

The Art of Critical Pedagogy by Jeffrey M. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-8204-7415-1.

Many recognize the need for critical praxis to bridge “theory” and “practice” for social change, but few can explain what this actually entails. As standardized curricula and testing continue to crush the spirits of countless students and educators, however, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* describes step by step how to navigate the current educational landscape and empower marginalized students by putting critical pedagogical theory into action. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell engage with students in participatory action research, embodying “theory as liberatory practice” (hooks, 1994) while responding to Freire’s (1997) appeal for reflective journaling on the pedagogical process.

Accessibility of Theory and Application to Action

Offering digestible theory without lofty jargon while simultaneously illustrating direct application of such theory to educational practice, this book proves accessible to practitioners and researchers and to novice and veteran teachers alike. From the very first chapter, the authors deconstruct current issues in urban education using theories to wipe clean, rather than smudge, the political and economic lenses necessary to see how some schools are designed to fail. They make clear connections between school realities and concepts such as “deficit model” thinking (Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997), “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 2000), socioeconomics (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Anyon, 1981), “academic apartheid” (Akom, 2003), structural determinism and hegemonic practices (Gramsci, 1971), critical praxis against “banking education” (Freire, 1970), and more.

Similarly, chapter 2, “Contemporary Developers of Critical Pedagogy,” not only offers one of the best overviews of critical pedagogy available, but also highlights both the “rock star” and “underground” educator-activists who have powerfully shaped the discipline. While some critics believe that critical pedagogy is weakened by its diverse philosophers’ discursive disagreements, this book successfully illustrates how such diversity provides a stronger framework for educational change.

Each subsequent chapter grounds teacher practice in educational theory as Duncan-Andrade and Morrell describe their applications of critical pedagogy to five different high school learning environments: an English classroom, a women’s basketball team, a college access program for students of color, a teenage summer research seminar, and an ethnic studies course. For example, in the English classroom, the authors used Freire’s (1970) theories against banking education, Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, and Smitherman’s

(2001) analysis of the Language of Wider Communication to develop literacy and academic achievement, while also teaching students to contextualize, critique, and respond to texts. Leveraging students' abilities "to take ownership of the knowledge production process" (p. 55), the authors show how to use theory to critically read "canonical" literature while tackling the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Testing program (ACT), or Advanced Placement (AP) exams. Students analyzed urban educational inequality, popular culture, and race and justice in society through this English course. Similarly, the authors employed critical pedagogy in six summer seminars, helping situate youth as critical action researchers¹ and transformative intellectuals. Student research teams not only acquired "academic literacy" but also explored issues such as educational access and influences of popular media culture on youth. Student action researchers then presented their findings in multiple public arenas and conferences to university faculty, local and state politicians, teachers, community members, and parents. Thus both author-educators and students had opportunities to engage in critical praxis for social change.

Advancing Critical Action Research

This book provides a brilliant example of how to conduct critical action research with youth by respecting them as research *partners* while embracing one's own "interestedness" in the welfare of such youth. The authors address the history of "scientific research" and explain their refusal to be limited by a false "scientific objectivity" towards their students. Furthermore, they offer a valuable perspective on a new generation of "indigenous" researchers as both educators working in their home communities and students researching their own neighborhoods.

Addressing the Weaknesses of Critical Pedagogy

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell overtly challenge only one current critique of critical pedagogy, Delpit's (1987, 1988, 1995) claim that critical pedagogues ignore the skills necessary to succeed and go to college when focusing on racialized/classed power structures. However, their research speaks directly to critical pedagogy's greatest weaknesses in a way that strengthens the theory overall. First, as noted by Kincheloe (2007), the voices of critical pedagogues of color are rarely heard, but this book provides a strong contribution to social justice education from two successful educator-activists of color working with students of color while using tools developed by a critical, pan-ethnic collection of scholars. Second, as noted by Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003), some scholars have critiqued the elitist, masculine language of critical pedagogy that

they say creates new forms of oppression. Yet Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's book moves away from that tradition by showing how critical pedagogy can leave the confines of a male-dominated "ivory tower" and be used to engage diverse urban teens in research about their own communities and for their own communities. Finally, some may hear—from the voices of both public school educators and administrators—that critical pedagogy is only about theory and politics without enough of the praxis and action that it promises to offer. However, the authors show how they put theory and politics into action and even devote an entire chapter to applying critical pedagogy to national content standards in English, math, and social studies.

Possible Points of Controversy

Some may question Duncan-Andrade and Morrell's research methodology and find it difficult to replicate their pedagogical approach. Although the authors explain the methodological philosophies and themes that drive data analysis, a more detailed description of *how* they engaged with their data would make this work stronger. For example, describing how they coded student work could help contextualize the researchers' conclusions. Furthermore, this work might be easier to replicate if the authors had described the ethical, institutional, political, and personal roadblocks they may have faced and overcome. Kleinsasser (2000) notes how reflexivity upon one's own ethics before, during, and after conducting research allows one to make deeper analyses, since "ethics cannot be separated from epistemology and...reflexivity on ethics has everything to do with good data" (p. 157). Behar (1996) also notes the importance of making oneself "vulnerable" in reflexive research, which the authors do not fully explore in this book.

Finally, as the authors recognize, critics may contend that their work is not generalizable because the sample size of approximately 300 students across five studies is fairly small. However, the authors explain how to address this weakness through further critical pedagogical research in other communities. Furthermore, as Eisner (1998) argued, qualitative research with smaller sample sizes is still valuable because it provides new perspectives for understanding complex systems like education.

Although learning how to engage critical pedagogy in our teaching practices may not be an easy process and may look different in our diverse classrooms, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell inspire us to remember that teaching is truly an "art" requiring both love and creativity. By providing us with the tools necessary for joining pedagogical theory with action for social change, they encourage us to further develop critical pedagogy *with* our students and our communities.

Note

¹ Critical Action Research takes a critical perspective on action research. Action Research is a practitioner inquiry-based methodology that engages a process of continual problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and action while involved in one's work (teaching, community organizing, etc.). Youth Participatory Action Research is a rapidly growing and developing research methodology that engages youth in such action research alongside adult practitioners. Through such a methodology, youth are involved in their own praxis through critical and collective inquiry, reflection, and action regarding the reality of the world as they experience and observe it. Youth Participatory Action Research provides youth the opportunity to study social problems affecting their own lives while simultaneously determining plans to transform systems and institutions in ways that promote social justice. For more details on Youth Participatory Action Research, please read *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research In Motion*, edited by Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (2008).

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Reviewer

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