



Soupbone Syllabus: Critical Pedagogy

Adapted from [Soupbone Collective](#) discussions in January and February 2021. Created by Shawn Coughlin, Margaret Schnabel, and Rebecca Young. Discussion presentation found [here](#).

Course Description

Founded by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that advocates for the liberation of oppressed people by critically evaluating and disrupting traditional pedagogical practices. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire dismantles commonplace assumptions regarding how education should unfold — including the power imbalance between teachers and students and what he refers to as “the banking model for education.” In these discussions, we draw on Freire and a resulting generation of educators to investigate critical pedagogy in contemporary classrooms and beyond. In our dedication to making knowledge accessible, we recognize critical pedagogy as an invaluable tool for community-building—and, by extension, cultivating multiple ways of knowing and working collaboratively to produce life and meaning. We consider how critical pedagogy has evolved alongside emerging social needs and movements, as well as how it is complicated by shifting classroom relations and alternative environments.

Our first discussion, Content and Design, examines what critical pedagogy is and how it is practically implemented in classrooms today. Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* alongside Bree Picower's “Using Their Words,” we trace how Freire's dialogic pedagogy continues to influence social justice education. Discussion two, Pedagogy in Practice, examines the classroom relations proposed by education strategies like restorative justice and trauma-informed practices. We use Laurent Cantet's 2008 film, *The Class*, as a case study for considering how critical pedagogy is executed and stalled by refusals in the classroom. Finally, following Freire's call for radical change beyond the classroom, our third discussion examines a variety of texts — including bell hooks' *Writing to Transgress* (1994), Bettina Love's *We Want More Than To Survive* (2019), and poetry and fiction from Jos Charles and Toni Morrison — to consider how the philosophies of critical pedagogy can be applied to our everyday experiences learning in dialogue with others.

Content and Design: What and How Are We Teaching and Learning?

Discussion Materials:

- ❑ Chapter 2 from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, 1968
- ❑ “Using Their Words: Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design,” by Bree Picower, 2012
- ❑ *The West Wing* (clip from season 2, ep. 16) dir. by John Gallagher, 2001

In what ways have you experienced “authentic education” (or not)?

Discussion questions:

1. Do you agree with Freire’s analyses of pedagogy and oppression? Why/how is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* still relevant today?
2. Freire tells us that, “**authentic education is** not carried on by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather **by ‘A’ with ‘B,’** mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it” (93). Why does Freire stress learning ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ or ‘about.’ In what ways have you experienced “authentic education” (or not)?
3. What do you view as the ideal role of a student/teacher? Does the reality of classrooms today reflect that ideal?
4. Centered on the thoughts and feelings of students, Bree Picower proposes a six-element plan for practicing Social Justice Education: 1) self-knowledge; 2) respect for others; 3) issues of social injustice; 4) social movements and change; 5) awareness-raising; 6) social action. How have you seen these elements implemented within and beyond classrooms?
 - a. What do you think about “teachers who want students to be active citizens but are uncomfortable addressing the ugly histories” (3)?
 - b. How would you teach social justice?

Pedagogy in Practice: How Are These Concepts Implemented?



Deborah Roberts, *Let Them Be Children*, mixed media collage on canvas. 2018.

Discussion materials:

- ❑ *The Class* dir. Laurent Cantet, 2008
- ❑ “Restorative Justice in School: An Overview,” from Cult of Pedagogy podcast (ep. 89), 2018
- ❑ “Trauma-Informed Practices Benefit All Students,” by Alex Shevrin Venet on Edutopia, 2017

What refusals have you made in the classroom? What assignment(s) would you have refused if you could?

Discussion questions:

“Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak, their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.”

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“If your words are less important than silence, keep quiet.”

— Souleymane from *The Class*

1. To build the groundwork for restorative justice, Smalls tells us that “teachers have to be intentionally trying, **working to create personal relationships within their classrooms.** So they’re doing things like having circles and telling kids about their lives, telling stories about what happens to them, **giving the kids a chance to have an insight into their own personal culture.**” What is the texture of classroom relations grounded in restorative justice? How does Small represent teacher-student relations?

- a. When do students in *The Class* find the chance to share “insight into their own personal culture?” How does their insight influence the classroom?
 2. Consider your own education. How would have restorative justice or trauma-informed practices (i.e. healing circles, meditative circles, actor-to-actor resolution) altered your experiences?
 - a. Recall an incident of punitive punishment and imagine alternatives to this detention, suspension, or expulsion. Rather than shaming and isolating students, how could repairs have been made?
 3. *The Class* highlights the role of discipline in education — including its construction, execution, and limitations. What issues or nuances does the school’s disciplinary policy fail to account for? Where are critical pedagogy and restorative justice practices enacted in the film? Where are they missing?
 - a. How does Khoumba’s ‘respect’ letter to François rewrite their teacher-student relationship?
 - b. Recall when François approaches Esmerelda in the courtyard/playground. How does this scene challenge pedagogical practices observed in the classroom?
 - c. What limitations of institutional and punitive discipline does the film exploit?
 4. Self-representation plays a major role in both critical pedagogy and *The Class*. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that the oppressed must ‘reclaim’ their right to speak by rendering their identities and world-views legible. Similarly, François encourages his class to create self-portraits so that they can share their experiences (personal, national, etc.) with one another. What is the impact of self-representation in *The Class*? How do students represent themselves and are they successful? Where is self-representation refused and what can we learn from these refusals?
 - a. When asked to share his self-portrait, Souleymane responds, “If your words are less important than silence, keep quiet.” What happens when ‘the oppressed’ refuse to speak? Is his refusal an act of resistance, and if so, what is he resisting?
 - b. At the end of *The Class*, Henriette tells François that she did not learn anything. What does she mean by this admission and why is it so difficult for François (and perhaps us) to believe?
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Critical Pedagogy Beyond: How Do These Concepts Apply to Other Environments



Image of bell hooks lecturing.

Discussion materials:

- ❑ “Building a Teaching Community,” from *Teaching the Transgress* by bell hooks, 1994
- ❑ “We Who Are Dark,” by Bettina Love, 2019
- ❑ Excerpt from *Feeld*, by Jos Charles, 2018
- ❑ “Recitatif,” by Toni Morrison, 1983

WHAT IS THE MOST LIBERATED, OR LIBERATING, CLASS YOU'VE BEEN IN?

Discussion questions:

1. In “Building a Teaching Community,” hooks writes,

In recent years, many white male scholars have become critically engaged with my writing. It troubles me that this engagement has been viewed suspiciously or seen merely as an act of appropriation meant to enhance opportunistic agendas. If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. (131)

What would it mean for “all border crossings [to be] seen as valid and legitimate” right now?

2. In hooks’ view, one of the key differences between “education as a practice of freedom and the

conservative banking system” are the power relationships between students and teachers: in the latter, teachers are encouraged to believe that they have nothing to learn from their students, while in the former, the process of accruing knowledge is a mutual act, equally determined and guided by the professor and the student. **What is the most liberated, or liberating, class you’ve been in? Have you experienced the shifts of power that hooks describes?**

- a. Do you find hearing others’ personal narratives helpful?
3. In “We Who Are Dark,” Bettina Love outlines a detailed definition of abolitionist teaching (p. 2). What terms in Love’s definition of abolitionist teaching surprised you?
 - a. In what context did you hear the term ‘abolitionist teaching’? Does Love’s definition align with your initial understanding of the term? Would you add anything?
 - b. What did you think of the way Love characterizes the **end goal** of abolitionist teaching? (p. 17)
4. According to Love,

Education reform is big business, just like prisons. [...] Both prisons and schools create a narrative of public outrage and fear that dark bodies need saving from themselves. The two industries play off each other, and America believes that criminality and low achievement go hand in hand. (11)


In what ways does Love’s comparison speak to your own educational experience? What steps are necessary to counteract the “fear that dark bodies need saving from themselves”? Is this an American issue or a global issue?

5. Let’s [listen to Jos Charles read from Feeld](#).
 - a. What words does Charles’ verbal reading clarify?
 - b. Where is the meaning still ambiguous?
 - c. What happens when familiar words (‘women,’ ‘want,’ ‘hoarse’/‘horse’) are defamiliarized?
6. Must queer language always embody, as a reviewer writes of Charles’ book, a **“mismatch of thing and word and sight”**—i.e., be **difficult**? How does Charles **play with** and **create pleasure** from language?
7. Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” was published in *Confirmation*, a 1983 anthology edited by Amiri and Amina Baraka. In the story, racial signifiers are important, but inconclusive—Morrison never indicates who is Black and who is white. How did you initially read Twyla’s remarks that she was “stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race” and that “we looked like salt and pepper standing there”? How did these moments complicate your view of textual ‘evidence’?
8. Throughout “Recitatif,” Morrison also underscores the ways in which memory is fraught and highly malleable—primarily through Roberta and Twyla’s recurring conversations about Maggie, a kitchen worker at St. Bonny’s.
 - a. What does this story teach you about Maggie, and how? How does Morrison use

Maggie to probe at the fallibility of memory?

- b. How do Twyla and Roberta's memories of Maggie intersect with race? In what ways is race, like memory, socially constituted? How are they distinct?
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Further recommendations:

Our discussion slides [here](#) 

Criticism / Theory

- ❑ Sedgwick, Eve; "Pedagogy of Buddhism" from *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (2002).
- ❑ Ewing, Eve; *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*. (2018).
- ❑ Tuck, Eve; "[Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities](#)." (2009).
- ❑ Kramnick, Jonathan; "[The Interdisciplinary Fallacy](#)." (2017).
- ❑ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney; "[The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses](#)" from *Social Text*, 22.2. (2004).

Non Fiction / Articles

- ❑ Anderson, Melinda; "[Why the Myth of Meritocracy Hurts Kids of Color](#)." (2017).
- ❑ Schwartz, Sarah; "[How Do We Teach With Primary Sources When So Many Voices are Missing](#)" (2019).
- ❑ Stover, Justin; "[There Is No Case for the Humanities](#)" (2018).

Fiction

- ❑ Smith, Zadie; *On Beauty*. (2005).
- ❑ Binnie, Imogen; [Nevada](#). (2013).
- ❑ Puchner, Eric; "[Essay #3: Leda and the Swan](#)" from *Music Through the Floor* (2005).
- ❑ Barth, John; *Giles Goat-Boy*. (1966).

Poetry

- ❑ Ewing, Eve; *Electric Arches*. (2017).
- ❑ Layli Long Soldier; *Whereas*. (2017).

Art

- ❑ Abdella, Trey; [*Temper Tantrum*](#). (2020).
- ❑ Roberts, Deborah; [*Let Them Be Children*](#). (2018).

Music

- ❑ Soupbone's Critical Pedagogy [Spotify Playlist](#)

Film / Video

- ❑ Menéndez, Ramón; *Stand and Deliver*. (1988).