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Educational Inquiry and the Pedagogical Other
On the Politics and Ethics of Researching Critical Public Pedagogies
JAKE BURDICK AND JENNIFER A. SANDLIN

Why don't you professors stop burrowing farther and farther into your private world? Does that unshareable language make you feel more specific? Or updated? I literally don't understand the upside of creating these walls around a subculture? —Reverend Billy, anti-consumption activist (personal communication)

Following the introduction of cultural studies and critical pedagogy into educational inquiry, researchers and practitioners have taken sharp interest in how forces outside of the walls of educational institutions—forces such as the media (e.g., Burdick, 2009; Dalton, 2006; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007; McCarthy, 1998), the social/material conditions of students' lives (e.g., Willis, 1981), and the transformation of schools based on public policy/perception shifts (e.g., Roseboro, O'Malley, & Hunt, 2006)—all work to shape, augment, debilitate, and delimit the functioning of schools and their ability to serve as sites of democratic production. Drawing from these studies, as well as the theoretical contributions of critical theory and cultural studies, the term and concept public pedagogy emerged most cogently into the literature in the early 1990s (O'Malley, Burdick, & Sandlin, in press; Sandlin, Milam, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2008) as another way of framing and exploring the educational phenomena occurring outside of schools. Educational researchers interested in public pedagogy no longer need to locate the school as the epicenter of educational activity. Rather, they view public spaces and discourses themselves as innately and pervasively pedagogical.

Earlier work locating learning outside of institutional spaces clearly emerged in Illich’s (1971, 1973) work on deschooling and conviviality, Cremin’s (1976) notion of an “ecological” view of education, and Schubert’s (1986) conceptualization of curricular questions, to name a few (Sandlin et al., 2008). Further, the notion of a public pedagogy can be found in the literature as early as 1894 (D’Avert), albeit with a drastically different meaning than we employ in this paper (Sandlin et al., 2008). Beginning with Luke’s (1996) foundational collection of essays focused on the pedagogies of popular culture and everyday life and Giroux’s (e.g., 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) extensive body of work, however, educational and cultural researchers and theorists converged upon a more common, yet still contested, understanding of public pedagogy as the forms of educational activity that exist in cultural spaces outside of institutions of schooling. Research in this vein has taken up such diverse interests and sites as film (e.g., Giroux, 2002), public artwork
(e.g., Irwin et al., 2009), museums (e.g., Kridel, this volume), architecture (e.g., Ellsworth, 2005), and pervasive neoliberal ideologies (e.g., Giroux, 2004b), among many others—all exploring how the curricula and pedagogy available therein either close out or produce possibilities for the forging of democratic publics.

Despite this proliferation of public pedagogy research and theory and its underlying commitments to a broader vision of educational discourse, there has been little discussion of the problematic role of the researcher—who is likely closely affiliated with the institution—and the tools/means/languages she uses to query, analyze, and re/create these public spaces. Educational research, like any other disciplinary genre of inquiry, is tied to its specific context and historicity, to the species of education associated with schools and schooling, and to the standards that produce the boundaries of acceptability within the field. Volosinov (1976), in discussing the coherence of language systems, states that “every utterance in the business of life is an objective social enthymeme. [The utterance] is something like a ‘password’ known only to those who belong to the same social purview” (p. 101). These concepts are easily applied to the limits of acceptable educational research imposed by colleges of education, the review process for scholarly publications and presentations, and the greater political context encompassing our work. However, these criteria and the potentially rigid definitions they afford reduce educational practice and theory to the space of existing cultural models and language of teaching, learning, and curriculum. That is, they offer a bounded space of what counts as education, often collapsing all pedagogies into schooling metonymically. The resulting schema for educational research may be useful and appropriate for inquiries into formal sites of learning; however, the limited discursive space posed by an already-known construct of how education looks and feels offers a problematic space to/for researchers interested in the curricula and pedagogies existing beyond and between institutional boundaries.

We contend that the shift in context from analyzing the institutionalized, knowable space of schooling to studies of pedagogical activity occurring outside of the materially and ideologically defined boundaries of the school requires a careful examination of one’s inquiry purpose and practices. Especially when researching critical, resistant public pedagogies—or spaces of counter-hegemonic practice—educational researchers’ ethical obligations extend beyond the basal, legalistic understandings of beneficence and harm. Instead, researchers become obligated to address how one’s very research practices might undermine the political possibilities of sites of critical public pedagogy, diminish the transformative potential that public pedagogies hold for educational research and practice, and ultimately reinscribe normative, delimiting notions of pedagogy, effectively transmuting any productive possibility to the realm of the already-known. Interweaving a framework from post-colonial thought (Bhabha, 1992, 1994; Said, 1984, 1993, 1994; Willinsky, 1999), poststructural feminist and performative methodological work (Denzin, 2003, 2008; Pillow, 2003), and the literary contributions of Bakhtin (1990)/Volosinov (1976), we argue that researchers interested in critical public pedagogies must reconsider many of the basic assumptions and premises of educational inquiry. We propose this linkage of theoretical perspectives as each proposes a specific ethical positioning to the notion of alterity, positions that collectively call for an attentiveness to and irreducibility of Otherness as a crucial component of developing any semblance of resistant, counter-hegemonic consciousness. Drawing from these perspectives, we posit that critical public pedagogies offer us glimpses of the pedagogical Other—forms and practices of pedagogy that exist independently of, even in opposition to the commonsense imaginary (Barone & Lash, 2006) of education. Without this careful approach to researching sites of learning outside of formal institutions, we argue that researchers risk taking on an institutionalized form of the colonial gaze, applying reductive logics to or even completely
ignoring phenomena that are not easily recognized in the dominant cultural meanings of teaching and learning.

The Problems of Naming: Lessons from Postcolonial Theory

One of the problems inherent in locating critical pedagogy in popular and public culture is that our very frameworks for understanding what pedagogy is extend from our own cultural constructs of what counts as teaching and learning in institutional settings—constructs that reify traditional forms of intellectual activity as the only possible mode of critical intervention. Beyond simply attending to the content of their work, researchers studying public pedagogy must take careful measure of the processes and underlying assumptions of their inquiry, mindful that Western research bears “the unmistakable imprint of Western ways of looking and categorizing the world” (Viruru & Cannella, 2006, pp. 182–183). Further, this imperialist legacy is evident in current educational research practice: “Despite the field’s historic openness to new ideas and insistence on the inclusion of marginalized perspectives, these structures continue to reflect mostly Euro Western perspectives: define, categorize, and develop guidelines for how it should be done” (Viruru & Cannella, p. 182). Following Willinsky’s (1999) analysis of the effects of colonialism on the practice of education, educational research into critical public pedagogies also has the prospect of reconstituting these spaces under the institution’s control, effectively (re)inscribing the privilege of the etic over the emic and the false distinction of what counts as education. Willinsky states:

Imperialism afforded lessons in how to divide the world...Its themes of conquering, civilizing, converting, collecting, and classifying inspired education metaphors equally concerned with taking possession of the world—metaphors that we now have to give an account of, beginning with our own education. (p. 13)

There is a need for educational researchers to move toward the development of a research approach that, in Barone’s (2001) terms, seeks to enhance possibilities of “multiple meanings” rather than affix public pedagogies to coordinates within an a priori analytical—and likely, institutional—grid. Accordingly, educational researchers working with/in these spaces need to embody an ethical disposition that regards the potentially radical otherness of public pedagogy without reducing it to a mere technology for asserting the superiority of commonsensical educational practice (Willinsky, 1999). Echoing the myopia that characterized the imperial West’s constant need to reaffirm itself as the center of knowledge (Smith, 1999), Ellsworth (2005) notes, “…pedagogical anomalies...are difficult to see as pedagogy only when we view them from the ‘center’ of dominant educational discourses and practices—a position that takes knowledge to be a thing already made and learning to be an experience already known” (p. 5, italics in original). Taken in this light, analyses into public pedagogies might raise important questions regarding how, where, and when we know teaching, about the relationship between Giroux’s (2000) version of dominance as public pedagogy and a reconsidered perspective that evokes the possibility for sites of public resistance (Sandlin & Milam, 2008), and about the species of pedagogy occurring in public spaces that might still elude our vision. These inquiries, coupled with Giroux’s groundbreaking approaches in integrating cultural studies into research on pedagogies, could provide curriculum and educational scholars with new ways of understanding their practice, both within and beyond traditional schooling.

Public pedagogy as a polyvocal and polymodal discourse—especially in terms of critical/counterhegemonic pedagogies and pedagogues—is often performative, improvisational, and
tentative, rather than fixed, requiring that researchers not reduce these educational practices to the vocabulary of the known. Critical public pedagogy research, instead, should attend to the *politics of representation*. Denzin’s (2003, 2008) work on anti-colonial research practices, despite its explicit focus on race and the troubling space between indigenous participants and non-indigenous (and potentially culturally colonizing) researchers, coheres closely to the problematic relationship of formally trained educational researchers and informal sites of educational discourse and practice. As Denzin (2008) argues, “agents of colonial power, Western scientists discovered, extracted, appropriated, commodified, and disturbed knowledge about the indigenous other” (p. 438). In Bhabha’s (1994) terms, public pedagogies can exist in a “caesural” space for educational researchers (p. 352), a space where they remain unnamed and unclassified within the field’s taxonomy—*unknown*, and potentially *unknowable*, within the vocabulary of commonsensical educational discourse (Sandlin, 2008). However, once these sites and practices are brought under the gaze of educational inquiry and *named* within the constellation of the known, they are relegated to the extant doxa of knowable educational discourse, explained into stasis via the “enunciative present” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 347) of the academic gaze and fixed within the moment’s available disciplinary discourse (Foucault, 1970).

**Discomfort and Exile: A Feminist Ethics of Critical Public Pedagogy Inquiry**

We advocate for what we are calling a “methodology of discomfort,” following Wanda Pillow’s (2003) notion of “reflexivities of discomfort” (p. 187). Pillow discusses how feminist, critical, and postcolonial researchers, since the crisis of representation in qualitative research, almost instinctively now draw upon practices of reflexivity to address ethical issues surrounding representation and legitimization within qualitative research. Reflexivity, often in the form of divulging or examining one’s own “positionality” and reflecting on how this has shaped research design, data collection, and data analysis, has become so commonplace that it is invoked and practiced—yet rarely explicitly defined or problematized—by almost every qualitative researcher interested in exploring, addressing, or somehow minimizing the typically unequal power relationships between researchers and research participants. Researchers engage in reflexivity to reveal how knowledge is constructed during the research process, to craft more “accurate” interpretations of data, and to practice research in ways that seek to minimize researcher authority and power and be more empowering for participants.

Pillow asserts that reflexivity often takes on the flavor of “confession,” wherein the researcher makes explicit her positionality and how she reflected upon and attempted to address issues of power throughout the research process. Through this confession, she experiences a kind of “catharsis of self-awareness,” which provides a “cure” (p. 181) and helps her to feel as if she has dealt with issues of representation, and thus can move on in peace. Researchers often use reflexivity as a way to render the unfamiliar—research topics, participants, contexts—familiar, or more approachable or understandable, for themselves and their audiences. Through confessional, familiarizing practices of reflexivity, a researcher attempts to understand herself, so that in turn she can better “know” or comprehend her participants, a stance which assumes a modernist, fixed, knowable subject. Pillow argues these familiarizing tendencies of reflexivity, along with the notion that somehow recognizing and confessing one’s positionality can lead to better “truths,” work against reflexivity’s critical possibilities, and ultimately cause researchers to rely on and have their worked judged by—colonized by, we could argue—traditional conceptualizations of validity and reliability. She cautions researchers to work against this “familiarity” urge, and instead argues researchers should embrace “reflexivities of discomfort.”

A reflexivity of discomfort seeks to leave “what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar” (p. 177), a task
Pillow admits is both difficult and uncomfortable. Pillow draws upon the work of Chaudhry (2000), Visweswaran (1994), and St. Pierre (1997) to illustrate how these reflexivities might be practiced, arguing that these writers “interrupt” reflexivity—and in doing so, render “the knowing of their selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable” (p. 188). A reflexivity of discomfort “seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (Pillow, p. 188). The authors Pillow discusses as examples problematize dominant discourses of acceptable practices of research and challenge how critical, compassionate researchers may be perpetuating those discourses through the very ways they engage in reflexivity. Within reflexivities of discomfort, reflexivity is not used as a source of power to “know” the “other” better, thus rendering the “other” more “understandable.” Rather, reflexivity becomes a way to block, challenge, or interrupt the practice of gathering data as ‘truths’ into existing ‘folds of the known’ to practices which “interrogate the truthfulness of the tale and provide multiple answers” (Trinh, 1991, p. 12) (Pillow, p. 192). Pillow suggests that a reflexivity of discomfort leads to tellings that are “unfamiliar—and likely uncomfortable” (p. 192). Researchers seeking to practice reflexivities of discomfort do not dismiss the importance of examining issues of power, but recognize reflexivity is inextricably linked to power and privilege that cannot be easily or comfortably erased.

Drawing upon these ideas, we advocate for a methodology of discomfort that “pushes toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable” (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). By expanding and inhabiting uncomfortable spaces, researchers with/in critical public pedagogy work in a mode of consciousness that Said (1984, 1993, 1994) termed exilic, a space that transgresses the inherited script of dominant narratives. Said reflected on critical inquiry as the interstitial place of exile. In his own critical work, Said saw the potential for public intellectualism and pedagogy as a space that must inhabit the gaps between competing and, ultimately knowable, ideologies. According to Said (1994),

the pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives...Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one in your new home or situation. (p. 39)

Through feelings of discomfort, the notion of exile takes on an embodied and reflexive epistemology, one that resists the colonized rationale of imperialist research practices via the longing for an understanding that has been denied. In an exilic consciousness, the researcher/writer is in a constant state of recursion, but not of flux. As Said (1993) notes, “liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies” (p. 332). The discomfort, then, is the homelessness of the exile, and the state of crisis and trauma is not an intervention into a pacific narrative, but a continual sense of emergence and energy, the ever-present possibility of naming the nameless (Bourdieu, 1977). A methodology of discomfort thus decouples authorial power from research and opens channels for democratic dialogue and social imagination by abstracting the researcher herself from the safe space of the known and accepted.

The ethical obligation of researchers of public pedagogy, then, is to practice a form of inquiry as circumscription, drawing the uncertain contours of what we do not know without filling in those spaces with the litany of things that we do. We must seek to develop ways of exploring public pedagogies for the ways they are unknowable and practice—as well as bring attention
to—the silences they reveal in our understandings of curriculum and pedagogy. This methodology would be driven by a code of ethics that, after Denzin and Giardina (2007) refuses to turn social activism into a subject that is an object of educational inquiry. We must refuse to re-label and reshape into the words and forms of education. We seek to move away from the neocolonialist impulse to grasp, to understand, to classify—this calls for working towards what Denzin (1989) calls “interpretive sufficiency,” which means “taking seriously lives that are loaded with multiple interpretations and grounded in cultural complexity” (Denzin, 1989, pp. 77, 81, cited in Christians, 2007, p. 57). Megan Boler (1999), herself working through a “pedagogy of discomfort,” calls this witnessing—“as [methodological] inquiry a pedagogy of discomfort emphasizes ‘collective witnessing’ as opposed to individualized self-reflection. I distinguish witnessing from spectating as one entrée into a collectivized engagement in learning to see differently” (p. 176). Witnessing, we contend, implores researchers to attend to educational phenomenon in a dialogic process, one that inverts the epistemic power at play in the research scene and makes porous the boundaries of researcher and researched.

“Burrowing Farther and Farther”: Answerability as an Obligation

Perhaps the primary question for educational researchers working with/in sites of critical public pedagogy becomes one of the tensions between beneficence and harm. However, reaching well beyond the legal meanings those terms have taken on via institutional review boards, public pedagogy researchers must consider the ways in which their work might actually disrupt the very projects they explore, thus reducing the possibility of critical public space to yet another institutional discourse. As researchers interested in sites and practices of critical public pedagogy, we have often felt the tension of trying to honor the transgressive projects we study while still writing and addressing a distinctly institutional audience. The quote we used to open this chapter comes from an e-mail communication Jennifer received from Bill Talen, known more broadly as Reverend Billy, an anti-consumption activist, and, as we would contend, a public, critical pedagogue. Despite agreeing to participate in Jennifer’s study, Talen typically questions her intentions openly—wondering how and why his work and his performative selfhood becomes reduced to the private, specialized, and exclusionary discourse of the academy, all while touting his transgressive nature as a transformative public figure. Talen’s questions linger—do we have the right to reduce these public, critical discourses to simply serve the needs of the private institution, and perhaps worse, our private careers?

To answer these questions in an ethical manner, we turn to Bakhtin’s (1990) discussion of ethics as they relate to alterity and to the human obligation of answerability. Bakhtin views the Other—in our case, both in terms of an individual and the possibilities of pedagogy—as a crucial function of understanding and existing as a self, a position that we are obligated, ethically, to enter into dialogically. Bakhtin notes,

This ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world. For only I—the one-and-only I—occupy in a given set of circumstances this particular place at this particular time; all other human beings are situated outside me. (p. 23)

For Bakhtin, thus, every human occupies a divergent subject position that is at once wholly unique and wholly limited. This concept of a locational self is the hinge to which much of Bakhtin’s work on dialogism is tied, as in the dialogic moment, either as an act of agreement or disagreement, the divergences of unique selves intersect to produce new meanings, ones that
could not be achieved within the horizons of the self. This production of meaning via discourse, the dialogical extension to the Other and return to the self, for Bakhtin, amounts to an ethical act, one that allows us to “vivify and give form to” (Bakhtin, p. 32) ourselves as a selfhood and as an Other. As such, for Bakhtin, our highest ethical obligation is that of answerability—of responding to the Other and entering into the dialogic process of being human.

Relating these issues to the concept of critical public pedagogy, we argue that educational researchers must see their work as an answer—a response to the pedagogical utterances of the Other; however, keeping in mind the institution’s problematic, colonial history, we forward the idea of a methodology of discomfort as a means of reconsidering, inflecting, and fundamentally changing the very timbre and intent of our answer. As Bakhtin (1990) cautions, “the [researcher] puts his [sic] own ideas directly into the mouth of the [researched]1 from the standpoint of their theoretical or ethical (political, social) validity, in order to convince us of their truth and propagandize them” (p. 10). To enter into Bakhtinian, ethical dialogue with critical educators/educations in public spaces, researchers must work through the historical/hierarchical epistemological authority offered to individuals within the institution, reframing their answers as tentative, open, and in the voice of the amateur (Said, 1994). Taking up the ethical call to answer, then, implores researchers to look beyond the unerring quest for certainty in much of academic research and instead to conduct academic inquiry that voices itself as decentered, humble, and even celebratory of the pedagogies that exist beyond our institutional knowing.

Extending this point, we argue that in dialogue with the contribution of non-institutional, unexpected, critical public pedagogies, we must be willing to eject the academic mandates of reduction, dissection, and evaluation, embodying instead a disposition of conscious, critical celebration of the prospects of an/Other pedagogy and ways of understanding teaching and learning that upend and unearth our own comfortable, stable notions of educational practice and meaning. Research on dominant, neoliberal genres of public pedagogy often involves researchers subjecting the cultural text in question to the kinds of rigorous analysis often found within critical qualitative research designs (e.g., Giroux, 2002), effectively illuminating the hidden discourses of power that undergird these sites and practices. However, we contend that critical public pedagogy inquiry—much like ethnography—has the differential purpose of revealing the forms of power that undergird our own perceptions, epistemologies, and knowings of education. That is, by witnessing the alterity of other pedagogies, other curricula, we effectively illuminate the constructed, arbitrary, and power-laden nature of our own inquiry, teaching, and understanding of educational practice.

Public Pedagogy’s Implications for Educational Research

Carefully conducted and reported critical public pedagogy research has the potential to implore teachers, researchers, and theorists to reconsider their foundational understandings of pedagogy itself, as well as of how and where the process of education occurs. We contend that the basic assumptions that undergird most educational research cohere largely to commonsensical cultural constructs of what counts as teaching and learning in institutional settings—constructs that reify traditional forms of intellectual activity as the only possible mode of critical intervention (Ellsworth, 2005). Savage (this volume) suggests that if the concept of “public pedagogy” is going to make sense in educational inquiry, researchers need to look beyond simplistic overlays to view pedagogies as “not simply oppressive or emancipatory, but rather dynamic, dialectic, political, and bound up with power in chaotic ways.” Perhaps more importantly, it is our hope that public pedagogy research can help to reintroduce this chaos to the false stability of educational research and into the schools themselves.
References


