

Progressive Pedagogical Praxis: The Importance of Adopting Intersectional Frameworks for a Praxis-Oriented Teaching Self

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English literature is one of those academic disciplines that I have come to appreciate for its interdisciplinarity.

As a secondary school English language arts teacher, I have become more attuned to the ways that literature promotes critical thinking and analysis of ideological frameworks—skills which have empowered me with the critical faculties to better deconstruct hegemonic assumptions. More recently, however, in my final semesters as an English literature undergraduate, I have come to realize, with the help of Terry Eagleton, that English literature itself is a hegemonic ideology: hegemonic in its privileging of certain texts as more “literary” than others, in its distinctions of value that prioritize figures like Shakespeare as measures of civilizations’ achievement, and in its seemingly normalized “unobtrusive power.”¹

Speaking from my cross-continental educational experiences in predominantly “Western” academic institutions, my encounters with English literature have been mediated through the predominance of the Western canon: Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Orwell, Beckett, Miller, and other White male authors. Though lightly peppered with empowering texts by

women authors, such as Sylvia Plath and Laura Esquivel, and people of color, such as Frederick Douglass and Alice Walker, the predominance of White male authors in (Western) secondary school English classrooms has remained, for the most part, until recently, unquestioned.

Critical pedagogy is a transformative pedagogical framework that foregrounds the politicized nature of current educational practices, in which certain discourses are privileged—while others, typically those in opposition to the dominant ones, are silenced.

Benedicta Egbo explores its dialectical views as simultaneously addressing the ways “power mediates academic success” and “how challenge and interrogation can interrupt” Eurocentrism’s hegemonic control over education. With the focus on improving outcomes for all students, in a democratic sense, critical pedagogy empowers students through dialogical communication, which “facilitate[s] the development of critical thought and expression.” In dialogically-centered classrooms, students are viewed as active constructionists of knowledge who, alongside their teachers, are encouraged to critically question mainstream understandings, canons, and assumptions. Thus, by recognizing and engaging “the sociopolitical environment within which their profession is embedded,” culturally literate teachers can expose the ways language acts as power to produce exclusionary practices and reinforce epistemological hegemony.²

Enacting change begins with understanding the pervasiveness of cognitive imperialism as a hegemonic Eurocentric project. Coined by Marie Battiste, cognitive imperialism is a “form of

¹ Benedicta Egbo, “Education and Diversity: Framing the Issues” in *Teaching for Diversity in Canadian Schools* (Toronto, ON: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009): 9.

² Benedicta Egbo, “Transformative Frameworks for Promoting Diversity” in *Teaching for Diversity in Canadian Schools* (Toronto, ON: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009): 112-114.

cognitive manipulation used in social and education systems to disclaim other knowledge systems and values.”³ Battiste emphasizes its effects on cognitive and epistemological domains, rather than on the cultural domain. As such, the enforcement and privileging of certain, more legitimized knowledges performs destructive epistemic violence. Epistemic violence, here, is used in Egbo and Spivak’s sense of the silencing of marginalized voices—encompassing the ways in which the westernized, English discourse privileges certain knowledge forms.⁴

Battiste explains that, in order for us to decolonize through transformative action, there must be a “personal commitment . . . to unpack and understand [our] own positionality and location in relation to oppression” and carry out “an explicit examination of privilege, dominance, and normalized discourses.”⁵ Battiste stresses the importance of self-examination and critical observation that foregrounds a reflective and reflexive critical consciousness towards confronting and challenging entrenched Eurocentric ideology. Thus, the concept of cognitive imperialism is crucial for understanding how the English literary canon reflects this supposed superiority of European knowledge systems, reinforced in the circulation of literature, and how, though a seemingly dialectical struggle, educators can begin to

combat its hegemonic violence by questioning and examining themselves.

Battiste’s proposed self-examination is directly linked to the notion of praxis: the continual construction and reconstruction of “a new mindset” through ongoing critical reflection and self-analysis.⁶ Careful introspection of our own beliefs, knowledge, and understandings enable us to reach self-awareness of the ways our identities influence our pedagogical choices.⁷ Knowing ourselves encourages us to make informed decisions so that we may recognize, in order to challenge, ingrained hegemonic ideologies.

Egbo emphasizes that one of the most important components of praxis is critical self-reflection, which encourages educators to regularly question their personal values, pedagogical beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions so that they may develop habits of self-monitoring “to identify and so modify undesirable practices.”⁸ Praxis, as such, requires our agential and personalized self-scrutiny to encourage ongoing self-improvement, to help us develop “an inclusive theory of practice,” and to provide “practical insights that can engender change and successful educational outcomes.”⁹ Otherwise, we remain unaware of our own biases and prejudiced beliefs, which further distances us from connecting and appropriately facilitating the learning process with our students. As a

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³ Marie Battiste, “Cognitive Imperialism,” in *Springer Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, ed. Michael Peters (New York, NY: Springer, 2016): 1.

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): 76.

⁵ Battiste, “Cognitive Imperialism,” 4.

⁶ Benedicta Egbo, “Initiating Praxis: Knowing Self, Students, and Communities” in *Teaching for Diversity in Canadian Schools* (Toronto, ON: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009): 123.

⁷ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 123-4.

⁸ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 126.

⁹ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 126.

result, another important dimension of praxis is knowing our students, which, as Egbo elaborates, includes “learning from the students themselves” in a reciprocated manner that actively involves “students in the construction of knowledge.”¹⁰

For progressive educational experiences to truly subscribe to praxis-oriented strategies, we must know our students and build meaningful partnerships with them through the adoption of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is an essential pedagogical approach that places the needs of students at the forefront by recognizing that each student comes into the classroom with “a cultural paradigm different from that of the teacher.”¹¹ While this seems obvious, the classroom is an environment where we, as teachers, can project “the rationality and superiority of our own worldviews” over our students, and thereby legitimizing, in a cognitive imperialist sense, our epistemologies over theirs.¹²

To combat this, culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that “focuses on teaching school knowledge by building on what students already know, thus making the students active participants in the learning process in very authentic ways.”¹³ As a subcategory of critical pedagogy, such an approach provides culturally relevant dialogical teaching “that engages, rather than disenfranchises, students.”¹⁴

Culturally relevant pedagogy personalizes the educational experience, enabling each student to relate the content to his or her cultural context. More importantly, it makes genuine the learning process by validating students, recognizing their learning priorities, and empowering them as they contribute to the construction of knowledge. In

the context of English literary study, adhering to a culturally relevant pedagogical approach includes selecting texts that represent the multiculturalism of the classroom, encouraging students to read and write texts that engage them on personalized levels, and drawing on the dynamic multivalence of literary texts that enable students to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct meanings in relation to their own understandings.

Relatedly, a multiliteracies pedagogy encourages us to view “language and other modes of meaning-making as dynamic representational resources.”¹⁵ In other words, it refers to the various and complex multimodalities in which people construct meanings through language, culture, and context. Like critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy, multiliteracies pedagogy relies on a learning environment that fosters growth and affirms difference to promote students’ co-collaboration. When we, as educators, validate students through genuine interest in, and understanding of, their diverse backgrounds, we encourage them to make connections and find continuity in their own literacies, as well as our own. As an inclusive pedagogical framework, multiliteracies pedagogy pushes us beyond our ingrained or static assumptions about what it means to understand and make meaning, and towards emergent, constructivist multimodalities that are dynamic and multifaceted.

Constructing knowledge is therefore predicated upon the cultural contexts that students bring to educational experiences. Such experiences also include, crucially, assessments. Students and teachers alike have predisposed notions of how to interpret and respond to

¹⁰ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 147.

¹¹ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 126.

¹² Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 126.

¹³ Egbo, “Initiating Praxis,” 147.

¹⁴ Egbo, “Transformative Frameworks for Promoting Diversity,” 112.

¹⁵ Fenice B. Boyd & Cynthia H. Brock, “Reflections on the Past, Working within the ‘Future’: Advancing a Multiliteracies Theory and Pedagogy” in *Social Diversity Within Multiliteracies: Complexity in Teaching and Learning*, ed. By Fenice B. Boyd & Cynthia H. Brock (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014): 2.

various questions, scenarios, or problems. These notions are influenced most pronouncedly by aspects of their cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, including values, communication patterns, learning styles, and epistemologies.¹⁶ As such, when designing and choosing assessments, providing students “with the opportunity to demonstrate what they really know in culturally responsive and valid ways” not only ensures the content is “accessible, meaningful, and relevant,” but also allows them to demonstrate their competence under the “conditions that show them to their best advantage.”¹⁷

In doing so, this cultural competence, or the recognition that cultural differences exist among students, fosters an inclusive and productive classroom in which students can confidently participate in a constructive cultural community.¹⁸ More specifically, culturally competent teachers employ critical pedagogical practices, take responsibility for knowing their students, and using “students’ cultures as a basis for learning.”¹⁹

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My philosophy of diversity embraces these concepts and pedagogical frameworks.

When considered in conjunction, they are integral to the formation of progressive pedagogical praxis. Rather than considering it as a separate component, critical pedagogy is the overarching commonality among them: any notion of critical pedagogy must include culturally literate teachers who can expose the epistemic violence of cognitive imperialism by engaging in self-critical and self-improving

practices. It must include a teacher who is able to facilitate dialogical classroom environments in which students, considered as constructionists of their knowledge, are validated through the applications of multiliteracies pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogical practices.

In my continued and developing practice as a secondary English literature teacher, I aim to integrate these components to encourage both myself and my students to better deconstruct and challenge the perpetuated cognitive imperialism in the canonization of English literature.

I must initiate and habituate critical introspection and self-modification in my practice.

I must foreground cultural competence and multiliteracies pedagogy to redefine, culturally contextualize, and personalize dynamic and collaborated modes of meaning-making

I must co-construct knowledge with my students through reciprocated and emergent learning—a learning that is fostered through validating, empowering, and authentic educational experiences.

¹⁶ María del Rosario Bastera, “Cognition, Culture, Language, and Assessment: How to Select Culturally Valid Assessments in the Classroom” in *Cultural Validity in Assessment: Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Diversity*, ed. by María del Rosario Bastera, Elise Trumbull, & Guillermo Solano-Flores (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011): 72-91.

¹⁷ Bastera, “Cognition, Culture, Language, and Assessment,” 80-2.

¹⁸ Bastera, “Cognition, Culture, Language, and Assessment,” 80.

¹⁹ Bastera, “Cognition, Culture, Language, and Assessment,” 80.