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Reclaiming Legitimate Authority in the Academy: A Critical Analysis of Jones' Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

Like any good paper, Harkins and Wells' (2009) analysis of critical pedagogy has provoked critical reflection and controversy. In this article, I respond to Jones' (2012) defense of critical pedagogy, formulated as a response to DeCesare's (2009) critique of Harkins and Wells' article. As elaborated by Jones, critical pedagogy is aimed at reducing the power differential between teachers and students in order to empower the diversity of student voices on any given issue. Critical pedagogy invites dialogue among diverse and even clashing perspectives, with a mind toward resolving conflicts between perspectives without privileging anyone viewpoint (including the professor or teacher's presumably more informed expertise on relevant issues). In his reply, Jones argues persuasively that critical pedagogy can be an effective means for learning experiences that are organized around self-reflective encounters with Otherness (e.g., courses related to diversity; self-reflection; conflict management; comparative analyses of culture, etc.). However, in his piece, Jones extends his defense of critical pedagogy more generally. In the following reply, I argue against the minimization of teacher authority in undergraduate classrooms. Drawing upon sociocultural approaches to human development, genuine empowerment occurs when students gain the capacity to use cultural tools to position themselves with reference to the cultures in which they will live and work. Such tools are acquired in language-based interactions between students and more accomplished cultural agents (e.g., teachers, parents, more accomplished peers, etc.). The authority of professors in the classroom is legitimized both by their greater expertise and by their responsibility to educate students. Minimization of the legitimate authority of the teacher runs the risk of disenfranchising the very students that advocates of critical pedagogy seek to empower.

Keywords

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I.

Reclaiming Legitimate Authority in the Academy: A Critical Analysis of Jones' Critical Pedagogy

In his rejoinder to DeCesare's (2009) critique of Harkins and Wells' (2009) approach to critical pedagogy, Jones (2012) has performed a great service. His well-written and erudite article brings clarity to debates about the role of critical pedagogy in higher education. Jones advocates critical pedagogy as a mode of dialogical learning which minimizes the power differential between students and teachers. The relative leveling of the authority of the teacher

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allows inclusion of multiple perspectives into classroom discourse, including those that challenge implicit and dominant beliefs and assumptions about the matters at hand. A key feature of Jones' reply holds that in his critique of Harkins and Wells' application of critical pedagogy, DeCesare critiqued critical pedagogy as a general approach to pedagogy, rather than assessing the special merits of critical pedagogy for learning about human diversity. I have no quarrel with the idea that critical pedagogy may be well suited for approaching such a class. However, Jones' own reply extends beyond this more local issue to a defense of the utility of critical pedagogy as a general approach in higher education. In this reply, I respond to Jones' arguments about the critical pedagogy approach in higher education. In what follows, I will argue that rather than advancing the interests of undergraduate learners, the goal of minimizing power relations between teachers and learners runs the risk of disempowering the students that it is intended to benefit.

Is the Classroom a Democracy? Justifying Legitimate Authority in the Classroom

In advancing his conception of critical pedagogy, Jones (2011) draws on Morey (2000), who advocates a shift from traditional pedagogical methods to those that "[minimize] the power relations between teacher/student dyads to provide an arena for difference" (p. 60). The minimization of the teacher's power creates a "space" that invites alternative voices into the classroom. Learning occurs as diverse voices conflict and expose the implicit cultural, social, economic presuppositions that inform each other's voices and perspectives. Reducing the power of the teacher empowers alternative voices that students bring with them into the now more inclusive classroom discussion. As a result, "empowerment shifts the dynamic from a position where the instructor is an all-knowing facilitator of knowledge to a position where commonly accepted 'truths' are open for interpretation and critique" (p. 61). Critical pedagogy thus becomes a form of democracy in action: "It teaches students to engage in the democratic process and brings one's beliefs into question for open and rational discussion" (p. 61).

To be sure, education should be about calling "beliefs into question for open and rational discussion" (p. 61). However, the democratic ideal calls for such "open and rational" discussion to occur among individuals who are able to speak in an informed and more-or-less developed voice. In minimizing teacher power and legitimizing the authority of voices of students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds, Jones conceptualizes the classroom as a kind of discussion among "culturally autonomous" equals.

However, the relationship between a teacher and a student is not and should not be an equal one. Professors must retain a degree of authority and power over their students. Teachers gain their authority from (a) their responsibility for guiding their students' acquisition of valued skills and knowledge, and (b) his or her greater relative competence in the field in question. It is from her responsibility and greater competence that a teacher's *authority* is *legitimized*. Legitimate authority thereupon justifies the power differential in the teacher-student relationship. When one person has legitimate authority over another, she assumes both the right and the responsibility to influence, advise, educate, or make demands on the person with less authority. In this regard, teachers are granted the power to make demands on students that the teacher believes will promote the development of skills and knowledge. Further, teachers are empowered to assign grades. Depending upon a teacher's goals and beliefs (for better and for worse), grades serve a variety of functions. These include motivating students to engage in learning activities (e.g., studying, writing papers, completing projects), providing feedback about learning and performance, and assigning evaluations that differentiate students for purposes of acquiring future schooling, employment, and related positions.

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The teacher's authority in the classroom does not arise from her power; conversely, the teacher gains power in the classroom through her legitimate authority. If it were the case that power was bestowed upon a teacher by authoritarian fiat—for example, simply by being an employee of the college;,by having gained seniority over the years, by being given the power to assign grades or because of a priori status relations in a college—then the teacher's power and authority would have no legitimacy. The differential power arises as a product of the teacher's greater competence and knowledge. The exercise of power in the classroom is limited by the boundaries of the teacher's acknowledged competence and knowledge; outside of that competence and knowledge, the teacher has no special claim to power and authority. The reason why it is not desirable to minimize a teacher's power or authority in the classroom is because the student is not ordinarily in the position to know what is best for him or her. If and when the student gains a level of knowledge and skill comparable to that of the teacher, then the teacher no longer has legitimate authority over the student. As a result, the teacher's differential power is (or should be) relaxed. But until that time, the teacher has *a responsibility to the student* to use her authority to teach the student that which he does not know. Arbitrary power is tyranny; the power entrusted to teacher is legitimized by the teacher's agreement to use his competence and knowledge—as long it remains superior to the student's—for the benefit of the student's development.

Are All Discourses Created Equal?

The minimization of authority in the teacher-student relationship grants equal legitimacy to all voices in the classroom. This runs the risk of legitimizing positions on issues that are more-or-less underdeveloped, unarticulated or otherwise ill informed. Indeed, in his analysis of how conflict among competing voices promotes learning, Jones writes: "…the issue involves paradigms and their role in the educational process. In other words, how do individuals resolve conflicts between two paradigms *without favoring one over the other*?" (p. x, emphasis added). This latter phrase seems to bestow equity among the various paradigms, perspectives, discourses or voices that students and teachers bring to classroom discussion. To be sure, teachers and students alike must have the opportunity to advance their perspectives on any given issue in class. Although each participant in a discussion has a legitimate right to speak, the opportunity to advance a perspective does not guarantee the validity of any given perspective. However, the idea that we should work to resolve conflicts between competing viewpoints in ways that do not favor one over the other grants *a priori* legitimacy to all viewpoints.

Advocates of critical pedagogy suggest that the analysis of conflict among competing perspectives and paradigms can often result in new learning that transcends the original conflict. This is often the case: conflict among competing perspectives often exposes assumptive weakness in both viewpoints. When this happens, resolution of the conflict can create higher-order systems of thought that resolve the tension between the original perspectives. For example, imagine that two students are arguing over the role of genes and environment in human physical and psychological development. Advocating the primacy of genes as the primary determinant of development, one student cites research showing that genetic differences between individuals are associated different levels of mathematical achievement (e.g., Docherty, Kovas, & Plomin, 2011). The other student, advocating the primacy of environment, implicates research that shows how variations in culture foster different ways of representing and solving problems in mathematics (e.g., Saxe, 1990). In this discussion, each student offers support for a perspective that exposes a weakness in his interlocutor's argument. The result calls for the need to develop an alternative theory that can account for the arguments of both students.

However, consider the scenario in which either of these students offers his or her position as a counterpoint to a professor's (or to anyone else's) more highly developed position that genes and environments do not and cannot act independently in the development of physical or psychological structures (Gottlieb et al., 2006). In this situation, the professor's position goes well beyond those offered by her students. In such circumstances, do we want to grant a priori legitimacy to the teacher's and students' views? Do we want resolve the conflict between the teacher's and the student's viewpoints in ways that do not favor one viewpoint over the other?   In such circumstances, the teacher's view is the superior one; in this regard, it simply supersedes the student's uninformed "voice."

Of course, advocates of critical pedagogy may recoil from the very assertion that a professor brings more highly developed or superior knowledge. A key aim of critical pedagogy is to foster a degree of reflexivity that can function to expose implicit assumptions and beliefs that frame or prefigure any given argument—including the ostensibly more highly developed positions advanced by the instructor. However, maintaining the legitimacy of professorial authority is not to say that a professor is all-knowing. Neither does it imply that learning should proceed in a unilateral direction from teacher to student. It does not suggest that a student cannot effectively challenge a teacher's knowledge or presuppositions. Teaching and learning should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered; it should be *learning*-centered. As such, it does not matter who advances a good idea, as long as the good idea is advanced. (However, not all participants in a discussion may have the necessary expertise to identify a novel idea as a good one). I recently had a discussion with an individual who, after delivering a talk at a conference, was asked by an accomplished editor in the audience to submit the paper to him for publication. According to the speaker, when the editor learned that the speaker did not have an undergraduate degree, he rescinded his offer. In this situation, the editor privileged the authority of the speaker's (lack of) credentials over what she had to say. This sort of uninformed appeal to credentials is much more difficult to pull off in a field like mathematics. In mathematics, it does not matter who proves a theorem or advances the correct solution to a novel problem; the solution speaks for itself. But it does so through appeal to a system of more-or-less shared standards for evaluating the merits of an argument. Although we must remain open to the possibility that perspectives other than those advocated by the teacher can gain currency, this does not imply that all voices in the classroom can or should count as equal.

Knowledge is Power: How Cultural Agents Foster Emancipation through Sign Activity

Jones suggests that critical pedagogy empowers students by creating space in which all voices can participate and be heard in classroom discourse. To be sure, the opportunity for all voices to be heard should be sacrosanct in the academy. However, simply providing space for students to give voice to alternative personal, cultural, and intellectual narratives does nothing to empower them. This is because a student does not come to the academy with a voice that is fully formed. If she did, there would be no need for an education. Students are not empowered by being told that their existing knowledge, skills, beliefs, and values stand on equal epistemological footing as those that they have come to the academy to explore. While students do bring a system of knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs to their studies, these qualities have not yet been fully cultivated. Genuine learning requires that they build upon existing skills and knowledge en route to developing more powerful, higher-order systems of thinking, feeling and acting. Students are empowered not simply by being given space to speak, but when they are guided by more accomplished individuals to construct the higher-order systems of knowledge, skills, and values that they will need to adapt to the social worlds in which they will live and work.

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How do people acquire higher-order knowledge and skill? We know this: The vast majority of students do *not* acquire advanced knowledge and skill on their own. Most students do not come to college armed with skills for transcending conflict among competing perspectives. For most students, higher-order skills and knowledge requires active guidance from a more accomplished cultural agent. *Higher-order knowledge and skills develop as students gain facility with the intellectual tools that mediate the socio-cultural activities in which they will be expected to engage when they leave college and assume constructive roles in the larger community.* Knowledge is power. Higher-order knowledge is cultural knowledge. It is the acquisition and use of cultural knowledge that empowers students. To the extent that teachers have a superior command of the cultural knowledge and tools deemed appropriate in a given course of study, they have the responsibility to impart those tools to the student. To be sure, students learn by doing; to learn, students must eventually do *for* themselves. However, doing *for* oneself does not mean doing *by* oneself. Unless they have already acquired the level of skills required to learn on their own, students acquire higher-order knowledge through the process of *guided doing by more accomplished others*. If the teacher's authority is legitimized by his superior knowledge and skill in a given area, then the responsible course of action is to afford the teacher the authority to impart those cultural tools to the students who lack them. And herein lies a seeming paradox: When a teacher imparts cultural tools and knowledge to the student, the teacher is *using his power to empower the student*. The student acquires power by mastering the use of cultural tools under the guidance of a teacher. It is thus through the responsible exercise of power by a teacher that the student gains knowledge and power. This process is both supported and illustrated by Vygotsky's (1978) analysis of how the appropriation and mastery of signs functions to *emancipate* and thus empower the sign user from the here-and-now of his or her present circumstances.

The acquisition cultural knowledge is mediated by the use of cultural tools, the most important of which is language (sign activity). Signs (words) have special properties. Signs are capable of representing and communicating culturally shaped meanings that are shared throughout a linguistic community. Acquiring higher-order cultural knowledge is thus a matter of appropriating, internalizing, and using signs. Access to the cultural meanings represented in sign activity is central to the *formation* of higher-order thinking. In his highly influential work, *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978) described the emancipator function of the sign (word). According to Vygotsky, it is the mastery of cultural knowledge through the use of signs that is the source of individual freedom. He demonstrated this point by showing how signs free individuals from the "here-and-now" of (what was then clumsily referred to as) stimulus-response activity. In specific, Vygotsky argued that in infancy, a child's action (response) is regulated by a stimulus; the stimulus evokes a response:

(1) $S \rightarrow R$

Over time, children gain the capacity to use language (signs, words) to mediate higher-order thinking, feeling, and action. Unlike many traditional approaches to language, Vygotsky held that language did not serve merely as a vehicle for communicating pre-existing thoughts. Instead, he held that once acquired, language serves *regulative* functions; people gain the capacity to regulate their thinking, feeling, and acting using signs. But the importance of signs extends even beyond their regulatory functions. Because of their capacity to represent arbitrary and socially shared meanings, signs are the quintessential vehicle of teaching, socialization and enculturation, and other forms of social influence. To learn the meaning and use of words is to gain access to centuries of collective wisdom that would be impossible to create on one's own. Thereupon, when one gains the capacity to regulate patterns of thinking, feeling and acting

using signs, one is *freed* from the constraints of the here-and-now of the physical world. This is illustrated in the following diagram:

$$\textbf{(2)} \qquad \overset{\textbf{X}}{\underset{\textbf{(sign)}}{\diagdown}} \qquad \textbf{S} \longrightarrow \textbf{R}$$
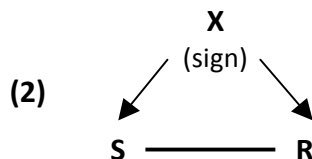
In this diagram, the sign (X) gains a regulatory function over both the "stimulus" and the "response." Over time, through the appropriation and use of signs, a child gains the capacity to bring stimulus and response under the regulatory control of the sign. This means that the child gains control over the interpretation and meaning of the "stimulus" as well as the formation execution of the "response." The child is emancipated from the here-and-now of the physical world through the appropriation and use of sign activity. The meanings and practices that are communicated and represented through sign activity must already exist (although are modifiable) in the culture before the child gains access to them. It is through access to cultural meanings and practices that children construct higher-order knowledge, skills, and values. Such access is provided to students gradually over time through language-based instruction and guidance by more accomplished cultural agents.

In addition to its function as a vehicle for representing and using arbitrary and socially shared meanings, language has other special properties. Unlike the symbol systems used in, say, pantomime, sign activity (word use) is *generative*. As a rule-governed activity, using a limited number of sounds and meaning units, it is possible to generate an infinite number of novel meanings. As such, language use—both within and between individuals—becomes an enormously effective tool for creating novel patterns of thinking, feeling, and action. In this way, the emancipatory function of language is not limited merely to freeing individuals from the here-and-now of the physical world. Once acquired, language-based interaction becomes a means for the successive recreating and reinventing selves. Thus, while the linguistic appropriation of cultural systems of meaning frees individuals from the here-and-now, as such meanings become increasingly internalized and integrated, persons are able to use language to forge new ways of being in the world, thus freeing themselves from the constraints of particular cultural positions that they may have previously assumed. Although it is ultimately impossible to create novel selves outside of the context of culture, the generative property of sign activity supports the process through which individuals, in their interactions with others, can work to transcend any particular social or cultural position.

Knowledge is power. Higher-order knowledge is cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge is acquired through sign-based interactions with more cultural agents. Students are empowered when they gain the capacity to participate in cultural activities through the guided appropriation and use of signs.

No Exit: Whose Knowledge? Whose Values? Whose Culture?

In order to foster the development of valued higher-order knowledge and skills, we must first assume, of course, that there is something that we value as higher-order knowledge. Jones draws on Morey's (2000) assertion that "[t]he main goal of critical pedagogy is to expose the illusion of educational neutrality present in most schooling" (p. 60). This is indeed a laudable goal. However, exposing the illusion of educational neutrality is a double-edged sword. Using one edge, we can and should expose the presuppositions that inform traditional pedagogy and

the knowledge and skills currently privileged in the academy. However, in brandishing this sword, critical pedagogy cannot escape the application of the remaining edge to itself. What are the values, beliefs and presuppositions that inform critical pedagogy? How do these values and beliefs structure pedagogical activity? How are decisions about the knowledge and skills that are promoted in critical pedagogy prefigured by those assumptions? What justifies those values and assumptions over others? There is, as Sartre might say, no exit when faced with these issues.

What skills, knowledge and values should we expect contemporary undergraduates to acquire? It is not enough simply to challenge the assumptions of the status quo and allow the directions of higher education to be defined by the unconstrained sublation of loosely articulated paradigmatic conflicts. Resolving conflicts between and among conflicting paradigms requires the prior acquisition of foundational skills in analytic reading, written expression, numeracy, moral understanding, and so forth, and more than a passing familiarity with the history of great ideas that arise from both Western and non-Western traditions.

It is hard to think of American students who have the privilege of attending college as an oppressed group. There are no simple parallels between American college students and the illiterate Brazilian peasants with whom Paulo Freire worked during the 1950s. Further, Freire's (1970) dissolution of the teacher-student dichotomy was meant to undermine what he took to be capitalist systems of oppression in rural Brazil. Is this a helpful model for arming middle-class and minority students to adapt and make contributions to contemporary American society? Although minority students are being admitted to college in record numbers, they are still admitted at much lower rates than students from the dominant culture. More important, despite increased access to the academy, minority students have not made significant gains in graduation rates once they enter college. Both majority and minority students alike need access to foundational knowledge and skills, and the capacity to position and re-position themselves within American society as it functions within the larger global world. One might suggest that minority students would profit from acquiring the cultural tools needed to gain access to currently dominant institutions and practices. One cannot change a system unless one understands the systems one wants to change.

If "educational neutrality" is an illusion—and I concur emphatically that it is—then no one is exempt from articulating and defending the value presuppositions that define and guide what counts as knowledge to be acquired in the academy. We cannot escape the task of identifying what counts as valid knowledge and skills simply by exposing or attacking the presuppositions of traditional education. An open-ended inquiry that is founded upon a clear understanding of the collective wisdom that comprises a solid liberal arts education is much to be desired. An open-ended inquiry that treats the Western tradition primarily as a force of oppression is one that runs the risk of disempowering and marginalizing the very students it is meant to serve.

Cultivating a Critical Voice

Jones ends his defense of critical pedagogy with a thoughtful rhetorical question: "What is critical thinking without a voice to contribute to the discourse?" The obvious implication is that it is only by providing space for alternative voices to be heard that critical discourse can occur. But what does it mean to have a voice? The cultivation of a student's voice is the *telos* or *endpoint* of an undergraduate education. A student's voice—the capacity to position oneself on the important issues of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—develops gradually through the student's interactions with others, with his teachers, fellow students, the authors (both living

and deceased) of the books he has read, with intellectuals, pundits, and through confrontations with the Other. However, students must be provided with the intellectual tools for engaging in and profiting from these interactions. To do this, they need authoritative (but not authoritarian) teachers who neither apologize for their authority nor remain closed off from the challenges of new ideas and perspectives, wherever those ideas have their origins.

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