

## **Taking the Temperature of Critical Pedagogy**

By

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### **Abstract**

*The fundamentals and background for critical pedagogy are given as a "primer" for those unfamiliar with this approach to education and to associate a few names with important concepts in critical pedagogy. If music educators were to employ the essence of critical pedagogy that includes skepticism and reflective practice, they would likely change the philosophy of music education, its structure and goals, and teacher education and professional development. As skeptics, however, we must first reflect on critical pedagogy--does it foster valid thinking for education in our conception of a viable democracy?*

The present focus on critical pedagogy is intense and if the educational temperature were taken of the topic, the thermometer might read “feverish” as the attempts to apply it to assorted aspects of education are many and varied. The question I’d like to address is whether critical pedagogy holds implications for music education and, if so, how these might play out in practice. The term critical pedagogy strikes one as a variation without a theme or at least one requiring a clear definition. When I first heard the term, I classified it as another bit of educationese in search of respectability. Critical pedagogues also promote praxis, a word that is rather ugly. Praxis, however, is defined in this context as an activity by which individuals create culture and society and, thereby, become more conscious (critical) human beings. Those who use it to mean simply “practice” misunderstand. Paulo Freire defines praxis as mindful reflection, quite different from a practical activity in the classroom (Lea, 2004). Praxis is an interesting idea if by involvement with it we mean that its strategy is taught and learned, offering the potential that humanity will receive a boost upward. All of this sounds admirable but we need to probe the field as, on the surface, there is little to suggest that critical pedagogy can improve daily teaching or learning in music education. In reading about critical pedagogy, I learned that a major tenet of it is skepticism, a practice that I have long found lacking in music education. I was caught; maybe critical pedagogy and I could live together after all. The skepticism described in critical pedagogy literature is not a simple put down of teaching and learning practices such as those in the news about No Child Left Behind, standardized tests, or poorly prepared teachers. Skepticism in critical pedagogy is designed to be forward thinking, the use of our individual and collective cleverness to not only improve our teaching-learning but to think about the role of education and perhaps the role of music in a just society. Deborah Meier’s (1995) approach to education has appealed to me in that she emphasizes skepticism in all “subjects,” carefully

avoiding cynicism. Although Meier is supportive of the arts in her speaking and writing, I've not been impressed with her arts program in Central Park East in New York City or at the Mission School in Boston -- so it is possible to be skeptical, in a healthy way, even of Debbie Meier and her philosophy as it plays out in the real world.

The discipline of music education has long been marked by a lack of professional skepticism; there has been little "critical" reflection on methods, materials, scholarship, research, or service. The interchange between Bennett Reimer and David Elliott on philosophy is one of the few exceptions and, although there is a personal element in some of their dialogue, it has nevertheless been an attempt at a professional critique. The historian would likely remind me of dialogue about "rote versus note" at the end of the 19th century and the Carl Seashore and James Mursell tiffs in the 1930's, but my comments are limited to discourse in the last 50 years.

Informed dialogue is the center experience of critical pedagogy and this element is conspicuously absent in music education. Questioning of teaching and research practices is taken personally no matter how carefully phrased. If we have weaknesses in our teaching/learning practices, the materials used, or even the preparation of teachers, those weaknesses do not find their way into print to be examined objectively. Live and let live could be the profession's motto. In her dissertation, a doctoral student at Harvard recently described me as having a "heartly skepticism and exacting standards that helped her to grow as a scholar by stimulating and challenging her thinking." I hope I deserve that description; I believe that "heartly skepticism and exacting standards" are badly needed in the profession. The *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* was founded in 1963 to promote scholarly exchange, and has been called "the conscience of the profession." If critical pedagogy represents this

stance, it may hold promise for music education but space allows me to provide only a few examples.

There has to be something more attractive than dialogue and reflection for music teachers to adopt critical pedagogy as a teaching strategy, as it comes with a bit of political baggage that screams out at the teacher who has been focused solely on conveying a passion for music and musical understanding. That baggage is critical pedagogy's philosophical underpinnings and its political base. The accoutrements of critical pedagogy need to be understood before adopting its lingo and goals; it is possible that its basic philosophy has been pre-empted by well meaning activists who don't represent the population attracted to critical pedagogy. In conducting research for this article, I couldn't identify what part of the philosophical base could be excluded without affecting the essence of critical pedagogy. The writers are united in voicing the need for change ---they are definitely on a journey.

Critical pedagogy is related to postmodernism and with postmodernism's rejection of experts, it allows me, a non-expert, to comment on a few of the ideas recently put forth. Those who have written the most on the subject are not timid souls and it is intellectually frightening to give their instructional practices a fair hearing. They are as sure of their cause as is George W Bush of his but they sit at the opposite end of the plank from Mr. Bush.

Music education has focused on seeking information, knowledge, and understanding that educated students could use to agree on the musical or aesthetic "truth" of, for example, Brahms' clarinet trio, there being an ineffable meaning in the work that through education many of us could experience, a heightened stage of humaneness attained through listening and/or performing great music. Roger Scruton (1997) believes it is possible for one to find the "truth" in music. He also mounts an argument against postmodernism, the consideration of which would be

important for critical theory/pedagogy.

Those educators who speak most passionately about critical pedagogy (or critical theory as it is sometimes called) are Mike Apple, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, William Pinar and in arts philosophy the existentialist, Maxine Greene. These educators trace their thinking to Sartre, Barthe, Heidegger, Foucault -- the post-modern school of phenomenologists who paint all social issues in a hopeless gray. Educators have generally given short shrift to the ideas of the phenomenologists due to the unresolved conflict between the importance of established course content and a more free approach to the school curriculum. Educators tend to be more hopeful about the present situation than that portrayed in the literature describing deconstructionism. Jurgen Habermas is a straw man for these postmodernists with his dedication to reason, ethics, and moral philosophy although he is accepted for his lucid arguments about the role of "power" in education and in politics and for his efforts to find ways to attain a better society and culture. Habermas believes in cognition and rational thinking, qualities dominant in the discourses by those who wish to change social policy through education. Habermas, a member of the Frankfurt school, extends modernism rather than supporting postmodernism. Awareness of a place for race, gender, ability, age, sexual preferences, religion, ethnicity and language, and the connection of each of these to globalization, the media, political parties, immigration, trade policies, multiculturalism, and the work of NGOs grew out of the early Frankfurt school. An understanding of the relationships is essential in understanding critical pedagogy. Everyone is to have a voice. The Frankfurt school believed in emancipation by the critique and social action of critically conscious persons but I digress from describing the philosophy that relates to critical pedagogy.

Critical theorists have no time for the ideas of neo-liberals and on a practical vein are

against vouchers, charter schools, and any form of privatization in education. Vouchers are racist, sexist, homophobic and an instrument that prevents not only equity but adequate food and medical care for students (Giroux 1999; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2000).

Critical pedagogy has no time for oppression of any kind; all students are to have an equal chance at the good life. The voices championing equity in education are many, some you may not connect with critical pedagogy: bell hooks and her concern for home place, and power and urban meaning in identity politics, Lisa Delpit who points up the relationship between power and pedagogy in educating other people's children (the minorities), Paulo Freire and his three stages of consciousness (the optimum one being critical consciousness), the feminists, and many more. Educators have been at the forefront of the battle for equity. Freire is often cited as the primary exponent of critical pedagogy. He proposes that we teach critical thinking, dialogical pedagogy, and critical literacy, but when one delves a bit deeper to find why he turned to these ideas in education, one finds a somewhat radical philosophy that extends beyond formal, K-12 schooling. His efforts to use education to call attention to oppression in South America were stopped by the government (he was exiled from Brazil 1964-1979) when his ideas and their supporters threatened the status quo. Freire linked human suffering to the need for fundamental change in most government institutions. Pedagogy for Freire was not limited to the practices in schools, as individuals of all ages and all cultural spheres needed the education "habits" he was proposing. Thus, all aspects of Latin American colonialism that kept privilege and oppression alive were targets for his literary salvos. Freire is important today for his emphasis upon dialogue: he argues that dialogue in education is the practice of freedom. It is through prepared discussion (and using the language and concerns of the students) that individuals are alerted to the lack of social justice in today's cultures (Freire, 1970). He challenges the neutrality of the

technological model of education in the United States as it blocks the expansion of consciousness and blocks creative and liberating social action for change, emphasizing as it does respect for authority, experts, character building, and good work habits. Issues such as how and what to teach in character classes clearly separate critical pedagogues from traditional teaching. Freire does not ignore the need for the development of skills and competences, as without these the exercise of power would be impossible.

By definition, critical pedagogy is to “control” the subjects in the curriculum, subjects that involve common sense and dialectical thinking and that have intellectual possibilities. Doubting (skepticism) replaces believing. It is understandably easier to doubt, to criticize, and to reflect when one speaks from the power base of the majority, which is most of us, but the same questions from a subculture can be threatening and so these strategies have been less used by the oppressed as there is less reward for effort and less hope of change. Freire, Giroux, and hooks suggest that schools and universities are the proper sites in which intellectuals can develop a pedagogy of critique, articulate the values of dominated groups, amplify stories of subordinated experience, and practice resistance and solidarity (Boyce, 1996). These thinkers believe that education cannot be politically neutral and that it is important to challenge the status quo. With this philosophy of the importance of education in promoting social justice for all, the national and international agenda of public and private institutions influence not only education and its institutions but all of society allowing them to tap for support philosophies from John Dewey to Richard Rorty. The politics of ethics, difference, and democracy are proactive; using dissent or dissatisfaction to change a culture is not just a textbook exercise; the players must be involved. It is through questioning then thinking and doing that this “liberatory education” can produce social transformation. With this broad base and interest in every cause or symptom of inequity,

the initial focus in the struggle centers on power and influence.

Henry Giroux opens his 2003 book, *The Abandoned Generation*, with these words

One of the most serious, yet unspoken and unrecognized, tragedies in the United States is the condition of its children. We live in a society in which too many young people are poor, lack decent housing and health care, attend decrepit schools filled with overworked and underpaid teachers, and who, by all standards, deserve more in a country that prides itself on its level of democracy, liberty, and alleged equality for all citizens. (Giroux 2003, ix)

He argues that critical pedagogy is important in the struggle of oppressed groups to reclaim the ideological and material conditions for organizing their own experiences. In 1994, he argued that critical pedagogy signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actually work to construct relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities. Pedagogy, in the critical sense illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power (Giroux, 1994). The role of education is being perverted by the conservatives who want the schools to produce consumers (Giroux, 1997). If we were to apply critical theory to Giroux's own arguments, we would need to challenge thoughtfully each of his concerns. For example he worries about the gap between the rich and the poor and believes that the rich should do more for the oppressed. Americans are able to spend 10 trillion dollars on themselves because they produce 10 trillion dollars of products and services (*Economist*, 2004). This superfluity is not documented as causal for the world's misery or the gap as data on the gap are difficult to document. Recently great strides in the quality of life of millions of Chinese and Indians have been made. This progress was not made at the expense of anyone living in Africa or South America, rather it resulted from a change of government policies in India and China that allowed these two countries to take advantage of the world's economic system. Gap data are of some importance but the situation of the poor can be improved through actions of their own leaders. These arguments become so theoretical despite their claim to pragmatism that they are of marginal value to K-12 teachers. Who can envision 10 trillion anything? Giroux knows this

and argues against using rationalism, at least the technological kind, in the discourse, as so many rational ideas are based upon Western ways of knowing and existing forms of domination. I need a bit of help to fully understand this argument but I do know that Giroux is searching for a new type of social engineering, one not based on the traditional ways we have solved problems. Giroux wants to create new forms of knowledge through more interdisciplinary knowledge, less emphasis on individual disciplines, and more inclusion of popular culture in the curriculum, a move designed to reduce the divide between the culture of the elite and the “folk.” One important, and understandable, purpose of this inclusion is to have an informed analysis of the popular media such as television and film. It is essential to be able to recognize trivia and trash, and critical pedagogy provides a means for discrimination and the ordering of priorities.

Michael Apple (1996) is a neo-Marxist with a focus on the nuts and bolts of schooling; he makes his approach to critical pedagogy more understandable than other critical theorists. He uses the term “critical educational studies” rather than the more limited “critical theory” or “critical pedagogy.” Apple argues that there are real concerns in education grounded in the structural relations of education that are not simply social constructions. These would be difficult to change. Reflection must discriminate between these relations while promoting caring and social justice. He also argues that any approach that evacuates the aesthetic, the personal, and the ethical from our activities as educators is not about education at all; political arguments are not alternatives to moral and aesthetic concerns. Although Apple is moderate and inclusive in his writing, he remains firm about the crucial nature of basic human rights, the destruction of the environment, and the deadly conditions under which some children are raised that provide them with no hope for the future. His view is that the hegemonic alliance between the economic and political elites who see high academic standards as the only function of the school will only

make goals more difficult to achieve. A national curriculum will exacerbate gender, race and class differences. Cohesion is possible when we are willing to recognize the differences and inequalities that exist and if we agree on the importance not only of education but how it should be conducted. Apple would likely state that music educators have not asked the critical questions of schooling and of society, but rather they have spent their time fiddling at the edges or with issues of limited importance.

The big question was posed by Joscka Fischer, Germany's foreign minister, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq: What kind of world do we want? (Fischer as cited in Kagan, 2004). That question is basic for all of us in education, and in our discipline there are many questions such as who establishes the curriculum, teacher qualifications, student competency, who formulates the questions related to education and then who makes the decisions? Where critical pedagogy holds sway, students would not be obligated to accept our course objectives, our selection of experiences, and our method of course evaluation. It is interesting – even fun – to conjure up a range of issues about which there has been limited or no critical dialogue. I'll suggest a few that require reflection and action beginning with the most abstract, but you may add to the list for use in initiating critical pedagogy's strategies with your colleagues and students. The University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture set forth this challenge for its participants in April, 2004. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, art was often put forward as a form of redemptive activity that could replace the fallen meta-narratives of Christianity and socialism. Romantics in both centuries saw in art a realm of expression and influence that was fundamentally different from the coercion of political force and the perceived narrowness of religious devotion. As we begin the twenty-first century, however, much of this optimism has faded. Art seems powerless to effect social change; artists and academics make

smaller and smaller claims for what art can do to promote the vitality of a liberal society. Audiences, meanwhile, are disenchanted by the increasing abstraction of art, and artists often either distance themselves further from their audiences or surrender their art to becoming simply another form of capitalist enterprise (*Insight*, 2004). Why have the arts lost so much cultural capital? Why is music's considerable value to be available for all students but not required? How does music add to or enrich human life? What role, if any, do music teachers have in the power issues of education or the societal issues that are affected by the quality of thinking in the U.S.?

Critical pedagogues in education have abandoned disciplines as a way of organizing learning; William Pinar (2000) wants educators to think of curriculum as being organized in any one of the following: politically, racially, autobiographically, phenomenologically, theologically, internationally, in terms of gender, or even based on deconstruction. How would that work in music? I am unable to think intelligently about the music education curricula without separating required "general" music from the elective music program that is typified by secondary school music curricula. Even with this distinction, the boundaries of the general music program are fuzzy. A recent article advocating transforming school culture through the arts seemed to apply only to a required music program taught separately or integrated, as the program's purpose was to help the school and the community solve problems related to family fragmentation. The educators involved in this venture created "learning tribes" through which they promoted inclusiveness and the values of caring, cooperating, and respect – important outcomes but ones that may be attained through several avenues; in other words the arts or music would not provide unique experiences (Jones, 2003-04). The use of "arts education" as a substitute for music education means that curriculum scholars developing experiences in music are working in an

undefined area, as it is the arts that need to “fit” into the school program thus relegating music to just one of several ways of attaining goals for arts education. This change is deserving of informed thinking and considerable dialogue. Music (or arts education) touches the lives of citizens beyond formal schooling so critical pedagogy for music education would apply not only to K-12 experiences but to higher education, professional organizations, and society in general. How would one construct a humanities critical thinking requirement for all college students, and to what extent would music be a part of that curriculum?

Let me close by applying a bit of skepticism from critical theory/pedagogy to music education. Before applying it to the K-8 or K-12 classroom, one should reflect on the primary purpose of music education in the schools. Reflection on a philosophy makes sense, however, the profession works from the specific to the general. I’ve already indicated that I believe that there are two distinct music education programs in K-12 schools each with a unique philosophy and purpose but I’ll not pursue that further at this time. There has been a felt need by the professional organizations in the arts to describe their programs by outcomes or standards in order to be aligned with curricular subjects such as mathematics and the sciences. MENC-The National Association for Music Education has vigorously promoted national standards for a decade, developing teaching strategies to facilitate their attainment. Critical theorists in education are generally not supportive of national mandates in education and certainly not discipline specific standards. Not only was there an absence of professional dialogue prior to their adoption but the recommended standards do not represent the opinion of experts in the field. It remains appropriate to apply critical pedagogical principles to the standards and all pedagogical recommendations related to the standards.

Within the standards, critical pedagogues would use their strategies to reflect on the

competencies in music that contribute to the major goals of education. Skill development is of a higher priority in music than in other subjects in the school curriculum. Critical pedagogy appropriate for teaching English literature in the secondary school differs considerably from critical pedagogy in secondary school music focused on skills, as skills are learned efficaciously through direct instruction from a continuing teacher/coach who is adept at identifying “bad habits” that interfere with performing excellence and who can suggest appropriate remedies. There are important competencies in music that could profit from critical pedagogy, but they are not priority outcomes as reflected by the standards. With the present feverish appeal of critical pedagogy to many policy makers in education and to many American citizens, critical pedagogy deserves a hearing by all music educators. We should approach this area with considerable skepticism, as the outcomes of a valid music program appear to be unique and to share less in common with other core subjects than is widely believed. For example, the inability to distinguish between school and non-school music is a major good and must not be discarded because of peer pressure for a uniform approach to all teaching and learning. To put this argument in perspective: There have been no criticisms of music education, other than insufficient time to accomplish all goals as there has been of language arts and mathematics education. Most of us have studied music for decades and still find much of value that we do not know or cannot do. Thus, we really have an open road, a road that could profit by a critical in-house assessment of what kind of American citizen can contribute most to American democracy, starting with a skepticism of the entire educational reform movement that has provided little evidence that the problems of some school subjects are also problems in music education. We have based our teaching on practice (not praxis) and case studies unconnected to any theory that would hamper our ability to generalize. Yes, we have to look skeptically at ourselves and others,

but we also must recognize that control of the curriculum is also about power as much as it about efficacious teaching and learning.

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