to deploy in the classroom. Additionally, Vinson et al. (2001) argued that the “authenticity” of the pedagogical experience was erased by educational standardization. Hursh (2001) echoed this claim by stating “in an effort to raise tests scores teachers are coerced to ‘teach toward the test’ resulting in simplified and degraded teaching and learning.” (para. 4). The result of these policies in the classroom is the general degradation of the ethos of teaching as a craft, and the dehumanization of the educator. Thus, within the standardized classroom:
Teachers are excluded from designing their own lessons and the pressure to achieve passing test scores often produces highly scripted and regimented forms of teaching. In this context, work sheets become a substitute for critical teaching and rote memorization takes the place of in-depth thinking. Behaviorism becomes the preferred model of pedagogy and substitutes a mind-numbing emphasis on methods and techniques over pedagogical practices that are critical, moral and political in substance. (Giroux and Schmidt, 2004, p. 222)

Disturbingly, this model of pedagogy has truly become normalized on the ontic level as public school students in the United States are educated via a framework of standardization year after year. The implications of this process are far reaching. As Titone and Duggan (2010) explained “many former students now looking to become teachers themselves know no other model of education,” thus, “the fact-peddling educational system itself creates its own future fact-peddlers,” who only know how to “value isolated facts over narratives,” and “attack problems as if they emerged in isolation” (p. 4). Thus, far from a mere policy regime, educational standardization can be understood as having far reaching implications upon pedagogical praxis. Therefore, though efforts to change current educational policies are justified, such macro-political aims ignore the ways in which the ideology of standardization has become normalized within pedagogical praxis.

Conclusions

Upon taking into consideration the highly problematic nature of the current public education system in the United States, how should educators respond pedagogically? Although some may suggest that the ethical action is to refuse to participate in a broken system, I disagree. Educators ought to search for meaningful ways of enacting generative pedagogy, regardless of
the horrid state of the bureaucratic system in which they are currently, temporally located. Similar to the ways in which various groups of individuals that have found themselves temporally located in less than ideal socio-political contexts have devised ways to both practically “get by” as well as resist the larger system they must nonetheless operate within (Scott, 1998), I argue that contemporary public educators in the United States ought to theorize and deploy meaningful pedagogical strategies that are tenable in the broader institutional framework of standardization. Indeed, Titone and Duggan (2010) believed “the answer lies in the hands of the teacher and his/her ability to take a critical and creative approach in the classroom” (p. 5).

In light of the faults presented by the paradigm of educator as technician/banker, alternative methodologies have been posited by both critical and progressive/pragmatic pedagogues. The next chapter discusses the important contributions as well as the shortcomings of both of these pedagogical schools of thought before outlining the theoretical and practical considerations that must be addressed by a pedagogy that is both workable, while at the same time minimally problematic within the above described educational context. Generally speaking, I believe that while both pedagogical traditions offer important theoretical and practical considerations, neither offers a theorization of praxis that meaningfully engages the pedagogical situation of the current secondary public educator in the United States. Although critical pedagogy theorizes an important, humanizing counterpoint to the totalizing, dehumanizing discourse of educational standardization, I contend that such theorizations, in and of themselves, fail to offer tenable praxis under a policy regime that removes teachers unwilling to quantify “success.” Conversely, while pragmatic theorizations of pedagogy offer important emphases on workability, such theories seem to lack the critical reflexivity that is necessary to confront
standardization in the classroom. In the next chapter, both of these trajectories of critique and reflection are extended, before discussing the necessity for a theorization of pedagogy that appropriately blends elements of both critical and pragmatic pedagogy, while also re-centering teaching in the public secondary classroom in the U.S. as a question of educational communication.
Chapter Notes

1 I theorize the notion of “democracy” in greater depth within chapter 4. However, for clarity I generally agree with Dewey’s (1927/1981) conceptualization of democracy as premised upon the notion of a “community” and not merely deliberation or voting so that “The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can not be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association” (p. 621). Thus, democracy might be succinctly defined for purposes of discussion within this text as “The idea of community itself” (Dewey, p. 623), and explained more broadly as:

   From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups. (Dewey, p. 623)

2 While I theorize the term “identity” at greater length in chapter 4, for clarification, I generally agree with Moya (2006) that terms such as “minority” and “disenfranchised” groups refer to “Ascriptive identities” (p. 97) that can evoke “very different associations in different places” (p. 99), but always “are invoked and mobilized by those in positions of relative power to justify day-to-day processes of social and economic inclusion and exclusion” (p. 97).

3 This idea may have been be best stated by the economist (and paragon of neoliberalism) Hayek (1978) who remarked “free choice is to be exercised more in the market place than in the ballot box”, because, “the first is indispensable for individual freedom while the second is not:
free choice can at least exist under a dictatorship that can limit itself but not under the
government of an unlimited democracy which cannot” (p. 15).

4 Both Rentschler (2006) and Howell (2008) discuss at some length the ways in which
NCLB and other such policies have become normalized to the point of becoming politically
insulated in two ways. First, politicians are able to avoid blame by pointing to failure of schools
to be “accountable.” Second, an industry of testing companies and research institutes has been
created that serve as a powerful political interest that can fund campaign war chests.

5 Rentschler (2006) explains that as the overall quality of education falls in urban areas,
private schools benefit in two ways. First, parents with the financial means choose to move their
children to private schools. Second, in many areas failing public schools grant un-affluent
families access to “voucher” schemes that re-direct public money to private schools.

6 Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) explain that one of the major pit falls of political
opposition to NCLB and similar policies has been the failure of opponents to craft a clear policy
alternative, particularly an alternative that can access the ideas of “reform” and “accountability”
in the same ways as standardization.

7 Hursh (2007) argues that NCLB and similar pieces of legislation are built upon a
broader value structure that is white and middle class in nature.

8 A prime example of this would be Ruby K. Payne’s A Framework for Understanding
Poverty (1996/2003), which includes a quiz for educators entitled “Could you survive in
poverty?” (pp. 53-54). Included in the 18 yes/no questions are “I can entertain my friends with
my personality and stories”, and,” I know how to get a gun, even if I have a police record.”
Payne’s book is taught in many basic pedagogy courses focusing on “difference” in the
classroom.
CHAPTER 3

CURRENT PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES AND LIMITATIONS

In response to the dehumanizing educational policies, Giroux (1985) claimed classroom teachers must “develop a discourse that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility” (p. 379). To this end, the present chapter explores existent theorizations of pedagogy from two distinct bodies of academic discourse: critical pedagogy and pragmatism. I argue that although both schools of pedagogical thought offer important insights to the secondary public educator in the United States, both also suffer from theoretical blind spots and issues of contextuality that preclude usage within this pedagogical situation.

Thus, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, critical pedagogy is discussed as well as critiqued by way of application to the presently considered educational framework. I argue that while critical pedagogy offers important points of theorization that must be included in any generative pedagogy, a philosophical counterpoint is needed to re-contextualize this theorization in a manner that is both generative and tenable. Next, pragmatic pedagogy and philosophy is discussed as a mediating perspective to critical pedagogy, as well as critiqued via a critical standpoint. I argue that from a blending of pragmatic discourse into critical reflexivity, a practical usage of critical pedagogy might emerge. Finally, several particular areas in need of re-theorization that a critical/pragmatic pedagogy must address are briefly delineated.

Critical Pedagogy

I contend that critical pedagogy is a central starting point for the construction of a comprehensive educational philosophical standpoint with which to mitigate the problematic effects of the present standardizing impulse of public secondary education in the United States.
However, such a strong emphasis on theorization and critique without pragmatic praxis offers little meaningful insight to current public secondary educators in the United States, with regards to their day-to-day pedagogical enactment. Though political activists can (and should) fight against current paradigms of educational standardization, teachers are necessarily bound up within the contemporary (failing) standardized framework. Thus, a pedagogy fixated upon the future utopia of the de-standardization of educational policy fails to offer pathways of meaningful praxis to individuals whose actions must be active in a classroom context that greatly mediates pedagogical choices. Therefore, although critical pedagogy offers important insights for educators, it generally fails as a truly workable alternative for public secondary teachers forced to act under the current educational paradigm of the U.S.

*Critical Pedagogy and Power*

Central to critical theorizations of pedagogy lies the critique of pedagogical power. Indeed, Simpson (2010) reported “Attention to the relationship of knowledge and power represents the most far-reaching and consequential theoretical component of critical pedagogy” (p. 372). Conversely, many secondary educational scholars operating within the current framework of standardized public education (Canter, 2001; Charles, 1999; Wong H. K. & Wong R. T., 2009) have argued that adequate classroom management is a pre-requisite to learner achievement in the secondary classroom. The term “classroom management,” however, is obviously a thin euphemism for what teachers and administrators really do: discipline. The actions described in the aforementioned texts include various active and passive “Behavioral Alteration Techniques” in the classroom, and bureaucratic methodologies such as in-school suspension, expulsion, and detentions. Thus, whenever a classroom is “managed,” the teacher is coercively regulating the behaviors of students. Students, described by Freire (1970/2010) as the
oppressed, are being told to stop behaving in a manner deemed inappropriate by teachers (the oppressors). If the students fail to meet behavioral guidelines, teachers often utilize more oppressive methodologies such as detention, harsh verbal reprimand, or other methods of coercive control. The positive role of bureaucratic behavioral constraints in a secondary classroom aiming to achieve the utopian goals of an emancipatory pedagogy seems upon first glance to be paradoxical with such a broader educational framework. Indeed, McLaren (1993) argued that destabilizing this normalized top-down hierarchy of power was a necessary first step before other, more nuanced elements of current educational practice might be addressed. Thus, the classroom, where “education is not carried out by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather by ‘A’ with ‘B’, mediated by the world” seems difficult to fully implement as a stand alone educational practice in the current public educational system (Freire, 1970/2010, p. 93).

Public educators might attempt to infuse their classroom with a shared ethic of love and co-creation of knowledge as described by hooks (1994), but the bureaucratic frameworks in which the individual educator finds her/himself oppressed under would stop such efforts through the usage of systemic discipline. Furthermore, while individual instances of epistemic co-creation, and non-coercive classroom management would certainly be positive from a pedagogical perspective, such actions would take place within a broader non-critical pedagogical context. Cooks (2010) observed that while individual teachers might attempt to implement critical pedagogy in their classroom, the students involved bring a constellation of power relations and behaviors that have been normalized via the broader educational system into the classroom every day. This pedagogical situation, attempting to critically engage students under a broader system of bureaucratic coercion, is not one that critical pedagogues tackle with any depth or specificity.¹ Freire (1978, 1994) did note that usage of some power was necessary when
critical pedagogues entered an educational location in which the students had been previously taught via a harmful pedagogy. However, such comments were fleeting and overwhelmed by whole treatises about the destructive functionality of power in the classroom.

While serving as the assumed starting point of most critical pedagogical theorization, Freire’s critique of pedagogical power is not without its detractors in the field of critical pedagogy. Kelly (1997) reported that this dualistic construction of power relations is over simplistic, and blind to other locations of socio-cultural domination. Thus, Kelly argued pedagogical power was better articulated via a feminist lens of desire mitigation, and learning understood as a form of pleasure. Ellsworth (1989) reported that far from being emancipating, critical pedagogy could serve as a barrier to meaningful praxis whenever the common tropes of dialogic action and empowerment became ends onto themselves. In so doing, Ellsworth argued, “key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy” became “repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 298). The author further argued that this logocentrism created a form of praxis in which teachers and researchers claimed to be committed to “a critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change” while at the same time choosing to “strip discussions of classroom practices of historical context and political position” (p. 300).

Although each of these scholars offer meaningful criticisms of Freireian pedagogy, none seem to offer clear alternatives that move beyond the level of anecdotal suggestion. Furthermore, each of these criticisms stem from enactment of critical pedagogy in the context of higher education, which offers a wholly different set of curricular and bureaucratic choices for the progressive educator. Indeed, even Ellsworth (1989) believed that critical teachers should
theorize “classroom practices that were context specific and seemed to be much more responsive to our own understandings of our social identities and situation” (p. 299)

Thus, the key question emerges, according to critical pedagogues: how should the emancipatory educator deal with the seemingly dead pedagogy of standardized secondary education in the United States? Freire (1978, 1998/2001) noted that part of engaging in critical pedagogy was rejecting the notion of “an” alternative. Furthermore, Camus claimed (1956/1991) that mere rejection of status quo politics and policies in and of itself reifies the problematic, meaningless *telos* such acts of rebellion seek to confront. Perhaps the closest analog to dealing with standardized education via a critical standpoint was offered in Freire’s (1978) dealings with the re-structuring of educational standards in Guinea-Bissau. During the revolutionary period of this African nation, Freire exchanged letters with revolutionary leaders, encouraging them to engage in the ongoing creation of their own pedagogical methodologies because such strategies would “be valid only to the degree that they are ‘reinvented’” (1978, p. 74). However, it is hard to extrapolate this advice to the current, non-revolutionary, comparatively affluent context of the United States. Furthermore, the other anecdotal examples given in the relevant literature tend to focus on the actions of educators engaging in critical pedagogy in the less standardized context of higher education. Thus, it is hard to conceptualize just what critical pedagogues would have the secondary educator operating in the dead bureaucracy *do* if such educators lack the authority to restructure the bureaucracy. If not complete rejection, does critical pedagogy merely call for educators to engage in an emancipatory pedagogy under a harmful system that will most likely punish the pupils for not learning in a bureaucratic fashion, and remove the educator for a failure to meet employer expectations? I contend that this critical reductionism of the role(s) of power in the classroom, and a failure to offer more specificity with regards to actions available to
educators in less than ideal pedagogical situations exemplify two key shortcomings in current critical analysis of the path educators should follow to create the critical classroom. A counterpoint to the Freireian construction of power, was offered by Foucault (1975/1995, 1978, 1981) that offers more nuance to both of these shortcomings.

First, Foucault (1975/1995, 1978, 1981) offered an understanding of power as problematic and omnipresent. Foucault reported, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1978, p. 93). However, Foucault clarified that he did not believe “that power is evil by nature” (1981, p. 8). This understanding seems both critical of and largely irreconcilable with the Freireian notion of power as merely constructed as a binary. While Freireians understand power as a directed social force from teacher onto student, Foucault’s conceptualization of power is more diffuse and nuanced. Thus, according to Jardine (2005), a Foucauldian might see that within a specific classroom power is influenced by social factors between students, between teacher and student, between teachers, between all of the individuals and the broader socio-political context of the community, and myriad other multi-directional assemblages.

Secondly, whereas Freire (1970/2010) believed that deleterious power relations might be abridged by engaging in epistemic co-creation, Foucault contended “In order to limit power, the rules are never sufficiently rigorous. In order to displace it from all the opportunities which it falls upon, universal principles are never strict enough” (1981, p. 8). In the face of such an understanding of power, Foucault proposed two quasi-political tactics of resistance and problematization that I believe are of note to the pedagogical situation. First, Foucault articulated the idea of the “specific intellectual” (1984, p. 72). The specific intellectual is an individual working within some context of truth production in a particular socio-historic context. Foucault
posited that such individuals ought to engage in “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (1984, p. 75). Secondly, Foucault (1981) argued that affiliating with movements against hegemonic power were important because “It is through revolt that subjectivity (not that of great men but that of whomever) introduces itself into history and gives it the breath of life” (1981, p. 8). The implications of such understandings of power and resistance with regards to the classroom teacher provide a powerful counterpoint to Freireian notions of epistemic co-creation.

Foucault and Freire acknowledged (albeit in very different ways) the need for a mediated form of progressive engagement, in which centralized power is utilized protectively and in the least problematic way possible. However, these thinkers offered a confusing and somewhat antithetical understanding of how such tactics might play out in real political and social action often premised on the utopian goal as opposed to the pragmatic steps necessary to bring such a utopia to fruition. Furthermore, such notions of pragmatic and/or judicial usage of power in the classroom seem largely un-reconcilable with critical pedagogy’s overarching explanations of critical classroom engagement. Therefore, I contend that although critical pedagogy offers an appropriate starting point and *telos* for the contemporary secondary public school teacher in the United States, such individuals must look elsewhere in order to assemble theoretically sound pedagogical tactics for their educational context.

_Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Hegemony_

The second important critique offered by critical pedagogy is the understanding of education as a conduit for the reification of majoritarian cultural hegemony and social domination of minority groups. Simpson (2010) reported that critical pedagogy “insists on an attentiveness to how taken-for-granted practices of oppression and exploitation can play out in
the classroom” (p. 373). Indeed, Freire (1975) claimed that de-linking the classroom from the dominant cultural tropes was a key first step to broader societal change. This was echoed by hooks (2003) who reported “segregated schools are becoming more the norm” (p. 67), thus “working to end educational racism in education is the only meaningful and lasting change that will benefit black students and all students” (p. 80). Giroux (2003) sharpened this critique by claiming that such mechanisms of hegemonic reification were clearly at work within the standardization movement reshaping public secondary schools in the United States. These theorists have argued that in order to combat the reification of cultural hegemony, teachers and students should make efforts to create open and safe discursive space in the classroom to engage in both expression of difference and co-creation of community.

Unfortunately, standardized test creators and school administrators seem unwilling to relax the constraints of standardization in order to open up a discursive space for critical cultural pedagogy. Thus while hooks (2003) described at length a positive alternative to a mere reification of majoritarian culture in the classroom, this alternative would be most harmful to those students most in need of liberation under the current educational framework. Certainly students of minority cultural roots should not be subject to strict cultural indoctrination, however, it should be clear that failure to prepare these students to achieve certain standardized benchmarks (tests that are diploma pre-requisites, college entrance exams, citizenship tests, etc.) would have very real effects on the ongoing socio-economic problems many of these students currently face.

The very real implications of this tension between pedagogical goals and current restrictions are clearly elucidated by the conservative educational writer Hirsch (1987). Hirsch claimed that the U.S. is in danger of slipping into a sort of economic and social degradation due
to what he termed “cultural illiteracy.” Hirsch posited that the ability of learners to decode texts was becoming more and more disparate due to a lack of certain pre-requisite cultural knowledge needed to understand works of literature. Even though Hirsch’s general back-to-basics pedagogical orientation is certainly not reconcilable with a critical pedagogical orientation, it seems that his focus on the importance of basic majoritarian cultural knowledge as a pre-requisite to further material and political success in one’s society offers an important consideration that must be dealt with when developing a critical educational curriculum. This is especially true when considering the importance placed upon standardized testing success with regard to higher education and later placement in positions of power in the existent social/political framework of the United States. So, while mere indoctrination of hegemonic cultural tropes is certainly problematic, a failure to ensure at the very least rote knowledge of such ideas can become a barrier in and of itself.

Critical Pedagogy and Communication

Of particular importance to this project are the ways in which critical pedagogical scholarship and communication studies scholarship continue to influence and shape, in multi-directional ways, theorization and praxis within each field. The critical pedagogy literature places a strong emphasis on the role of communication and language in the construction and problematization of both pedagogical power and cultural identity in the classroom. Indeed Freire (1970/2010), and hooks (1994) both indicate language and communication are key sites of the reification of hegemonic control inside of school spaces. Furthermore, Peters (1999) has investigated the role of communication as a particular problematic within western culture. Peters explained that shifting notions of specific ontologies of communication were at the center of various social, political, and philosophical discords.
However, more key to this project than the way in which critical pedagogical action and other progressive engagement can be seen as bound up within communicative constructs, are the various ways in which the discipline of communication studies has made use of critical pedagogy as a focal point for scholarship pertaining to communication education. For example, Cooks (2003) as well as Treinen and Warren (2001) have argued for a critical impetus in curriculum construction across the communication studies discipline. Such a curricular standpoint is in keeping with the general telos of both Freire (1998/2001) and hooks (2003). Additionally, other communication scholars have utilized critical pedagogy as a critical lens through which to interrogate the role of social forces in the construction of power dynamics in the communication studies classroom. For example, Fotsch (2008) has discussed the way(s) in which race influences the communication class and Prividera (2004) critiqued the way(s) in which gender might influence power dynamics inside such classrooms. Both of these trajectories of critique are logical extensions of the more generalized work of critical pedagogues.

The furthest extension of this ongoing interaction between communication studies and critical pedagogy is Fassett and Warren’s (2007, 2010) critical communication pedagogy (CCP). Fassett and Warren (2007) describe CCP as a critical pedagogy “somewhere in the nexus of the areas of overlapping interest” between the fields of communication education and instructional communication (p. 38). Simpson (2010) offered a slightly different articulation of the research agenda posited by CCP. CCP scholars, she explained, “offer rigorous attention to the ways in which communication is socially constructed, embrace the constitutive and embodied nature of all communication, and foreground the significance of human agency within particular contexts” (p. 361-362). Significantly, Fassett and Warren (2007) ground their pedagogy much more expressly in the critical study of communicative classroom practices than earlier critical
pedagogues. Thus, the authors claimed that pedagogical power can be understood as “fluid, omnipresent, and oft overlooked” because classroom identities are “complex, emergent, and relational” (p. 43). Fassett and Warren (2010) posited that communication education scholars have an obligation to not only enact critical performances of pedagogy in their school spaces, but also drive a commensurate research agenda. Simpson (2010) offered a distinct critique of the work of Fassett and Warren as unclear and perhaps problematic. Simpson reported that while the overarching goals of CCP as articulated by Fassett and Warren are certainly progressive and critical, this lack of specificity engenders a risk of deleterious usage and un-critical cooption.

Aside from the seminal work of Fassett and Warren, defining or describing CCP becomes difficult, as other CCP scholars have articulated contrary and differentiated research and teaching agendas. Some authors theorize explicitly under the banner of CCP, others do not. Two examples of critical pedagogical work within the confines of communication studies of additional note are the theorizations of CCP focusing on performative ontologies of racialization and power, and critical communicative pedagogy theorized in concert with service learning.

Simpson (2007, 2010) has insisted that CCP scholars should incorporate theoretical constructs of racialization and power derived from performative studies of whiteness (2007) and Critical Race Theory (2010). Simpson (2007) urged communication instructors to examine “how we perform our own racial agency and articulate our relationships to whiteness in the presence of our students” (p. 249). Thus, in order to gain the right sort of reflexive standpoint, Simpson argued that CCP scholars ought to examine their own performances of race, power, and other social constructs within pedagogical spaces. Furthermore, Simpson and Cooks (2007) explained that performatively centered understandings of critical pedagogy should focus on “the crucial importance of theoretical frameworks for understanding individuals, relationships, agency, and
change that take power and access into account and that center difference at interpersonal and structural levels” (p. 312). Thus, the authors implored communication instructors to adopt a critical attitude of self-reflexivity with regards to their usage of pedagogical power, as well as the way(s) in which socio-cultural constructs of identity come to play on these power relations. Of important note, although by no means Foucauldian, Simpson and Cooks (2007) offered a construction of pedagogical power that is more nuanced and grounded than the Freireian (1970/2010) binary of pedagogical power relations.

In addition to the way(s) in which CCP scholarship has extended notions of both identity and power in the communication classroom, CCP scholars have also pushed the boundaries of where the communication classroom can exist, and how far the critical cultural role of the communication education can be extended. Britt (2012) reported that “service learning” was being incorporated by a growing number of communication instructors into a broader theorization of CCP. While varying in scope and rationale, such incorporations of action and “activism” outside of the classroom are premised upon the notion of removing the barrier between critical engagement in the classroom and deployment of critical citizenship within one’s broader society. Indeed, Crabtree (1998) claimed “education, as well as our own scholarship, should not just be about possession of information, but about the use of knowledge” (p. 187).

While offering an important level of specificity to the broader work of Fassett and Warren, these performative and service based approaches to CCP suffer from a distinct deficit when applied to the pedagogical context addressed within the present project. Even though the previously discussed scholars offer important insight into the role of the academic in the higher education communication classroom, such a focus in and of itself leads to an over-contextualization of praxis that leaves little for the public secondary teacher in the United States.
While performative critiques of power and racialization offer an important theoretical counterpoint to the totalizing discourses of both standardization and critical pedagogy proper, Simpson and Cooks fail to offer a praxis based approach to the application of this theorization specifically applicable to secondary education in the U.S. Likewise, while the problematization of the line between the classroom and the broader world is of theoretical importance to public high school teachers, the praxis inferred from this theorization seems both unavailable to many such teachers, and antithetical to student achievement under a regime of testing and accountability.

*Toward a More Useful Critical Pedagogy*

Even though critical pedagogy serves as a clear starting point for humanizing classroom engagement, I argue that several important paradoxes can be seen across the varied corpus of critical pedagogical theorization. The disparate views critical pedagogues take on the issues of power and culture, as well as the ambivalent role of the communication studies discipline in relation to critical praxis, each have implications for the public secondary teacher in the United States.

An important paradox of power exists in the existent critical pedagogy literature. Although it seems that Freire (1978, 1994) makes a clear case for the necessity of some construct of power within the classroom and hooks (2003) certainly extends this notion, both theorists also paradoxically reject power usage as “proper” praxis. Furthermore, none of the critical theorists seem to explain in any sort of detail how a classroom educator might construct such a minimally problematic hierarchy of power within a broader hierarchical bureaucracy beyond stand-alone anecdotes, often situated in the context of higher education. Some semblance of useful praxis might be seen in Foucault’s (1981) argument that while power relations are omnipresent,
resistance to the acceptance of the most immediate and normalized sorts of power relationships is key to the overarching emancipatory project. Furthermore, I contend that Freire (1970/2010) lays clear the need for a concrete plan of action through which educators might engage in critical praxis. This blind spot of the necessary but problematic nature of power in the critical classroom is a weakness in the existent critical pedagogical literature that must be addressed.

Giroux (2003) and hooks (1994, 2003, 2010) offered the important components of cultural knowledge, reaffirmation of agency, and an understanding of the primacy of language in constituting and critiquing power structures to the broader framework of critical pedagogy. As is the case with Freire (1970/2010), these authors seem to offer a solid set of theoretical pedagogical considerations as well as a clear theoretical alternative. However, I believe that this alternative theorization, though perhaps helpful in certain educational situations, is not feasible under the organizational constraints of public secondary educational institutions in the United States. Without mediating critical pedagogy in some way(s), it seems that a descent into new forms of ethnocentrism, or some form of solipsistic relativism that would only serve to reify the power of majoritarian cultural groups might ensue.

Additionally, although communication studies scholars have embraced the nomenclature and telos of critical pedagogy, and offered more theoretical specificity with regards to both power and cultural identity, existent work in this field is unsuited for extension into the secondary classroom in the United States for several reasons. First, while an increasing number of authors are exploring the role of critical theory within communication education, Fassett and Warren (2010) noted a general lack of scholarship in the context of educational communication. The authors further noted that insofar as such scholarship existed, it tended to be grounded within the field of education rather than communication. Second, the relevant literature within
the field of communication studies tends to focus on the pedagogical setting of higher education, which varies in numerous ways from the presently interrogated school space. Thus, quite paradoxically the best reasoning for looking outside of this existent theorization comes from Simpson and Cooks (2007), who beseeched communication scholars “not for one theory that fits all contexts, but rather for theories that have practical consequences” (p. 312).

In order to achieve the end goals of critical pedagogy, educators teaching in the aforementioned pedagogical situations must augment the theoretical goals of critical pedagogy with the pragmatic application of more traditional and moderate educational and political theories. Thus, in order to offer the secondary public educator in the United States a tenable manifestation of engaged pedagogy, I argue that strains of critical pedagogy must be rearticulated via the framework of philosophical pragmatism.

A Mediating Perspective: Philosophical Pragmatism


All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are at one. (p. 455)

The notion of pragmatism as democratic praxis has been extended by various neo-pragmatist thinkers into the fields of philosophy (Rorty 1989/2007, 1998), educational theory (Biesta, 1994), communication history (Keith, 2007), rhetoric (Danisch, 2007), and communication theory (Russill, 2008). I contend that philosophical pragmatism offers a mediating standpoint
through which educators might deal with the paradoxical nature of existent critical pedagogical literature, as well as the obvious theoretical shortcomings of standardized educational constraints. However, I further argue that Deweyan pragmatism in and of itself also falls short of achieving the needs of such an educational situation due to a general lack of critical self-reflexivity and a tendency toward universalization of both values and truth.

**Pragmatic Pedagogy and Politics**

Dewey (1938/1998) offered a set of theoretical assumptions pertaining to education that prefigured many of the broader goals of the critical pedagogues. Much like the critical pedagogues that would follow him, Dewey contended that the pedagogical situation was least harmful whenever learning took place in a way that was authentic and provided meaningful epistemic experiences. However, Dewey also warned of many of the pitfalls that seem inherent in a classroom devoted to critical pedagogy in all temporal locations without question, while still criticizing the obvious shortcomings of what he termed “traditional” education.

Dewey (1938/1998) posited that although traditional education often over-used coercive force in order to discipline students, the alternative offered by progressive educators was not without its own flaws. Dewey further claimed that freedom in the classroom setting was not always a positive attribute because “There can be no greater mistake, however, than to treat freedom as an end in itself. It then tends to be destructive of the shared cooperative activities which are the normal source of order” (1938/1998, pp. 73-74). This seems to be consistent with Freire’s (1970/2010) discussion of the problems associated with action for action’s sake, devoid of theory. Instead of a rigid traditional educational structure, or the amorphous and pedagogically dangerous chaos sometimes created in the name of freedom, Dewey offered a view of structure that utilized legitimate usage of power, pragmatic assumptions of learner freedom, and a sort of
social contract construct with regards to classroom discipline. This distinction between power usage as either legitimate or illegitimate seems somewhat more nuanced than Foucault’s (2000) understanding of power relations as multifaceted and generative, and more practical than Freire’s (1970/2010) critique of pedagogical power as “a tendency to sadism” (p. 59).

Englund (2000) argued that pragmatism should be the starting point for any future curriculum reform, due to its emphasis on democratic notions of responsibility and community. This standpoint is consistent with Rorty’s (1998) argument that political progressives should utilize the democratic mechanisms of the state in order to create piecemeal reforms, leading toward a more progressively liberal state. According to Rorty, the contemporary notion of progressive thinkers abstaining from interaction with the state will in fact lead to traditionalist political groups re-entrenching their control over mechanisms of power. Furthermore, Rorty (1989/2007) discussed the necessity of mediating utopian goals with seemingly disparate actions, if such actions would further the utopian cause in the future. Thus, Rorty (1989/2007) stated that society ought to be “people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation” (p. 61). Therefore, neo-pragmatist politics would be based upon taking the most expedient actions, within a realistic understanding of the political environment, even if the mechanisms of the state might be flawed or seem antithetical to the end political goals.

The applicability of Rorty’s critique of ceding political mechanisms to traditionalists has obvious implications for the progressive educator. Whereas most critical pedagogues seem to embrace a sort of ground up revolutionary change, Rorty argued for a workable, piecemeal approach to reform. Furthermore, while Freireian theorists view pedagogical power as universally deleterious to classroom experience, pragmatic theorizations of power posit a type of
power enactment that is protective and judicious, serving to ensure the establishment of community standards for all.

**Critiques of Pragmatic Pedagogy and Politics**

Pragmatic pedagogy and politics have been critiqued from a variety of viewpoints. Of note to a discussion of pragmatism as pedagogy are the areas of social identity, and a tendency toward universalization.

The role of social identity within pragmatist thought is questionable. Eldrige (2004) offered a detailed account of Dewey’s stance on race and other meaningful social categories. Of note to the current discussion are several issues elucidated by the author. Eldrige argued convincingly that even though Dewey was a co-founder of the NAACP and often campaigned for other similar social causes, his personal correspondences were often littered with racist assumptions and phrases that were indicative of the common bigotry of the pre-civil rights era United States. Furthermore, Eldrige noted that Dewey often categorized social identities as essentially meaningless because they were created by society. Finally, the researcher reported that Dewey’s stance of discrimination and racism was predicated on treating them as cultural “habits” that could be simply un-learned via proper educational methodologies.

Rorty is somewhat more nuanced on the subject of social identity, but his theorization is not without pitfalls of its own. First, Rorty’s (1989/2007) overall epistemology is a contingent form of Wittgensteinian relativism which largely avoids any discussion of the “knowability” of categories like race, gender, or the like. Furthermore, Rorty (1998) contended that although various subjects he categorized as “cultural studies” have significantly increased the visibility and sensitivity to social difference with American society (pp. 80), such a focus has silenced what he views as the more “important” issues of social and economic policy (pp. 84). Finally,
similar to Dewey’s (1927/1981) call for progressive politics and pedagogy to strive for the “great community” (p. 643), Rorty (1989/2007) implored social actors to seek to create a new universalization of human subjectivity under the notion of “we liberals” (p. 198). However, Foucault (1984) criticized Rorty’s move toward universalism by arguing that such semantics presupposed negative outcomes.

**Toward Pragmatic Pragmatism**

I argue that Dewey’s (1938/1998) understanding of the necessary role of structure in an experiential learning environment and Rorty’s (1998) notion of pragmatic usage of hegemonic institutions is applicable to the construction of a minimally problematic philosophy of education under the current framework of educational standardization. While Freire (1970/2010) and hooks (1994) built a broad but solid theoretical lens through which to approach the practice of education, Dewey’s pragmatic usage of structure seems a prerequisite to creating the sort of classroom where dialogical action can take place. If learners do not feel safe to think critically, and engage in a co-creation of knowledge because the appropriate classroom climate has not been created via pragmatic structuring, it is highly unlikely that they will engage in emancipatory dialogue. Thus, in order to theorize a form of praxis that is both critically reflexive as well as practically tenable for the secondary public educator in the United States, neither critical pedagogy nor progressive pragmatism in and of themselves seem sufficient. Instead, such educators require a blending of the necessary components of each of these schools of educational theorization. Such a standpoint, I suppose, could be viewed as a pragmatic rearticulation of critical pedagogy, or a more critical strain of pragmatic thought. I would disagree with either of these claims. Instead, I believe that such a pedagogical stance, focused within the presently discussed pedagogical situation, takes on a character of its own. The following section will
discuss several key area of problematization that such a pedagogy of critical pragmatism must address, in light of the shortcomings of either tradition to sufficiently address the plight of the secondary public school teacher in the U.S.

Conclusions: Areas in Need of Address

In order to create the best pedagogical standpoint through which standardized educators might meaningfully engage in democratic, engaged, critical instructional communication, I claim that several areas must be considered further. In the present section I will briefly discuss each of these areas. A further discussion of these areas and theoretical alternatives that deal with each of these will be offered and theorized in chapter 4.

Culture and Identity

Although the aforementioned critical pedagogues and pragmatic thinkers have discussed the importance of considering the cultural identity of both teacher and student when constructing the most meaningful pedagogy, neither of these groups of thinkers have sufficiently theorized the basis under which social “identity” is to be understood. This blind spot has several important implications. Such theorizations of social identity become questionable in the face of two separate critiques of “identity” that have become commonplace in western culture and thought. First, a critique of focusing on “identity” as a politically important idea has been offered by neoliberal thinkers. For example, D’Souza (1991) believed that a focus on race, gender, and other socially meaningful categories within the sphere of education has led to an anti-educational academy. Conversely, Butler (1990) questioned the usefulness of static social categories when constructing emancipatory social movements. Thus, a pedagogy that seeks to be both minimally problematic while also necessarily pragmatic must address the need for a commensurate theorization of culture and identity that is both critically reflexive, and pragmatically useful.
Power and Agency

Simpson (2010) argued, “The relationship of agency and structure constitutes an additional area of concern related to knowledge and power” (p. 372). As previously noted, the existent pedagogical literature offers varied views of the nature, and role of power in the classroom. While Freire (1970/2010) seemed to view power as uni-directional, controllable, and knowable, Fassett and Warren (2007) ground their discussion of power in more Foucauldian terms. Dewey (1938/1998) and Rorty (1998) both seem to call for a judicious usage of power, but neither seem to delineate the degree to which those “in power” should exert such force (other than perhaps Rorty’s idea of “avoiding cruelty”). Furthermore, all of these authors, insofar as they discuss cultural power in the classroom, seem to focus on the broader cultural influences that exist outside of school spaces. This focus ignores the existence and influence of more situationally specific cultural influences within individual schools and classrooms, that may or may not be linked to broader cultural/class/gender relations.

These incongruent notions of power are complicated all the more by Foucault’s critique of the autonomous subject (1969/1972) and de-stabilization of notions of power as directional, knowable, or useable (1981, 2000). Perhaps a starting point might be a re-centering of judicial power usage within the context of Foucault’s “specific intellectual” (1984) or “revolutionary subjectivity” (1981), but even these ideas seem hard to reconcile with the overarching idea that power relations are “inherent in all social existence” (Foucault, 2000, p. 20).

Furthermore, West (1999) claimed that Foucault’s foreclosure of any form of agency in and of itself precludes democratic action. This notion of “democracy” as key to overcoming deleterious elements of contemporary society was cited by both Dewey (1927/1981) and Rorty
(1989/2007). Yet West (2004) seemed to theorize pragmatic democracy as a form of consensus building that differs from either of these earlier pragmatists.

Thus, an important area of consideration remains un-resolved in these disparate notions of power, agency, and democracy: how power relations between student and teacher, student and student, classroom and state, etc. may be understood, described, and utilized for (through some from of learner and educator agency) the creation of a critical notion of subjectivity toward democratic ends. Furthermore, even though Fassett and Warren (2007, 2010) begin the process of such theorization, their reliance on performative notions of agency are grounded solely within the realm of the communication classroom. Such a theorization of agency, power, and democracy must be re-considered within the context of the public, secondary, standardized classroom in the U.S.

*Truth and Knowledge*

Finally, I contend that theorization of a minimally problematic, tenable pedagogy in the previously discussed educational context requires a reconsideration of disparate views of basic epistemic assumptions. Both Freire (1978) and Foucault (1984) argued that truth is a relative construct influenced by hegemonic power structures. Conversely, Dewey (1938/1998) prescribed a form of contingent social constructivism while Rorty (1989/2007) endorsed a similarly tentative epistemic stance predicated upon usefulness of knowledge. These disparate epistemic assumptions are further complicated by Hirsch’s (1987) explanation of political and economic consequences of cultural illiteracy and the bureaucratic limits (discussed in chapter 2) of knowledge under the standardized paradigm of educational policy.
Thus, I contend that progressive educators within this specific pedagogical context require an epistemic standpoint that is both critically reflexive and consequentially aware. Such a re-theorization has implications for both learner engagement and curriculum scope and sequence.

Toward an Alternative

In order to re-theorize the pedagogical situation in a way that is meaningful to the secondary high school teacher in the U.S., each of the aforementioned areas in need of re-theorization will be addressed in the next chapter. In each case, care will be given to approach the elucidated theoretical juncture with both an eye toward meaningful, tenable action as well as critically reflexive theorization. In so doing, the next chapter will offer a rough framework of a pedagogy of critical pragmatism, applied to the presently considered pedagogical situation.
Chapter Notes

1 While Fassett and Warren (2007), Giroux and Giroux (2004), and hooks (1994, 2003, 2010) all discuss their experiences as critical educators at some length, these discussions are neither instructive in nature nor centered around the educational context of this project. While Wink (2010) focuses on the context of secondary public education, the interaction with critical pedagogy is focused on planning interactive lesson plans.

2 For examples, see the various chapters from part III of Fassett and Warren (Eds. 2010).

3 For examples, see the works referenced by Simpson (2010).
A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL PRAGMATISM

West (1998) posited that:

The tradition of pragmatism is in need of a mode of cultural criticism that keeps track of social misery, solicits and channels moral outrage to alleviate it and projects a future in which the potentialities of ordinary people flourish and flower. (p. 187)

This is perhaps no more true than in the context of public secondary education in the United States. Such teachers are offered many theoretical alternatives to doctrinaire standardization, yet as discussed in the previous chapter, all of these options leave something to be desired. After all, though pragmatic thinkers offer sweeping theorizations of the educational situation, “Such a noble liberalism assumes that vast disparities in resources, enormous polarizations in perceptions or intense conflicts of interests can be overcome by means of proper education and civil conversation” (West, 1998, p. 184). While West has undertaken such a project within the realm of philosophy, a similar methodology of theorization has yet to be applied within the realm of public secondary education within the U.S., or the discipline of communication studies. Thus, in this chapter I will articulate a re-theorization of pragmatism that “promotes a critical temper and democratic faith without making criticism a fetish or democracy an idol” (West, 1998, p. 186). To this end, the present chapter begins with a brief description of the pedagogical alternative theorized before applying this theorization of pedagogy to the particular areas in need of re-theorization discussed in chapter 3.
Axioms of Critical Pragmatism

In order to theorize and enact generative pedagogical possibilities in the face of the standardizing educational bureaucracy currently at play in the United States, I believe that a new alternative is necessary. I term this alternative pedagogy critical pragmatism. Critical pragmatism is critical in the sense that it is self-reflexive and skeptical, and pragmatic in the sense that it is focused on tangible, achievable outcomes. Much of what is outlined in the current discussion was pre-figured by various previous scholars, albeit within radically different disciplines and across various socio-historic experiences.

Critical pragmatism is critical

Critical pragmatism can be said to be “critical” in at least three important ways. First, consistent with hooks (1993, 2003, 2010) critical pragmatism understands that all forms of communication and education are necessarily bound up within hegemonic cultural forces that are problematic. Second, deriving from Freire (1970/2010) critical pragmatism is skeptical of the role of power in the pedagogical situation. Finally, generally consistent with Foucault (1984, 2000) critical pragmatism understands both power and culture to be diffuse constructs that are always present, and not easily delineated or controlled.

Critical pragmatism is pragmatic

Critical pragmatism is “pragmatic” in at least two ways. First, critical pragmatism uses as an overarching methodology of theorization the classical pragmatism of Pierce (1904/1997) and James (1907/1997) which holds as a key litmus test the actual, real effects of assuming any proposition to be true and/or useful. Second, critical pragmatism draws from Dewey (1888/1997, 1899/1981, 1927/1981, 1938/1998, 1939/1981) and Rorty (1989/2007, 1997) the notion that some uses of power, although potentially harmful, are useful to broader social projects.
Critical pragmatism is communicative

Finally, critical pragmatism is communicative. While both critical (hooks, 1994) and pragmatic (Dewey 1938/1998) theorists frame the educational situation as one bound up within discourse and communicative action, critical/pragmatic pedagogy should not be understood as simply related to communication, or about communication, it is in at least two meaningful ways a pedagogy of communicative action and theorization.

First, the framing of this project as a question of communication studies (as opposed to merely educational philosophy) is both deliberate and important. The framing of the question of how U.S. public secondary educators can engage in meaningful, minimally problematic pedagogy under a framework of standardization as a question of communication scholarship is in response to the lack of scholarship produced by the discipline pertaining to this particular communicative forum. As discussed in chapter 3, critical communication pedagogy scholars tend to ignore this unique (yet important) school space in favor of discussions of either communication courses, or merely limiting their discussion to higher education.

Fleury (2005) argued that communication scholars had done a disservice to educational communication by relegating non-communication courses to the scope of Communication In the Disciplines scholarship. Fleury reported that such a standpoint relegated particular communicative problems in these courses to instances of discipline specific communication, that in effect removed them from the constellation of pedagogical issues communication scholars should take up as viable research questions. Fleury claimed that instead, infusing disciplines with the wealth of experience communication scholars continually produce was necessary to ensure that all classrooms offer “preparation for citizenship, for communication beyond the curriculum”
Similarly, I argue that critical/pragmatic pedagogues ought to take theorization of communication seriously as a particular manifestation of their pedagogy.

Additionally, critical pragmatism can be understood as a pedagogy of ongoing intrapersonal communicative action. Since critical/pragmatic pedagogy is premised upon an unavoidable tension between the teacher’s desire to be both necessarily critical yet at the same time purposefully pragmatic, critical pragmatism is a theorization of pedagogy that avoids static standpoints or answers and remains tentative, like an open question in a discussion, as opposed to definitive, like an argumentative stance in a formal debate (Keith, 2007). Thus, the critical/pragmatic educator must constantly ask reflective questions that stem from two lines of inquiry. First, the teacher must ask, “Am I being properly critical within my pedagogy?” Second, “is my pedagogy necessarily pragmatic in nature?” However, this process of reflecting upon one’s mode and manner of teaching is not to be understood as an event, but instead as a general ongoing method through which pedagogical decisions are continually reached and later reflexively evaluated. So that, for example, curricular decisions become driven by the implicit weighing of “Have I considered the ways in which this lesson is bound up within hegemonic, normative articulations of truth?” versus, “Am I ensuring that all of my students will be able to demonstrate mastery at the end of this term on the requisite standardized instrument of examination?” Such a theorization of the pedagogical situation is not to be understood as dogmatic, but instead as both dialogic (in the Freireian sense) and experimental (in the Deweyan sense). While some general theoretical trajectories can be derived from the present discussion, critical pragmatism should be understood as situationally flexible with regards to both theorization and praxis. After all, both a critical engagement in the classroom and a pragmatic
stance toward learner outcomes require a great deal of situationally distinct theorization and implementation.

In the remaining portion of this chapter I offer (for illustrative purposes) the manner in which the aforedescribed theorization of pedagogy might be applied to the specific deficiencies of existent pedagogical theorization discussed in chapter 3, within the context of the U.S. public secondary classroom. First, a critical/pragmatic theorization of culture identity is offered. Next, the role of power and agency in the critical/pragmatic classroom is discussed. Finally, a general epistemic standpoint for the critical/pragmatic educator is elucidated.

**Culture and Identity**

I contend that in order to engage in what hooks (2010) termed the decolonization of the academy, critical/pragmatic educators require a theorization of culture, identity, and difference that is both grounded within the real, day-to-day lived experiences of both the students and the teacher within the broader community. Additionally, this theorization must be critical of the power relations and social structures such assumptions about culture and identity are predicated upon. Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) offered such an alternative theorization of cultural identity as both grounded in social reality, and self-reflexively critical of the mechanisms of socio-cultural life that reify such understandings of reality. The authors termed their theorization of identity as “realism.”

Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) posited that the realist interpretation of identity was responsive to contemporary discourse about social difference, one in which:

Identity-based liberation movements and their politically active constituencies, which include ethnic and racial groups, women’s groups, gay and lesbian groups, and disability groups, have come under sustained attack by people on both the Left and Right of the
Within the classroom, Moya (2006) delineated between two types of identity formation. According to Moya, ascriptive identity could be described as “social categories” which are “inescapably historical and collective, and generally operate through the logic of visibility” (p. 97), while subjective identity could be described as “our individual sense of self, our interior existence, or lived experience of being a more-or-less coherent self across time” (p. 98). Thus, even though dialectic and discursive action in the classroom space might generate or mitigate the re-articulation of subjective identity, many socio-historic elements of broader culture and society act upon the learner-agent both during and outside of the school day to re-ascribe and re-delineate ascriptive identity. Moya (2006) further argued that realists theorized “ascriptive and subjective identities as always in dynamic relationship with each other,” so that, “people are neither wholly determined by the social categories through which we are recognized, nor can we ever be free of them” (p. 99). Such a theorization of identity differs sharply from both essentialism in which “the relationship between the ascriptive and the subjective is one of absolute identity” and idealism in which “there is no stable or discoverable relationship between the ascriptive and subjective” (Moya, 2006, p. 96).

Realism, as articulated by the aforementioned authors, offers an important counter point to both the pragmatic and critical understandings of pedagogical identity. Dewey (1939/1981) articulated an understanding of cultural identity that might be best described as pathological essentialism. Dewey believed that certain “cultures” were preferable to others in so far as the cultural upbringing of a child could influence future decision-making and learning. Conversely, Rorty (1989/2007) rejected the importance of cultural identity and other significant social
categories in favor of a form of idealism. Rorty argued for a process of expanding and universalizing the supposedly inclusive category of “liberals” to subsume other politically progressive movements previously articulated along socio-cultural trajectories. Both of these reductions of identity to single variables are problematized by Freire’s (1998/2001) argument that dominant culture (and, one could assume, its assumptions pertaining to identity production) is reproduced in the classroom, and hooks’ (2010) claim that the classroom should be utilized as a unique space for emancipatory identity re-articulation. Thus, the realist notion of identity allows the critical/pragmatic educator a means of theorizing culture and social difference that both accepts the broader non-pedagogical factors that ascribe identity while at the same time refusing to foreclose a possibility of pedagogy as a means of creating spaces for the re-assertion and re-articulation of subjectivity.

Such a theorization of identity is of special importance within the confines of the standardized classroom. McNeil (2000) claimed that in addition to the ways in which educational standardization has had deleterious effects on minority communities, regimes of standardization also create and reify “fixed” social categories of both race and gender. Indeed, every student subjected to regimes of standardized testing are continually asked to “bubble in” their social identity on a biographical data sheet prior to taking any standardized exam. Thus, regardless of how social difference might be articulated in the individual classroom, students and their teachers will be categorized via a narrow taxonomy, and judged accordingly.

*Culture, Identity, and Epistemology*

Various theorists (Castells, 1997; Harding, 2006; Moya, 2006) have argued that while ascribed social identities are often utilized by hegemonic cultural actors as a means of social control, far from abandoning such identities, traditionally disenfranchised groups ought to utilize
these identities as a specific epistemic location. Harding (2006) theorized that progressive social projects required a multitude of disparate and socio-culturally distinct epistemic standpoints in order to critique the assumed universalism of hegemonic constructions of “truth.” According to Harding, disenfranchised social groups should “understand that the distinctive kinds of knowledge that they themselves can produce are made possible by the particular forms of their oppression” so that they may “‘study up’ to identify the particular concepts and practices through which their distinctive forms of oppression are enacted and maintained” (p. 258).

Consistent with this standpoint, I believe that a critical/pragmatic pedagogy must accept the inevitability of social processes of identity ascription while at the same time actively searching for meaningful ways to enact both student and teacher identity as epistemic resources. To this end, education should be viewed as a collaborative and communicative process in which social identity is identified, interrogated, and most importantly re-negotiated as an epistemic resource. This pragmatic application of realist notions of identity is consistent with both critical and pragmatic projects of pedagogy and epistemology. According to Freire (1998/2001) critical re-assertion of identity whenever students and teachers have lost “our right ‘to be’ is the kind of knowledge that becomes solidarity, becomes a ‘being with’” (p. 72). Furthermore, realist understandings of identity as epistemic are consistent with James’ (1907/1997) pragmatic construction of truth which asks, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life?” (p. 113).

Culture, Identity, and Critical/Pragmatic Action

Finally, the usage of a realist theorization of identity in a critical/pragmatic pedagogy is necessary to critical classroom engagement toward pragmatic socio-political goals. Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) explained that a realist theorization of identity asserts “identities are politically
relevant, an irrefutable fact” so that individual and group identities become a “nodal point by which political structures are played out, mobilized, reinforced, and sometimes challenged” (p. 7). Consistent with Peirce’s (1904/1997) explanation of the pragmatist’s need “to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences” of “the affirmation or denial of the concept,” critical/pragmatic educators ought to utilize the realist theorization of social identity in order to equip both student and teacher with the necessary critical grounding to engage in collaborative critical cultural work (p. 56).

Moya (2006) extended the notion of identity engagement as necessary to political action squarely into the specific location of the classroom. Moya (2006) explained, “To the extent that we are genuinely interested in educating for a just and democratic society, then, we will recognize the salience of identities in the classroom” (p. 96). Thus, consistent with Freire’s (1998/2001) call to utilize pedagogy as a transformative social act and James’ (1907/1997) method of judging the merits of theory on its ability to accomplish tangible, meaningful outcomes, it becomes clear that a realist theorization of identity as described above is a necessary element of critical/pragmatic pedagogy.

Perhaps even more central to an overall theorization of pedagogy as a both critical and pragmatic communicative act is the paradoxical role of both power and agency in the classroom. Although socio-cultural identities may be helpful epistemic points of departure, creation and mitigation of identity in the classroom certainly seems contingent upon creation and re-articulation of power relationships and individual agency within such a classroom.

Power and Agency

As noted in chapter 3, an important tension exists between the disparate theorizations of power across the existent critical and pragmatic pedagogical literature. Freire (1970/2010) built
his theorization of critical pedagogy upon a notion of power that assumed uni-directionality, and the general belief that pedagogical power was necessarily anti-humanizing in nature. Conversely, Dewey (1938/1998) and Rorty (1998) both argued that some usage of power and antecedent structures was necessary when attempting to achieve utopian goals, both in pedagogy and politics. Both of these standpoints toward power are problematized by Foucault’s (1981, 1984, 2000) argument that power is omnipresent and elusive. However, the Foucauldian critique of power also implies the foreclosure of certain types of social agency. West (1999) posited that removal of agency from the emancipatory project was questionable, specifically with regards to the theorization of social action by minority groups.

I argue that some theorization of agency is necessary to construct a meaningfully critical pedagogy within the context of standardization. The need for historically disenfranchised groups (Sanchez, 2006) and individual students (Moya, 2006) to exert some degree of agency with regard to the creation of social identity has been discussed by various scholars within the context of identity politics. Furthermore, both critical (Rice & Vastola, 2011) and pragmatic (Vinson et al., 2001) educational theorists have discussed the need for teachers to find ways wherein they might re-assert pedagogical agency in the face of standardizing educational policies. Finally, Fassett and Warren (2007) argued that communicative educators must utilize some notion of agency within their pedagogy. The following section offers a critical/pragmatic theorization of power and agency in the presently discussed pedagogical situation.

**Critical/Pragmatic Pedagogical Power and Agency**

I contend that a meaningful solution to the question of pedagogical power and agency can be offered via a pragmatist methodology. While both Freire and Foucault frame their discussion of power and agency via the normative questions of “what” is power or “how” does power
operate within specific locations, pragmatic theorists instead look to the way(s) in which these competing assumptions of truth either enable or foreclose the likelihood of achieving the best possible outcomes. However, merely examining the outcomes of theorization of power does not in and of itself offer an alternative articulation of power usage. Dewey (1888/1997) seems to have pre-figured this in discussing on what grounds a society can justify the importance of democracy as a social good. In this manner, Dewey not only frames the question of power away from the descriptive questions of “what?” and “how?” in favor of the proscriptive question of “can?” but also includes the important critical reflection of “on what grounds?” I argue that this analysis of democracy by Dewey offers the best workable alternative to both Freire and Foucault when imported into the classroom setting.

Dewey (1888/1997) claimed that in all social situations in which groups of social actors have been labeled as “rulers” and “ruled” some instability and conflict will exist: “Unless there is complete despotism or stagnation, there is constant clashing of the two wills contained and constant clashing of the two wills continued, and a constant shifting of power. There is a condition of unstable equilibrium” (p. 194). In the same way, the pedagogical situation bound up within the framework of standardization always necessarily rests upon an instability of power and desire between student and teacher. Additionally, Dewey (1888/1997) claimed that creation of judicious power relations should be viewed within a specific and ongoing socio-historic context, which (consistent with Foucault) are uncontrollable and inescapable. Dewey (1888/1997) rejected the notion that “a constitution could be made ad hoc, and established on a tabula rasa of past history” (p. 195). Instead, Dewey (1888/1997) claimed:

A government springs from a vast mass of sentiments, many vague; some defined, of instincts, of aspirations, of ideas, of hopes and fears, of purposes. It is their reflex and
their incorporation; their projection and outgrowth. Without this basis, it is worth nothing. A gust of prejudice, a blow of despotism, and it falls like a card house. To say that democracy is only a form of government is like saying that home is more or less geometrical arrangement of bricks and mortar; that the church is a building with pews, pulpit and spire. It is true; they certainly are so much. But it is false; they are so infinitely more. Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of an historic past, the consciousness of a living present, the ideal of the coming future. (pp. 195-196)

Seen in this way, a move toward more democratic notions of power could be said to both accept the historic basis of non-judicious power relations that inform present assemblages of authority, yet at the same time striving to find tenable ways of re-articulating these relationships into a more democratic reality.

With regard to the question of agency, Dewey (1888/1997) rejects both the neo-liberal atomization of the individual as well as the Foucauldian foreclosure of any form of individualism. Instead, Dewey (1888/1997) argued that society is best understood not as the bringing together of “non-social atoms” but instead an always already existent “social organism” (p. 186). In this way, individual actors only gain agency whenever they act within the construct of the community. Thus, Dewey (1888/1997) concluded democratic action could be regarded as “not loss of selfhood or personality” but “its realization” so that “The individual is not sacrificed” but instead “brought to reality” (p. 197). The notion that agency might be predicated upon social interaction is consistent with the pedagogical insights offered by Simpson and Cooks (2007). The authors believed that performative understandings of pedagogical power “foregrounds relationships and the social rather than an individual-social model” (p. 307).
This understanding of agency as dependent upon social-democratic action works well in the construct of the classroom. Certainly a teacher has no pedagogical agency in a metaphorical vacuum. It is only in concert with (not merely in the presence of) students that a teacher could be said to be teaching. Conversely, a collection of students is nothing more than a social aggregate of teenagers until communicative engagement with a teacher has begun. Thus, pedagogical agency can be theorized in this way as collaboratively mediated actions that take place with students and necessarily bound up in existent power structures. However, this understanding of pedagogical power and agency in no way forecloses the importance of individual volition of teachers, but instead argues that full membership within the micro-social location of the classroom is a necessary pre-condition for such assertion of agency to have any true meaning or purpose.

*Enacting a Critical/Pragmatic Theorization of Pedagogical Power and Agency*

Extending the insights offered by Foucault discussed earlier in this text, power is always already existent in the classroom setting prior to any action being taken by the teacher. Such relations of power in the classroom are created and reified by social relationships outside of the school within the broader society, as well as in the specific relationships that exist only inside of the specific classroom space. Insofar as these relationships of power continually “flow” through the social space, the role of the teacher might be best understood as creating dams, aqueducts, and levees around which the inaction of these power relationships might be re-directed, re-collected, and re-apportioned in the least problematic, seemingly most judicious ways. While doing so however, the pragmatic critical pedagogue understands that her/his predictive ability is limited and any claims of effectual certainty are at best merely probable. Thus, the role of the teacher becomes more democratic and less autocratic through the introduction of the construct of
fallibility with regard to utilization of pedagogical power. By this I mean that the teacher should communicate to her/his students a standpoint of doing her/his best to create a system of managing power relations in a way that is seemingly the best approximation of equity and fairness to all groups of individuals, yet at the same time remaining open to the notion that mistakes will be made in such efforts. Furthermore, insofar as the student/teacher relationship remains open with regards to dialogic action, students as both individuals and self-identifying groups of individuals have a right to communicate, through situationally appropriate channels, grievances they may have with regards to way(s) in which power relations are being managed. When such situations occur, a sort of meta-dialogical action should take place in which contrary articulations of judiciousness are discussed with both teacher and student having equal standing in the conversation until some at least contingent point of agreement might be reached.

In this way, the critical/pragmatic educator and student are both able to enact some construct of agency, while at the same time operating within the bounds of power relations that are always acting upon them in ways that they may not know/be able to amend. Specific examples of such a method of classroom management will be offered in chapter 5.

Truth and Knowledge

As stated in chapter 3, existent theorizations of truth and knowledge fail to offer a meaningful standpoint for the critical/pragmatic education. While Freire (1978) and Foucault (1984) both offer important criticisms of the role of power structures in delineating truth, and Dewey (1938/1998) and Rorty (1989/2007) offer some insights into useful epistemic theorization, all of these articulations of truth and knowledge on their own fail to offer meaningful ways to infuse critical/pragmatic praxis with a strong epistemic basis. After all, as West posited (1998), “The fetishization of criticism yields a sophisticated ironic consciousness
of parody and paralysis, just as the idolization of democracy produces mob rule” (p. 186). Thus, when searching for meaningful theorization of action within the structures of the neo-liberal state (in this case the public secondary classroom) progressive actors require a view of pragmatism that “neither downplays nor devalues education and conversation; it simply highlights the structural background conditions of pedagogical efforts and dialogical events” (West, 1998, p. 185). In the present section, I will offer such an articulation of epistemology.

First, a clarification of the scope of this question of epistemology is necessary. Even though the broader epistemic questions dealt with in this thesis could be applied to the entirety of the human experience, and certainly these epistemic questions could arguably both undergird and subsume epistemic considerations within specific classrooms, that is not the question this portion of the present project seeks to address. This omission of broader epistemic considerations is both deliberate and justifiable. If a proper epistemic stance can be crafted in the classroom, the pragmatic question would be: do universal epistemic questions about situations outside of the classroom have any importance? I believe they do not. Regardless of what proposition one were to make with regard to the nature of truth in the broader world, test-makers will still assume that truth is knowable, and the classroom space will still exist against an epistemic backdrop of knowability. Thus, the question posed here instead is: how may the previously discussed epistemic incongruence within existent theorization be utilized, modified, and extended in a way that leads to knowledge and truth being understood and discussed in the presently considered educational situation in such a way that is both minimally problematic, yet at the same time necessarily pragmatic?

Generally speaking, I claim that there are two distinct epistemic resources at work in the classroom. First, the classroom and the pedagogical actions that take place inside of it are
regulated and structured by the epistemic framework of standardization.¹ Within this bureaucratically regulated framework, a knowable corpus of “truth” is defined and reified via the requisite instruments of measuring both learner and teacher excellence that the standardization paradigm is premised upon (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). Conversely, there also exists within the classroom space the more diffuse epistemic resources of the students’ lived experiences and the standpoint of the teacher. The key question then is not to “decide” which of these competing epistemologies is preferable; after all, both epistemic trajectories will exist and influence one another regardless of how much they might be ignored. But instead, we ought to ask how might a situationally specific, tentative epistemology be discussed that makes use of both the lived experience of learner and teacher, as well as the regulated truths of standardized curriculum? I argue that critical/pragmatic educators can construct such an epistemic standpoint in the U.S. public, secondary classroom by utilizing and extending Dewey’s (1906/1981, 1938/1998) notion of experimentalism as well as Rorty’s (1989/2007) concept of ironism.

Deweyan Experimentalism

Dewey (1938/1998) offered an articulation of pedagogical truth that viewed facts as knowledge as important only in so far as they interacted with real, lived experiences of students. According to Dewey (1906/1981), “truth is an experienced relation of things, and it has no meaning outside of such relation” (p. 185). Dewey termed this epistemology “experimentalism.” Far from a sort of rigid objectivism that this term might imply, Dewey’s articulation of epistemology was experimental in nature in that it urged students should “try out,” or test facts and truths for themselves. This process of engaging with facts instead of ingesting rote information is strikingly similar to Freire’s (1970/2010) discussion of humanizing pedagogy.
According to Dewey, the implications of experimentalism were twofold. First, through usage and engagement with truth claims, such facts are given the valuative quality of meaning. Second, Dewey posited experimentalism as a loose form of social constructivism so that the learner does not become a member of the community by merely accepting facts as true, but instead by engaging in authentic, lived experience with such truth claims, and through dialogic action, becoming a member of the social organism of the community. Such an articulation of epistemic principles was not merely a question of philosophy to Dewey, but instead a key element of appropriate political action. Dewey (1916/1997) explained, “since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another” (p. 218).

I contend that this standpoint of experimentalism is key to engaging in critical/pragmatic action within the secondary public classroom in the United States. Through an experimental standpoint, educators can teach a set corpus of facts as mandated by standardized curricular principles, while at the same time allowing students to assign their own unique valuative judgments to such articulations of knowledge. In so doing, truth claims such as “the importance of various economic philosophers including Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, John Maynard Keynes, and Adam Smith and their impact on the U.S. free enterprise system” become propositions for testing, discussing, and often disagreeing instead of monolithic truths that are to be merely memorized and later regurgitated (Texas Educational Agency, p. 75). However, the question could certainly be raised as to how curricular goals could be treated as tentative, testable propositions of fact, while at the same time ensuring that students do retain the requisite assumptions of fact necessary to achieve satisfactory progress with regard to standardized testing.
scores? In order to accomplish this, the critical/pragmatic teacher should turn to Rorty’s (1989/2007) concept of epistemic ironism.

Rorty’s Ironism

Rorty (1989/2007) argued for a sort of anti-foundationalist episteme in which all claims of both universal and standpoint specific truth should be held suspect. However, Rorty also reported that there might be instances in which it would be helpful for liberal intellectuals to publically act as if certain propositions of truth and/or value were universally true, while privately reserving some doubts. For example, while liberal thinkers might privately be skeptical of universal conceptions of “good,” a public endorsement of certain constructs such as civil rights might be worthwhile in order to advance politics in a way that ultimately achieves the end goals of liberal politics. According to Rorty, individuals need not believe that truth and value claims are universally applicable, merely useful in a particular socio-historic location. Bacon (2005) argued that this ironic stance toward truth was the proper politics for intellectuals to undertake in and era of postmodernism. Conversely, Cleveland (1995) claimed that such a stance toward political and social truth would lead to a sort of neo-fascism in which progressives endorse heinous political ideologies in their politics, while privately distancing from such notions.

My usage of Rorty’s ironic epistemic stance in this instance is slightly different than the manner described above. While the usage of ironism in politics is certainly questionable, this sort of tentative epistemic endorsement fits well within the confines of the standardized classroom. After all, universal notions of truth always already exist in the standardized school space. Before, and regardless of, critical pedagogical action, fixed notions of knowable truth have been legally created and regulated via testing regimes. Thus, I contend an ironic standpoint toward the
standardized curriculum might allow for students and teachers within the presently discussed educational setting to “succeed” under the narrowly defined limits of regimes of testing and accountability without acquiescing epistemologically.

The term “teaching to the test” has become a common phrase used to express discontent with perceived epistemic limits placed upon teachers by regimes of educational standardization. The common assumption is that curricular goals and standards require teachers to openly approach such truth claims as objective truth that should not be questioned, as well as an epistemic line past which classrooms should not cross. However, this is a misguided premise which assumes the only possible alternative would be to teach against the test, that is to say engage in learning without any pre-conceived notions of fact or curriculum, perhaps somewhat similar to Freire’s (1970/201) dialogic classroom. Instead, I claim that a third option is possible: teaching past the test. By this I mean that teachers should teach “test facts” which are explicitly understood to be true within the confines of standardized testing, but which within the classroom are merely propositions which are up for negotiation, debate, and experimentation. Thus, teachers and students take an ironic stance toward truth. While publically (during standardized testing) students affirm the closed set of test facts, privately (in the actual classroom, in broader society, etc.) students see these regulated truth claims as merely a particular claim to truth created by hegemonic power structures, open to debate. I contend that by relegating the epistemic reach of standardization to merely the testing situation, the dehumanizing nature of standardization is removed from the classroom proper, while still allowing students to achieve the testing “success” necessary to achieve further educational and social goals on their way to becoming critically engaged citizens.
Conclusions

I argue that the theorizations of culture and identity, agency and power, and truth and knowledge offer a theoretical framework through which secondary public educators in the United States might engage in pedagogy that is authentic, meaningful, minimally problematic, and properly pragmatic. However, as noted previously, mere theorization of pedagogy is insufficient. Teachers must teach. Therefore, they must find ways to engage in praxis in order to achieve their theoretical goals. To this end, chapter 5 will offer a specific, particular narrative of the way(s) in which a critical/pragmatic pedagogy might be enacted in the presently discussed educational context.
Chapter Notes

1 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of neo-liberalism, educational standardization, and the regulation of truth.
CHAPTER 5

TEACHING PAST THE TEST

When I began actively engaging critical scholarship, I often felt helpless in my “day job” as an educator. As Pelias (2000) described, “You speak from your white, middle class, male body. You speak from the academy, perpetuating its logic, its standards, perpetuating the system” (p. 228). As a communication scholar working in the public secondary classroom, I too felt as though I was aware of the harmful nature of the “knowledge” and “standards” that I doled out daily, yet felt so bound up within, so implicated by that I struggled to find a way around their grasp. I found some solace in the words of Dewey (1938/1998), but so much of his theorization seemed antiquated, too pragmatic, too focused on action for its own sake.

It was from this paralysis of praxis that the present project began, searching for my role as a communication scholar, as a critical educator, while remaining true to myself. But more than that, searching for a way to name, to describe, to theorize, and to justify what I was doing day-to-day that worked, that I saw making a difference. It is perhaps fitting then, that this project ends with a recounting of my lived experience as a public secondary teacher in the United States. As a means of offering a grounded example of the pedagogical standpoint elucidated in the preceding chapter, I conclude this project with an autoethnographic telling of my own experiences, enacting a pedagogy of critical pragmatism.

Method

In order to recount my experience with a particular deployment of critical/pragmatic pedagogy, I make use of the method of autoethnography. As utilized by Pelias (2000), autoethnography involves engaging research questions via the recounting of lived, personal...
experience. According to Denzin (1997), autoethnography requires the ethnographer to turn “the ethnographic gaze inward on the self,” while continually “looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur” (p. 227). Elias and Bochner (2000) explained this method is particularly well suited for engaging areas of inquiry that require lived, experienced, standpoint specific epistemic resources to meaningfully engage. Additionally, Orbe et al. (2007) explained that autoethnography was uniquely well suited for engaging research questions pertaining to critical pedagogy.

Consistent with the recommendations of Pelias (2005), my autoethnographic account is a subjective account of “lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life” (p. 418). However, unlike other utilizations of autoethnography, my usage here does not seek to establish a subjective truth, or critique any other discrete epistemic claims, but instead offers an example of how the aforedescribed theorization of pedagogical praxis has worked in a specific, subjective experience. This pragmatic usage of autoethnography is meant to offer a subjective account of a way in which such a pedagogy might be successfully deployed and engaged.

Therefore, what follows is an autoethnographic account of my particular experiences in deploying a pedagogy of critical pragmatism. Though I argue that this narrative offers an example of praxis driven by the previously elucidated theorization of pedagogy, it should not be confused for an attempt at offering a universal exemplar. Indeed, such an effort would be both anti-critical and un-pragmatic. Instead, my story sketches out one way that a particular secondary public educator in the United States found pathways to engage in critical/pragmatic education under the overarching regime of standardization. Furthermore, this autoethnographic account of my own pedagogical experiences should not be read as instructive of how such a pedagogy ought to be approached, but instead as descriptive of ways in which this pedagogical theorization has interacted with one teacher’s educational experience.
We Went Past the Test

When I became a public school teacher after my brief year in private, Catholic education, I was warned by my colleagues that I needed to start “thinking about TAKS in July.” Perhaps because of my naiveté, or my initial non-traditional classroom placement, or my general apathy toward authority, I instead chose to not think about TAKS, at all. Instead, I engaged my students in lessons about topics that seemed important to me (environmental policy, the civil rights movement), topics in which they expressed a strong interest (overpopulation, the Cold War), and areas/issues that both myself and the students knew little about (Indian History, the religions of Iran). While still generally following the prescribed scope and sequence handed down to me by my district supervisors, in terms of pedagogical choices most of my day was spent “off script.” At department meetings, I would remain mostly silent about what we were “doing” in my world geography and U.S. history courses. Indeed, one could make the argument that I was committing a sort of dishonesty by omission, failing to inform my superiors that I had deliberately thrown the playbook out of the window and was teaching in a much more organic, fluid (or was it just sloppy?) fashion.

I must admit that as winter turned to spring and TAKS approached, I was worried about the degree to which my year of teaching social studies would be deemed “successful” by the state of Texas and my direct superiors. Even though I was critical in my pedagogical posture, I had not questioned the pragmatic outcomes of my actions. However, I was far too invested in a general attitude of “anti-testing.” To change course now seemed both dishonest and deleterious. Shortly before the state tests were administered, my contract was renewed for another year, and I breathed a sigh of relief knowing that even if (when?) my students faired poorly on the TAKS exam, I was at least guaranteed another year of employment.
In July, I drove to the school for our mid-summer work session, assuming my students’ test results would belie my year of rebellion (or, I was beginning to ask myself, was it something else? Incompetence? Laziness?). To my great shock and confusion, my classes had not only done well, but had in fact posted the best scores in the school district. How could this be? My classes contained high numbers of “ELL” students, “at risk” students, “LD” students. How did our small learning cooperative post better results than the “AP” classes? Than the “Honors” classes? I was not the only person asking these questions. My superiors wanted to know what the “secret” was as well. I couldn’t tell them the truth, could I? I didn’t.

The following years of my career in secondary education involved two new (to me) manifestations of standardization that precluded a wholesale rejection of the rules. First, my ELA and social studies students were tested every other week via a regime of “benchmarking” to determine if the individual students were “where they should be.” This raised the stakes of following scope and sequence since students that failed to meet standards of “adequacy” on these micro-political manifestations of standardization were essentially punished via mandatory tutoring sessions and removal of certain campus privileges. Second, I began to be placed in “professional learning communities” with other teachers of the same courses to ensure not only vertical but also “horizontal” alignment. That is to say, I was now mandated to meet weekly with my co-workers to ensure that we were all on the “same page.”

I found myself further bound up within the policy mechanisms of standardization. As Hursh (2001) had discussed, not only were my students subjected to the state expectations of knowledge and truth, but also the basic universalizing logic of the test had begun to manifest itself (in both explicit and implicit ways) into my day-to-day working experience. The punishing nature of testing was now presenting itself in ways I had no way of circumventing. “Failure” was now
bureaucratically managed on a regular basis. My conversations with fellow teachers had been subsumed by the standards. Just as Giroux (1985) had discussed, our work was becoming more and more devalued. Foucault (1975/1995) seemed to be indicating that there was no way to re-deploy my criticality in this space. The panoptic mechanisms of standardization seemed to be becoming more diffuse, and more omnipresent. Or perhaps it had always been this way, I was now just more aware? It is hard to say.

I tried to follow the curriculum I was given. It didn’t work. My classes become bored, I became bored, my students acted out, our benchmark scores were terrible. Freire (1970/2010) seemed to be right, I was not only complicit in a form of dehumanizing pedagogy, but my management of knowledge was failing by its own standards as well (1978). I had to make a choice, would I follow the plan and fail, or openly defy my superiors under increased scrutiny and (most likely) be forced from a job I loved, from a group of students I wanted to see flourish? I chose a third option.

Our class time stuck with “the plan,” we spent three weeks on the Middle Ages, no more, no less. The rules were wrong, I was sure of this. But just as Rorty (1998) encouraged liberals to use the mechanisms of the state, I became resolved make “the system” work for us in the classroom. I felt that I could smile and nod at the scope and sequence; after all, it was just a rule about time. In rearticulating the bureaucracy in such a manner, I felt that some agency was taken back. Instead of learning only the content mandated from on high, we discussed the meaning of the content. We began to have conversations in class about what was right “for the test,” and what we thought about this. For that matter, we began to talk about what we thought about “the test.” Our benchmarks improved.
Our classroom conversation began with a day or two on “learning” (memorizing) the definitions of key terms about governmental structures in the Middle Ages, but our conversation about these terms and ideas took us to dialogues about contemporary understandings of national identity and citizenship. Students were allowed to self-select groups to discuss these ideas. Often self-selection followed socially delineated categories of race, gender, and social class, but not always. I can see in reflecting that Moya (2006) was right; our ascriptive identities weren’t “gone,” the biographical data sheets, the class rosters, and other “official” documents reminded all of us that we were either “White,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” “Asian,” or “other.” But, these static notions of being became engaged when we chose our affiliations in the class space. The categorizations that had been placed upon us, that impacted us in and out of the classroom in ways that were both deleterious and privileging came alive when we infused them with our subjective experiences (Moya, 2006). Our groups spoke from their standpoint, sharing their own “kinds of knowledge” (Harding, 2006, p. 258). We argued, we discussed. Much of our class time became a cacophony of communicative action.

We spent two days talking about the War of the Roses. Then, we contextualized the information when a student wanted to compare it to our dress code:

“Why can’t I wear a red rosary, but no one cares if everyone wears blue on Friday?”

“We wear blue for school spirit”

“So?”

“We don’t wear colors that tell us who we’re down with and who we’re going to jump!”

“Yes you do, yes you do, you just do it on the football field!”
Every student successfully answered the question “what significance did ‘roses’ play, in the ‘War of the Roses’?” We read Foley’s (1999) article about high school football. We self-selected discussion groups. We had very uncomfortable conversations. Every student made an “A” on their qualitative methods test. We spent a day learning about independent variables and dependent variables. We spent two days talking about the TAKS test. We decided the test was bad research. Every student aced the essay question about quantitative methodologies on the AP exam.

While I was pleased that I thought I had found a way to remain “critical,” I kept an eye on the outcomes of what we did. Just as James (1907/1997) recommended, I measured our criticality by what we accomplished. I became more pragmatic. But, through this pragmatism our engagement became a form of action. We did not merely “talk” about facts, we enacted and lived them. Through this the information we were mandated to discuss moved from being a fixed, unquestionable subject for us to learn toward a status of permeability. We interrogated the test’s knowledge, we were engaging in Freire’s (1970/2010) dialogic action, but with a distinct pragmatic purpose that was explicit, and important. Just as Dewey (1888/1997) had intimated, we gave meaning (both social and personal) to the assertive facts of our standardized classroom. Our class became a dialogical laboratory where we “experimented” with truth (Dewey, 1938/1998). We were engaging in “communication beyond the curriculum” (Fleury, 2005, p. 79).

Over time, my role changed. I was always known as a “strict” teacher. I think I still am. Slowly, I found my role as disciplinarian fading in and out of the classroom context. Conversations would get heated, students would discuss whether they should continue to speak to each other in such a way, I stayed in the background. When I did exert my privilegized role as teacher, it took on more meaning. “We don’t use racial slurs in our classroom, ever.” We never did again. “We can’t have one person in the class interrupting the process, it’s just not cool to everyone else. Do you think
that is unfair of us?” We didn’t interrupt anymore. As my role as “manager” of the classroom became more flexible, and by proxy more potent when utilized, I found myself willing to openly express a stronger degree of fallibility to the students. Sometimes students would express a genuine discontent with my usage of discipline. Sometimes they were right, and I would tell them so. Sometimes they were wrong, but only because they agreed with that conclusion after I better explained my point of view. The students began to understand that I was doing my best to be “fair” but still be “on point” (their characterization). Sometimes I was wrong. The moments I chose to re-direct behavior took on more meaning, my authority (in so far as I chose to characterize it that way) seemed to be more legitimate, less dictatorial. I had to exert my authority less. We took care of each other.

So, while our telos had become pragmatic, our method remained critical. There was no abdicating of power, instead the bounds of that power and the means by which its grip might be reproached became another object of discussion. Just as Dewey (1938/1998) had recommended, I sought to center myself in a place of judicious, protective management. In so doing, I separated from the broader group and re-directed the class in ways that hooks (2003) might agree with, away from words and actions that were violent and reifying of hegemonic power, toward a place of conciliation and community. Although Freire (1970/2010) might have still seen me as a “banker,” engaging in “dead” bureaucracy, I saw the practical outcomes of my actions as critical. The necessary usage of power in our class space became essentially critical in a way that James (1907/1997) and Peirce (1904/1997) might understand, critical in so far as their outcomes de-linked our class space (albeit in small way) from the social forces that were always acting upon us.

Paradoxically, when we allowed the community of the classroom to mitigate our behavior, we gained a new sort of agency. Even though in many ways we remained in the binary of Freire’s
(1970/2020) oppressed and oppressor, this imbalance became re-contextualized within the construct of Dewey’s (1888/1997) social organism. In this way we did not shed our traditional pedagogical identities altogether. Indeed, I remained “Mr. Jordan,” never quite comfortable with being “Jason.” However, the actions we took became not a mere revolt, nor doctrinaire obedience, but instead a collaborative, cooperative social movement toward pedagogical goals important to the group. Through this we achieved a level of agency by acting with one another. While certainly the test mitigated our complete “freedom,” and my role as a teacher under the system of standardization, the actions afforded to us now had meaning (Dewey, 1888/1997). In giving our actions meaning, the ways in which standardization foreclosed other avenues of action became less important. Whereas in many rooms around us there was nothing but the test, TAKS became for us, just a test.

Sometimes we had to learn things that weren’t interesting to the group:

“This sucks”
“I agree”
“Then why do we have to know this?”
“Because it is on the test”

My co-workers thought I was crazy. “You can’t tell students that something is worthless and only being covered because of a standardized test.” Can you? We talked about the test; we talked about if we cared:

“Do you want to pass TAKS?”
“Yeah”
“Why?”
“I want to go to college so that I don’t have to live in a trailer with my family anymore”
“Do you want to pass TAKS?”

“Sure”

“Why?”

“My mom and dad both went to SMU, if I can’t get in there they’ll be pissed”

“Do you want to pass TAKS this year?”

“Yes sir”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be a citizen one day, and I think having a diploma will help”

“Do you care about TAKS?”

“Nope”

“Can I convince you to at least try?”

“I dunno, are you going to get in trouble if I don’t?”

“Probably”

“Ok, I’ll try, but only because you’re not an asshole like everyone else”

We learned the “test facts” we talked about if we agreed with the test facts. Sometimes we didn’t (no, we decided, Moses was not a main influence on the Constitution). We took Rorty’s (1998) ironic stance toward truth. Yes, publicly (when we took the test) some things were true, and it was socially important to master these facts to advance past high school. However, privately (in our class space), we were not beholden to a construction of the value of these test facts; we were more tentative, more skeptical. We knew the answers the state wanted, we could provide those, but they didn’t mean anything anymore. Our class discussions became about these claims, not an indoctrination of them. We were able to critique notions of truth, while at the same time ready to
replicate such claims when it was necessary for advancement. Almost every student passed the test. We kept beating the “good” classes with the “good” kids.

Not everyone “passed,” even if most did. I wondered if I was to blame for the “failures,” even if we were doing so well overall. Why couldn’t I engage everyone? Was I being too academic? Too culturally insensitive? Was I just a bad teacher getting lucky? We tried to re-tool. Constantly.

I came to realize that my actions in and of themselves lacked meaning, they were *mere* actions. Only in concert with students, only when *we* acted did they obtain a form of criticality, an *ethos*. I came to realize that the same was true of my students as well. They needed *we* in order to give their experiences meaning as well.

So, although Pelias (2000) was right in a sense: “When all is said and done, you will know that you are not critical. Others can and will take your place,” he was also quite wrong (p. 228). Every classroom needs students and every classroom needs teachers. Who embodies these roles may change, but *mere* presence is not what gives these individuals their status. Only through ethically driven, yet purposeful, communal action can such a collection of people become a classroom: a community of learning, creating, sharing, and becoming. A place where *we* can defy *they* with our shared success. And, when individuals become *we*, any place can become a classroom, no matter what regimented, harmful, standardized rules and regulations are put in place. Because, when I/they become *we*, the standards aren’t a barrier or a stopping point, they just become something else to talk about, and that conversation can go anywhere.
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