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## Special Issue Introduction: 50 Years of Critical Pedagogy and We Still Aren't Critical

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## Introduction

### 50 Years of Critical Pedagogy and We Still Aren't Critical

Shirley R. Steinberg

A new millennium, and a quarter of a century since Paulo Freire died...

Paulo engaged us with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sometime after 1970, '68 in Brazil. When we acquired our first copy of Freire, many of us stayed up all night, we were energized...astonished that someone finally *got it*. Those early days of critical pedagogy were full of answers, we knew them all, we read copiously, and sent out our prose, expounding upon what had become the obvious: education was not about an *it, a thing, a lesson*...it was about our schools, our students, the context in which we all found ourselves. We were ready to rumble, we heard those cries from the corridors, practiced the practice, taught to transgress, drank bitter milk, we would become intellectuals, understand our exiles and communities, make our road by walking, and that as teachers, well, we were cultural workers. We knew it all, we did it all, we had the answers. Oh, the smugness with which we breezed through hallways, our qualitative, critical theoretical, neo-Marxist, post-modernized selves. We could juggle our Aronowitz with our Foucault, our Bourdieu with our Bowles and Gintis, we grew taller explaining the first Giroux, and shared our *Women's Ways of Knowing*...in the bag, a new pedagogy, we would change the world.

In the cold winter of 1991, Donaldo Macedo invited us up to Boston to meet

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Paulo Freire, as little Muhammads, we would go to the Mountain, meet the source of our strength...so much to say, to ask, to hear. The day/evening didn't disappoint, Joe Kincheloe and I have told this story many times, and so it goes. We met Paulo at his favorite Portuguese restaurant, overwhelmed by this tiny bearded man, his enthusiasm, passions, and love emanated from his warm embrace and, well, frankly, his love of food. Paulo insisted we order soup pots filled with boiling chicken, vegetables and broth, each of us having our own pot, we ate most of the afternoon. As I have noted before in my writing, Paulo loved to eat. He said that he could never trust someone who didn't like to eat. He relished food, the look, scent, and taste...consequently his conversation at dinner often went to food...the food of the people. And when he spoke of food, he drew it to the context of emancipation, of knowing, of reading the world.

I was primed for my life to be nourished by critical pedagogy; not only had I been blessed with amazing mentors, (David G. Smith, Julie Ellis, Kathleen Berry), I had dined with Paulo...the real deal. Teaching my first courses in the foundations of education, I was invincible, had the answers, could pose the questions. My students were psyched, they were engaged, I was a changer...I would make a difference.

Soon after my first set of classes, my students were sent into the field, ready to continue the gospel. I shudder at the first phone call I received by one of my students...she was dashed to the wall by a cooperating teacher who told her how to categorize the class by race and economic status. She was sobbing, how could this be? Standing up to the teacher, she gave her "Freirean" response, the oppression, the reading the world, the whole bit. She cried to me, "how could you do this to me? You taught me things I can't use, the schools don't want to know about justice and empowerment, they want us to follow directions." A week later, the students returned to class...where were the triumphs, the testimonies of wonderment, the emancipatory way they had all paved? Didn't "it" work? Actually, no, it didn't. My work was so obsessed with Freire's words, that I didn't encourage them to stop to contextualize and read the words of others. Teachers and administrators weren't interested in emancipation, they had standards, rules, tests, and running records to deal with. Context? Context was the classroom, the teacher-proofed readers with the red paragraphs telling us how to answer questions. How could I have been so wrong?

Tapping into my inner Giroux/Grumet/Pagano/McLaren/Britzman soul, I revisited every discussion we had. All the fun, laughter, tears, the coming-to-Jesus moments we sought in order to be the revolutionary teachers we were meant to be. Teaching is not as simple as eating a pot of chicken. Reading the world means to read the world we don't like or agree with as well...nothing is ever "in the bag." Teaching, critically teaching, is hard work. It requires us to rise above the petty annoyances of those who *aren't like we are*. We are the interlopers, we are the minority, most don't want to have liberatory, critical students...they want obedient, grade-getting quiet students to pass the tests and make the curriculum look good.

My teaching required a redux. I had to understand the context. Not the context of the mango tree, or ebonics, or gender equity...I had to understand the context of a capitalist country, an anti-intellectual environment, a standards-based curriculum, and the obsession with being #1. I am still learning, my frustration grows, with colleagues, students, parents, and the corporate takeovers of our universities. Like Sartre's existential hell, we burn with other people: educators, administrators, and politicians...incinerated by frustration and exhaustion. I'm not going to stop, give up... but it sure as hell is hard to keep that pedagogy of hope Paulo told us about. So here we are, 50+ years later, the oppressed still don't have a pedagogy...and we still keep on keepin' on.

That's what this issue of *Taboo* is...keepin' on. Different voices, different pedagogies, all trying to make a difference. With critical pedagogy, there is no "there" there. It isn't a thing, a method, a way, it's not a philosophy, not a curriculum. Critical pedagogy is a spirit, an image of what can be if we are able to see what is. It is a commitment to be teachers as activists, to be unpopular, to be humble, but be shit-stirrers, and to create pedagogical uncoverings of what we can do...what our students can do.

About three years ago, I ceased using the singular term, critical pedagogy... it isn't a thing, it's a vibe, and there are so many critical pedagogies. Freire didn't have a method, a taxonomy, he had a way of being...a way of doing...a way of reading. In this special issue, in the journal I started with Kincheloe two decades ago, I invite you to delve into the words of those who care to make that difference...knowing full well that it may never come to be. Freire didn't create a critical pedagogy, he presented multiple ways of knowing, critical pedagogies which may or may not succeed, given the context of the class, of the teacher, of the "rules," and of the heart. It ain't easy, but it's nice work if you can get it.