Public Pedagogy as Critical Educational and Community Leadership
Implications from East St. Louis School District Governance

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Public pedagogy...is an activism embedded in collective action, not only situated in institutionalized structures, but in multiple spaces, including grassroots organizations, neighborhood projects, art collectives, and town meetings—spaces that provide a site for compassion, outrage, humor, and action. Such pedagogy disrupts processes of injustice and creates opportunities for the expression of complex, contesting, and subaltern perspectives. —Jeanne F. Brady (2006, p. 58)

The multiple, distinct, and at times incongruent articulations of public pedagogy evident in the literature base are indicators of a construct under active theoretical development. The complexity of interpretations and descriptors advanced by a broad representation of scholars, as evident in this handbook, affords researchers and activists a rich and nuanced range of analytical perspectives to support continued theorizing of intersections involving education, democracy, activism, and the nature of the public. Recognizing that the construct “public pedagogy” is neither fixed nor settled, our intent here is to focus on a possible conceptual trajectory through which public pedagogy may be engaged to inform both research and activism oriented toward social justice. In doing so, we locate ourselves in relation to particular theoretical understandings of public pedagogy that we find compelling, take up questions of the implications of public pedagogy for educational and community leadership, and identify specific challenges that remain open. We illustrate each of these aspects of our framing of public pedagogy with perspectives from a prior research project with our colleague John Hunt involving a 10-year period of state financial oversight of the East St. Louis, Illinois School District from 1994–2004 (Roseboro, O’Malley, & Hunt, 2006).

Overview of the East St. Louis, IL Study

In 1994, three years after publication of Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* brought national attention to the distressed pedagogical, fiscal, and capital infrastructures of the almost exclusively African American populated East St. Louis Illinois School District 189, the State of Illinois appointed a three-member panel to oversee the fiscal operations of the district. The focus of
our study was primarily an analysis of the public discourse between the locally elected school board and the state appointed financial oversight panel, and secondarily a preliminary assessment of the influence of the oversight process on fiscal and student achievement indicators in the district (Roseboro et al., 2006). Data representative of this public discourse involved archival documentation, which included 175 newspaper articles about the district printed between 1994 and 2004, legal decisions, oversight panel reports, state fiscal reports, school board minutes, and student achievement data. The centrality of this archival data in our methodology is reflective of our interest in interrogating the public construction, performance, and representation of highly political discourses and collective identities involving these two bodies and their relationship to education in East St. Louis, as opposed to more immanent inquiry into the actors’ perception of the complexities and dynamics of the oversight process. As a consequence, media representations are prioritized in our interpretive work with the recognition that, within the contemporary hyper-reality generated through media matrices compressing time and space, these representations act as totalizing narratives that mediate the world and so structure, explain, and delineate knowledge prior to experience or reflection (O’Malley, 2009a). Implications of the functions of this media role vis-à-vis public pedagogy are addressed below.

Our analysis identified two distinct ideologies among the financial oversight panel and school board governance bodies. The panel employed a language of accountability oriented toward management and conservation of fiscal resources and which equated improvements in district finances with improvement in learning. In contrast, the board engaged a language of total community which valued the district’s role, as the largest employer in an economically devastated community, in economic and employment reinvestment in the community. While the state superintendent’s decision to appoint the oversight panel against the wishes of the school board certainly contributed to the immediate tensions that emerged between the two bodies, we located the discord more substantively within these competing ideological frameworks. The inability of these governance bodies to construct a hybrid space in which frameworks of accountability and community might inform one another to address circulations of power and foster alternate conceptualizations that are “neither the one nor the other” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 39) allowed each to reify the other in a manner that effectively froze communication and pathways for constructive action.

A clear example of how extensively this ideological discord and resultant entanglements affected operations in the district involved the financial oversight panel’s effort to first dismiss the superintendent, arguing that the power of the purse afforded the panel a right to not pay the superintendent appointed by the school board, and then to dissolve the elected school board itself. Although a subsequent lawsuit involving this action was decided in the board’s favor, significant resources were extended in this and other conflict situations between the bodies (for a more detailed explication of these issues see Roseboro et al., 2006). Ultimately, the conclusion of the decade-long oversight process evidenced a balancing of the district budget, increase in reserves, and capital improvements (supported by concurrent state efforts to create equitable revenue rates) but evidenced no significant improvement in student achievement indicators. Though our theoretical perspectives problematize the accountability system’s limited and essentialized construction of student achievement indicators, we do find it significant that a decade of direct state involvement in the district’s governance did not generate meaningful changes in those measured indicators.

Distinguishing Public Pedagogy from the Productivity of Media Representations

Popular culture and the media representations it generates often function as educative public sites through which hegemonic knowledge claims are produced, circulated, and reinscribed.
Giroux (2004), for example, describes how the military-entertainment complex functions as a public pedagogy “instilling the values and the aesthetic of militarisation through a wide variety of pedagogical sites and cultural venues” (p. 216) including Humvee marketing campaigns, paintball games, and military recruitment advertisements. Just as clearly, these sites can also serve as avenues for the disruption of dominant cultural discourses and production of alternate imaginaries of democracy, ethical citizenship, and social justice. Recognizing the nuance and variation through which public pedagogy is conceptualized as a theoretical construct and cultural project, we prefer to frame public pedagogy in our work as a collective interruption of hegemonic discourses and material structures via a location of meaning in difference and agency for justice. In other words, we associate public pedagogy with the disruption and transformation of dominant and constraining cultural, political, economic, historical, linguistic, theological, and ecological configurations and consider hegemonic pedagogical moves in media and popular culture to be distinct from public pedagogy.

Our perspective in this regard is significantly informed by the work of Brady (2006) and Dentith and Brady (1998, 1999) who, working within a feminist politics of ethics, theorize public pedagogy as a curricular notion oriented toward subverting dominant ideologies. Regarding media as a dominant site where identities are constructed and aware of the processes of hegemonic cultural reproduction inherent within media representations, Dentith and Brady (1998) assert that media localities also carry the potential to serve as pathways for liberatory discourses and the (re)creation among women and other marginalized populations of collective identities oriented toward activism for justice. Requiring critical examination of daily experience and the complex interactions of government, media, and popular culture, public pedagogy creates sites of struggle in which “images, contradictory discourses, canonical themes and stories, and common sense versions of reality are disputed” (Dentith & Brady, 1999, p. 1). In this way, Dentith and Brady (1998) express explicit interest in public pedagogy as a grassroots and community phenomenon situated within and beyond institutional structures which fosters movement “from positions of social inequality to ones of informed activism” (p. 2) through a social politics for collective power that pursues concrete advances in neighborhoods, health and social services, education, and “all forms of basic human rights” (Dentith & Brady, 1999, p. 2). Giroux (2000) presents a similarly reconstructive understanding of what he terms radical or critical public pedagogy, stating that it

should ascertain how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of reality and take on the force of common sense assumptions shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations at work in the dominant social order. (p. 355)

We emphasize that, from our perspective, public pedagogy integrates the discursive critique with political action for social change. Linking these notions of cultural critique and collective agency for justice, we use aspects of our analysis in the East St. Louis study to first illustrate the productivity of media representations in framing public discourse and political identities, and second to focus the disruptive implications of public pedagogy for constructing educational and community leadership as critical democratic engagement.

Our aim in the study was to investigate the public relationship between the school board and oversight panel, viewed as a political performance that highlighted, ignored, and masked the children of East St. Louis—making them both invisible and hyper-visible within the same move. Thus, we focused on the identities of these bodies as performed in public space and interpreted through print media representations. While such representations do not necessarily reflect the
everyday identities of people or organizations, they do classify, articulate, and constrain such in ways that disseminate public meaning. A public “we” who seeks to understand the district as an identifiable “other” through media representations can easily enough reify those representations, forgetting that they are interpretations in the making. Our own interpretation of these interpreted performances highlights a structure in the print media that portrayed an epic public battle between good (financial oversight panel) and evil (school board), absent reflection on the complexity of the democratic process, its problematic translation into current school infrastructure, and persistent tension between the divergent accountability and community ideological frameworks. The media, as voyeuristic narrator, acted as a medium through which outsiders came to know the people of East St. Louis and it also acted as a bridge that both separated and connected the citizens of District 189, as well as the governance bodies.

Arguably, the pedagogical influence of the media in this illustration has been reproductive of modernistic commitments to bifurcation, essentialization, individualism, and hierarchy as constitutive elements of social organization and analysis. Further, this influence produces a raced reading of the East St. Louis experience in that media representations code the board members elected by a predominately African American community as bad/incompetent and code the panel members appointed by a largely White state bureaucracy as good/effective. There is also a classed dimension to this coding in that East St. Louis residents are disproportionally more likely to be of a lower socioeconomic status than Illinois residents in general. The impact of this coding as a hegemonic pedagogy reinforcing discursive and material structures of racism and classism within the governance system and within the public imaginary cannot be underestimated. As such, these media representations carry unproblematized cultural and linguistic assumptions that, while purporting an interest in educational reform, more accurately function in the public space to stabilize historically dominant cultural and ideological structures. We assert here that while the dynamics of these media representations are highly eductive of a public imaginary and clearly pedagogical, it is not helpful to categorize these reproductive moves as public pedagogy.

Our interest, following from Brady’s conceptualization (Brady, 2006; Brady & Hammett, 1997; Dentith & Brady, 1998), is to advance public pedagogy as a theoretical construct that specifically informs both counter-hegemonic inquiry and collective agency oriented toward a democratic ethic of social justice. As Brady (2006) writes, “public pedagogy is a critical public engagement that challenges existing social practices and hegemonic forms of discrimination” (p. 58). As such, the practice of public pedagogy is not exclusively or even primarily the domain of academics and educators by nature but instead involves “a range of activist individuals and community groups that are providing a democratic vision to challenge inequality in both public and private institutions and everyday practices” (p. 58). Put a different way, practitioners of public pedagogy might be found among (though not identified with) scholars, educators, artists, healthcare and social services personnel, community organizers, spiritual directors, earth literacy and environmental advocates, and a multiplicity of other locations insofar as these focus their practice as cultural workers oriented toward democratic and participatory transformation within the public sphere. Primarily, though, public pedagogy practitioners are located within grassroots, community, and social activist networks rather than by profession. In other words, democratic and participatory engagement with and within local communities is constitutive of our understanding of public pedagogy. A core aspect of this conceptualization of public pedagogy is its tenacious commitment to creating “alternative discourses that focus on alliances rather than identities [which] is a much more complicated strategy than one that attempts to organize around some cohesive unity …[and] is always context specific” (pp. 58–59).
In taking up the poststructural conviction that “meaning is generated through difference rather than through identity” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481), public pedagogy attempts to move beyond a divisiveness of identity politics through which transformative action can break down along lines of contesting positionalities and in its place prioritizes participatory projects constructed within and across difference. Likewise countering the extensive neoliberal commitment to individualism over the common good, public pedagogy understood in this light is a critical project working across difference with the intentionality of sustaining theoretical and political engagement for social change (Dentith & Brady, 2005). Constraining and hegemonic moves within media representations, then, have pedagogical import and are sites that public pedagogy will seek to interrupt through collective alliances but are not themselves public pedagogy. The project of public pedagogy is tenaciously concerned with disrupting “processes of injustice and [creating] opportunities for the expression of complex, contesting, and subaltern perspectives” (Brady, 2006, p. 58).

Public Pedagogy as Educational and Community Leadership

Conceptualizing public pedagogy as collective political agency across difference that interrupts and reconfigures discursive and material structures of subordination and injustice in public space raises very particular questions about its nature as an embodied project of democratic educational and community leadership as well as the role of the scholar vis-à-vis public pedagogy. Continuing to employ the East St. Louis study as an illustration, we now focus on an example of public pedagogy in practice and also attend to implications for rethinking educational and community leadership. In Roseboro et al. (2006), we took up Ellsworth’s (2005) notion of anomalous places of learning as a key theoretical resource for the work of locating and mapping public pedagogy projects that might be overlapping or working within spaces delimited by educational research questions. Ellsworth identifies anomalous places of learning as “peculiar, irregular, abnormal, or difficult to classify pedagogical phenomena” (p. 5). Provocative and promising, they are difficult to see as pedagogy when we remain rooted in “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). It is the alternate perspective—the differing vantage point—that allows one to imagine pedagogy in new ways. In discussing the architectural and conceptual design of places of learning, Ellsworth highlights the significance of a pedagogical hinge that creates the experience of a learning self by “putting inner thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, desires, and ideas in relation to outside others, events, history, culture, and socially constructed ideas” (p. 37).

We identified collective, grassroots expressions of parental/guardian dissent in East St. Louis as anomalous places of learning and suggested that the potential of a pedagogical hinge exists in this intangible, intersubjective space. Our analysis was aided by Fusco’s (1995) theorizing that possibilities for border crossing in the midst of political and cultural dualities that impede effective communication become evident in “the voices of those marginalized by the official discourses of both sides” (p. 19). Parents and guardians were generally not visible in media or public representations that we examined in relation to the decade-long conflict between the board and the panel, and they were certainly not integrated into those exchanges as an integral constituency. Nonetheless, parent/guardian groups did emerge several times in our analysis as countering their apparent marginalization from the governance process and asserting their own desires for their children’s learning. In two instances of requesting separation from the district, parent/guardian groups expressed a notably public lack of confidence in District 189’s capacity
to educate their children. In 1997, they expressed disillusion with the school board oversight panel leadership through an organized request to detach 36 residences on the district’s eastern edge and reassign them to two other districts. In reaching a 6–0 decision to approve this request, the St. Clair County Regional Board of School Trustees emphasized the significance of the district’s lack of progress with student achievement and recognized parents’ fears about entrusting their children to the district (Maty, 1997). Then, in 2000, 72% of Fairmont City’s registered voters (a Hispanic majority) signed a petition to detach from the East St. Louis School District (an African American majority) and join the neighboring Collinsville schools (a White majority). Fairmont City residents stated that their concerns involved the quality of education, safety of the educational environment, and efficient use of tax revenue.

While a thorough analysis of the modes, merits, and efficacy of school choice initiatives within and beyond public education is well beyond the scope of this chapter, the depth of parent concern and initiative, revealed in their capacity to organize for change from a subaltern position vis-à-vis the governance process, is illustrative of the conceptualization of public pedagogy that we are advocating. Our suggestion is that in these cases parents and guardians of District 189 acted as public pedagogues, teaching educational, policy, and political professionals—as well as a larger public—about their children. Parental and guardian activism for structural change, in the midst of clear deadlock in district governance and an attendant inability on leadership’s part to effectively address issues of teaching and learning, is itself an educative process that challenges taken for granted assumptions about leadership, parental involvement, and responsibility for meaningful education in public schools. This perspective dislodges the location of the public intellectual within the academy or a broader yet still traditionally defined intelligentsia (Sandlin, Milam, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2008) and extends this construct to also recognize activist individuals and collectives as potentially engaged in emancipatory pedagogical, intellectual, and cultural work. Implicit in the pedagogy of these parent/guardian groups is an inversion of the—at the time, emergent—educational accountability discourse through pathways of agency in which parents and guardians allied to hold district and state policy apparatuses accountable for educational progress. Absent any clear indication of who could or would transform the district, parents/guardians acted as educational leaders pursuing meaningful structural change and publicly interrupting the reified and ineffective interaction between the board and the panel that structured conditions of deadlock in district governance. Understanding these parent/guardian actions as public pedagogy involves accepting the social phenomenon of parents’ and guardians’ political interruption as an embodiment of Ellsworth’s (2005) anomalous places of learning.

More specifically, the potential of a pedagogical hinge exists in the anomalous place of parent/guardian dissent that constructs a space of possibility within which parents’ and guardians’ hopes, fears, and demands for their children might come into mutual relation with ‘outside’ political and educational structures as well as the sociocultural realities of the school system. To be clear, this pedagogical experience is not primarily directed toward, though certainly is inclusive of, the learning of those who are subordinated (in this case parents/guardians as a group marginalized from the governance discourse) but rather a broader public in the interests of shifting power relations. A pedagogical hinge might appear in this East St. Louis case particularly if persons in institutionalized configurations of power choose, in relation to the public interruption expressed through parent/guardian dissent, to move beyond essentialized positions of self as authority and expert to, instead, a privileging of the learning self (Ellsworth). We believe that this choice to bridge the self-other hyphen (Fine, 1994) by embracing self and other as both leader and learner offers a possibility for shifting the dynamics of reified and adversarial discourses like those that marred the school board-oversight panel relationship. If politicians and educators identify and privilege the learning self within a continuum of their professional
identities, educational systems may become more capable of engaging the conflicts inherent within school reform oriented toward meaningful education.

Locating public pedagogy within grassroots collective agency for counter-hegemonic social transformation points a way towards reconceptualizing educational and community leadership. Resisting identification of role with leadership, public pedagogy’s core turn towards alliances for social justice built across and within difference echoes Butler’s notion of rupturing hierarchical arrangements through organization “around a shared feeling of dissent” (Thurer, 2005, p. 144) rather than unity or identity. Subaltern subjectivities and discursive productions are particularly highlighted within public pedagogy as leadership and resources for interrupting relations of power that circulate through binary frameworks in favor of heterarchic possibilities, and the nature of “public” is understood to incorporate the location of pedagogues in time, space, and relation as well as questions of pedagogical addressivity (Ellsworth, 2005) and answerability (Bakhtin, 1990) within cultural and political work for justice. This commitment in public pedagogy to subaltern perspectives and to transformation from positionalities of marginalization to activism for justice, as Dentith and Brady indicate, is not an assertion of the infallibility of dissent. We caution that dissent also must be problematized and deconstructed, recognizing that the eruptive line of flight which bursts “with anticipation and expectation … [engendering] spaces of intervention and relation” also carries the danger of encountering forms of organization that reterritorialize activist energy (de Zegher, 2007, p. 30).

Parent and guardian dissent in East St. Louis is not a guarantee of justice or democratic inclusion. Raced connotations of the Fairmont City move between districts, for example, as well as potential implications of abandoning the district as in the case of the petition to the regional board both make evident the tensions and doubled moves that are inherent within this dissent. Dissent and interruption of the public space, then, are not themselves a new certainty and cannot constitute an alternate metanarrative of progress. They are instead a resistance to inscriptions of injustice, and they are a possibility of thinking and acting differently (St. Pierre, 2000). As such, public pedagogy projects seek to radically refigure notions and practices of educational and community leadership as constructs that transgress binary arrangements and that refuse to acquiesce to the necessity of hierarchical social, political, and educational structures. Through the interrogating and interruptive work of public pedagogy, education and community, learning self and pedagogue, grassroots and governance, elite and public bleed into one another in partial, fluid, and contradictory ways that construct Bhabha’s (1994) new political objects that are “neither the one nor the other” (p. 39) and which engage the process of disruption without rushing to the production of a unity of antagonisms. Public pedagogy as educational and community leadership both emerges within and creates pathways towards interstitial spaces, engaging play and struggle in locations and movements between poles.

Coda: Concluding Implications of Public Pedagogy for Educational and Cultural Researchers

As conceptualized here, the project of public pedagogy is integrated intellectual and activist work oriented toward the social transformation of both discursive and material structures of injustice and discrimination. Its nature as a political project grounded in grassroots and community leadership presents unique challenges and possibilities to educational and cultural researchers, just as it does so for other actors involved in educative and activist networks we associate with public pedagogy. In relation to researchers and the research process, these are challenges that call into question hierarchical constructions of the scholar as expert or public intellectual capable of standing apart from communities as a context where meaning and
struggle are generated, and which, of course, distinguish researching public pedagogy from doing public pedagogy. Our fieldwork involving other public pedagogy projects, including Black students’ protests in the university involving cultural politics (Roseboro, 2006) and secondary school student protests for educational equity in Chile (O’Malley, 2009b), convince us that new methodologies are called for which blend research and acts of public pedagogy into a praxis that is politically engaged within communities and across difference in cultural work for social justice. Here we draw on participatory inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997; Reason, 1998), participatory and youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), and attempts to transgress power relationships through alternate methods such as peer research (Dentith, Measor, & O’Malley, 2009). This linking of research and public pedagogy has very serious implications for the commitments we make as educational and cultural researchers and the strategies that we will and will not engage.

While one clear contribution of research involving public pedagogy is as a provisional and nomadic “site of passage” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 379) that connects local communities to one another and to scholarly communities in theorizing public engagement for justice, it also challenges us to rethink our priorities and assumptions in the research process. For example, what does it mean for research to be constructed by and within grassroots struggles and activism? How does public pedagogy contest our received or taken for granted notions of educational leadership, community leadership, or educational and cultural research? Does a construct as simple and as power-laden as “Principal Investigator” retain meaning in relation to public pedagogy? How do tensions about the meanings of justice become negotiated within public spaces? How might the research process engage the work of creating strategic alliances across and within difference? What are unintended or chosen pathways through which research disrupts or counters educational and community leadership generated within public pedagogy? In what ways may construction and dissemination of research “findings” actively interrupt processes of injustice, and what does this take in terms of commitment and action? Who does research involving public pedagogy seek to engage, and why? What does betrayal of our activist collaborators look like?

References


