

Meaning Making and Making Meaning Meaningful: The Relationship Between Language and Thought in Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between reasoning and language in critical pedagogy, which is quite curiously left unspecified by many critical theorists, who relegate to a singularity: “language-thought.” Exploring that language-thought relationship reveals that the exercise of language is not enough to constitute thinking. Rather, thinking emerges only through self-aware meaning-making. The crux is that neither self-awareness nor meaning-making emerges unless words construct change.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, critical thinking

MEANING MAKING AND MAKING MEANING MEANINGFUL

Beginning with Paulo Freire’s (1987) seminal condemnation of traditional “banking” pedagogies in which “the teacher thinks and the students are thought about” (p. 54), critical theorists have sought liberating pedagogies founded in the belief that teachers must encourage students to reason about their world, i.e. not be “thought about.” The individual’s critical engagement of the world through thinking and language not only motivates “problem posing” education, but equally other critical mainstays such as *conscientizacao*—the understanding of social position and cultural forces—and praxis—the harmonization of thinking, naming, and action. As such, it will come as no shock to those familiar with criti-

cal theory that it holds cultivating the individual's capacity to reason about the world as a primary objective.

What is curious, if not outright ironic, about critical pedagogy's fervency for reasoning is that critical theorists largely leave "reasoning" undefined. While we find ample allusions to the importance of reasoning capacity in nearly all writings on critical theory, a precise understanding of reasoning in the critical paradigm remains elusive. For example, when Freire writes that "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (1987, p. 58), he makes a valuable point about how thinking must be dialogic, but "thinking" as the cognitive action remains nebulous.

To a certain degree, it seems unfair to critique critical pedagogy for failing to define within its context something so difficult to define in *any* context. Yet if reasoning is to be valued (and it should be), it certainly needs to be defined. In fact, the absence of its definition only enables critiques of critical theory from theorists (Hairston, 1992; McComiskey, 1993) who see it as primarily concerned with a political agenda rather than an educational one. That said, this inquiry does not concern itself with the critiques of critical pedagogy's stance but rather with understanding how critical theory defines reasoning. While I hope doing so dispels assertions that critical theory is merely a political pedagogy, the greater value will be understanding what "thinking" we should strive for when teaching (critically or not).

Though an unusual thing to do at the relative beginning of a piece, I'm going to start with the answer to the question and define thinking in the critical context. Back in 1981, Ann Berthoff (1981) actually offered a fairly succinct account of how critical theory defines reasoning, herein referred to as "critical awareness":

Critical awareness is consciousness of *consciousness* (a name for the active mind). Minding the mind, being conscious of consciousness, is not the same sort of thing as thinking about your elbows when you're about to pitch a baseball; nor is it *self*-consciousness. Consciousness in meaning-making activity always involves us in interpreting our interpretations; thinking is a matter of "arranging our techniques of arranging"; criticism is a matter of coming to "Know our knowledge." (p. 44)

But what does "consciousness of consciousness" mean? And if we understand what it means, why is it so important? Though succinct in itself, and though surrounded by some additional discussion, fully decrypting what "consciousness of consciousness" means requires a more Frankensteinian collection of fragments from other critical pedagogues.

Critical Thinking Emerges through a Linguistic Social Construction

What's clear from the outset is that critical pedagogues view reasoning not from a positivist perspective but rather as occurring within a socially constructed reality, with language serving as a means of creating the world rather than a means of "knowing" it. As Giroux and McLaren (1992) explain it,

... language constitutes reality rather than merely reflecting it. Language ... is not conceptualized as a transparent window to the world but rather as a symbolic medium that actively shapes and transforms the world. That is, language is the primary medium through which social identities are constructed, collective agents are formed, cultural hegemony secured, and emancipatory practice both named and acted upon. (p. 12)

Thus, Giroux and McLaren, and other critical pedagogues (Freire, 1987; Shor, 1992; Frankenstein, 1992; Wardekker & Miedema, 1997) attribute to language an all-encompassing power, one that not only interacts with the world and constructs our identities within it but one that also establishes our hegemonic place within that world. Language not only governs our interaction with the world from a personal perspective, i.e. how we perceive it, it also governs our position relative to other power structures and linguistic constructs.

So powerful, then, is language's role in Giroux and McLaren's critical conception that they authors reject the notion that an identifiable self can exist outside of language use. While Giroux and McLaren (1992) concede a *physical* existence exists as part of a "non-discursive world outside of language" (p. 14), they assert that "language helps us constitute subjectivity, which is often constructed out of a multiplicity of subjective positions ... [and is] distinct from identity because ... [the] term 'identity' ... implies that there is a fixed essence that exists independently of the range of discourses made available to individuals" (p. 14). Thus, while Giroux and McLaren concede a material reality, they contend that no "self" can exist outside the language construct; they embrace linguistic subjectivity but deny non-linguistic identity.

Since the self is subjective emergence of language, it fluctuates according to circumstance. As Giroux and McLaren (2012) put it, we have "an individual presence without essence" (p. 14). That "individual presence" does exist but we cannot possibly identify existence's nature without naming it, and that act of naming it makes it both subjective and linguistic. Therefore, thinking and the thinking self emerge only through language. But a problem emerges: If the self exists *only* as a subjective linguistic construct, and therefore only as a relative one, how does that "individual presence without essence" achieve the act of reasoning?

We can begin to discern the way such a subjective "self" reasons by examining how critical theory treats that self pedagogically. If there can be no self aside from its linguistic construction, there also can be no ontological external reality aside from its relation to that self because, as Giroux and McLaren point out, all

conceptions of reality are governed by naming. Therefore, as Susan Gabel (2002) remarks, critical pedagogy

must not conceptualize the subject. The [student] subject should not be preformed as belonging to a particular race, or sexuality, or (dis)ability, or class prior to the pedagogical relationship. Rather, the pedagogical *subjects* [emphasis added] (teacher and student) must emerge within interactions in the pedagogical community. (p. 181)

Hence, there is no topic without individuals who engage and define that subject through language. Yet that language functions through a dynamic between the knower and the known does not mean that we can see the specific role language plays in that dynamic; we do not see the dynamic between thought and language.

The Inseparability of Thinking and Language

Toward understanding that language-thought dynamic, Freire and Macedo (1987) offer some insight when discussing literacy, the crux of which comes down to a fusion of the “two” acts:

The knowledge of earlier knowledge, gained by the learners as a result of analyzing praxis in its social context, opens to them the possibility of a new knowledge. The new knowledge reveals the reason for being that is behind the fact, thus demythologizing the false interpretations of these same facts. Thus, *there is no longer any separation between thought-language and objective reality* [emphasis added]. (p. 157)

Although Freire and Macedo are speaking to the point of how knowledge comes to be accepted as knowledge, the essential point here concerns their conflation of thought and language into the singularity of “thought-language.” Their advocacy for that singularity offers two critical clues into how critical theory defines reasoning: First, it affirms Giroux and McLaren’s social constructed view of the world. Although on face value, Freire and Macedo’s use of the term “objective reality” suggests a positivistic view of reality, that face value understanding is a red herring. Examining the sentence more closely reveals that the authors conflate “thought-language” and “objective reality” into a singular element, therefore signifying that “*objective*” reality only emerges from the linguistic cognition of the “self.” Reality is, for all intents and purposes, a construct.

Aside from affirming reality as a construct, the second way the “thought-language” singularity clues us into how critical theory views reasoning is that critical theorists cannot separate the “two” at all. In other words, the fact that it *is* a singularity means that Freire and Macedo cannot articulate the former without the latter. Though they hyphenate the two terms, they offer only a typographical distinction between them, not a functional one.

Freire (1987) does this again in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by stating that our “object of investigation is not people . . . but rather the thought-language with which people refer to reality” (p. 91). And we see the same conflation when Giroux and McLaren (2012) assert that “experience is largely understood through language” (p. 16), with the implication being that there can be little cognition—the “understood”—without language. While that initial statement seems to suggest that *some* cognition can pre-exist language, they quickly go on to erase that separation by stating that “*experience is constituted by language*” [emphasis added] (p. 16). For Giroux and McLaren, therefore, understanding the experience through linguistic conceptualization *is* the experience itself, and we cannot identify any experience otherwise. And since naming (language) is the same as understanding (cognition), Giroux and McLaren just as easily could have said that “experience is constituted by thought-language,” thus returning us to Freire’s conflation of the terms.

In one *seeming* point of contrast to the singularity, Freire said that “[o]ur task is not to teach students to think—they already think; but, to exchange our ways of thinking with each other and look together for better ways of approaching the decodification of an object” (as cited in Frankenstein, 1992, p. 246). Such a distinction between thinking about an object and the object itself seems to contradict earlier notions of “thought-language” as one. Yet a closer unpacking suggests that Freire’s initial use of “think” does not refer to a cognitive process of reasoning but rather to raw cognitive ability, i.e. intellect. The latter half of the statement, by contrast, refers to “better ways” to *reason*. In fact, considering the importance Freire places on “exchang[ing] ways of thinking with each other,” it seems accurate to interpret his statement as suggesting that students already possess intellect but lack the means of reasoning, i.e. discourse. This returns us to the inseparability of thinking and language.

Given that inseparability, it is no wonder that critical theorists hold language use in such esteem, such as in the classic distinction between the “banking” and “problem posing” education. In the former, “the teacher thinks and the students are thought about.” Why? Because it is in “the banking notion of consciousness that the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ the students. . . . And since people ‘receive’ the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still” (Freire, 1987, p. 57). That passivity comes not only because teachers positively “know” the world, but also because they communicate that knowledge *to* students by filling students with pre-formed *language*, thus depriving students of the ability to linguistically interact with the world themselves.

Following the same logic, Shor (1992) points more directly to language use as a requisite of education, stating that the banking method “represents [students] as deficient, devoid of culture and language, needing to be filled with of-

ficial knowledge” (p. 32). As he articulates it, the essential problem with the banking method comes in how it approaches students as “devoid of . . . language,” which leaves them (a) unable to name the world themselves and (b) at the will of whatever language comes to them from their “teachers.” A close read of Schor’s statement about banking education therefore establishes a clear distinction between the exercise of language, which simultaneously involves thinking, i.e. language-thought, and the ingestion of language as a passive act, i.e. banking.

Withholding Language Therefore Suppresses Thinking

With language use and thinking therefore intertwined, perhaps the deeper interrelationship between the “two” forces can become more apparent through Freire’s (1987) contention that “it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions. Superficial conversations to the cause of liberation carry danger” (p. 48). Like Shor, Freire considers language—“dialogue, reflection, and communication”—as the operative force by which educators will help humanize students or the force by which teachers will dehumanize them through canned instruction—“slogans, communiqués, monologues.”

Yet Freire’s passage also points to a more insidious function of language in education. Before educators choose between languaging-at-students (monologue) vs. languaging-with-students (dialogue), they get to language-about-students, i.e. label them as capable of reasoning and exercising language or not capable of reasoning and exercising language. Students labeled incapable of reasoning will not be reasoned *with* (by the teacher), thus perpetuating their inability to reason in the future. Thus, the teachers’ use of thought-language *about the students* ultimately shapes what the students do or do not become.

This withholding of language suppresses the amount of cognition that occurs. Teachers who dehumanize students into bankable objects equally dehumanize themselves by failing to engage a meaningful dialogic. “Verbalistic lessons,” Freire (1987) writes in reference to non-dialogic chatter, “reading requirements, the methods for evaluating ‘knowledge,’ the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking” (p. 57). Thus, “verbalistic lessons”—empty banking uses of language which stand in contrast to a genuine critical dialogic—prevent teachers from reasoning just as much it prevents their students from doing so. Absent of genuine language use, the teacher assumes a position of static, positivist knowledge and “obviate[s]” his or her own “thinking” about the issues at hand by failing to exercise thought-language. In short, a lack of a dialogic suppresses thought in teacher and student alike.

That suppression, as Marilyn Frankenstein (1992) asserts, ultimately results in the obfuscation of reality for all involved: the “dominant language [such as that spewed by anti-dialogic teachers] can distort people’s ability to know reality critically” because it not only fails to represent reality, it also fails to involve students in thought-language construction (p. 244). Referencing M. W. Apple, Frankenstein suggests that “labels used in educational settings work against the development of critical consciousness by mystifying the situations and relations which they describe” (p. 244). To expound on Frankenstein, when students ingest subject matter through prefabricated teacher-language disconnected from subjective understanding, that dominant(ing) use of language will “mystify” them by keeping them detached from cognition. Similarly, teachers who “label” students *a priori* of engaging them only end up “mystify[ing]” those students as “smart” or “dumb” rather than engaging them through thought-language as real human beings. Therefore, by adopting and espousing dominant(ing) verbalism, the banking teacher becomes as disconnected from reality as the students, all the while grinding true language-thinking to a virtual halt for all parties involved.

In contrast, by adopting a “problem posing” methodology, the “teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (Freire, 1987, p. 61). This is the true dialectic of which Freire speaks, one in which knowledge “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1987, p. 53). Contrasting this against the positivist, banking method, we find a world of knowledge constructed through the act of exercising language-thought “with each other” rather than as a static reality to be ingested.

Language-thought is not an act but a state: Consciousness.

Yet what proves essential in understanding how critical pedagogues characterize thinking is that the dialogic is not merely an activity in which we engage, as in dialoguing with students or not, but rather a state of existence. As Giroux (1984) writes, it is “a critical mode of reasoning and behavior” (p. 114), thus pointing to it not as something we *do* but rather as an expression of a state of being, i.e. “behavior.” As behaviors are externalized expressions of internalized “subjective positions,” we are not beings capable of reasoning but reasoning-beings, and given previous discussion of the connection between cognition and language, *our “beingness” is contingent on the presence of language-thinking.*

Building on that contingency of “beingness,” Freire identifies three levels of consciousness, the lowest level of which includes people “with the most dominated, ‘semi-transitive’ consciousnesses [who] have a fragmented, localized awareness of their situation and are unable to *think* [emphasis added] dialectically about

it” (Frankenstein, 1992, p. 241). In a banking pedagogy, for example, students receive fragmented, decontextualized pieces of information with which they cannot interact dialectically. We equally could consider such information localized in that it does not exist in the context of the students’ world, but rather remains contextual only to the academic institution. Students learning about history in this semi-transitive model receive only pre-selected pieces of history that carry meaning only pertinent to succeeding in history class itself.

One step up from semi-transitive consciousness, those “living in more open societies naturally develop ‘naïve transitive’ consciousness where they begin to see causes in a broader context, but are still convinced that ‘causality is a static, established fact’” (Frankenstein, 1992, p. 241). Consequently, they are not susceptible to change through their actions. Continuing the history class example, naïve transitive students might recognize some greater implications of the history lessons and connect those lessons to the modern world, perhaps facilitated by the teacher’s pedagogy, but still view that history as something apart from them, something they can play no role in constructing or interpreting, something to be learned through ingestion rather than something about which to construct understanding. Such history also would “mystify” them because it would be pre-selected by the teacher rather than emerging from the dialectic, and the amount of actual thinking would remain minimal.

Both semi-transitive and naïve transitive consciousnesses fall well short of what critical pedagogues consider true critical consciousness. As Shor (1992) writes:

In education, critically conscious teachers and students synthesize personal and social meanings with a specific theme, text, or issue. The problem of literacy, for example, is addressed in a context related to the everyday life and language of students. History and literature are studied in relation to student autobiography. Science is contextualized inside student experience and in relation to power and problems in society. A class for critical consciousness explores the historical context out of which knowledge has emerged and its relation to the current social context. It suggests that people can learn what they need to know to act transformatively on the conditions they discover in school and society. (p. 129)

Consciousness, which we saw to be a manifestation of language-thought, only emerges through *participation* in the construction of reality, which occurs through a conflation of “external” topics and our subjective selves. Or rather as Shor points out, topics are “contextualized inside student experience”—there is no topic apart from student experience of “it.”

Returning, therefore, to the connection between thinking, language, and consciousness, consciousness is not something we can do; we cannot be conscious *about* subject matter. Rather, consciousness begets subject matter. Consciousness,

to return to Giroux's word, is "behavior." We behave consciously or not. *We are* conscious or we are not. Or as Freire (1987) puts it, "consciousness and world are simultaneous" (p. 62).

Reaffirming language's essential role in consciousness, it is not just "consciousness and [the] world [that] are simultaneous." Rather, *as consciousness is only constructed through the language then consciousness and word are also simultaneous*. Or, to quote Freire's and Macedo's (1987) famous maxim, "[r]eading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). Therefore, it might appear as though critical theory defines reasoning as consciousness that emerges through dialogic interaction with the world through the word.

However, just when that resolution seems near, it is at this point that the connection between language and thought in critical theory becomes even more tenuous. First, Freire's notion that reading the world "precedes" the word becomes troubling in that it implies that consciousness pre-exists language, i.e. that we can be conscious of the world without the word. And while it might seem as though Freire and Macedo (1987) use the "reading the word" literally—referring strictly to the act of literacy itself rather than to the more general act of using language—they clarify that point when stating that "even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world" (p. 35). Thus, in seeming contradiction to his previous statements concerning the singularity of language-thought, Freire seems to establish world consciousness as existing prior to word consciousness.

Freire and Macedo (1987) continue on to explain that "reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work" (p. 35). This produces more questions: How can we "read the world" prior to the "spoken word," much less the written one? How can we write and rewrite the world without the (spoken or written) word? And most troubling, how can we have *conscious* effect on the *world* without the *word*?

To all three questions, Frankenstein (1992) offers some insight, noting that literacy "becomes an important part of a liberatory curriculum because reading enables people to gain distance from the concrete immediacies of their everyday lives in order to understand more clearly how their lives are shaped by and in turn can shape the world" (p. 244). In other words, language (literacy) allows us to look upon our "selves," our "realities." Returning then to Freire, we can understand his placement of world before word as an acknowledgment that our lives do involve "concrete immediacies"—direct, moment-to-moment interactions with a physical something, i.e. the world. But such interaction occurs at one of the three levels of consciousness discussed earlier, and those levels of consciousness about the "concrete immediacies" determine our "distance" from it, i.e. how much perspective we gain on our own circumstance and how aware we are of our place

within the greater social construct. In this way, reading the world *does* precede reading the word insofar as we exist with “concrete immediacies,” but *consciousness about the world* emerges only through language-thought; only *language* offers us “distance” through which to reflect back on the world consciously.

Consciousness requires the linguistic distance to reflect on the “self”

This reflective “distance” will prove essential to understanding reasoning in critical theory, which, as Shor begins to elucidate, involves a “critical posture towards the construction of the self in society” (Buffington and Moneyhun, 1997, p. 16). Breaking Shor’s statement down, we see that it delineates between two different selves. The first and more obvious one is the “self in society.” However, if we are to hold a “critical posture towards” the self, then there must be something that holds that critical posture. Therefore, the second and less obvious self is the self that adopts the “critical posture towards” the “self in society.”

How can a self reflect on a self? Through consciousness. Through distance. It is only the conscious self that can reflect on the self that exists within the “concrete immediacies” of existence. In fact, Wardekker and Miedema (1997) reinforce Shor’s distinction between the self within and a self that is self-aware: “[b]esides the acquisition of competencies, [education] asks for the development of personal identity: being aware of yourself as a continuously judging and acting person. Without this awareness, rational activity is unthinkable” (p. 56). As did Shor, they see reflection on the self as the essential element of a liberating pedagogy for without such self-awareness “rational activity” or cognitively conscious action remains “unthinkable.”

With the thought-language distinction and self-aware subjectivity as foreground, we can begin now to understand the essential relationship between language and thought in critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogues appear to define cognitive consciousness as the behavior of putting language to the world rather than non-reflectively existing within the “concrete immediacies.”

Yet for critical pedagogues, cognitive consciousness involves more than languaging about the world and the self. Returning to Giroux and McLaren’s (1987) point that “language constitutes reality rather than merely reflecting,” true awareness of the world and self requires more than awareness about the world; we cannot *just* use the word, we have to be *aware* of our use of the word. Use of the word can occur even within semi-transitive consciousness, e.g. students who regurgitate the teacher’s words back to the teacher. But awareness of our use of the word and how that constructs reality is something quite different, something that moves us much closer to understanding thinking in the context of critical theory.

For Shor and Freire (1987), therefore, true consciousness occurs only through two means, both of which he outlines below:

To the extent that we ... communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to *know that we know*; which is something *more* than just knowing. . . . We human beings know also that *we don't know*. Through dialogue, together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality. (pp. 98-99)

Speaking then to the first criterion—that we “know that we know”—it is not enough to just to know because knowing—exercising thought-language—does not represent true critical consciousness. Instead, critical consciousness requires that we “know that we know,” that we are conscious of our consciousness, aware of our self-awareness, and reflective about how our exercise of language subjectively constitutes reality itself, none of which could be possible without the dialectic.

Nor does merely *using* language make it possible to “know also that *we don't know*,” which Freire evidently holds in equal regard to knowing the known, because knowing that we do or do not know represent two sides of the same proverbial coin. We cannot possess awareness of our knowledge without intrinsically and simultaneously recognizing its boundaries, without understanding the limitations of our awareness and thinking.

Yet that dualistic construct—knowing and not-knowing—emerge only through the exercise of language because, to quote S. I. Hawayakawa (1990), the defining element of advanced language use is that “language can be about language” (p. 6). Words can be about words, and through words our thoughts can be about thoughts, and the “self” can reflect on the “self.” Whereas those in Freire’s semi-transitive state equate language about the world with the positivist world itself, e.g. “apple” the word *is* essentially apple the thing, those who are critically conscious recognize that the language construct can be about the language construct, e.g. we can reflect on how we define the word-thing “apple.” An in the truer actuality of critical consciousness, language is never about anything but language itself.

Freire (1972) sums it up as follows:

In the process of decoding [breaking down codifications], the participants externalize their thematics and thereby make explicit their ‘real conscious’ of the world. As they do this they begin to see how they themselves acted while actually experiencing the situation they are now analyzing, and thus reach a ‘perception of their previous perception. . . . By stimulating ‘perception of the previous perception’ and ‘knowledge of the previous knowledge,’ decoding stimulates the appearance of a new perception and the development of new knowledge. (p. 96)

This represents the true power of the dialogic and the crux of the relationship between language and cognition in critical pedagogy. Critical consciousness does not just grant the power to name the world; it grants the power to know that we are naming it and *how* we are naming it. The relationship between language and

thought is not really a thought-language conflation. *Rather, true critical consciousness emerges only when thought-language is recognized to be about thought-language.*

We not only can name the world, we can give name to our naming. Put another way, we not only can be aware that we are self-aware, *we can be self-aware about the ways in which we construct awareness.* As Giroux and McLaren (1992) express it: “What makes literacy ‘critical’ is its ability to make the learner aware of how relations of power, institutional structures, and models of representation work on and through the learner’s mind ... a critical perspective demands that the very ideological process of language itself be interrogated” (p. 18).

Thus, while the use of language is tied to thought and consciousness, the use of language about language—knowing that we know—is tied to *critical* consciousness, or more to the point, to critical *reasoning*. Thinking, as an act of consciousness, “demands that the very ideological process of language itself be interrogated.”

Thinking is transformatively using language about language

We must remember, however, that Freire included the ability “to act critically to transform reality” as an equally essential element of true critical consciousness. Indeed, a consistent theme amongst critical pedagogues is that becoming a truly conscious being means more than just naming the world and, indeed, even more than knowing that we are naming the world; critical consciousness equally involves participation in the transformation of the world.

Initially, this appears to be a relatively simple idea. Freire (1987) writes that “there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p. 68). As the world is a construct of the word, any self-aware exercise of thought-language changes the nature of the world, even if only for the one person doing the naming. By contrast, inauthentic words might be those that are abstracted from individual reality and “mystify,” and/or those deposited from a teacher. They lack authentic, actionable power and thus cannot be transformative.

“On the other hand,” Freire writes, “if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism*. The latter—action for action’s sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible” (1987, p. 69). We see, therefore, that words must emerge genuinely, neither out of a desire to produce action nor a desire to produce verbiage. Instead, they must emerge from a genuine dialogic with self, other, and the world.

While Freire (1987) points out that “critical reflection [as in an internal dialogic] is also action” insofar as it transforms the self (p. 109), true praxis is more accurately the interaction of the two. Frankenstein (1992) defines praxis as “reflection and action dialectically interacting to re-create reality” (p. 317). Given Frankenstein’s and Freire’s points, true critical consciousness, *and true reasoning*

in the critical context, exists in the dialect between reflecting and acting, or as van Manen situates it, “in connections between doing and being” (as cited in Gabel, 2002, p. 178). This returns us to Giroux and McLaren’s characterization of the self as a “subjectivity”—“individual presence without essence.”

Without essence but always dialogic, the critically conscious subjective self is determined not only through thought-language but also through action. As the unauthentic word does not represent true cognitive consciousness, and as words gain authenticity only when manifesting transformative power, we therefore gain real critical consciousness—we are only really *thinking*—when shaping the world through language and action: praxis. In other words, if we cannot be said to be *interacting* with the world, if in giving name to it we have no effect on it, then we equally cannot be said to be fully conscious *because the reality then remains separate from our selves* in the sense that it is neither affected by the self nor is the self affected by it. For better or worse, knowing that we know is not enough because knowledge itself, if unactionable, cannot be said to be authentic knowledge at all. Thinking in language or about language without praxis is verbalism. *Consciousness, therefore, is the self-aware self’s interaction with the world through the word.*

With that understood, we find that language and cognition in critical pedagogy can be separated from the thought-language construct insofar as knowing that we know is not just thought-language but rather thought-language about thought-language, or, to return to Berthoff’s definition, “consciousness of *consciousness*.”

The reason that kind of reasoning holds such importance in Berthoff’s view (and this author’s as well), is that it is awareness of self-awareness that permits us to step back from our subjective selves and recognize our place in the world, which in turn permits actionable reflection—praxis—and thus true consciousness. Consequently, while we can make some meaning of the word by reading the world, that meaning—understanding—will not be *meaningful* until the word acts on the world and the world acts on the word. In this way, critical theory advocates for reasoning that is not just active but rather action in itself.

Supposing, therefore, that we successfully define critical theory’s view of reasoning as *self-aware self’s interaction with the world through the word*, subsequent questions emerge: Does critical pedagogy, e.g. problem posing education, ultimately foster the kind of self-aware self that we need in order to truly transform the individual (and the world)? It is one thing to foster dialogue, but to what extent to the fostering of dialogue actually produce self-awareness? And if we suppose the self-aware self to be the goal, how can we measure its development? As critical pedagogues, we need to address such questions if we are to affirm those pedagogies that truly liberate.

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