The Democratic Classroom: Challenging Traditional Teaching Methods While Challenging the Status Quo of Inequality

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Imagine life as an undergraduate student at a typical university like Cal Poly. You come into the first day of one of your classes, trying to imagine what the coming quarter will require of you. You sit in a plastic desk that you don't quite fit in, and you are packed in with other students who are, like you, hoping to follow what they have been told are the right steps to get good grades, graduate, and receive a bachelor's degree. The professor walks in and assumes their place at the front of the room as they squint at the sea of anonymous students. They begin to tell you what you need to do for them in the next ten weeks in order to receive a good grade. They act like this class is the only class that you are taking and that it should be the only priority in your life. They expect you to sit quietly, take in the information and to think as they think, because after all: they are the ones with the PhD.

As a future sociology professor, I want to deviate from this traditional educational structure. I want to make the student who walks in to the first day of class feel like they have a say in their education, that they are being taken seriously, and that they are encouraged to think critically about the class and the material. The traditional education system is flawed and reproduces the status quo while belittling students. I believe that a class should be based on democracy and equality because these are the ideologies that I want my students to uphold. In this paper I will criticize the traditional educational system, explore the ideas of democratic teaching and the pedagogical theorists that inspired me, and I will explain how these ideas will manifest themselves in a class that I would teach.

My Evolving Views of Education

I have only just started to view the educational system that I have grown up with in a critical way, yet I have wanted to be a professor of sociology since I was a freshman. My continually evolving ideas about what the position entails and represents, as well as my research

of critical pedagogy, have led me to my current conclusion that the traditional education system is flawed. Here I will explore my ideas of education from both a student's perspective and as a potential professor.

Throughout my undergraduate education I have sat in classes and wondered what it was like to be the person at the front of the room. I was lucky to know that I wanted to teach in the future so I could be aware of what I liked and did not like about the structure of these classes. Without any research on the subject, I came to the conclusion that I enjoyed a discussion-based social science class, and was frustrated when discussion was not incorporated into a class or when it was discouraged. However, discussions require my fully awakened mind, attention, and participation, which I do not always look forward to as a student. Yet I decided that as a professor, it will be my goal to offer a class that requires the full presence and participation of the student. If my students are paying to be educated by me, I will cause them to think critically and fully "show up" to class. Ideas like this led me to think more about the role of the professor in the traditional educational system and how it impacts students.

As I thought more about my future in teaching sociology during the end of my undergraduate career, I discovered critical pedagogy and the works of Paulo Friere, Ira Shor, and bell hooks. These works caused me to see collegiate education in a completely new way. I found a method of teaching that aligned with my ideologies that I have developed through my study of sociology, and about which I am intensely passionate. To be able to promote equality and critical thinking of society while doing what I love would be a dream come true. Because of my research in critical pedagogy, I now have an idea of the professor that I want to be in the future: one that rejects the traditional educational structure and empowers students.

Sociology and the Democratic Classroom

Once I had concluded that I wanted to be a professor in a democratic classroom, I realized that sociology has a wonderful and unique relationship with critical pedagogy, unlike many other subjects, which I will discuss below. This caused me to embrace the idea of the democratic classroom even more, and now I cannot imagine discussing sociology in a classroom without this framework.

Sociology requires discussion in a college course. It is an ever-changing subject, which is enriched by people's personal experience and testimony. It requires that one put their everyday life into the context of the subject matter and think critically about society. In a democratic classroom, one can teach about equality and inspire criticism about the structure of society, while staying true to those ideals in the structure of the class itself. As a professor, one can communicate to the student that they are consistent and that they practice the ideas they present in class in other aspects of life. There is much less hypocrisy here than would be found when practicing traditional teaching methods. For example, if a professor was teaching about classism, racism, or sexism and promoting equality, it would be hypocritical to then exercise a dictatorial classroom where they rule solely because of their social position in society. Democracy can be used in every aspect of the class; students can vote on the way they want to design the syllabus, what it takes to get each letter grade, how the discussions will be organized, and what supplemental material we use. After discovering these many ways that critical pedagogy can manifest itself in a classroom, I became determined to strive for this method in the future and become familiar with the works published on the subject.

The Flaws of an Educational System Rooted in Capitalism

During my research, I encountered theorists who criticized the traditional education system and addressed the experience that I have had in college. The writings of Paulo Friere

describe beautifully the inherent messages that the structure of the educational system conveys. After exploring these ideas, I will address the roots of this value system in our culture and the ways that the system negatively affects today's students.

I have never myself taken a class in which the professor practiced a democratic way of teaching, or practiced critical pedagogy. However, I have been frustrated by what Paulo Friere calls the "banking" concept of education, and have encountered various forms of it throughout my academic career:

> Instead of communicating, the teacher…makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits (Friere, 1970, p.58).

This is the typical system in which the professor has absolute authority, and the student is expected to receive information from the professor, internalize it, and spit it back out as they are quantitatively assessed. The professor then receives monetary compensation while the student receives compensation in the form of a letter grade (and ideally, knowledge) for their efforts. The student works only for this letter grade, and may or may not fully understand the information found in the curriculum in the context of their lives or the possibilities of its future uses. Yet this does not usually matter in the end. As long as the student "succeeds" in getting high marks in this business-like interaction, they are rewarded and told that this is education at its finest. The university could be seen as a place where many business transactions take place. The students and professors are there under a sort of contract to participate in the exchange of facts and grades, all for an inevitable economic purpose; the professor gets a salary and the student gets a degree that will earn them a higher salary. It is all about money in the end, not about knowledge. This makes sense in the context of American culture, where capitalism and materialism overshadow the value of knowledge and character. Capitalism is so ubiquitous in our society that

its values of materialism, wealth, and success by any means necessary can be found in almost every aspect of life. This system of education encourages the fastest and most efficient way of benefiting from classes, whether it is by gaining experience or just leaving with a descent degree. Huge classes with students packed together in a room are told to not contribute, but to solely listen and memorize. Don't interact, just play your role in the interaction. The student is there to obey, and to ingest the values and facts designed by society to "get ahead". "Success" is defined by an authority, and what actually benefits the students intellectually is not as important.

This system has many implications that Friere addresses in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As a sociologist, I tend to look at the underlying messages given to people by the structure of institutions, the media, etc., or the "hidden curriculum" (Friere, 1970). This educational system sends an alarming message to students when it is examined fully. The student is encouraged to do their work quietly, to never question the professor or the material, and to parrot back whatever the professor or textbook says. Friere describes the ideal role of the student and professor:

> Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are (Friere, 1970, p. 58).

Students receive the message that the better they can blindly accept and follow authority, the farther they can get in life. This undoubtedly serves a purpose in society: it reproduces the status quo of the social hierarchies based on class, gender, and race, and quite successfully. Friere describes the students as containers, who do not produce anything original or contribute to the interaction. There is no expectation of the student to think on their own, because that would challenge the existing structure of society. Friere paints the picture of the educational system that still exists today; one with silent students who need authority figures to think. Another message

sent to students by the banking concept of education is that the professor is the absolute authority on the subject and that they are there to give you information that only they have and of which the student has none. In the words of Paulo Friere:

> In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry (Friere, 1970, p. 58).

How can professors encourage the criticism of inequality, but at the same time enforce an unequal structure in the classroom? It is wrong to assume that the opinions and experiences of the students have no place in discussing the subject matter, and that the professor can never be questioned or taught on the subject as well. Students should be aware that their ideas are just as legitimate as a professor's, and that they, too, are just as qualified to provide an opinion on the subject.

The banking system of education and its capitalistic values can even be seen in the syllabus. The syllabus in the banking system of education is the usually set-in-stone schedule of what the student can expect for the term. As a student, I have the experience of receiving the syllabus the first day of class, and using it as a basis for whether to drop the class or not. It would tell me which weeks I had big exams and therefore which weeks I can expect to be miserable (especially since my other classes would undoubtedly plan an exam in the same week). The syllabus becomes a sort of contract, or physical proof of the power that the professor and the school has over the student. It is usually covered in threats about missing exams or late work, and has an attached schedule that is convenient for the professor, but does not take into account the life of the student. The syllabus by itself embodies the message that the traditional banking education system sends to students throughout their academic life.

The structure provided by the banking system of education also diminishes the confidence that students have in their original ideas and opinions on the subject. If a student disagrees with something the professor said, they are taught to think that they must be wrong or to ignore the thought. Individualism is so discouraged in the banking system of education that as a student, I even lack the confidence that I can come up with an original theory without drawing on the work of someone else, or someone with authority. This has many effects on the mindsets of students and even how they view their future. As someone who wants to pursue a doctoral degree, I find it hard to imagine publishing a completely original work that I will be able to defend and receive acknowledgement for from the professional community. It is unfortunate to think that I could have been practicing the creation and defense of my own ideas in a confident way in all of my classes throughout my education. Would a system of critical or democratic pedagogy encourage more students to pursue higher goals in their careers?

Democratic Education: Empowering Students

Discovering the works of Ira Shor gave me an extremely valuable tool to put the ideas of critical pedagogy into practical use. Reading about how he designed his classes inspired even more ideas about running a sociology class and how I could impact the students I will encounter in the most positive way possible. Here I will discuss the ideas behind designing a democratic classroom, my ideas about the relevance of students' everyday lives in academic discussion, and the concept of the intellectual and co-educators. These ideas inspire me to continue to criticize the status quo in education and to continue to look for new ways to run a college classroom.

Students should learn that their lives are important and relevant to everything they are learning in class. Although things like reality shows and parties seem like the farthest thing from relevant to their classes, they should be aware that these subjects are just as important as

anything else. Education should be about learning through discussing what students are passionate about and what directly impacts their lives (and revealing issues that affect them about which they may be unaware). They are paying for an education, and therefore they should be able to have it be relevant and important to their lives. That is why the subject material of a class should reflect the concerns and interests of the students, while giving them resources and new material to highlight what they may not know. This is accomplished by the democratic structure of the class, where the student can tell the professor what they need to explore and serve as a guide to keep them on topics that they are passionate about. It is also therefore important for the professor to constantly update supplemental materials to offer insights on subjects that matter to the students. This may even change for each term; something seemingly very recent and relevant in fall may be irrelevant to the students in spring. Education should become something that students are inspired by, and makes them eager to know more. My goal is to move away from pedagogical practices that cause material to feel abstract and stale. Students should be reminded that their socio-cultural context matters just as much as the socio-cultural context as Marx, Weber, and any other social theorist. Antonio Gramsci says it well in his writings on the concept of intellectuals:

> All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say; but all men do not have the function of intellectuals in society…every man, outside his own job, develops some intellectual activity; he is, in other words, a "philosopher", an artist, a man of taste, he shares a conception of the world, he has a conscious line of moral conduct, and so contributes towards maintaining or changing a conception of the world, that is, towards encouraging new modes of thought (Gramsci, 1957, p. 121).

The ideas and reflections of students about their world matter just as much as those of scholars (because as college students, they *are* scholars, and should see themselves as such). Gramsci encourages the common person to change the conception of the world and to redirect the paths

paved by the elite. He encouraged the idea of the organic intellectual as a way to fight class oppression and to encourage the idea of true equality. Students should be encouraged to take themselves seriously as great thinkers of their time and vehicles of societal change. They should be aware of the power they have to create new modes of thought and should be inspired to take back to title of intellectual from those in authority. Their ideas and experiences are just as profound as anyone else's. Nothing should be irrelevant when one is discussing sociology.

Based on the research I have done on pedagogical theory, I have made it my goal to teach in a democratic way, based on the guidelines and ideas of the Shor, Freire and hooks. Their ideas of how to empower students to challenge the stereotypes and structures in place in today's society based on race, class, and gender were crucial to the development of my view of teaching. A democratic structure to the class is essential when promoting a critical discussion of society: this means that the students would have control over determining the structure of the class, what subjects are focused on, the assignments, the syllabus, etc. The professor should not assume that they know the best way to teach the students the material. They are the ones learning it, so they should be the ones deciding the most effective way to understand it. I will also strive to emphasize that the professor and the students are co-educators, or "re-creators" of reality, as Friere describes it (Friere, 1970, p. 56). As mentioned earlier, one of the great qualities about sociology is its ever-changing nature and its relevance to anyone's day-to-day life. As a professor, one should also be taught by the students. It is impossible to know what their experience is in their socio-economical status and niche in society, in the context of the subject being discussed, and it is completely relevant to enhancing the understanding of the topic. Friere describes this idea of co-education:

> Here, no one teaches another, and no one is self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are

> 'owned' by the teacher (Friere, 1970, p. 67). The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the student's thinking (Friere, 1970, p.63).

As a professor, my goal will be to teach and encourage critical thinking. I will attempt to get students in the habit of thinking beyond what the media tells them, and to think about the motives and social context behind the messages and images they see every day. If my students learned nothing from my class other than to look at society and all its aspects with a critical eye, I would be satisfied. Students would take away so much more and be more permanently affected by this kind of experience in the classroom than if I focused on the names and dates associated with all the classic sociological theorists, for example. It is not about specifics, but about teaching or enhancing the tools needed to have an engaged and critical mind, and having students look at their world in a new way.

Manifestations of Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom

To actually run a democratic classroom, one must assume that there will be a lot of resistance to doing things differently. A democratic professor must be prepared for anything and have the dedication to teach based on the theories of critical pedagogy. Here I will discuss my plans for the specific ways that democracy and equality will manifest itself in the structure of my courses, including the topics of the syllabus, grading, classroom etiquette, assignments, and "protest rights".

Democratic pedagogy can manifest itself in a contemporary college classroom in many ways. My goal is to demonstrate that students have power over their education and that they themselves are the class as a whole. Their ideas determine what we would cover (and to which topics the professor could add material and new ideas), and their preferences would determine how the class was run. Although it seems naïve to think that I could one day abandon the

traditional ways of teaching and run an idealistic and democratic sociology class, the works of Ira Shor have given me hope that such a thing is possible. I might not be able to abandon everything that contemporary academia expects of me as a professor (for example, letter grades), but I can design a class that, at its core, exemplifies my critical pedagogical ideologies. My syllabus, for example, may have to have an exam or two on it, depending on the department and college requirements, the class size, etc. However, there would be no final copy that I would pass out to students on the first day. The syllabus would be an ever-changing, evolving schedule that the class would decide on periodically throughout the term. I would, of course, have material and subjects that I would set out wanting to cover, but if the class was passionate about one subject and was disinterested in another, I would have to adapt to their preferences for learning and therefore be able to change the syllabus accordingly. It would all depend on the students and their collective interests and preferences for learning about their society and thinking about it critically.

In more specific terms, this would mean that I would perhaps post a syllabus online that the students could view that would consist of the first few weeks outlined with the subjects we could cover. I would, of course, need material and class activities prepared ahead of time in case the students were unsure about the direction they wanted to take (most could be uncomfortable with the idea of democratic pedagogy and might need guidance for a period of time). Yet all of these plans would have to be flexible to change and possible termination. I would also have a variety of options for readings and assignments. When it comes to outside class work, I do not plan on throwing it all out based on the students' desire to have no homework. However, if they would rather have a paper assigned on a book due at a certain time in the term rather than having read a chapter for each class and incorporating it into discussion, that would be where a lot of

negotiation could take place. Also, I would have many readings listed as options for the students that they could look at and decide which ones they would rather do. As I have pointed out, I would try my best to constantly update the readings, and to have current and relevant works available. The syllabus would be something that would be very open and flexible, and I would strive as a professor to have as much of it as possible open to extensive negotiation.

The first day of class in my ideal democratic sociology classroom would consist of explaining who I am, the students introducing themselves, and the administration of a survey. This survey would be a way for me to assess the interests of the students and their preferences for learning, an idea I got from Ira Shor in *When Students Have* Power:

> On the first day of class and after, students should talk a lot and produce a variety of texts which educate the teacher about their interests, levels of development, idiomatic diversity, cultural backgrounds, and thematic preferences vis-à-vis the syllabus. Their initial discourse replaces the routine of the teacher's pre-emptive lecture on what things mean and what will be covered. This is the function of the questionnaire…inviting students to inform me about their choices at the same time that it helps reduce my discursive profile (Shor, 1996, p. 30).

This survey would help me get an immediate idea of who these students are so I could try and prepare materials and activities that would suit their interests, as well as using their responses as ideas for examples to bring up in class discussions. However, their constant verbal input would be consistently used as well to shape the class. This survey would ask their preferences for what we should do in class; for example, if they enjoy in-class group assignments or discussions, or if they prefer a focus on the whole class discussing the material. It would also ask their favorite hobbies, TV shows, musical artists, movies, academic subject, etc. From this I would attempt to get an idea of what interests this group of people the most and what parallels I could make that would inspire more ideas and comments in class discussions. I would also ask where their hometown is, to get a sense of their socio-economic and cultural background, and if they wanted

to tell me anything else about themselves. This kind of "lets get to know each other" procedure can be a turn-off to some students in college classes; they may either think that the teacher is presenting a false interest in their lives that will later be ignored, or they think it is a waste of time to get to know a professor on a more personal level. However, I will emphasize to the students that although I do care about them as people and wish to know more about them (because that is natural when one plans to spend an extended period of time with them), I am using this information to make the most out of their time in class and the money they are spending on their education. This seemingly personal and ephemeral information about them is actually crucial to the design of the class and how enjoyable it will be and how much of an impact it will have on them. By using this survey I will attempt to further make my classroom a democratic environment.

Some classes that I have taken have addressed the topic of shy students who do not enjoy speaking in class. I wanted to address this topic since I plan to design a class that is centered on discussion and a constant interchange of ideas between the students inspired by material. The classes that I have been in where a professor addressed this offered an option that was equivalent to in-class participation; a student could post on an online discussion board outside of class to get full credit without having to speak aloud in front of their peers. Although I believe in a democratic classroom with class procedures based on the students' input, I am less open to negotiation to incorporate an option like this to replace in-class discussion. Of course, if a student had a disability or a special circumstance regarding speaking aloud in class, I would handle that on a case-by-case basis. Yet I firmly believe that no matter what field one intends to go into, public speaking or discussion between peers is an essential part of one's career. I feel that I would be doing a disservice to my students by sending the message that being able to

confidently create and defend your ideas verbally is not important. However, each class is different, and one could have many students who are not comfortable speaking to the whole group about their ideas. To accommodate this, we could vote on things like having the class split up into smaller groups on some days for some students to feel more comfortable and develop their ideas more fully before expressing them to the whole class. Or perhaps some students would prefer coming to office hours to discuss one-on-one so that they are more comfortable with the material and their ideas or opinions before class. With each class there will be flexibility to change things to accommodate for the needs of each group. I also understand that some students are more interested in or familiar with sociology or the social sciences than others, and it will be easier for some to speak up more. In a typical discussion, I will not randomly call on students and demand them to contribute when they might not have any ideas yet. I will wait as long as it takes for students to respond; it could be a student's opinion on the subject, or it could be a concern about the relevance of the topic or a suggestion to take the discussion in a different direction. Either way, it will be up to the students to run the class and keep things moving. Yet as a professor I will strive to keep the discussions relevant, and hopefully interesting, for everyone by presenting material and ideas that they may not find on their own. If I fail to do so, the class will be designed so that students can criticize the direction the class is going and can control what they are getting out of the experience. This is based off of Ira Shor's idea of "protest rights":

> 'Protest rights'…means that each student has the right at any time to protest what we are doing…We can then stop and figure out if we should do things differently. I'll invite the protesting student to explain her or his objection, find out if anyone else feels the same way, and then ask for suggestions and alternatives for us to do our work. We'll debate alternatives and vote on what to do next. With 'protest rights,'…students don't have to sit through a class that drives you nuts or leaves you confused or frustrated or angry or insulted or just plain dulled out (Shor, 1996, p.112).

As a professor, I will strive to extend my democratic pedagogical practices to every aspect of the classroom, including its physical set up and dynamic. Ira Shor pointed out that the practice of having the professor at the front of the room sets up an unequal relationship with the students and implies an absolute authority of the professor:

> In terms of changing the political climate and the rhetorical setting of the classroom, circle seating can help disturb the unilateral authority of teacher-talk. Circle seating…helps restructure discourse from one-way lecturing to multi-lateral dialogue. This is democratically valuable, because the way we sit and speak with one another teaches us stances toward authority, knowledge-making, and society (Shor, 1996, p. 67).

In addition, the placement of the students' desks in rows with a limited view of each other implies their insignificant role in the class and the discouragement of interaction with each other during class. The design of the room with the sole focus on the professor is not how I want my class to be structured. Ira Shor's practice of placing the desks in a circle in the classroom is a way to encourage everyone to interact and acknowledge each other, and truly become co-educators. This practice has often been a turn-off to some students. Yet I think that it is mostly because it demands that one is fully present in class, something that many students, myself included, often dread. However, as a professor I will encourage a lively discussion about things the students care about, while fully seeing and interacting with their peers. As professor, I will be part of the circle as well, without distinguishing myself in any way. I will participate in the discussions, yet I will let the class run them primarily. I will try to come across as an equal in the physicality of the class set up. It will be difficult to truly be an equal, since the students have learned that they *should* separate themselves from their professor and treat them differently. I will try to negotiate the line between student and professor and encourage the idea that the class is a place to exchange ideas between peers. Hopefully this negotiation and encouragement of

new ideas about the structure of the classroom will make students feel somewhat comfortable with focusing on the ideas and material more than how to please or succumb to the authority of the professor.

As far as classroom etiquette goes, I will of course encourage mutual respect and will attempt to manage interruptions and general disorganization and chaos that may occur in discussions. My view on other day-to-day concerns like bathroom breaks, a class break at the hour, food, and tardiness is generally that everyone in the class is an adult and anything that does not disturb the discussion is fine. I would never try and impose authority on whether or when students can go to the bathroom during class or whether they could eat food at that time (unless the room we are in has certain rules). Some absence and tardiness is something that happens from time to time in life, and will inevitably happen to me as a professor during my classes; I cannot punish students for something that could just as easily happen to me. Most of these issues, however, would be covered by discussion and voting by the students regarding their specific class. If they cared particularly about something or found something to be an issue, they could decide on certain rules or agreements between them. As a student, I find it frustrating that professors continue to treat their students as if they are in high school in traditional college education, and imposing their authority on things like bathroom breaks and punishment for being late. A democratic classroom should encourage the mutual respect and equality of all present, and my views of critical pedagogy extend to everything involving the class, including minute things like this.

Since I have pointed out my rejection of the banking system of education, I must address the idea of grading. Giving a letter grade is an unfortunate necessity in the education system in our society. I would hate to act like I assume the authority as a professor to assess the students in

a way that could affect their future; therefore, drawing on the idea of Ira Shor in *When Students Have Power*, the students will decide what constitutes what grade, and will, in theory, give themselves a grade at the end of the term, based on what they did. The students will discuss and vote in the beginning of the term what type of assignments, participation, and attendance will constitute an A, B, C, and D grade. As a professor, I will require some combination of in-class participation in discussions and some form of further outside of class research or development of ideas in essay form. However, the students will decide what combination of these elements will result in what grade, and other specifics. For example, a group project or presentation instead of an individual essay, or how many absences one can have and still receive an A. Based on the decisions of the class, there will be a write up of the agreed on requirements for each grade that will be available to everyone. Therefore, the student can manage their grade in the context of their life. For example, if they started out wanting an A but decided they might need to skip class for another obligation, they can accurately determine how that will change their final grade. My goal is for the students' grades to be completely predictable throughout the term based on the amount of effort they want to put into the class. There should be no surprises, and the requirements for grades should always be open to negotiations, as with everything else in the democratic classroom. In Ira Shor's words:

> In this…experiment with contracts,… the teacher would no longer set all of the rules, decide the grading policies on his own, do all of the evaluation, and be the only one announcing requirements. Students would make important decisions and evaluations about their work. The curriculum would be mutually discussed. …[E]ducation works best when students set goals for themselves, clarify their purposes, deliberate with others on the rules, evaluate themselves, their peers, the process, and the teacher, and not wait to be told what to do and what things mean (Shor, 1996, p. 75).

With all of these aspects of the class I hope to genuinely prioritize the students' experience and approach education in a completely new way. In every aspect of my teaching, I

want to reject the assumptions that the traditional educational system implies and feeds to both students and professors.

My Role as a Professor

My role as the professor will be extremely important when trying to engage in a democratic classroom. I will attempt to reject all the previous notions of what a professor should be as dictated by the traditional education system. Here I will discuss how I will be of service to students, my personal bias and how that will affect the class, the incorporation of interdisciplinary material, the issue of language addressed by bell hooks, and how the income of the students at different universities could affect my teaching.

My specific role as a professor will be something that I will strive to constantly examine while I am teaching. Although I will not place myself in an authoritarian role or claim to know much more than the students, I will acknowledge that I can be a resource to them throughout our time together. I will encourage that they come to my office hours, email me, or talk with me after class to obtain more information on a topic or to just continue a discussion that they are interested in or passionate about. I will be part of the class that they are paying for, so I will encourage that they use my knowledge and time as something that they can take advantage of to get most out of their education. I will also try to remind them that I will be available to give advice, write recommendation letters, or look over drafts of papers for them. My goal is for my job and my efforts to not end when I walk out of the classroom.

During my teaching career, I also want to continue to emphasize interdisciplinary thought and material in my classes. Throughout my college career, my classes have derived from many fields. My major alone encompassed sociology, anthropology, and geography, my concentration was in social psychology, and my minors were in psychology and religious studies. I designed

my courses in this way because I was interested in so many different subjects, and as I think about teaching, I want to continue to practice interdisciplinary thought to keep a critical, open mind on the subjects being discussed. Students should not take information they read in classes as an undeniable truth just because one field says so. I want to emphasize the debate between many disciplines to call attention to the fact that scholars and experts with PhDs can be criticized or even wrong sometimes. I want students to get used to questioning the things they hear from "reliable sources" and "experts", and I think that continuing to emphasize interdisciplinary thought will help achieve that.

My personal bias, based on my location in the social hierarchy of race, class, and gender, is also something that I want to be constantly aware of during my teaching career. Even when I think of using interdisciplinary material I can feel myself wanting to indulge myself instead of doing what I should for the students. I have many preferences, such as using sociology over anthropology, or discussing sexism over classism, that could interfere with my true intentions for teaching students. I need to be acutely aware of my tendencies to emphasize what *I* am passionate or knowledgeable about, and to not allow them to take precedence over what my students are passionate about and want to discuss. On a daily basis in the classroom, I need to resist the temptation to guide the discussion to what I am comfortable with, or to what I think will be most beneficial. I need to remember that the students are teaching me as well, and that they will often know better than I will what will inspire them to learn and think critically. The class will be using *their* lives as a vehicle to examine and criticize society, not mine.

The idea of language addressed by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* is something that stood out to me and that I want to address in my future classes. She points out that some language used by students is labeled "slang" and is rejected as non-academic. Although I realize

that students should be taught to write and express themselves in a professional manner that will help them succeed, I want to address this idea of language that is "acceptable" or "unacceptable" and bring it to the attention of my students. Since my goal is to encourage critical thinking, I would ask the students what they thought of contemporary slang or other ways of speaking besides standard English, and if it should be used in class discussions. I would definitely not discourage it; any way that the students can effectively express themselves and address their contemporary lives should be incorporated into class. In this discussion, I would attempt to bring up the idea of who decides what language is "professional" or "right" or "acceptable". Does society as a whole decide? Did they have a say in it? "…in the patient act of listening to another tongue…we may disrupt that cultural imperialism that suggests one is only worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English." (hooks, 174) Of course, if something else comes out of this initial idea rather than these questions, I will adapt with the preferences of that specific class. As a professor, though, my pedagogical view is that the students may have a language of their own that they want to use to express their ideas, and I should never impose my authority and ideas of what language is acceptable. Drawing attention to something seemingly black and white or established like language is a good way to get in the habit of thinking critically, and I appreciated bell hook's analysis of the subject.

> Shifting how we think about language and how we use it necessarily alters how we know what we know. (174) When I need to say words that do more than simply mirror or address the dominant reality, I speak black vernacular. There, in that location, we make English do what we want it to do. We take the oppressor's language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language (hooks, 1994, p. 175)

Ira Shor addressed an important topic in his books *When Students Have Power* and *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* that I have little experience with, but wish to address as well. He described the experience of teaching at a community college in a low-income, working

class area of New York. Throughout these works, he brought up how this environment and the different class background of his students affected his teaching.

> The new learning for my worker-students could not succeed unless I examined and transformed my style, language, way of thinking, themes of study, and forms of teaching…I had to remake my learning agendas sympathetically and critically from inside the needs and lives of the students, who belonged to a class very different from my own (Shor, 1980, p. xxiv).

In my future teaching career, I want to remember to be aware of my audience and the circumstances of the environment in which I am teaching. If I am teaching at a community college, I need to be aware that my students may have many other obligations like children, a long commute, long work hours, or multiple jobs. If I am teaching at a private university, I need to be aware of the specific resources or special programs that the students may have available to them. In any case, I need to acknowledge the specific lifestyles that each atmosphere dictates, and to be sensitive and knowledgeable about what those mean to the students.

I hope to one day put these ideas into practice as a professor of sociology. Hopefully I can be one more person in academia who is dedicated to challenging the status quo not only in theory and study, but in practice in the arena where I am expected to work and contribute to society. If not for the ideas and inspirational writings of Ira Shor, Paulo Friere, and bell hooks, I would be just another body in academia repeating what I had been told and reproducing the values of inequality and capitalism. By engaging in a critical pedagogy and proposing a curriculum that designs a democratic classroom, I hope to inspire students and possibly other professionals in academia to take a second look at the educational system and to think critically about the society they live in. A college education is supposed to prepare our youth to become thoughtful, interactive citizens, and to be potential leaders and revolutionary thinkers- change

must come to the educational system in order for that to be realized. Education is one of the most important pillars of society, yet discussion and critiques of the educational system and its values are hardly ever seen. This complex and important institution should reflect the values that we hold as citizens and individuals. If we are not promoting equality and democracy in our classrooms, then how will these values be passed on and truly prioritized in future generations? Social change can start in the classroom, and I hope to contribute to that change.

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