

## DOES THIS FEEL EMPOWERING?:

### USING MÉTISSAGE TO EXPLORE THE EFFECTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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#### *Abstract*

The extent to which critical pedagogy disrupts the relations of dominance inside postsecondary classrooms, or empowers students to take socially just action beyond the classroom has been debated and challenged for decades. Through the use of métissage, an interpretive inquiry method that affords collaborative interrogation of individual narrative writings, we five participants in the same critical pedagogy course conducted a post-course inquiry project in order to explore what we had learned through the course. Through this inquiry project, we have come to a deeper understanding of critical pedagogy praxis. Ultimately, what we learned through the use of this inquiry method maintains important implications for postsecondary educators.

*Keywords:* critical pedagogy, postsecondary teaching, métissage, transformative learning

## **DOES THIS FEEL EMPOWERING?: USING MÉTISSAGE TO EXPLORE THE EFFECTS OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

Realizing the emancipatory potential of critical pedagogy within postsecondary classrooms is immensely difficult. Certainly, critical pedagogy encourages the exploration of power, privilege, and oppression, illuminating how unequal, structurally based social relations are reproduced in and through educational policies and practices. However, the extent to which critical pedagogy actually disrupts the relations of dominance inside classrooms, or empowers students to take socially just action beyond the classroom has been debated and challenged for decades. Indeed, a range of scholars critique critical pedagogy, not only for failing to disrupt hegemonic educational practices, but also for reproducing the very “relations of domination” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 298) that it is intended to challenge (e.g. Gur-Ze’ev, 1998; Orner, 1992; Ruiz & Fernandez-Balboa, 2005). Highlighting this essential dilemma as it played out in her undergraduate anti-racism course, Ellsworth (1989) noted,

when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and ‘banking education.’ ... [The] discourses of critical pedagogy ... were “working through” us in repressive ways, and had themselves become vehicles of repression. (p. 298)

Other scholars have echoed this lament (e.g. Gore, 1993; Ruiz & Fernandez-Balboa, 2005) and expanded Ellsworth’s discussion of the contradictions inherent to the practice of critical pedagogy (Evans, 2008; Gur-Ze’ev, 1998; Shor, 1996). Indeed, grappling with these inherent contradictions is an essential element of undertaking critical pedagogy. Doing so requires that instructors be highly attuned to the enacted curriculum. Yet, assessing the enacted curriculum necessitates

knowledge of classroom participants' experiences, perspectives, and learning.

Unsurprisingly, the extant literature identifies a complex set of challenges around assessing critical pedagogy's effect on students' learning. Of particular relevance to this paper are the concerns related to instructors' assessment of students. One issue involves the connection between assessing students' performances and assigning grades. Within postsecondary classrooms, instructors' grading schemes can exert pressure on students to perform the role of "student" in ways that reify traditional professorial authority. Even less overtly hierarchical classroom assessment strategies—such as participatory assessment and student self-assessment—may serve to control and discipline students rather than empower them (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000; Tan, 2004). Consequently, course-based assessments may not be well suited to reveal whether students' learning and developmental experiences are consistent with the eventual goal of critical consciousness.

As a whole, this scholarship underscores the difficulties of understanding whether and how critical pedagogy, as enacted within postsecondary classrooms, offers transformational learning experiences to the students inside those classrooms. More importantly, it suggests the need for postsecondary educators to integrate more appropriate assessment strategies into their practice and, in turn, more effectively document the effect of critical pedagogy on students' learning trajectories.

In the service of this overarching goal, this paper presents the results of an inquiry project devoted to exploring five participants' experiences in the same graduate-level critical pedagogy course. After the end of the course, we five participants—four students and the course instructor—adopted a collaborative narrative method known as *métissage* in order to explore our experiences during the course and to better understand what we had learned from those experiences. *Métissage* afforded us a mode of inquiry that complemented our theoretical focus, the politics of difference and critical pedagogy; honored the multiplicity and ambiguity of our individual interpretations; and facilitated new perspectives on praxis. Ultimately,

what we learned through the use of this inquiry method maintains important implications for assessing the learning that results from and through critical pedagogy.

The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. First, we consider the existing literature on the contradictions inherent to teaching critical pedagogy inside postsecondary classrooms as well as the dilemmas involved in assessing students' learning from critical pedagogy. Second, we discuss the context and impetus for our inquiry project by describing the postsecondary course that we participated in, and our subsequent collaborative inquiry project. Third, we present our methodological approach, starting with a discussion of *métissage*, and then explaining how we adopted *métissage* as an inquiry method. In the fourth section, we describe aspects of what we learned from and through our approach to *métissage*; then in section five, we consider the implications of our inquiry project for postsecondary educators.

## **CONTRADICTIONS INHERENT TO THE PRACTICE OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

The theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy reveal concomitant barriers to the enactment of its goals in actual practice. Although by no means homogeneous in their approach, seminal thinkers of critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2003; Shor, 1996) view socio-economic groups as divided by unequal power relations, which are both perpetuated and legitimated by dominant cultural practices. Education is embedded within structures and practices of inequality, with the result that students come to believe their own limitations in achieving their goals while subscribing to an ideology of meritocracy. For critical pedagogues, the structure and practices of education militate against critical pedagogy's goals of emancipation, social justice, equality, and transformation. Embracing and enacting these goals at any level of formal schooling require sustained effort and commitment; at the postsecondary level, practitioners face students who have been well disciplined by years of schooling. From this perspective, practitioners must be dedicated to a rigorous struggle to understand "what is" in relation to "what could be" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. x) while examining

“who benefits” from undemocratic and oppressive institutions and unequal social relations. Complicating the challenge, such practitioners are also embedded within and implicated in the same set of unequal social relations they hope to transform.

Given this fundamental dilemma, it should not be surprising that much of the literature on critical pedagogy focuses on what *could* or *should* be done within and beyond classrooms to support social justice and emancipatory goals. Much of this work is highly theoretical, focusing on the ultimate, transformative ends, and providing little practical guidance for educators on how to disrupt power dynamics.

In contrast, other work is eminently practical, proposing specific classroom strategies or instructional techniques that promote critical praxis (e.g. Nylund & Tilsen, 2006). Between the scholarship that describes critical educators’ instructional approaches (e.g. Breunig, 2009) and the texts offering guidelines, whether explicit or implicit, for teaching courses with social justice goals (e.g. DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014), scholars have suggested the advantages of co-constructed learning goals, collaborative group work, journal writing, student dialogue, and the use of multiple forms of evaluation. Ultimately, such student-centered strategies can provide opportunities for critical reflection and link to political issues with personal experiences (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) while also potentially redefining the role of the teacher (Breunig, 2005; Suoranta & Moisisio, 2006).

The extent to which such strategies effect critical pedagogy learning goals, however, remains uncertain. For instance, such strategies do not distinguish themselves as critical alternatives to generic student-centered pedagogies. Breunig (2005), a social justice researcher, notes that strategies associated with critical pedagogy (e.g., reflection, experiential activities, presentations, group work) can be implemented devoid of social justice goals, reducing critical pedagogy to “tokenism” (p. 120). As well, critical educators have challenged the notion of applying particular truisms – such as creating a “safe space” – from the literature on student-centered instruction. Multiple authors, for example, highlight the illusory and potentially deceptive nature of creating a “safe” space and advocate the importance of intentionally creating space that promotes discomfort, and cultivating an attitude of

courage among participants (e.g. Arao & Clemens, 2013; Redmond, 2010).

The contradictions involved in enacting critical pedagogy highlight the importance of describing what and how students actually learn through critical pedagogy in postsecondary classrooms. Yet, assessing learning in any postsecondary classroom poses certain challenges. Evaluating the effects of critical pedagogy, in particular, is complicated by the fact that traditional assessment tools compose part of the very system that critical educators seek to problematize. As Braa and Callero (2006) write, commenting on their sociology students' learning through union organizing, "the goal of critical pedagogy is to enable emancipation through personal and social transformation. Success in this regard is difficult to measure using standard course assessment tools" (p. 366). Given the inadequacy of such assessments, Braa and Callero were ultimately unable to represent the specific, subjective understandings students actually developed when they experienced critical pedagogy in praxis.

One approach to this assessment dilemma is to explore students' explanations of their own learning. However, even when researchers focus on the student perspective, they may inadvertently privilege their own experience and interpretations over those of students. Consequently, the use of alternative assessment or research strategies may still fall short of fully unearthing students' learning. For instance, in Fernandez-Balboa's (1998) article, he documents how he explored relations of power in his classroom through ongoing dialogue within the class in concert with a reflective journaling process for students. Drawing upon excerpts of student writing, Fernandez-Balboa demonstrates how the journaling process allowed students to "talk back," helped the instructor understand the multitude of experiences unfolding within the class, and provided the time and space necessary for the class to productively move through episodes of tension. The author therefore examines his effectiveness as an educator by interpreting student texts in light of his own experience. Ultimately, the article reflects Fernandez-Balboa's interpretations of the students' texts. More recently, Paugh and Robinson (2011) used critical discourse analysis to assess their abilities to promote critical

praxis among their students, teachers enrolled in a master's level program of study. Through the analysis of artifacts from the course, including written reflective journals, and transcripts of videotaped discussions during class (in both small and large groups), the authors provide specific examples of how the student-teachers accepted or resisted neoliberal discourse about teachers' shortcomings. Thus, the researchers interpreted student-teachers' written and verbal statements in order to assess those students' experiences of critical praxis.

While excerpts from student writing and classroom discussions can reveal some aspects of students' perspectives, drawing on such excerpts to substantiate instructor/researcher claims may ultimately misrepresent students' perspectives. First, selecting student dialogue to highlight researcher ideas tends to essentialize student experience (Cook-Sather, 2007), presenting students as a uniform group, with one experience and one voice. This discounts difference and fails to honor students' subjective experiences of learning. Second, the researcher runs the risk of misinterpreting students' experiences or articulating students' learning inaccurately. Third, speaking on behalf of the students (rather than *with* students) reinforces educational hierarchies and privileges educator/researcher expertise and elite knowledge over students' knowledge and experiences.

Our work—the results of a collaboration of instructor and students – contributes to the literature by exploring participants' experiences of critical pedagogy without privileging the instructor's perspective over students' interpretations. Through the use of a particular methodology known as *métissage*, we five co-inquirers have pursued a nuanced exploration of our experiences – both within, and beyond the critical pedagogy course – and the resulting learning as we have each understood it. Through this inquiry project, we have been able to assess this learning and transformation in relation to the theoretical goals of critical pedagogy.

## **CONTEXT OF INQUIRY: THE COURSE AND POST-COURSE COLLABORATION**

All five authors of this paper were participants in a doctoral-level course called “The Politics of Difference: Coalition Building and Critical Pedagogy” at a Canadian university. Offered during the summer 2014 term, the course was required for a cohort of 23 students in an Ed.D. program focused on postsecondary educational leadership. The five of us, four students and the instructor of the course, hold formal positions as postsecondary educators across one college and two universities in British Columbia.

### **THE COURSE-BASED LEARNING CONTEXT**

The instructor’s goals for the course provided the framework for the curriculum that was enacted throughout the semester, as well as for the analysis that we take up in this paper. In order to encourage students’ abilities to notice, reflect upon, and respond to the enactment of power and privilege in postsecondary contexts, the instructor crafted a series of writing assignments that culminated in an analytic memo (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) regarding the classroom dynamics and social relations constituted over time in this course. A common practice in interpretive, qualitative data analysis, memo writing offered students an opportunity to explore their insights as emergent concepts, rather than as final analyses.

Building on initial discussions about mindful listening and noticing absences (Wah, 2004, p. 22), the instructor provided resources on writing descriptive fieldnotes as guidelines for documenting what participants noticed and heard (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Students also decided to devote a class session to discussing examples of autoethnographic research. Prior to crafting the culminating memo, students wrote journal entries between class sessions, in-class responses to pre-planned writing prompts, and in-class reflections on “hot moments” (Harlap, 2014, p. 217) that arose periodically throughout the term. Students then drew upon the various writing they had already completed in order to draft and submit a more elaborated analysis, exploring such issues as: the enactment of power and privilege in the classroom; the construction of professorial



authority and students' responses to that authority; and reflections on positionality/identity and how that shapes participation in class.

Students' approaches to the journal entries and in-class writing varied; some took advantage of the opportunity to develop competence as participant observers and authored ethnographic field notes, some students produced autoethnographic writings (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and others wrote critical personal narratives (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). In turn, the analytic memos that students submitted varied in the level of abstract theorizing that accompanied their critical reflections. The one feature students' submissions shared was evidence that students had engaged in an intentional reflexive process whereby the "act of writing itself becomes a way of being and knowing" (Foley, 2002, p. 475).

Students' submission of the analytic memo assignment proved to be a pivotal moment for the instructor's pedagogical growth. In the process of commenting upon students' analyses, she came to the following realization:

Reading the 23 students' analyses as a set illuminated the pedagogical challenges of this course in markedly profound ways. I was prepared to read differing interpretations of the same classroom events, but was surprised to read entirely conflicting accounts of incidents that I had observed and participated in. *I also found myself writing comments like "how do you know this?" and "not everyone in the class would agree with this," in order to question unsupported generalizations that students wrote about other participants. I then considered the implications for how I understand what happens in the classroom and its effects on students' learning. Are my own analyses and assessments of students' learning and development similarly unsupported generalizations? What aspects of students' experiences do I fail to notice?*

After reviewing the range of analytical lenses and different foci of analytical interest, the instructor (R) invited four students (C, K, M, & S) to consider collaborating on a future writing project based on their experiences of the course, and to continue writing field notes or

journal entries through the end of term. The invitation to these four students was based on two criteria. First, the depth of their analyses suggested that each of them had a rich and extensive set of narrative data to draw from. Second, each of their analytic memo submissions focused specifically on the tensions and challenges of enacting critical pedagogy inside a postsecondary classroom.

## **POST-COURSE COLLABORATION**

We five – the instructor and the four students – committed to participating in a post-course inquiry project to share our accounts, experiences, and insights from the course. From the start, the collaboration was premised on a poststructural rejection of an absolute truth, and intended to explicate multiple, shifting versions of knowledge, truth, and power. We began by sharing and discussing the four students’ analyses from the course, with an initial goal of encouraging deeper discussion around critical pedagogy and its enactment in the classroom. The initial question guiding our re-consideration of our experiences of the course was “What *did* we learn about and from the enacted curriculum in our critical pedagogy course?”

First, the students shared their writings with each other. As a group, we discussed how each student’s writing was unique in terms of focus, voice, and perspective; although some of the four students had written about the same situations, they tended to focus on different elements of the situation, and their insights and conclusions were unique. During our early discussions, we identified various themes—some of which emerged as explicit topic areas in individual analyses, others of which became visible only in juxtaposing two or more analyses, and still others which emerged through dialogue as retrospective insights. We then chose three themes to converge upon for in-depth examination as a group: instructor-student power dynamics; the extent and nature of students’ verbal participation; and how difference was enacted and understood in the classroom. To facilitate this exploration, we decided to adapt the collaborative narrative method known as *métissage*. In the course of our inquiry, we realized that the initial themes we chose to explore were less important than the *process* of engaging in the

critical practice of *métissage*; Exploring *our learning*, rather than what we learned about our chosen themes, was what generated our most profound insights.

## MÉTISSAGE AS A METHOD OF INQUIRY

*Métissage* is a research method popularized by postcolonial and poststructural curriculum theorists such as Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers and Carl Leggo (Chambers et al., 2008; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). The essence of *métissage* is to explore how individual autobiographical writings (“life-writings”), once woven together with the writings of others, reveal the subjective nature of the world we live in. *Métissage*, from the Latin word *mixtus* or “mixed”, threads together writings of multiple individuals’ life experiences in order to create a narrative tapestry that both reveals and affirms differences, and promotes new understandings of individuals’ subjective locations (Chambers et al., 2008; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009).

In a political sense, *métissage* resists grand narratives, or discourses that attempt to totalize experiences. Instead, the goal of “mixing” or “braiding” strands of life-writings is to highlight differences. Specifically, Chambers et al. (2008) recommend that the act of “braiding” the strands be accomplished

in such a way that retains the integrity and distinctiveness of the individual texts/voices and at the same time creates a new text, one that illuminates the braided, polysemic, and relational character of our lives, experiences and memories, as well as the interconnections among the personal and the public realm. (p. 142)

Our adoption of *métissage* for our inquiry project involved several iterations of braiding, dialogue, and writing. During our first iteration, we developed braids for each of the three topic areas mentioned above, incorporating excerpts from the analytic memos, writing produced during class sessions, and journal entries. The first step involved sharing these various course-based writings with each other. We noticed a diversity of approaches across these writings, both from author to author, and over time for each author. Some texts focused

on documenting observational data, other texts represented highly reflexive personal narratives of the author's pivotal experiences in class (Ellis et al., 2011; Burdell & Swadener, 1999). Some narratives reflected an autoethnographic approach, wherein the author examined the self as a starting place for analyzing her social context (Ellis et al., 2011), and in many instances, interpreted her own experience in light of course readings or other relevant scholarship. Thus, as a whole, these writings varied in the degree to which students analyzed their experiences in relation to others, their socio-cultural context, and the existing research (Ellis et al., 2011). The writings also varied in the degree to which the author moved beyond her personal experience to become part of a political project (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). Nonetheless, all four students approached the writing with an increasingly critical lens, problematizing relations of power, agency, voice, inequity, and the potential for social change within the institutional context (Ellis et al., 2011; Quicke, 2010).

After reading the full set of text, we distributed the task of braiding around each theme to multiple individuals, who worked separately. Braiding involved selecting pieces of text that illuminated some aspect of each theme, then juxtaposing multiple perspectives and interpretations in ways that elaborated and complicated the initial concept. At times, individuals worked electronically, highlighting text in different colors, then cutting and pasting with the text editor. Ultimately, everyone engaged—at one point or another—in a material process, of physically printing, cutting, and rearranging segments of text on paper. In keeping with the principles of *métissage*, we aimed to retain the individual voices yet gain new understandings through the placement of each individual's words/ideas in relation to others.

The process of crafting these multi-layered, mixed narratives (the *braids*) served as the foundation for dialogue during our subsequent meetings. These discussions of process and textual artifacts helped us to recognize and unpack differing interpretations of the texts, and to discern differences in experience, perspective, and interpretation that remained invisible when we worked in isolation. Consequently, we decided in subsequent iterations to work in pairs to accomplish

more braiding, and to move beyond our initial emphasis during group meetings on identifying shared meanings.

Throughout this post-course inquiry phase, each participant kept a research journal. As part of this journaling component, each participant wrote entries after each group meeting, documenting what she had learned *through* and *from* the discussion. These post-meeting analyses, in turn, became interim research documents (see Clandinin, 2013), which the group examined and deconstructed in further discussion.

In sum, throughout our inquiry project on the effects of critical pedagogy, we generated collaborative, braided texts that we analyzed through an iterative process of writing and dialogue. This enabled us to place subjectivities front and center, and advance our various understandings. Métissage allowed us to draw upon our individual interpretations, collaborate in sense-making discussions as a group, and represent our insights—all within a methodological approach that encourages the weaving together of multiple voices in the production of new knowledge.

## **THE POWER OF MÉTISSAGE IN LOCATING AND EXTENDING OUR LEARNING**

While we initially conceived of métissage as our research strategy, we discovered that the resulting narrative tapestry formed a literary artifact (a new text), and that our group collaboration served as a new, extra-curricular space of critical pedagogical praxis (see Worley, 2006). We now understand and subscribe to Chambers et al.'s (2008) broad conceptualization of métissage as theoretical construct, literary strategy, literary artifact, and ultimately, research praxis and pedagogical tool.

### **INITIAL ROUNDS OF BRAIDING AND DIALOGUE**

Our métissage process produced a series of progressive revelations, evolving from relatively simplistic to more nuanced ideas. What follows is an excerpt of an initial braid, represented below as one narrative, with each of the four students' contributions separated with asterisks:

There seemed to be an air of defeat, as if awareness of the magnitude of the problems preventing social justice and equality left the class with a feeling that there was nothing we could do. \*\* And what did I expect with the structure of our classes? All of these topics in bite sized chunks. Never enough time to really unpack them or address them adequately. Of course it can't be transformative in that time frame. We are constrained by the structures of the program that we are bound to. \*\* There remains a sense of power and control through being in a traditional university classroom where we are relegated to specific space (classroom) and time and rules, course syllabi, readings, assignments, evaluation by teacher, et cetera. \*\* How do you balance the risk of harm with transformation in an effort to achieve coalitions/social justice? Is the risk worth the reward? Transformation requires vulnerability and vulnerability requires letting down your guard in the learning process.

In our early discussions, we interpreted this excerpt as an expression of frustration, reflecting a shared sense that we had been unable to realize the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in the classroom. We discussed the language of defeat, constraint, and harm. Within the braided text, individual contributions note the constraining and oppressive elements of the postsecondary classroom and raise questions as to what degree a student should risk disrupting conventional practices, and for what personal reward. This excerpt reflects our preoccupation during this early analysis with what we understood as our failure to achieve critical pedagogy in the classroom, and our focus on structural constraints without consideration of our own agency and involvement in reproducing the status quo. Like Ellsworth (1989), we viewed the reproduction of power and privilege in our classroom as a failure of critical pedagogy. Unlike Ellsworth's account, in which she notes her own role in that reproduction, however, our analysis focused on the constraints of educational structure and hegemonic classroom practices without identifying our own agency in producing the power dynamics we hoped to see disrupted.

## SUBSEQUENT ANALYSES

Over time, we began to question our generalizations and unpack our assumptions, and as a result, we developed a more nuanced analysis of the braided texts. We posed and responded to probing questions such as, “How did you know that?” and “What assumptions are you making?” or challenges like “I don’t agree that was everyone’s experience” or “I didn’t feel or see it that way.” These discussions allowed us to problematize, rework, and reframe our ideas, challenge the interpretive schemas that informed our writing, and ultimately, come to better understand ourselves in relation to others.

For example, within the braided excerpt presented above, we questioned the generalization about “defeat”: To what extent was this was a shared experience? Even if multiple participants did experience it, what did each of us know of others’ responses to those feelings? What notions of transformation lay beneath each person’s use of the term? By reading the braided text, then discussing our interpretations, we first recognized the tendency towards generalizations and assumptions in other people’s writing and thinking, then began to identify it in our own work.

We also came to recognize that the tendency to make generalizations and assumptions frequently served as a default position, a stance that is both easy to slip into and normative. To avoid moving into this default position, which effectively erases difference, we needed to be intentional, active, and sensitive to individual subjectivities. In dialogue and in writing, generalized statements and the appearance of “we” became the grounds for interrogation. Now, our use of “we” and “our” is highly intentional: We five co-authors have questioned the assumptions that our inquiry group (and our class, more broadly) shared the same goals, risks and rewards, ideas of social justice, or viewed empowerment and transformation in the same way. Finally, we questioned our early interpretations regarding our “failure” to realize critical pedagogy goals within the parameters of the course. Indeed, we moved beyond our early analysis of frustration as evidence of failure, to an understanding of tension as a catalyst for learning and as an integral component of critical pedagogy.

## MÉTISSAGE AS THE CATALYST FOR OUR LEARNING

Métissage, as a complex and iterative process of writing, braiding, re-writing, critical dialogue, reflection, and tension, brought differences to the forefront and created the opportunity to challenge the myths of our assumptions and allow for new interpretations. Significantly, although we agree on the essential aspects of the process, we experienced them differently. In what follows we highlight three crucial aspects of our métissage process, while incorporating individual perspectives from our interim research documents.

**The mixing.** Reading our individual writing mixed with others' enabled a different kind of engagement with the existing texts, and produced immediate, individual benefits. For K, for example, reading the braid created a de-personalizing effect, enabling her to analyze individuals' perspectives and stances in a less emotional way: "Through braiding I forgot who wrote what. For me, individual judgments, contradictions became disembodied, less emotional and more open to critical examination." In contrast, M described her experience of the mixing as making others' ideas more personal: "The braiding is essential in pushing the dialogue forward because it helps me personalize or internalize the ideas of others in new ways."

While our experiences with the braided text differed, we agree on the importance of the mixing in promoting reflexivity. This reflexive process allowed for increased awareness of how our dynamic, evolving, multiple selves are historically, culturally, and socially situated (Foley, 2002). In this process of examining ourselves in relation to each other, we were increasingly able to approach the uncomfortable and unfamiliar (Pillow, 2003).

**The dialogue.** The polyvocality afforded by and through our group discussions of braided texts fostered insights unmatched by the textual analyses we undertook as individuals, or in pairs. Group discussions made the paradoxical and unstable relationships among author, text, and reader more transparent and open to analysis (Foley, 2002; Lather, 2001). Elaborating one's own perspective and critically questioning others therefore offered opportunities to discern and clarify interpretations.



Seeing my words/reactions juxtaposed to those of a peer who articulated a very different position helped me gain clarity. [It was through our discussions] that I realized the extent to which I had made sweeping assumptions about others or about situations that transpired. (S)

My conflicting views surfaced, allowing me to challenge my assumptions and the assumptions of others. I learned a deeper understanding of my own positionality. (K)

As we reached greater clarity of our own positions relative to others', we became aware of ways in which we had misinterpreted and were continuing to misrepresent each other's ideas.

When people explained their positions and ideas, I recognized that what I had read was not what they had intended, but what *I* had thought was important. (C)

In addition, this dialogical process also allowed new meanings to emerge, which in turn, changed the course of the collaborative discussion.

The original autoethnographic writings that I wrote/interpreted for myself were then taken up by others who generated new meanings. The texts became productive beyond my own standpoint, generating new discussions and ideas among our group while creating a new "distance" between me and my original interpretations. Yet, from those meanings, I was able to also generate new meanings for myself. (C)

Ultimately, the critical stance we adopted through each round of discussion – questioning, challenging, reflecting, clarifying, reinterpreting, interrogating – provided a new space for "hearing" one another's intentions and ideas, rather than simply relying on what we thought we "knew" about the others in reading their writing.

While I may cognitively accept that meaning making and the construction of knowledge is an individual process that others cannot be privy to, my default behaviour is to make my knowledge *the* knowledge and to hear and process the knowledge of others through my own framework. (M)

A new dilemma has presented itself to me: how the epistemological and theoretical lenses of each of the group members lends her own interpretation to the reading and writing of the text. (S)

It was through our process of writing, analyzing and deconstructing our writing through dialogue, and reconstructing novel insights and understandings that we were pushed to examine ourselves within our contested social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. As Warren (2011) notes, reflexivity cannot be done alone.

**Tension of collaborative writing.** While issues around misinterpretation and misrepresentation arose throughout the project, they became most salient when we tried to document what we were learning through our ongoing dialogue. Each of us struggled with putting our multiple experiences, awareness, and new ideas into words; additionally, it was challenging to capture and adequately represent *individual* understandings that were reached through group dialogue into *collaborative* written work. Finally, although aware of the danger of essentializing our experiences into a uniform Truth, we were simultaneously uncertain how to represent our varied perspectives.

In our attempts to represent our (individual) learnings, we are engaged in another level of interpretation; our “findings” take on the appearance of generalizable truth claims, stripping away the true meanings/intentionality of what we have each learned. (S)

Most significantly, the tension produced at this stage of the process sparked some of our most sudden and meaningful revelations – about ourselves and about others.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

This inquiry project has provided an extended opportunity to engage in sustained critical practice. This is not to say we have overcome the challenge of having systems of domination “work through us” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 298). To the contrary, we have renewed respect for the inherent contradictions of critical pedagogy, and the need for each of us, whether as students or as educators, to

revise and re-envision what we see, hear, and “know” about others. As M articulated the power of *métissage* in enabling this re-visioning,

The grounding function of *métissage* as place, pedagogy, and practice, has provided me with new understandings and new ways of being in my classroom, and beyond, where I am able to actively problematize my assumptions and the assumptions of others. I feel better equipped, as an educator, to be explicit about my role and practice and to provide space for subjective meaning-making that promotes difference and celebrates lack of consensus.

Similarly, S wrote,

I continually remind myself of the individual and subjective nature of experience. This leads me to more openly listen to the opinions of others (without the intent to seek consensus), and to challenge myself to voice my disagreement, to be critical, when necessary. This extended *métissage* process is responsible for this ongoing and recursive interrogation of my critical praxis.

Working in this extra-curricular space has also sparked some unsettling realizations about our identities and performances in postsecondary classrooms.

As a student, I have often focused on the professor as the most important member of the audience. Rather than listening to others, I have focused on how I will interject or reiterate the points I think are most compelling. This re-framing of the discussion back to my focus limited my learning, yet this is also what has enabled me to excel as a student in postsecondary classrooms. (K)

In class, I felt a lot of resistance to disruption, to examining the status quo—a feeling of trying to keep the “safe space” (which I interpreted as “don’t cause any disruptions”). ... It was difficult for me to disagree with others in class. I found myself looking for ways in which to build consensus—I felt like learning hadn’t happened if we couldn’t agree upon it. (S)

Such discomfiting self-awareness has, in turn, fostered a new sense of agency. S for instance, wrote, “Because of this experience I have a deeper sense of agency and a commitment to speak my mind rather than keep silent. . . . the disruption has come from within.”

These insights about ourselves – in relation to others – have also led to new and differing understandings about what constitutes learning inside postsecondary classrooms, and how we as educators, might better attune ourselves to uncovering students’ learning.

Through this process, I have come to understand aspects of these four students’ learning and development that I had not anticipated. I also realize how my ideas about what and how students *should* have learned in my course may have constrained my ability to assess alternative (and legitimate) learning outcomes. I can now imagine new ways to foster critical dialogue, and feel ready to hear and see a more diverse range of learning as well as inchoate indications of development in my future classes. (R)

We understand that the short-term effects of critical pedagogy may seem small. They may not be immediately visible, or even legible when measured against the instructor’s intended learning goals. The nuances of such learning complicate the assessment project, but do not preclude it.

I have come to appreciate critical pedagogy as an iterative and incremental process. The process requires small steps that encourage students to consider possibility. What students discover about themselves and their situations is highly contextual. I do not control critical pedagogy, I provide space for it. (C)

Through our experience with *métissage*, we find ourselves thinking about how to recognize and encourage moments of agency across different students’ learning trajectories. Acknowledging the potentially individual and unique nature of students’ internal disruptions, and providing opportunities to make them visible increases the likelihood that we, too, will be poised to take notice. How we further these instructional goals is context-dependent; we offer no generic, practical strategies lest we reify the theory-practice divide. Yet we can offer a few comments on our own developing practices.

I pay more attention to silences. I invite students to communicate through a broader range of media, and practice vulnerable learning through example. I now approach assessment as something I do “with” students, not “to” or “for.” (K)

I [have long used] reflexive writing assignments to help students understand their own positionality and help them contextualize concepts within their own experience and life history. [Now] I’ve started to have the students share and discuss their reflexive writings to help expand their own understanding and to illuminate varied perspectives and positions within the group. (M)

Even in first and second year courses, designed as surveys of “content,” there are possibilities for exploring student agency and empowerment. For example, [in a course on supervision] I give an assignment asking students to write about how they feel about directing the work of others, and to analyze ways in which policy enforcement makes them uncomfortable. (C)

## CONCLUSION

Initially, we approached the *métissage* process with the goal of identifying shared understandings of how complex issues like power, voice, and difference played out in the classroom. Our inquiry process shattered our assumption that we understood or experienced these concepts similarly and that consensus was a possible, or desirable, outcome. We now recognize the power of *métissage* to foster deep, critical dialogue around individuals’ reflections, to more effectively highlight and honor various subjectivities, and to make our learning more visible, whether to ourselves or to others. We regard our individual insights as the jumping off point for the next set of questions that we ask of ourselves and others, for how we (re) situate ourselves as educators, and for how we respond to the inherent tensions of postsecondary education. *Métissage*, as a process of dialogue and action, *is* praxis and has, indeed, felt empowering.

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