Paola Muñoz  
Education Minor Capstone  
22 May 2016

The Master’s House: Deconstructing Normative Education Structures Within, and Outside of, the Ivory Tower

“What does it feel like to be a problem” asked W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. José Muñoz, Latinx performance theorist, poses this same question: “Chico, what does it feel like to be a problem?” This question has guided my survival, that of my ancestors, as well as the search for my community’s autonomously conceived narrative: Chichx, what does it feel like to be positioned as inherently problematic — begs Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga from queer womxn of color. The United States has problematized minorities, objectifying them and (re)positioning them as intellectually deficient and alien; it is our burden to cross institutional, geographical, and linguistic borders that have truly crossed us. If one cannot speak — as indigenous children were not allowed to do — if one cannot read or write — as African-Americans were not allowed to do — if one has a distorted view of their complex narratives because it was rewritten as a myth — as Asian-Americans were subjected to — then one cannot be liberated, and thus regarded as a person entitled to the rights that “Americans” have institutionally boasted about. Language has power, depending on who holds the pen, and who gets to speak. For marginalized people to be liberated, they must reclaim and rewrite their own narratives.

The three insights that I have gained throughout my experience include navigating “what does it feel like to be a problem” as it relates to the critical pedagogy within my own education and instruction, learning what it means and looks like to be a (co)teacher, and ultimately what it is to be a (co)learner. These three insights of identity, teaching, and learning have guided my process as an education minor, as well as a socially conscious individual working within a formal educational institution. These insights have informed and addressed the context of who I am, who my students are, the influences of the spaces we exist in, what we are (co)learning, and what we are (co)teaching within a societal context. Moreover, I’ve grappled with the realization that education should not be solely legitimized within formal institutions of higher education. Critical pedagogy (CP) is the act of affirming, and explicitly incorporating, the knowledge, reflection and praxis of the students. CP acknowledges that students bring valuable/teachable/learnable experiences to their classrooms, and that these students also participate across a multitude of pedagogical sites within their communities — not just within the school. Additionally, CP also works to empower students by developing curriculums and practices where students can see themselves, their families, communities and contexts reflected within formal educational spaces. Pedagogy should serve its function outside of the Ivory Tower; it must be an accessible catalyst for social justice. If not, what else will be? Students, within formal and informal educational spaces, do not exist within a vacuum Through my experiences as a Writing and Language Tutor through the Knights Institute Writing Center, as a facilitator for the Gender and Socioeconomic Status sections of the Intergroup Dialogue Project — and now the coach, training 26 facilitators who are teaching the course — as a student within my Education classes, most prominently within Multicultural Issues in Education taught by Dr. Sofia Villenas.

***
“Can I get another tutor?” After three years of having worked for the Knights Institute Writing Center, having received training throughout all of that time, reading countless essays and applications, and being a writer for the Cornell Daily Sun and Huffington Post and being the Senior Editor for Oblivion Magazine, a student looked up to me and requested another tutor. This translated to: I doubt your editing and writing experiences. Do you mind if I get tutored by the other white female tutor in the room? I was distraught. I looked at the other tutor, expecting her to say (what we are supposed to say to folks): we all have the same tutoring experiences — trust her judgment. But she didn’t. She gladly decided to assist the student, offering her the same advice that I had. 30 minutes wasted, stereotype threat getting retriggered all over again. Am I enough? Am I a strong writer? Why did my student doubt me? This was my first lesson in understanding how Latinx disabled womxn are positioned as inherently “problematic”. What did it feel like to be a problem in that instance? It felt like I did not belong in that space. For me to be a teacher in that moment, I had to learn that this was a battle that I would constantly have to face throughout my life: my qualifications being questioned because I am brown. When I started off as a writing tutor, that was the first year that I decided to pursue the Education Minor, and through my courses, specifically through Waiting for Superman, I was able to find a name for that feeling: stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1997). I felt that because I was Latina, that I was intellectually deficient and thus in trying to disprove that stereotype, I live up to it because I begin to internalize it as true. Move forward to three years later, I internalized that threat and I quit my job, despite having three years of experience. Critical pedagogy and the works of Paulo Freire have reinvigorated me and given me the confidence to return. Seeing Latina professors teach my classes, with the first question of the semester posed by Dr. Karen Jaime being “What does it feel like to be a problem?” gave me a sense of home as an individual and as an educator. I would have to experience, reflect, and put into praxis the feeling of oppression and turn it into resistance through practice as an educator. Ultimately, for me to teach within an environment where I intentionally make it my effort to see that stereotype threat is not internalized by marginalized students rather that they develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, I would have to reject this myth and truly internalize it for myself to begin with.

***

Education should not occur on the basis of a deficiency model — assuming that students are not prepared for what they are learning, and that their way of learning is not as “competent” as that of what the normative culture imposes. Within Sarah David Powell’s “Your Introduction to Education” describing Piaget’s four stages of cognitive development, Piaget is described as focusing more on the cognitive deficiencies of the child, whereas Vygotsky focuses more on the socio-intellectual strengths of the child that are already there; while it is important to recognize the diverse needs of children, it is equally as important to recognize that those who have less access to resources should not be equated with being intellectually and cognitively deficient — it is up to the teachers to focus on each of the students’ strengths in order to foster a socially equal environment. One must incorporate the various learning styles of different students, and hone that within the classroom, without necessarily assuming that the student learns according to “one learning style” either. Assuming so would be treating diverse students as monolithic entities, and that by “figuring them out” one can then prescribe a learning strategy for them. One must recognize the diversity and variability within each diverse group too — there is as much variability within a culture as there exists between two, that of the culture that is traditionally “Othered” and that of the culture that is declared as normative within a particular society. With that said, for the teacher to acknowledge that different students’ ways of learning are, in fact,
valid, the teacher must recognize that they themselves are equal to the students — that their way of learning and teaching is as valuable as the student’s way of retaining and communicating information within evaluations. For that reason, and using my personal experience facilitating for the Intergroup Dialogue Project (IDP) for my second consecutive semester (first during the gender session, for socioeconomic status, then as the coach for the program), my education philosophy holds true now, as much as it did then, for every participant within the classroom: “I am a teacher, and I am a learner.” This philosophy is not only critical to my understanding of education, but also towards moving into a state of mind that acknowledges that education is not passive; education is an active means towards liberation, and for that to be reached both students and teachers must begin to empower one another and themselves as worthy of that dignity within a social context that unfortunately discriminatingly disenfranchises and oppresses some, while privileging others on the basis of that oppression. Ultimately, teachers must strive to constantly reflect and build upon their praxis, as well as to strengthen how they learn from their students. As mentioned, students have much more to teach than instructors do. Education is a mutual, co-constructive process.

Ultimately, through my experience as a student for Multicultural Issues in Education, I learned about the power of language and how being intentional within your praxis, specifically through rhetoric, can either lead to the empowerment or disempowerment of students (as evident within my second time teaching the Intergroup Dialogue Project). One of the books within that particular class always stands out to me the most. Within Orellana’s exploration of how children navigate borders, the Acuerdos specifically in that space are a compilation of community guidelines, decided and agreed upon by the children themselves. As opposed to traditional rules and regulations that explicitly communicate the prohibition of certain behaviors and actions — by using the word “no” — the Acuerdos are positive reminders of the dignity that each child should hold and display towards one another. Instead of telling students not to fight, the children had decided upon “be kind, be respectful.” By using positive statements as opposed to prohibitory ones, the adults within the room implicitly communicate that they trust that the children within the B-Club after-school program are their own autonomous persons, and that they are intrinsically valuable and trusted, as opposed to mischievous and rowdy — what children are traditionally perceived as, a deviation from what society conceives and dichotomizes (or in the words of Orellana, constructs a border between) away from as the adult: guided and organized.” Orellana then states, “I wonder, however, if we could have established this without the use of the word “no”, simply by asking: is it safe, or respectful, to use the school phone in play?” (Orellana, 730-731). This phrasing would have also honored the intellect of the children; it assumes that the children are capable of engaging in dialogue that is led by probing, instead of mandating, in order to conceptualize and establish their own decisions based on their own understanding of what respect — in this case, whether or not one should use the phone — looks like. As a facilitator for the Intergroup Dialogue Project’s socioeconomic status, I was led to self-critically assess my approach to the community guidelines established by my students during the second week of class. As I reflect back to my first semester as a facilitator for the gender session, I remember our community guidelines (written on a poster board) as being short, written by one scribe, and prohibitory; no profanity, no disrespectful language/cutting people off, etc. This stands in direct contrast to my facilitation session the second semester, as a second-time facilitator. Within my session, the students took the initiative themselves to set up the poster
board, choose their favorite color of marker themselves, decided that they wanted to take turns being the scribe (some with larger handwriting, others smaller), and ultimately, aside from the “no profanity” rule, all of the statements were positive. The guidelines are long, and they are amendable and subject to dialogue and deliberation (“amendable guidelines” was one of the guidelines). Language has power, and that power conveys whether or not someone is subjugated by it, or whether that power is intrinsic within the self of the child where they can redirect it outwards in order to empower, instead.

***

Over this past summer, I evolved from a purely data-driven learner to one that became truly fascinated with qualitative approaches to education: I was a participatory observer with Professor Sofia Villenas, the same lecturer for Multicultural Issues in Education. By researching how the Ithaca, New York community instructs towards social justice through taking both a historical and contemporary look into Ithaca’s past and present, I explored the influences of public pedagogy — what folks learn through social justice events, murals, podcasts, etc. — on how communities establish a memory and knowledge of resistance. From the Black/African-American resistance movement to the Latinx community, even looking at the intersections of the queer rights movements in Ithaca, the education of resistance became clear to me. This is how I began my journey within ethnographic and anthropological research regarding public pedagogy, where my passion most fondly lies. Consequently, I developed my own independent research project from her project over the summer through McNair Summer Research Program. My research on Ithaca Latinx community celebrations — looking at mourning and festivity events such as the Orlando Shooting Vigil and Hispanic History Month celebrations — as public and legitimate pedagogical sites of resistance was inspired by this very same research.

Despite this research experience, my passion for education within informal pedagogical spaces has been most influenced by my aforementioned leadership in community social justice dialogue space. Through my community involvements, I have learned how low-income WoC have survived intersectional oppression by learning to (re)conceptualize their identities as resistant and powerful, not culturally deficient. As evident through my facilitation of the WoC Support Group, First Generation/Low-Income Support Group, and the Intergroup Dialogue Project — what started it all for me in training to become a facilitator for the program and now a co-founder for the WoC and First-Gen groups — for the past two years, community epistemologies of resistance are visible through the mental health practices of self-care as survival, as well as the peer education model of promoting social justice knowledge and history through community spaces. Within all these instances, reflection, as discussed by Paulo Freire, as praxis is powerful. Reclaiming memory, a history that has been violently erased, by writing our own narratives as WoC through learning about our pasts, is powerful — reflection is an epistemology of resistance. Dialogue about our reflections as praxis, like the personal, is political. To collectively remember — to reflect — on our pasts, that of our ancestors and our communities, is to engage in praxis. Remembering has been stripped away from WoC: Black womxn not knowing their stories outside of the United States, the diaspora, immigrant, and refugee community having their stories reimagined as “illegal”, Asian-American womxn narratives perceived as monolithic, and so on. We must work to reclaim our own memories, to learn from our pasts in order to survive and thrive within our presents and futures.

Through my research and educational community work, I aspire to continue my work at Columbia University through my Masters in Anthropology and Education this Fall. I will expect to receive the resources and training to study how WoC use dialogue as praxis to take action in
reclaiming their written and oral histories. This can be done by theoretically erasing imagined linguistic, cultural, and gender imposed borders and blurring the lines around these impositions through educational dialogue for WoC in intragroup settings with one another — such as the Intergroup Dialogue Project and identity centered support groups. I aspire to become a future community organizer and facilitator within the South Bronx, particularly through organizations such as BronxWorks and The Icarus Project, where I can take the resources acquired through the Ivory Tower and create accessible mediums for WoC to learn about information pertaining to their histories. This entails collectively building spaces by, with, and for, WoC that foster community, self-care practices, and provide resources for overall professional development within low-income neighborhoods. If these spaces do not exist, we must build them ourselves. Education and history are not solely legitimate if they are produced within academia. To be a problem is to recognize that because resistance means self-care, graduating, *chismiando*, resisting colonization, being vulnerable: WoC carry the world on “these bridges called their backs”. I desire to understand my own (re)positioning, because indeed it does take a *pueblo* to raise a resilient Brown chica. WoC communities have a great deal to teach us; we simply have to be willing to learn.