Problematizing “Public Pedagogy” in Educational Research

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There are valuable and useful states of mind other than that of knowing. —Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997, p. 171)

There appears a fabulous haze surrounding the term “public pedagogy,” which renders it both exciting and problematic to consider. Yet too often, I feel the murky waters around the term are imagined clean and pure, to the extent that public pedagogy scholarship remains relatively free of trenchant critique. In this chapter, I propose that many vagaries and incongruities plague the term, rendering it incredibly deceptive when deployed in educational research. In doing so, I suggest that while the terrain around public pedagogy is vibrant, it can be a minefield for conceptualizing the ways informal pedagogies operate in contemporary times.

I frame this chapter in relation to an ethnographic research project I am currently conducting, involving work with young people in two socially disparate spaces in suburban Melbourne, Australia. Central to my research is a desire to explore the ways various educative dimensions operate in young people’s lives to enable the conditions for certain imaginations and subjectivities to emerge. I am particularly interested in the role informal sites of pedagogy play in our era of expanding globalization and corporatization, and in how formal schooling spaces function within, and in relation to, the broader educative milieus young people inhabit. Initially, I set forth into the research wilderness keen to engage with the notion of public pedagogy, yet as my research has progressed, I have become increasingly disillusioned with the many paradoxes and limitations it poses. This chapter provides a snapshot of my experiences of disorientation in trying to engage and work with public pedagogy as a theoretical concept.

I begin by arguing that in our era of expanding corporatization and globalization, viable notions of “the public” may be obscured and prove inefficient when imagining spaces of educative influence. In light of this, I argue that the term public pedagogy is mythologized and totalizing, and conceals disparate social realities by failing to recognize how access to forms of knowledge is differentiated and situated within the specificities of individuals’ lived experiences. I argue that Giroux’s (2004b) notion of “corporate public pedagogy” is particularly misleading, and challenge popular assumptions that movies, advertising, video games, and other corporate media technologies represent “public” forms of educative influence.

Next, I argue that while transcendent views of “pedagogy” as operating through the broader
circuits of cultural life have great veracity, they are by no means novel and may do little to help us name, and thus analyze, the constituent elements of broader pedagogical flows. As such, unless specific forms of pedagogical address are located and analyzed, general or abstract theorizations of public pedagogy do little to distinguish it from traditional accounts of socialization and may be inefficient when deployed in research that aims to articulate nuances in the ways educative dimensions inform our lives.

Next, I explore what I believe is an enveloping negativity which dominates articulations of public pedagogy in certain critical pedagogy literature, particularly in Giroux’s (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) authoritative articulations of the term and other literature which engages with pedagogy from a similar perspective. I argue that popular and so-called “public” forms of knowledge are too-often posited as negative ideological forces that merely act upon and corrupt individuals. Public pedagogy is thus expressed as the very thing “we” must fight against: as the debasing barrier to rational understandings of the world. In line with Sandlin and Milam (2008), I argue that the bulk of public pedagogy literature fails to recognize the counter hegemonic possibilities of popular culture forms as vehicles of resistance.

I conclude by arguing that scholarship around public pedagogy is invigorating for its commitment to reconceptualizing what pedagogy means in contemporary times, but that informal sites of learning need to be re-imagined as spaces of resistive and regulatory potential: as dynamic, dialectical, and political spaces through which new visions can and will be forged.

Which Public? Whose Public?
The utility of “public pedagogy” as a conceptual frame began to blur and weaken when I started thinking about what constitutes the “public” in the term. I began to wonder: In our rapidly globalizing and corporatizing era, what exactly are public knowledges, public spaces and public educative influences? In other words: why I am calling this “thing,” this term, public? After all, my current research has immersed me in two very different suburban spaces, illustrative of what Wacquant (1999) and Warr (2007) term “socio-spatial polarization”: the notion that uneven access to globalizing social capital is essentially carving up geographical spaces into zones of advantage and disadvantage, and rendering certain suburbs “enabling or confining” (McLeod & Dillabough, 2007, p. 4). This disparate spatial patterning of socio-economic privilege is underpinned and exacerbated by the processes of advanced globalizing capitalism, creating markedly different social worlds within the fabric of cities the world over (Massey, 2005). The result may be multiple and disparate publics, rubbing against each other, as well the emergence of a plurality of new counterpublics.

A brief stroll through my research areas serves well to illustrate this notion of multiple and disparate publics. In the first area where I am conducting research, big proud houses with lush gardens share quiet streets with green parklands, public recreation areas, and good reputation government schools with strong tertiary oriented pathways. In the second area, a little over three miles down the road, damaged and dilapidated storefronts share a graffiti-choked landscape with run-down homes, large blocks of basic brown-brick units, and schools with “down-market reputations” (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 144) and largely vocationally oriented pathways. The way young people negotiate space in these two areas is visibly different. In fact, in the first area, young people can rarely be seen and are most likely spotted in the backs of SUVs, coming in and out of garages, being shuffled off to here or there by busy looking parents. In the second area, highly visible and audible groups of young people can be seen everywhere: outside storefronts, in fast food joints, and at the local train station. This visibility is a perpetual cause for media puff pieces whose demonstrative claims of gang warfare are regularly directed at young people from
the area’s significant Sudanese refugee population. When a 19-year-old Australian-Sudanese man was fatally bashed to death at the local train station in 2007, cries of “failed integration” came from the highest levels of Australian life, with the then Australian Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, suggesting Sudanese refugees were not “settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life” (quoted in Collins & Perkins, 2008, ¶ 17). The residual effects from such commentary are well documented in the area and suggest that young people from African backgrounds face systemic racial abuse and violence, militant police surveillance in streets and shopping malls, and social and academic problems in a school system that poorly caters to their needs. They may also doubt their right to be in public spaces by virtue of who they are. This ostensibly violent and “pathologised space” (Reay, 2007, p. 1192) is a far cry from the leafy green and predominately white-Anglo enclave a mere stone’s throw up the road.

This snapshot view of suburban disparity illustrates a significant unevenness in young people’s access to the possibilities offered in a so-called “global” city and suggests the operation of concurrent publics. In this case, unequal global flows (see Appadurai, 1996) of people, finances, opportunity, and education mean that young people may inhabit very different socio-cultural, and thus educative, worlds. The problem for me has been how to reconcile this with an interest in so-called public pedagogy. After all, which public and whose public am I referring to? Thinking “public,” even within the geographical boundaries of a reasonably confined area of southeast Melbourne, feels totalizing in its concealment of disparate social realities and may fail to adequately capture the ways access to forms of knowledge is differentiated and situated within the specificities of individuals’ lived experiences. While by no means do I suggest that individuals are bound to local spaces or lack mobility in either a physical or virtual sense, surely the ways young people learn cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the power of local spaces to mediate the ways forms of knowledge are received and experienced. Familial histories, local schools, distinct “communities of sentiment” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 8), the complex meshing of cultures and religions, economic advantage or disadvantage, distinct place-based imaginations, and so on, arguably converge to govern the conditions of possibility for young people’s pedagogic engagements. As such, it is difficult to see how there can exist a singular “public” in which pedagogies might be experienced and I believe that great many abstractions of public pedagogy fail to account for this disabling perceptive flaw. Such is the deceptive clarity with which public pedagogy tempts us.

In addition to this problem of multiple and disparate publics, I find the waters of the “public” further muddied by thinking around corporate culture, the corporatization of spaces, and the extent to which corporate discourses might permeate the educative experiences of young people. To play devil’s advocate, I ask: Are shopping malls public? Is watching TV inside your living room public? Is taking a walk down to the grocery store public? In fact, with the possible exception of exclusively state-owned libraries, museums, gardens and other such spaces, which citizens might not necessarily access, to what extent can we feasibly suggest that “public space” has ever existed, since the first line was drawn in the sand, so to speak, and private ownership became the raison d’être for Western social life? Even if public spaces did previously exist in more pure forms, they have certainly been eroded by the complex and competing interests of globalizing capitalism, public/private partnerships, and other technologies of corporatization that result in spaces being “re-territorialized” (Schmidt, 2004, p. 17) according to sponsorship interests. What’s more, we should be equally skeptical of any classic Liberal notion of a “public sphere” that might be imagined as decoupled from the powers and interests of dominant social actors and groups.

With these considerations in mind, Giroux’s (2004b) notion of a “corporate public pedagogy” appears incredibly paradoxical, hazy, and difficult to conceptualize. Giroux argues, for example,
that: “Corporate public pedagogy has become an all-encompassing cultural horizon for producing market identities, values and practices” (p. 74), which “with its narrow and imposed schemes of classification and limited modes of identification uses the educational force of the culture to negate the basic conditions for critical agency” (p. 74). He adds:

Public pedagogy in this sense refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain. (Giroux, 2004b, p. 74)

Central to Giroux’s argument, therefore, is a belief that due to advancing neoliberalism and the expanding power of corporations throughout the world, “non-commodified public spheres are replaced by commercial spheres as the substance of critical democracy is emptied out and replaced by a democracy of goods available to those with purchasing power” (Giroux, 2004b, p. 74). In this way, Giroux makes it very clear that the public sphere is diminishing, and being replaced by the private—a view reiterated throughout his work on public pedagogy (see, in particular, Giroux, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). It makes little sense, therefore, when Giroux (2004b) argues, “corporate power marks the space of a new kind of public pedagogy” (p. 74, emphasis added). By creating what I would argue is a false and binaristic distinction between the public and the private, Giroux positions us to question and critique privatizing discourses that are seen to be waging war on public life. In doing so, Giroux makes it clear that we should mourn the loss of public space, the loss of the public mind, and the loss of the public good—as if these mythologized and idealized public dimensions once existed in a real and quantifiable way and are being stolen from us. While I absolutely agree that corporatizing discourses require critical attention in this sense, how is the word “public” appropriate in this context, given that the discourses and pedagogies to which Giroux refers are either in part or wholly privatized and corporatized? After all, and at the risk of sounding repetitive, if we access commercial television networks and websites, go shopping in malls owned by mega-corporations, eat dinner in sidewalk cafes surrounded by street-based advertising and bill boards, aren’t we inevitably implicated in the consumption of private and corporate forms of knowledge? Even if we may not consciously choose to partake in “the private” as such, it is inevitably thrust upon us, with the result being a spectacular blurring of the classic public/private distinction. As such, I suspect a preferable term to Giroux’s oxymoronic “corporate public pedagogy” might simply be “ideologies of corporatization” or another such term which better captures the messy, fractured, and pervasive ways corporate discourses operate in our everyday lives and which may also complicate binaristic views of corporate culture as something which might be deposited into, or in pure opposition to, public life.5

Of course, a likely riposte to my line of argument may be to argue that the “public” in “public pedagogy” merely refers to what is available to the general population: that is, what is “out there” in culture, to be consumed by citizens either by choice or through incidental exposure. Thus, one may suggest “public pedagogies” are public only to the extent that as citizens we are able to access them. Yet this view can be countered on the basis that what is “out there” is clearly not available to all. Access to forms of knowledge is no doubt uneven and bound up in complex power relations and structures, which means young people’s access to pedagogical flows is conditional and contingent upon myriad contextual factors. This is especially true when considering the kinds of pedagogies which may be disseminated through so-called “popular” and “corporate” discourses, and because of this I would suggest there is a serious paradox in referring to the pedagogies of heavily corporatized popular media discourses such as movies, advertising, video games, popular music, and so on, as public. I fail to see, for example, how a video game can be feasibly under-
stood as a public pedagogy, especially if we consider one of my research participants whose only experience with video games is playing a PS3 for five minutes at the display counter at his local Kmart store! His family, like many others in my “disadvantaged” research area, simply cannot afford game consoles, cable TV, movie tickets, high-speed Internet, glossy magazines, and access to other cultural (and pedagogical) resources that some young people take for granted. To speak of such media forms as public pedagogies may therefore conceal the reality that young people in different social spaces engage differently, and with different kinds, of popular-corporate discourses. Moreover, in my “disadvantaged” research area, several groups of young people display strong affective and collective identifications with the corporatized discourses of American “gangsta rap” culture, which manifests largely through stylistic and linguistic self-fashioning. In contrast, young people in my other research area rarely appear to engage with such cultures. This has forced me to consider the ways the intersecting educative dimensions of local spaces may mediate young people’s engagements with popular-corporate discourses, which again renders any totalizing notion of a public pedagogy incredibly misleading. Finally, even if we ignore the fact that young people’s access to popular media technologies is differential, there is still the problem that the foundational fabric of these forms is deeply corporatized. Advertising agencies sell companies on the promise that placing a brand logo in a popular video game, for example, will likely generate around one billion “quality brand impressions” (that is, strong affective associations) for its players as they traverse the digital world (Quart, 2003, p. 127). In this sense, there is very little “public” about such corporatized spaces of the popular media.

Why Pedagogy?

Having decided that viable notions of a “public” may be obscured and may thus prove inefficient when imagining spaces of educative influence, I arrived at another black hole, so to speak. It occurred to me I had not questioned the “pedagogy” of the term either. I started to wonder: What makes something educative or pedagogic in nature? Isn’t everything educative? Or is it? And most importantly: What distinguishes the “pedagogy” in public pedagogy from traditional accounts of socialization or interpellation and the old saying that “ideology is everywhere” thus all ideology is educative?

On this point, I refer largely to Giroux’s articulations of public pedagogy (see Giroux, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005), which are commonly cited starting points for analyses of the term. Giroux makes the important point, for example, that public pedagogy transcends the realm of formal institutionalized schooling, thus operating in the broader circuits of our cultural milieus. Giroux (2004c) draws upon Williams’s (1967) notion of “permanent education” to describe public pedagogy, painting a picture of education “in its broadest sense” (p. 63):

What [permanent education] valuably stresses is the educational force of our whole social and cultural experience. It is therefore concerned, not only with continuing education, of a formal or informal kind, but with what the whole environment, its institutions and relationships, actively and profoundly teaches. (Williams, 1967, pp. 15–16, cited in Giroux, 2004c, p. 63)

At its heart, this argument is no different from Dewey’s (1916) argument nearly a century ago that all communication in social systems is essentially educative (p. 6). Emphasizing the “educational force of our whole social and cultural experience,” as a way of describing public pedagogy, seems merely another way to say everything is educative. More problematic, however, is that Giroux’s emphasis on culture and its role “in producing narratives, metaphors, images and
desiring maps that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about themselves and their relationship to others” (Giroux, 2004b, p. 78) is incredibly myopic, as the kind of culture to which he refers is perpetually “under assault, particularly as the forces of neoliberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns” (p. 78). In developing this view of culture and democracy under threat, Giroux centralizes the educative role of the popular media and corporate culture, particularly through technologies such as movies (2001b, 2003) and pervasive corporate branding (2001a, 2001c). These accounts of public pedagogy arguably mirror classic, and largely elitist, neo-Marxist critiques of mass media socialization as articulated by key Frankfurt school thinkers (see Adorno, 2001; Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; and Marcuse, 2006). These classic accounts posit media technologies as agencies of repressive socialization (or more bluntly, forms of capitalist brainwashing), which placate individuals through containing and castrating their potential for critical thinking. As Kellner (2002) argues, Frankfurt school texts regarded the culture industries and mass culture as “modes of social control” (p. 290) and “powerful forms of ideology and domination” (p. 290). A simple flick through the opening pages of Giroux’s (2001c) Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture’s War on Children provides evidence that the media and the gamut of “corporate culture” is held in this regard. Such negative visions risk seeing young people as little more than “interpellated subjects,” to borrow from Althusser (1984), onto which capitalist ideologies are inscribed.

Regardless of the legitimacy of such perspectives on socialization, interpellation or views of pedagogy as operating through the very broadest circuits of cultural life, an application of these concepts to the somewhat practical domain of educational research may pose problems. In taking an almost transcendent view of pedagogy into research, one may risk opening the analytical aperture so wide as to let the whole spectrum of blinding light rush in, the result being obscured visions through an overdose of pedagogical possibility. Put less dramatically, while broad visions of public pedagogy may seem to provide a neat umbrella term to describe the ways educative forces operate through cultural spaces, they may do little to help us name and thus analyze the constituent elements of broader pedagogical flows. In my research, for example, I have found the term public pedagogy increasingly redundant as my understanding of the nuances in young people’s educative engagements has increased. Each day I gain a greater sense of the ways multifarious and disparate pedagogies animate the lives of my young participants, as well as the ways “globally spanning” forms of knowledge (such as discourses in certain popular media texts or imaginations of global citizenship) are received differently in the varied contexts of my participants’ lives. Whether it is the collective engagements of young Australians with the discourses of American punk/hardcore culture, or the informal ways young people learn entrepreneurial skills and manufacture educational advantage through extra-curricular volunteer programs, any totalizing or singular notion of a public pedagogy becomes analytically untenable.

For “public pedagogy” to make sense in research, I believe it needs to be understood in relation to far more nameable sub-categories and specific forms of pedagogy, or in a pluralized sense, pedagogies. To be fair, Giroux does this by analyzing films such as Fight Club (Giroux, 2001b) and Ghost World (Giroux, 2003) and media spectacles such as the photographs from Abu Ghraib (Giroux, 2005); conceptualizing each as endogenous to the greater (negative) educative force of American culture. Yet Giroux’s (2004a, 2004b) broader analyses of neoliberalism and corporate public pedagogy feel incredibly hazy because such specificity is not always provided and, as a result, pedagogy is seen as a big and monstrous thing. The analyses of Ellsworth (2002) on the educational objectives of the U.S. Holocaust Museum and on various anomalous places of learning (Ellsworth, 2005), as well as Sandlin and Milam’s (2008) analysis of practices of culture jamming as forms of critical public pedagogy, also locate specific forms of pedagogical address. Ellsworth (2002, 2005) and Sandlin and Milam (2008) also make it clear what makes such forms
Problematizing “Public Pedagogy” in Educational Research

For example, when Sandlin and Milam (2008) analyze the culture jamming activities of anti-consumerism activist Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, their case for pedagogy does not fall back upon broad notions inspired by socialization or visions of education in its broadest sense. Rather, Reverend Billy’s culture jamming performances are understood as specific forms of political and pedagogic intervention, designed to open spaces of learning which run counter to the ideologies of consumerism. Culture jamming as a “pedagogical hinge” (see Ellsworth, 2005) and as a form of détournement is thus conceptualized by Sandlin and Milam (2008) as powerful pedagogical praxis, which seek to actually teach individuals within the contexts of certain spaces. In this way, a more specific understanding of informal pedagogical processes is articulated, which veers away from monolithic visions of public pedagogy as a form of mass media socialization.

Beyond the Negativity of Public Pedagogy?

With such critiques in mind, scholarship around public pedagogy signals a vibrant “glitch in the matrix” in its challenge to still-dominant views of formal institutionalized schooling as the lifeblood educative authority in young people’s lives. I find much work on public pedagogy invigorating for its commitment to reconceptualizing what pedagogy means in contemporary times and in providing lenses through which the power of informal spaces of learning can be understood (see Ellsworth, 2002, 2005; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). I am deeply concerned, however, with what I believe is an enveloping negativity which dominates articulations of the term in certain critical pedagogy literature, particularly in Giroux’s authoritative articulations of the term (see Giroux, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) and other literature which engages with pedagogy from a similar perspective (Kincheloe, 2002; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004). By “enveloping negativity,” I mean that dominant popular (and, in Giroux’s case, “public”) forms of knowledge are too often posited as negative ideological forces that are largely seen to act upon and corrupt individuals. Public pedagogy is thus expressed as the very thing “we” must fight against: as the debasing barrier to rational understandings of the world. These visions not only silence the counter hegemonic possibilities of popular cultural forms as vehicles of subaltern resistance (Sandlin & Milam, 2008) but also paint an incredibly cynical, miserable, and myopic view of Western culture. Whether it is corporations like Disney (Giroux, 2001a) or McDonalds (Kincheloe, 2002), or texts such as Fight Club (Giroux, 2001b) or Ghost World (Giroux, 2003), dominant culture is seen as a despot of damaging social values, imagined through alienating rhetoric and grand “culture as threat” narratives. Despite my previously close engagement with critical pedagogy scholarship (see Savage, 2008), I have become aware of the many dangers posed by considering “public pedagogy,” from this perspective. I will detail two of these specifically.

First, I believe the perspectives of Giroux (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) and Kincheloe (2002), in particular, offer very peculiar visions of cultural power and knowledge, which play heavily upon the purportedly destructive capacities of dominant forms of pedagogy while not adequately exploring the resistive relationships we may possess in relation to them. Such texts arguably imagine authoritarian-style public or cultural pedagogies projecting scorchingly into our lives from white-hot loci of domineering power; visions which may serve to conceal rather than enlighten our understandings of complex power and pedagogic relations. In Giroux’s (2001a) analysis of Disney, for example, the corporation is understood as a “teaching machine,” responsible for the “organization and regulation of culture” (p. 2), with the power to “commodify and homogenize all aspects of everyday life” (p. 11), and as a “threat to the real freedoms associated with a substantive democracy” (p. 11). Although Giroux briefly suggests
that “the way young people mediate texts” (p. 11) and “produce different readings of cultural forms” (p. 11) cannot be ignored, his book clearly paints a picture of Disney as a great evil in what is seen as a militant “battle over culture” (p. 11) and democracy. Kincheloe (2002) offers a similar argument in relation to McDonald’s as a “right wing cultural pedagogy” (p. 116), arguing that the corporation represents “corporate colonialism” (p. 106) and, drawing upon Fiske (1993), that fast-food companies represent a collective “power bloc” which threatens progressive democracy. Kincheloe pleads: “for the sake of human dignity we must resist” (p. 128), so that we can gain more power to “be our own civic-minded and democratically progressive people” (p. 128). Kincheloe does remind readers, however, that young people are not “passive, manipulable victims” (p. 47) and that corporations like McDonald’s are not “secretly conspiring to overthrow democracy and control the world as we know it” (p. 48). Yet such concessions and slight nuances concerning power and resistance are vastly over-shadowed by emphases on the “colonizing power” (p. 106) of McDonald’s, its efforts to court “the hearts and minds of the colonized peoples” (p. 104), and its success in the “re-education first of the American public and now the world” (p. 128). Moreover, by drawing upon Fiske (1993) to frame his vision of power, Kincheloe contends that power is “a systematic set of operations upon people that works to ensure the maintenance of the social order...and ensure its smooth running” (Fiske, 1993, p. 11, cited in Kincheloe 2002, p. 122; emphasis added). Confusion exists, therefore, over the nature and operations of power, made foggier by analogies of colonization and visions of public re-education that secures “hegemonic consent” (p. 47) and endangers our freedoms.

The negativity and lack of clarity of such visions illustrate the “repressive myths” of critical pedagogy (see Ellsworth, 1989), as well as the kinds of totalizing, highly abstract and misleading rhetoric it can potentially generate (Ellsworth, 1989; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). With the exception of minor concessions, such as Kincheloe’s (2002) brief suggestion that power can be multi-directional and counter hegemonic (p. 121), and Giroux’s related argument on resistive and democratic public pedagogy (Giroux 2004c; see also my note number 7 at the end of this chapter), the overwhelming polemical thrust of such literature is that power does in fact exist “somewhere,” at certain “power loci” from which it is projected, and that “we” must fight against it or suffer the looming consequences. After all, to deny such “power loci” and take seriously the point that power might be more diffuse and difficult to target would complicate critical pedagogy’s education-as-emancipation narratives, jeopardize the “revolutionary” role of critical pedagogues, and render problematic the writing against specific corporate institutions. An enemy, such as a corporation or a text, thus provides a neat target against which critical pedagogy’s missionary aims can be focused. In this way, by conceptualizing public pedagogy through the lens of critical pedagogy, Giroux cannot even take his own claims seriously, as if he were to critically consider his point that public pedagogy is, more complexly, “a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces” (2004b, p. 74), then he might find that conceiving of a critical pedagogy project against any particular corporation or film is too simplistic. To make public pedagogy make sense in this way, false binaristic visions of power and the individual must be conceived in order to justify critical pedagogy’s role. In other words, public pedagogy, as a form of cultural power, must be largely imagined as a force of domination exercised upon us, which we must wage resistance against. This didactic “oppressed vs. oppressor” model glosses over the myriad grey areas of power struggles, and perhaps more importantly, fails to recognize the powerful role everyday cultural texts and discourses can play as dynamic, dialectical, and political vehicles of resistance.7 As such, while binaristic conceptions of power can serve powerfully to mobilize and politicize readers, and should be credited for this reason, I believe they are built on an epistemological fallacy, and may provide a skewed and simplified understanding of the pervasive nature of power and knowledge.
My second and closely related point of friction concerns the nature of the “emancipatory project” that critical pedagogy literature typically levels against public pedagogy. Specifically, I believe there are serious problems associated with a project that aims to re-distribute or transform power through forms of intellectual and social revolution that specifically center around the praxis of critical pedagogues. I believe such views bestow the “critical pedagogue” a glamorized and disproportionately powerful role and, in doing so, grossly overstate the role formal education plays in educating (and revolutionizing) young people. In this way, these visions contradict the very premise upon which public pedagogy relies by focusing the role of educational revolution back onto formal learning sites. Giroux (2001a, 2001b) and Kincheloe (2002) both provide examples of the kind of glamorization of the critical pedagogue to which I refer. Throughout these texts, there appears an implicit assumption that harmful, dominating and so-called public forms of cultural knowledge require “fixing” by critical pedagogues, whose raison d’être is to essentially revolutionize social life by tackling the “wrong kinds” of educative influence and installing the “right kinds.” This generates a kind of Mr. Fix-It attitude toward everyday cultural life, which reeks of condescension, but also obscures the dialectic relationship between individuals and their cultures, devalues rather than celebrates human agency, and arrogantly understands critical pedagogues as the central locus for educational change. This paternalistic attitude is well illustrated by Giroux (2001a) when he writes that his “goal is to offer readers a set of tools that enable them to inquire into what Disney represents, in a way that they might not have thought about” (p. 9), and also by Kincheloe (2002) when he argues that against the fast-food power bloc, individuals who are concerned with a democratic society need to develop “power literacies” so that they can begin to realize and “understand how power works” (p. 119).

Giroux (2001b) offers an even more “holier than thou” sentiment in his analysis of Fight Club, in which he aims to “reveal its socially constructed premises, demystify its contradictions and challenge its reactionary views” (p. 61, emphasis added.). In a bizarre paradox, Giroux adds: “I want to ask questions about Fight Club that have not generally been asked in the popular press and engage in a discussion of how dominant public pedagogies prevent us from asking such questions in the first place” (p. 61). Here, Giroux apparently stands outside of the effects of dominant public pedagogy, able to ask the questions others can’t, because he has access to the tools able to reveal and demystify the hidden agendas that Fight Club promulgates as a public pedagogy. Readers are thus shown how forms of public pedagogy devastate and corrupt their lives with irrationality, but thankfully, with recourse to the tenets of rationality, reason and democracy, the tools of critical pedagogy offer a way out. This is not only a self-fulfilling prophecy, but also represents another false binary, this time between “the popular” and “formal education,” whereby public pedagogy,

underscores the central importance of formal spheres of learning that unlike their popular counterparts—driven largely by commercial interests that more often mis-educate the public—must provide citizens with those critical capacities, modes of literacies, knowledge and skills that enable them to both read the world critically and participate in shaping and governing it. Pedagogy at the popular level must now be a central concern of formal schooling itself. (Giroux, 2004b, p. 77)

By fixing the role of educative revolution on the shoulders of educators and institutionalized learning sites, the apparently powerful educative forces of public pedagogies are devalued through sidelining the possibilities of broader cultural forms as informal sites of learning and social change. A problematic assumption also exists that formal schooling might actually be capable of serving revolutionary needs; an assumption meticulously critiqued by Hunter (1994).
As McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) argue, Giroux’s position leaves no options for teachers other than to become critical activists or to defend a mythologized notion of the public against “the new corporate takeover” (p. 439). With reference to the United States, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) add that public school educators “have rarely been, on a widespread basis, consistent advocates of schools as public spheres where democracy is taught, learned and enacted” (p. 439), thus the contention that teachers need to be the new revolutionaries suggests writers such as Giroux “likely spend little time with specific teachers and students in specific schools” (p. 439).

In educational research, in actual grassroots settings, such peculiar views of the relationship between power, individuals and the pedagogue may profoundly distort analyses of young people’s relationships with popular cultural knowledge and provide a disabling model through which the various purposes of formal education might be imagined. For me, such visions have been particularly unhelpful in trying to conceptualize how pervasive ideologies of corporatization might influence young people through the various educative dimensions they inhabit, and have been obstructive in trying to explore how what happens inside schools connects with and informs what happens outside schools, and vice versa.

Thinking Forward…

Socio-cultural life is arguably comprised of competing, disparate, and diverse pedagogies, knowledges, powers, and interests, which circulate through fractured and fuzzy-bordered communities, networks, and associations. These uneven flows, in globalizing and corporatizing times especially, mean that the ways pedagogical forces operate can be highly differential in scope and influence, and that learning is likely a messy and splintered process that takes place in wild and complex ways. For these reasons, mythologized and totalizing visions of public pedagogy, which do not adequately account for the obscured nature of “the public” in contemporary times, which fail to delineate forms of “pedagogy” from outmoded socialization theories, and which operate on peculiar and overwhelmingly negative visions of power, may be redundant in educational research that hopes to produce a nuanced account of the ways educative dimensions operate in young people’s lives. After all, educational research requires a certain level of pragmatism and concepts that you can think with in tangible ways. While I am not championing forms of methodological positivism, I strongly believe that if a term or concept is obscured, has simply too many potential meanings, is itself universalizing in nature, or carries too heavily the myopic visions of one paradigm of thought, then it becomes quite ineffective as guide to understanding social worlds.

It has not been my aim in this chapter to propagate nihilistic cynicism, or what Giroux (2001d) calls “pedagogies of despair” (p. 18). Nor has it been my intention to level unwarranted criticisms at particular theorists or to try to intentionally denigrate the philosophies of a particular paradigm of scholarship. Far from being a disgruntled consumer, who has “tried on” public pedagogy only to find it is not working for me, I would argue my journey has been one of actively trying to engage with, flesh out, and work with the possibilities of public pedagogy, only to find more dead ends and debilitating u-turns than roads to further lucidity. My aim has been to sketch this journey, to put some ideas on the table which challenge many abstractions of public pedagogy to date, and to draw attention to some of the messiness and complexity which surrounds debates on the nature of informal pedagogies in contemporary times.

In looking to the future, my aim is to develop my thinking beyond problematizing public pedagogy and to open doors of possibility toward more lucid terminology and theoretical positions of a more productive nature. So far, this has meant abandoning the term public pedagogy in my research and writing, but holding closely the central idea that informal sites of learning
must be critically appraised as powerful, albeit wildly uneven, educative influences. I also believe that further considerations of the pedagogical dimensions of socio-cultural life need to take seriously the notion that pedagogical discourses, whether formal, informal or otherwise, harbor both resistive and regulatory potential. In other words, pedagogies are not simply oppressive or emancipatory, but rather dynamic, dialectical, political, and bound up with power in chaotic ways. Further recognition of this multi-directional and irregular nature of pedagogical power will no doubt pose new challenges for imagining resistive projects which aim to shift balances of power or inspire new modes of thinking, but surely it is better to work with these complexities than to fall into repressive models which aim to simply “revolutionize” or “free” individuals from the repressive pangs of “public pedagogy” and everyday life.

Overall, while my thinking is currently embryonic and somewhat utopian in scope, I feel refreshed by the challenge to think through these various threads of contention in a productive way. With this in mind, I shall conclude by returning to the words of Elizabeth Ellsworth. Indeed, there are valuable states of mind other than that of knowing, and I look forward to the future of this debate.

Notes

1. There is no space in the context of this chapter to illustrate the disparity of these two suburban spaces in depth. However, I will cite a few poignant points. Both my research areas are in Melbourne’s southeast suburbs and are located just over three miles apart. Unemployment in my second area doubles that of my first, there are significant per household income differences between the two areas, and there are marked differences in terms of educational attainments for both young people and adults in each area. My second area is also home to a high number of refugee families (particularly from Sudanese backgrounds) who live predominately in Housing Commission homes. I was told of one Housing Commission home in which two parents lived in a three-bedroom house with their 13 school-aged children. Social disengagement among Australian-Sudanese youth is a particular problem in the area and was the catalyst behind the Rights of Passage report, published in December 2008 by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (see note 2, below). Stories from young people in my research suggest young Australian-Sudanese people in this area find it incredibly difficult to gain employment and engage in social settings in which their cultural and religious backgrounds often rub violently against mainstream so-called “white Australian values.”

2. These various social and racial tensions are documented in detail in the Rights of Passage report, published in December 2008 by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, which evidences the systemic prejudice to which young Australian-Sudanese are subject in Melbourne’s southeast. The report is available at http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/rights_passage/index.html

3. See also, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004), in which the authors challenge the visions of “public good in crisis” as articulated in Henry Giroux’s Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture’s War on Children (2001c), Kenneth Saltman’s Collateral Damage: Corporatizing Public Schools: A Threat to Democracy (2001), and Alex Molnar’s Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America’s Schools (1996). McKenzie and Scheurich argue, with reference to American society, that there has “never been a period in the history of this capitalist country where the public good—that is, if the public is defined as “all,” not just white middle-class males—has not been under siege, or worse” (p. 438). As such, “the focus in the texts by Saltman, Giroux and Molnar on today’s crisis as the worst of the worst for public good is historically and sociologically naïve and misleading” (p. 438).

4. We should not forget that the very notion of a “public sphere” was essentially dreamed-up by early modern bourgeois elites (Fraser, 1990; Taylor, 2002) and was, from the beginning, “constituted by, a number of significant exclusions” (Fraser, 1990, p. 59). As Fraser argues, the “power base of a stratum of bourgeois men” (p. 60) deployed the public sphere as a “strategy of distinction” (p. 60) through which to define the hierarchical class rule of “an emergent elite” (p. 60). In this way, the public sphere can be historically viewed as an instrument of modernity, with a long history of securing the interests of dominant social groups (Fraser, 1990, p. 62).

5. I initially suspected that the term “corporate pedagogies” might have greater purchase, however, I have steered away from this alternative as a debate around what constitutes “the corporate” in this term would no doubt pose its own set of complexities and contradictions. In critiquing “the public” I do not wish to proffer a view that conceptions of “the corporate” are necessarily clearer.

6. I want to make it clear that if it weren’t for critical pedagogy scholarship, and the writings of Henry Giroux in particular, I would never have pursued academic research and my career as a high school English teacher would
have survived little past an infamous “chair throwing” incident during my second week in school. I admire critical pedagogy’s passion and desire to inspire resistive relationships in relation to potentially damaging forms of power, however, I find myself increasingly distanced from its debates. Moreover, I have grown tired of “revolutionary rhetoric” which is heavily theorized but which does not, and sometimes cannot, connect in any meaningful way to actual grassroots activism or everyday classroom experiences. Overall, I feel dogged by the negativity of the paradigm.

7. There is an important anomaly, or indeed, a concession, that must be noted. In his paper, Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals (Giroux, 2004c), Giroux takes a very different position from that which so clearly dominates his other conceptions of public pedagogy. In this text, Giroux writes of the possibilities offered by “forms of public pedagogy grounded in a democratic project” which represent “a small, but important, step in addressing the massive and unprecedented reach of global capitalism” (p. 71). Drawing upon Imre Szeman’s Learning to Learn from Seattle (2002) as an example, Giroux brings attention to the ways alternative pedagogies are produced within various globalization protest movements, “that have attempted to open up new modes and sites of learning while enabling new forms of collective resistance” (p. 65).

8. I must add, once such forms of oppression and domination are torn down, so to speak, questions around “whose values?” and “whose reason?” should be installed are rarely addressed in any detailed way in such critical pedagogy literature. These are left to our imagination, obscured by romantic rhetoric around the nourishment of public good and the democratic project. As such, “the bad” is painstakingly articulated, but “the good” remains a romantic specter, a beautiful somewhere space, in which abstract and utopian visions flourish. In addition, a rarely acknowledged problem in critical pedagogy scholarship is that once the oppressed “rise up” and “revolutionize” social life, if this is even possible, the resulting shift in the balance of power might actually render the oppressed the new oppressors.

9. Again, consider Giroux (2004c) as an exception to this dominant line of argument.

References
Problematicizing “Public Pedagogy” in Educational Research • 115


