

## Critical Pedagogy and the Teaching of Literature

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**ABSTRACT.** based on a postmodern perspective, this text presents education from the point of view of Giroux's critical pedagogy. It aims at demonstrating the possibility of a critical view of education and the teaching/learning of literatures, navigating through notions of power and knowledge as discursive constructions in constant movement.

**Key words:** questioning, critical pedagogy, postmodern, education, literature.

**RESUMO. Pedagogia crítica e o ensino de literatura.** dentro do prisma teórico pós-moderno, este texto apresenta uma visão de educação a partir de conceitos discutidos pela pedagogia crítica de Giroux. O objetivo é demonstrar a possibilidade de uma visão crítica da educação e principalmente da sala de aula de literaturas, explorando noções de conhecimento e poder como construções discursivas em constante movimento.

**Palavras-chave:** questionamento, pedagogia crítica, pós-moderno, educação, literatura.

Schools are children of modern times, and as such, they rely heavily on humanist assumptions such as objectivity, faith in the individual, absolute truth, order. They have been designed to maintain the established order by submitting individuals to certain social structures, and by simply reproducing factual knowledge, instead of helping students and teachers interrogate the narratives they are subjected to.

Schools were to be places for transmission, rather than production, of knowledge. School knowledge was alleged as external to human beings. It was therefore a given good, produced by a few to be passed on to others, and objective in the sense that it stood for the assimilation of factual information. Knowledge was not to be constructed at or by schools, because it was produced somewhere else, by someone else, and it came to schools already finished, complete, ready to be passed on; it was simply to be reproduced by students and teachers. Such knowledge was to be domesticated and administered, not questioned, analysed or negotiated. It was thus unappealing, distant from human meaning and subjective interchange.

Most teachers and students are also children of modern times. Determined by a positivistic concept of science and education, they subject themselves to their social roles of transmitters and receptors. They

support the idea of knowledge as a collection of factual information, as something objective and external to the individuals, something that is not produced at school. Widely accepted, such a view of teacher's and student's roles reinforces knowledge as given, distanced, free from a possible (and probable) contamination by *praxis*:

*... gaining school knowledge is seen as severing one's personal connections with the object of study. In this view, school knowledge comes in hard, neat and morally neutral packages that, once possessed, can be used for thinking, which is largely a procedural and individual rather than communal matter (Johnston and Nicholls, 1995: 96).*

However, postmodern times bring about a different view of knowledge, school and the role of education. Together with the questioning of the *locus* of signification and of the interrogation of the means of production and transmission of meaning/knowledge comes the notion of a fragmented subject, that opens up new possibilities of interpretation. Identities are always *in process*, influenced by history, time, by the *play of signification*, and so is every interpretation, every reading. Subjects are now beings *in relation*, that is, constituted by and from interrelations not only between individuals, but also between different relations of power, social classes, ethnic groups, markets, ideologies. These relations help establish

identities, and as such, they also act as constraints to limit *play*, to impose barriers to the endless process of signification of self and others, of external and internal realities. In a postmodern world, inhabited by fragmented individuals, certainties or absolutes do not exist. Meaning is not the essence of things, but is conferred to things by individuals, based on determined social regulations, on certain interpretive procedures of which people are not always aware<sup>1</sup>. Thus, meanings become localised, contingent, and not absolute or universal. Knowledge has been shown as biased by its producers, cultures and ideologies; it has been returned to history, time and place<sup>2</sup>, it has resumed its relation to subjectivity, its centrality exposed as a construction rather than an essentiality.

Jacques Derrida, discussing the concept of centred structures, presents them as something “contradictorily coherent”, making it possible to trace an analogy between what he says about centred structures and the status of objective knowledge:

*... it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida, 1995:151-152)*

Therefore, knowledge becomes play: signification being a system of *différance*, meaning is always differed, never complete and in constant change, just like knowledge itself. The absence of a transcendental signified, of an origin, of a centre, of absolute presence, dislocates the locus of truth. By doing this, it makes history (and the history of knowledge) “a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center”(id, *ibid.*), turning all absolutes into relatives,

that is, all certainties into products of cultural, historical, located, ideological interpretations. That is not to say that all is relative, but to admit that our relation to reality is always mediated; to say that is to relate certainties to social norms, to grand narratives that establish what is right and what is wrong; it is to affirm the importance of society in determining our view of the world.

In postmodern times knowledge and subjectivity are closely related, and interpreted in a different perspective from that of modernity. Individuals and meanings are now seen as socially determined, immersed in an endless *process of signification*, provisionally constituted and not absolute or complete. They are positioned in and through discourses as historical, and therefore as collective constructions, formed politically, socially, culturally, and constituted by the interrelation or play between self and other. Meanings and subjectivities are fragmented and dynamic, impossible to be known in their entirety. Consequently, the desire for domination and absolute control over meanings becomes utopian, resulting in frustration before an impossible dream. The absolute is out of reach once we recognise that knowledge is subjective, that it is never complete nor can it ever be wholly mastered. Due to its historicity, knowledge cannot be found in a state of static completeness, it cannot be found in universals that, once dominated, would guarantee the mastering of an eternal absolute truth. Meanings and knowledge are created in the relations between signifiers: one signifier relates to another, and another, each of which relates to others in its turn, in an infinite chain, in a chain of relations that cannot be controlled.

The *locus* of text signification, that has been moving from author to text to reader to interpretive communities, is now linked to power relations, to culture, to history, to time and place, to matters of who reads what, where, when, how, and mainly why he/she reads. The limits of interpretation are questioned, as well as the legitimacy of different readings.

Schools are not exterior to any of these aspects. The literature classroom could be a place where meanings are under construction. More than simply reproduce readings, students and teachers could, in the meeting of subjectivities that characterises the classroom, experience unique opportunities to produce knowledge. Considering that our identities are multiple, constituted in the interplay self/others; that meanings are dynamic and only perceived in the relations between signifiers (Derrida, 1978), and that knowledge is localised, the classroom can be seen as

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, discussing what he calls *habitus*, suggests that there are many concepts which are transmitted to us socially by what we call “practice”, without us being conscious of them; practices, he says, are plenty of injunctions which are “very powerful and difficult to change because of their insidiousness and silence, their insistence and insinuation.” (my translation from Bourdieu, 1996: 38)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Les Mots et les Choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*. In this book, Foucault traces a history of knowledge and its forms of production, showing that objective knowledge has not always had the function of a centre, that knowledge, and language, have not always been thought of as something transparent and neutral.

the *locus* of a dialogical relation that produces, as well as reproduces, knowledge and identities. Just like any other social space, the classroom establishes dialogical conflicts in which each participant “seeks for the response of the others” (Lacan, quoted by Usher and Edwards, 1996:78). In such spaces, conflicts and power relations are produced, maintained, tested; limits are checked, meanings are created and recreated. The classroom is a collectivity of fragmented subjects, a heterogeneous group formed by multiple identities in an infinite process of identification, in an infinite movement for the recognition of one’s self and of the others’. This makes of the classroom a world where there is a strong possibility of confrontation of values, concepts, reading experiences, beliefs, life histories; this opportunity constitutes a fertile arena for the exchange and reinterpretation of meanings, for the creation and recreation of truths and knowledge, for productive conflict.

Literature involves the production of meanings in and through literary texts; literature classrooms therefore potentially produce meanings through interpersonal relations in which authors, teachers, students, literary critics, educational institutions, cultures, societies, histories, values, attitudes, etc., all play their roles simultaneously. The elements that form and are formed by our attempts at sense-making are part of the classroom situation, and as such they must be studied if we try to understand the process of teaching/learning literature. The collective knowledge produced in classrooms is not an inferior kind of knowledge, nor is it better than other kinds. It is knowledge in its constitutive aspects, a social construction like all other knowledge, a situated process of meaning making, subject to and subjected by history, society, interpretive communities (Fish, 1995), discourses, individual and collective agencies.

Since meaning can only be found *in relation*, that is, in the play between signifiers, in Derrida’s *play of différance* (that differs and defers signification), so also knowledge, subjects, identities can only be perceived in a web of relations. And therefore education, like everything else, has to be thought of in terms of its relation to other aspects of society. People make choices, and so do educators. These selections are full of meaning and impregnated with values and beliefs. Teachers and students have the right to be aware of that, since it can help them not to impose their values on others, and understand that reality is not given or fixed, but a social construction that should be questioned, analysed, and transformed.

According to critical pedagogy, it is the function of education to provide students with a methodology that gives them the chance of seeing beyond their private worlds in order to understand the political, social and economical bases of the wider society. It is this pedagogy and its assumptions that we will discuss now.

For critical pedagogy, schools are not neutral grounds outside history, culture, power/knowledge formations. In the words of Giroux, one of the best known educators in critical pedagogy, “schools are historical and structural embodiments of forms and cultures that are ideological, in the sense that they give meaning to reality through ways which are many times actively contested and distinctly experimented by various groups and individuals” (my translation of Giroux, 1997:124).

Nevertheless, it seems perfectly possible to subvert the established procedures, to deconstruct the legitimate and promote change. This seems to be exactly what critical pedagogy proposes to do. Giroux believes that, in order to promote change, critical educators will have to

*get rid of the traditional parameters of educational theory and practice [so that] we can see schooling as inextricably linked to a wider web of political and socioeconomic arrangements. And when we analyse the nature of the relationship between schools and the dominant society in political and normative terms, we can oppose the hidden agenda defined through the ideology of social processes.* (my translation of Giroux, 1997:74)

The aim of critical pedagogy being, according to Giroux, to teach students to think critically, the first step to reach critical thought is what Freire called “conscientization.” In critical pedagogy, students and teachers have to be aware of the relations education maintains with the “outside”, with what is absent from the school curriculum, with the selections made, with the assumptions that are never discussed but rule the hidden agenda. These assumptions involve mainly the selection of certain types of knowledge to be privileged in school, the establishment and maintenance of specific classroom relations, and the structuring of schools (Giroux, 1997).

But this is only one step in implementing critical pedagogy. Another, and perhaps more important step, is directly related to the principal aim of this pedagogy Giroux sometimes calls simply “social”: to help students and teachers develop a basis from which to build a new social order that can, in its turn, lead to a “truly human education” (Giroux, 1997:74). So, critical pedagogy is not only about

awareness, it is not only about unveiling the hidden agenda, but also and mainly about helping schools to motivate people to agency, to informed action, to social change.

The basics of critical pedagogy having been presented, the last part of this article looks at the literature classroom, more specifically at university level, against the panorama set by critical pedagogy and the postmodern, focusing on the symbolic value attributed to the centrality of the written text.

Reading is thought of as an interpretation process as complicated and fragmented as the subject, as determined by interrelations as the world of signs, as distant from absolute interpretations as cultural values. In postmodern times, readings are not legitimised by concepts such as truth, author, critics, teachers; they are now discussed against current interpretive patterns and communities, alongside power/knowledge structures (Foucault, 1980). Readings are not discussed in terms of correct or incorrect, but of legitimate or illegitimate interpretations: readings are legitimate when they correspond to and accept the interpretive procedures validated by the community where or to which they are produced.

However, the teaching and learning of literature still seems to centre its legitimisation procedures in what Foucault called “commentary” (Foucault, 1995 e 1996). According to him, the principle of commentary assumes the existence of an original text and an original meaning. The idea is that many texts, written about an original text, claim to recuperate its original meaning, being each of them, therefore, a representation of the original text itself, and not simply a different text. Behind it lies the notion that there is a text whose meaning will be revealed in its entirety by the set of its interpretations. It is Derrida’s concept of the desire for “absolute presence”, for centrality, for an origin and a fixed centre.

Considering teacher, student and text as the main elements in literature classrooms, the text is evidently thought of as the most important of the three. And text, in literature classes, is always the *written* text. The amount of time spent with reading aloud, the insistence of teachers so that students “justify” their interpretations by referring to specific parts of the texts, the value given to critical texts, evaluations being mostly in written form, all point to the importance attributed to written language, to text, to centrality and the legitimised. The paramount importance given to the written text is a reflection of the desire for a kind of power that Foucault called disciplinary (Foucault, 1975), a

power that aims at regulating, surveying and governing people by means of controlling and “taming” individuals. Under the double assumption that there exists one single meaning or one single set of possible meanings to each text, and that this meaning can be recuperated through commentary, it becomes easier to control the production of meanings and of readings. If there is only a certain number of readings that are considered “acceptable” or “possible”, then whatever is outside the framed set or norm can be excluded from legitimation. The ones who decide what constitutes the frame, the ones that judge if a determined reading fits the norms of possibility, are the ones in power, the ones who have been given the authority for that. This is a kind of symbolic power that Bourdieu has extensively discussed in his work<sup>3</sup>.

Hence the authority given to teachers of literature, and respected by most students. Trained in a specific critical tradition, teachers of literature have the authority to label readings as right or wrong. The privilege given to the written text allows control to be exerted more objectively; it makes the establishment of limits to interpretation seem natural, and not “naturalised” (Foucault, 1996). A sense of objectivity and rational clarity has been strongly built around and demanded of written language, and that seems to justify the need for “coherence” and objectivity related to writing. Thus, the prominence of written language in the literature classroom does relate to the central position occupied by disciplinary power in our society.

On the other hand, the world today is perceived as a cultural set of discursive formations, historically determined by specific frames of processes of signification. Identities, subjectivities and individuals are seen as contradictory, fragmented, decentred. Conflict is positive, productive. Knowledge is partial, located, a social construction. Truth is biased, determined by the prestige of social groups, relative. Man is now humanity: questions of gender, race and globalisation have produced a new concept of subjectivity “in the move”, of identity “in process” (Hall, 1997).

The literature classroom has been trying to ignore this postmodern attitude concerning the teaching/learning process, mainly in its insistence on the centrality of the written text and on the maintenance of the rigid authority/control structures of disciplinarity. The postmodern literature classroom would be an ideal environment for the

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu has written a considerable amount about symbolic power, and especially about intellectual and cultural power. For more on this subject, please refer to the bibliographic references.

unveiling of the hidden agendas not only of formal education, but also of the sociocultural discourses that constitute us as individuals and as members of specific communities. Discourses of value and relevance can be easily perceived as cultural constructions when literary texts are discussed; differences and similarities in interpretations, reactions and opinions concerning literary texts are a fertile ground for the perception of difference, of the Other in the constitution of the Self (Lacan, 1977). Literature is all about signification processes and their legitimization, about meanings and their construction, and as such, it cannot be studied without bumping into these questions, that have apparently been so effectively avoided by the traditional literature classroom.

But such potentiality requires challenging changes in attitude. In order to be fulfilled, the unmasking potentialities of literature have to become part of the course objectives for both teachers and students. There is a need for a dramatically different attitude to knowledge and its “constructors”, its legitimization and its power. Most of all, there is an urge for a change in the concept of education and the roles of those involved in it, as well as to its “end”, that is, its objective and its “finale” (Usher and Edwards, 1996).

However, there is no recipe, no “method” for the implementation of such changes. There is not even a guarantee that they will “work”, or a certainty that tells they indicate “the right path” to be followed or pursued. As Usher and Edwards point out,

*“Education, true to its Enlightenment heritage, is full of people who speak for others, who seek to do good by them in the name of emancipation and progress. This speaking for, no matter what its intent, always has the potential to become too monological, too universalistic and too exclusive. [...] It follows from this that the work of change is always ‘in process’, inherently uncompletable and constantly open to question.* (Usher and Edwards, 1994:135)

Change is a continuous process that is always moving and changing itself. Recipes run the risk of becoming rules, and as such, they may reinforce the illusionary character of universality and absolute truth linked to the concept of method. Trying to close the possibilities of constant change, the plurality and ambiguity of the process of signification like that would be to impose limits to the *play of différence*, to attempt to murder signification, to destroy life and language.

Yet, in the conflicting movement that exists in the very nature of language and of discourse, there will always be ambiguity, and the possibility for

resistance and change. Literature classes can be a fertile ground for questioning, resisting and promoting change. But the postmodern questioning is not simply a synonym of defying and contradicting: it is mainly a challenge to the establishment in that it must be against whatever seems closed, centred, solid. The questioning posed by the postmodern attitude is one that involves a constant critique to its own suppositions, an openness to the subversive, to the non-conformist, to the refreshing otherness of external views. In the words of Usher and Edwards, “This questioning, in which education can play a potentially significant part, involves opening oneself to the call of different, marginal and transgressive ‘voices’ and engaging in sustained critique of logocentric regimes.” (Usher and Edwards, 1994:135)

This kind of questioning that challenges the immutable and the absolute, that promotes agency by the awareness of the power structures that act on our society and on us as individuals, that needs the constant defiance of itself in order to be itself, this questioning is latent in literary texts, in literature classrooms. It is present in every literary activity, perhaps sometimes waiting to be awoken in the classroom, perhaps hiding underneath a heap of assumptions about the nature of the study of literature, of teaching, of learning, of education. But there is no dust in this library of assumptions, because the eternal movement of signification mingles them all, transforming them in a melting pot full of boiling (and burning) possibilities.

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