
ABSTRACT: This chapter provides a discussion of current theoretical approaches to critical pedagogy and engages those scholarly conversations by considering the rhetorical role critical educators can play in helping students develop a critical consciousness. In particular, the chapter troubles the privileging of student-centered dialogue as an essential communicative mode of critically resisting mainstream educational psychology and its monologic mode of teaching. The ethnographically-oriented case study demonstrates that critical education that resists mainstream educational psychology need not privilege student-centered dialogue in order to develop students’ critical consciousness. Included is a conceptual overview of “critical consciousness” in the context of critical pedagogy research, a description of critical alternatives to student-centered dialogue, and implications for theorizing critical education when student-centered dialogue is an impractical option.

BIO: Cathy B. Glenn is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Her general research areas are critical and cultural studies, philosophy of communication, communication and performative theory, and mediated communication. She is co-founder and editor of Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research and has published work on topics related to critical rhetoric and pedagogy, process philosophy, temporality and ethics, cultural politics, and communication activism. This chapter, in a different version, appears as a 2002 article in Radical Pedagogy, 4, 1. All correspondence should be directed to cglenn@siu.edu.
Critical Consciousness and Pedagogy: 
Reconceptualizing Student-Centered Dialogue as Educational Practice

Dialogue, particularly when it is student-centered, is commonly understood by critical pedagogues as the principal communicative means for engaging students and developing in them critical consciousness. This approach to educational practice directly challenges mainstream educational psychology models of education that privilege monologic approaches to pedagogy. As such, a critical approach often assumes that student-centered dialogue—in contrast to monologic lecturing that assumes knowledge can (and ought to) be transmitted to students—is tantamount to critical education. However, dialogue’s privileged status in critical approaches to education has been critiqued as not only being difficult to facilitate in some institutional settings, but also as being uncritically appropriated without consideration of its limitations. In this chapter, those limitations are addressed and the possibilities of an alternative critical orientation and practice are explored via an ethnographically-oriented case study. Using Raymie McKerrow’s theory of critical rhetoric as an approach to teaching that nurtures critical consciousness without privileging student-centered dialogue, I analyze the strategies of one critical educator in a complex institutional setting: a classroom of over 100 students. Expressly, the focus in this chapter is an exploration of a critical communicative orientation that resists mainstream educational psychology models without uncritically jettisoning a lecture format that a critical educator may be called upon to employ in a classroom with a large student population. Ultimately, what is demonstrated in this case study, in contrast to the vast majority of critical pedagogy literature, is that critical education that resists mainstream educational psychology need not privilege student-centered dialogue in order to develop students’ critical consciousness.

Mainstream educational psychology embraces a Piagetian formalism, which tends to privilege cognitive assimilation by emphasizing, in teaching practices, students’ ability to understand phenomena by fitting it into their existing cognitive structures. Monologic teaching practices, which tend to privilege lecture formats, support assimilationist objectives by situating the teacher as the expert whose task is to deposit knowledge into passive and stable student-receptacles. In this model, when students are confronted with phenomena or ideas that disrupt their constructed reality, a mainstream educator will focus on helping students assimilate the new information into existing frameworks in order to resolve the tension that is created by contradictory information. It is an approach that presupposes the stability and discreteness of existing structures and, thus, tends to reify and reproduce them while eliding their interconnected constitutiveness. More than this, formalism is an objectivist educational psychology that demands students disconnect their processes of valuing, knowing, and being from each other and abstract or decontextualize those experiential processes from constitutive socio-cultural constructs. Put simply, formalist educational psychology reproduces students and educators who have difficulty understanding their roles in maintaining existing constructs and the possibility of their transforming existing conditions.

Critical educators, on the other hand, recognize and embrace a post-formal, accommodationist educational psychology. Accommodation, in Piagetian terms, is the move to adjust one’s cognitive structures to account for novel phenomena or ideas. Rather than fit disruptive information to existing cognitive structures, a critical teacher helps students develop a critical consciousness--that is, critical educators nurture students’ abilities to critically and self-
reconceptualizing student-centered dialogue

reflectively reconceive their cognitive frameworks in the face of dissonant phenomena or ideas in order to make room for novelty and the possibility of change. Critical accommodation is a subversive practice that takes seriously the constitutiveness of subjectival meaning-making processes: it is a hermeneutic approach that embraces emotion and intuition in relation with intellect and reason; situates students and teachers in socio-cultural contexts that are always already historical; is explicitly political in its recognition of interconnected relations and patterns among discourse, power, and identity; and, is future-oriented in its anticipatory, yet open-ended and contingent orientation. From this perspective, students and teachers, together, can explore difference in classroom settings as moments of opportunity for radical change. Dialogic teaching practices are often the privileged communicative mode in which critical educators resist mainstream educational psychology’s objectivist and abstractive tendencies. Instead, dialogic means are seen as essential in helping students recognize their roles in reconceiving cognitive constructs and creating the possibility of transforming socio-cultural conditions.

What is at stake in the debates among mainstream and critical educators is the very psychological health and well-being of students and educators, as well as the possibility for resisting oppressive and inhumane constructs and, in the process, constructing just socio-cultural conditions. These stakes are far too high to simply privilege dialogue as the only means to develop critical consciousness, especially when institutional settings may preclude student-centered dialogue. Instead, what is needed are communicative strategies that critical teachers can employ, even in the most difficult institutional settings. To that end, this chapter explores one critical educator’s rhetorical strategy to engage, in a lecture format, a large number of students without abandoning her critical approach. First, in the section that follows, is an overview of critical pedagogy as it relates to student-centered dialogue and development of critical consciousness. The second section addresses limitations of student-centered dialogue, troubling the facile dialogue-monologue dichotomy, and clears room for alternatives. McKerrow's praxis-oriented aspects of critical rhetoric, as an alternative to privileging student-centered dialogue, are outlined in the third section. In the fourth section, the case study, the various teaching strategies employed are analyzed via McKerrow's concepts. In the last section, I suggest possible implications for theorizing critical pedagogy when student-centered dialogue is not a viable option. The case study analysis suggests, ultimately, that student-centered dialogue is not the only—nor is it an essential—means for helping students develop critical consciousness.

Critical Pedagogy, Critical Consciousness, and Student-Centered Dialogue

In general, a principle aim of critical pedagogy is the creation of educational conditions—by educators and students in concert—within which students are able to develop their critical consciousness. The pedagogical process of developing critical consciousness involves working with students to recognize, evaluate, and negotiate structures of power and knowledge. The objective of this pedagogical focus on developing critical consciousness is that students will come to understand themselves as active agents, within and as a part of those structures of power-knowledge, facilitating identification and creation of conditions for the possibility of humane change in oppressive socio-cultural constructs. As part of this critical pedagogical approach, student-centered dialogue is viewed as essential in facilitating the development of critical consciousness. Critical pedagogy, then, is an educational orientation that directly challenges transmission models of learning, which are models that assume and privilege
the possibility that knowledge can (and ought to) be transmitted unproblematically (that is, without power considerations) from educators to students. This assumption is confronted, from a critical perspective, by recognizing that knowledge and identity construction is a fluid, negotiated practice that is informed by socio-cultural and economic contexts within which that negotiation takes place. A critical approach to educational practices assumes that without acknowledgement of those contexts and the power that constitutes them, their conditions cannot be addressed and their detrimental oppressive influence is reproduced, via transmission model educational practices.

At least three concepts are important to define at the outset: “critical” as it relates to pedagogy, “critical consciousness,” and “student-centered dialogue.” First, “critical” is an adjective that informs those words described by it with a set of assumptions embedded in critical social theory. Those assumptions include, but are not necessary limited to, the following: (1) language mediates knowledge and constitutes subjectivity, (2) discourse is always already constituted within relations of power, which are historically and culturally conditioned, (3) “factual” knowledge is always already value-infused, (4) subject-object-concept relationships are fluid and influenced by socio-cultural and economic constructs, (5) subordination of some in society is reproduced when the subordinated accept their status as natural and/or inevitable, (6) oppression, to be most fully addressed, must be recognized as occurring at multiple intersections (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, etc.), and (7) traditional or mainstream models of research, teaching, and thought tend toward reproduction of those oppressions. Thus, “critical pedagogy” can be understood as an approach to pedagogical theory and classroom practice that includes socio-cultural contextual considerations with respect to both educators’ and students’ positionalities in processes of knowing and knowledge construction. A critical approach to pedagogy, with an aim toward social change through educational practices, emphasizes student potentiality in contributing to transformation of oppressive socio-cultural constructs and, thus, moves toward realizing human emancipation. There are various other names for this approach pedagogical theory and practice (e.g., “post-formal,” “liberatory,” “anti-racist,” “emancipatory,” “radical,” “progressive,” “democratic,” etc.), all of which directly challenge mainstream transmission and cognitive models of educational theory and practice.

The second term, “critical consciousness” (what Paulo Freire coined as conscientization), is conceived as an ongoing process whereby learners (both educators and students) work together to move toward awareness (and awareness of their awareness) of oppressive socio-cultural conditions. Critical consciousness enables recognition, on the part of students and educators, of their roles as active agents in maintaining oppression. At the same time, critical consciousness enables understanding of the possibility of students’ and educators’ roles in humanly reconstituting those oppressive conditions and realizing social justice. Because the approach challenges transmission models of learning and knowledge construction, critical consciousness differs from the idea of consciousness-raising. The latter assumes that educators can (and ought to) transmit pre-selected knowledge to students, “depositing” it into passive student-receptacles, thus raising students’ consciousness. Consciousness-raising is understood as a top-down process, from active educator to passive student. In contrast, critical consciousness development is conceived as an active process negotiated between students and educators; it is an equalizing educational practice that understands students as active agents rather than passive objects. As part of the development of critical consciousness, students and educators work together to
challenge, disturb, interrupt, and rupture prevailing power and knowledge narratives in order to
develop critical capacities to recognize oppression and understand their own roles in both
maintaining and re-conceiving those narratives. Theoretically, the pedagogical aim of developing
critical consciousness, then, is to facilitate recognition on the part of students of their being
active subjects rather than passive objects. By extension, the practical objective is to create a
classroom environment wherein students’ own experience and lifeworlds (rather than pre-
selected curriculum) become central, and wherein students and educators can, together, challenge
the seeming “natural-ness” and inevitability of oppressed subjectivities and oppressive
circumstances. The process of critical consciousness development is at the heart of current
critical educational approaches, and the move toward development of critical consciousness
assumes that student-centered dialogue is essential in facilitating that development.

The third concept, “student-centered dialogue,” is understood as the intrinsic
communicative modality of employing productive critical pedagogical practices. Dialogue
amongst learners is most commonly understood, from this perspective, as an alternative to
monological or lecture approaches. Ideally conceived, productive dialogical practices are
employed as a direct challenge to transmission (or monologic) models of educational practices
and are viewed as opening up critical communicative opportunities to students. Thus, dialogical
communication practice from this perspective assumes that: (1) all learners (students and
educators) are invited as potential communicative participants, (2) interaction among participants
can be productively confrontational and/or cooperative in moving toward intersubjective
understanding, (3) knowledge is constituted in interaction (rather than discovered) and existing
power-knowledge constructs can be critically interrogated, (4) constituting more humane power-
knowledge constructs facilitates embodiment of critical citizenship on the part of learners, and
(5) critical, student-centered dialogue productively facilitates processes of critical consciousness
development. That the dialogue is student-centered, again, challenges transmission models by
drawing subject matter from students' own lives, language, and cultures, rather than from pre-
existing curricula. It is a bottom-up approach that focuses on students' experiences, identities,
and lifeworlds in an attempt to move away from top-down, educator- and text-centered curricula.
Student-centered dialogue, then, affords the possibility that learners can constitute critical
readings of dominant socio-cultural constructs by situating educational practices within their
own experiences. Moreover, it provides the opportunity to situate learning in historically
informed socio-cultural contexts from which learners can envision and enact social change.

Limitations of Student-Centered Dialogue: Considering Alternatives

Although the specific means engaged to facilitate student-centered dialogue vary among
critical pedagogues who adopt this approach, affording a privileged status to student-centered
dialogue currently is understood as synonymous with critical pedagogy and development of
critical consciousness. The practical advantages of student-centered dialogue in the classroom
have been a focal point in recent educational research and a large body of current scholarship
explicates the transformative potential viewed as inherent in this critical approach to pedagogy.
Scholars have addressed how dialogue can offer students an opportunity to rehearse social
criticism, how socio-cultural and identity issues can be addressed during dialogic processes, and
how issues related to race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation can be critically
engaged when dialogue is student-centered. Scholars also point to the constitutive aspects of
dialogue with respect to identity formation and this constitutive communication function is viewed as the primary means for helping students develop an awareness of their agency in affecting change in oppressive circumstances. Moreover, performing as critically thinking and speaking subjects in the classroom provides, for students, the basis for their performing as citizen-critics outside it, as well.

While acknowledging the value of a student-centered approach to critical, dialogic pedagogy, an equal acknowledgement of the possibly problematic nature of taken-for-granted assumptions of such an approach is also important. Critiques of dialogic assumptions include concerns that not all learners may be comfortable accepting an invitation to dialogue when the “rules for engagement” include a confrontational style of discourse or when cooperative or therapeutic objectives require more consensus than students are willing to support or more self-closure than they are willing to offer. Thus, some students may not view dialogue as a benign invitation; rather, they may perceive that the compulsory student-centered dialogic environment acts as a coercive force in demanding their participation in a particular style of educational practice. Without acknowledging the possibility of this reading by students, dialogue may simply reproduce the very normalizing and oppressive tendencies it seeks to challenge. Moreover, the possibility of oppressive power-knowledge constructs developing in student-centered dialogue has been critically addressed by some scholars. Critical approaches to pedagogy are understood as being explicitly political, but the politics embedded in current mainstream critical approaches are viewed as an inherent aspect of approaches that privilege student-centered dialogic as an essential style of educational practice. Without acknowledging the possibility of this reading by students, dialogue may simply reproduce the very normalizing and oppressive tendencies it seems to challenge. Moreover, the possibility of oppressive power-knowledge constructs developing in student-centered dialogue has been critically addressed by some scholars. Critical approaches to pedagogy are understood as being explicitly political, but the politics embedded in current mainstream critical approaches are viewed as an inherent aspect of approaches that privilege student-centered dialogue. Given the political assumptions of mainstream critical approaches outlined in the previous section and the extension of those assumptions into pedagogical practices by mainstream critical educators, the possibility exists that different ideological versions of “critical” may be marginalized, overlooked, or excluded. Thus, some students (and some educators) may be forced to define their position as “critical” in a manner that situates them outside mainstream critical ideologies and this may reproduce, in dialogue, the very socio-cultural and political marginalization and oppression that dialogue seeks to address.

In addition to these socio-cultural and ideological concerns, some scholars have questioned whether students are as passive and whether lecturing is as monologic as is commonly assumed by mainstream critical pedagogy theorists and practitioners. Dichotomous understandings of passive-active in relation to monologic-dialogic ignore the complexity of a range of different enactments on both “sides” of those contrasts. As is suggested above, some dialogic styles may be far from egalitarian and may serve to prompt students to withdraw into passivity rather than emerge as active participations, thus, inhibiting development of critical consciousness. At the same time, different styles of lecturing may afford students the opportunity for critically active engagement rather than passive acceptance of knowledge and, thus, nurture development of critical consciousness. A risk of theoretically assuming fixed dichotomies—active vs. passive and dialogue vs. monologue—is that the variety of educational practice options that span a range of both dialogic and monologic styles may be overlooked or ignored. That risk is particularly salient for critical educators who view student-centered dialogue as an essential aspect of their pedagogical practice, but who face considerable practical limitations employing it.

One of the practical limitations of employing student-centered dialogue is class size, an aspect of critical classroom organization that is rarely, if ever, a part of scholarly discussions of
student-centered dialogic pedagogy. It should go without saying that each classroom context is unique and each possesses its own promise and potential; on the other hand, each also presents distinctive contextual challenges. This recognition of contextual contingency--specifically as it relates to the number of students in a particular class--is virtually nonexistent in scholarship advocating a critical approach to teaching that uses learner-centered dialogue as the means to develop critical consciousness. Facilitating critical dialogue is not an easy task, even with a relatively small number of students; it is a complicated process that requires constant communicative (re)negotiation. For those critical pedagogues who find themselves in the context of a large classroom, that communication process becomes nearly untenable. It is crucial for those educators, then, to develop specific, situated, and localized strategies in order to retain the critical character of their teaching approach while adjusting their teaching strategies to accommodate a large number of students. One such strategy is suggested by Raymie McKerrow’s theory of critical rhetoric. In the following section, an outline of the praxis-oriented assumptions of critical rhetoric is offered as it relates to the rhetorical role critical educators can play in helping students develop their critical consciousness, particularly when a large class size prohibits student-centered dialogue.

**Educator as Critical Rhetor: An Alternative to Student-Centered Dialogue**

Raymie McKerrow’s critical rhetoric, as a communicative mode of resistance, subverts mainstream educational psychology assumptions. McKerrow describes critical rhetoric as a theoretical and practical enterprise encompassing divergent critical projects in its overarching critical spirit. Critical rhetoric serves to de-mystify and connect, through an engaged and subjective critique, seemingly unrelated societal forces of knowledge/power in order to recognize how they can create conditions of oppression and marginalization. In addition, employing critical rhetoric is a normative practice, rendering options for social action and allowing practical judgments about how to take such action. Critique, in this sense, is explicitly political, and the critical rhetor takes an advocacy stance in offering analyses. In particular, a critical rhetoric is concerned with how systems of power and domination are discursively constructed and maintained in order to construct counter-discourses that might interrupt and, potentially, transform oppressive constructs.

It is important to note that critical rhetoric does not point, at the outset, in the direction of a prescribed utopian telos. Rather, the critical rhetorician employs this method in an effort to sustain socio-cultural critique—it is a practice that recognizes the value of critique and the open-ended nature of the possibilities of its normative outcomes. Thus, because of its non-privileging nature with respect to outcomes, socio-cultural critique employed by critical rhetoricians need not prescribe particular judgments and action. Rather, political judgment and action are contingently related to the process of critical rhetoric.

Criticism, from this perspective, is also a performance and, as such, goes beyond traditional argumentation's focus on critique as an instrument of rationality. The critic, through a critique of collected cultural fragments, performs interpretations of social conditions and, in doing so, argues for interpretations of those fragments. Critical rhetoric is also performative in the sense that it is part of instantiating--through repetitive iterative processes on the part of rhetors--a sense of socio-cultural consciousness with an audience, thereby creating the conditions
for envisioning alternatives to the status quo. Ultimately, this performance of critical subjectivity on the part of a critical rhetor demonstrates, for an audience, a process of identifying and/or creating the conditions for the possibility of humane social change.

As it relates to a critical approach to teaching, particularly with a large number of students, critical rhetoric can be conceived of as a way to foster the development of critical consciousness when student-centered dialogue is not a practical option. In a large classroom setting where a lecture-type format is most suitable, an educator who practices critical rhetoric is able to offer to students readings of socio-cultural circumstances through her/his performance of critical discourse. An educator who lectures utilizing critical rhetoric can embody and invite aspects of dialogue by critically framing socio-cultural concerns and positing critical questions that encourage active engagement and multiple interpretations from diverse student populations. Critical rhetors, thus, nurture students’ potential to reflect on this critique and help develop their abilities for envisioning alternatives to oppressive status quo constructs. This pedagogical function of critical rhetoric acts as a “model” of critical consciousness for students and creates the conditions for students’ own critical engagement without having to prioritize student-centered dialogue in the process.

Also, when situated in a critical pedagogical approach, the open-ended, contingent nature of normative possibilities in critical rhetoric can be particularly effective in engaging students in the cognitive and affective processes necessary for critical classroom engagement. The non-privileging normative approach, with respect to the choices created in the critical process, leaves room for students' own socio-cultural and historically-located analyses and applications. In other words, critical rhetoric employed by an educator need not prescribe what students should believe or do. Instead, employing critical rhetoric challenges students to examine the taken-for-granted assumptions that may preclude their own critical reflection on and evaluation of those beliefs or (in)action. It is the process--the critical rhythm of sustained criticism--not necessarily the content of the critique that students can begin to approximate when an educator employs critical rhetoric.

The following case study demonstrates, through a specific embodied example of pedagogy, how critical rhetoric performed by a particular pedagogue can foster critical consciousness on the part of a large number of students when student-centered dialogue is an impractical option.

A Case Study

Dr. Michelle Wolf is 20-year faculty member in the Department of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts (BECA) at San Francisco State University (SFSU). She completed her M.A. in Communication Studies at the University of Massachusetts and her Ph.D. in Communication Theory--with a Mass Communications and Educational Psychology emphasis--at the University of Texas at Austin before relocating to California and accepting the position at SFSU. Wolf has been teaching for 25 years. Whether teaching 30 students or 150, her provocative style and inherently critical mode of teaching means that theoretical material introduced in class is interspersed with frequently affective, sometimes graphic, and always controversial media, and these cultural fragments are offered with a healthy measure of Wolf’s own socio-cultural critique. Her obvious enthusiasm for, commitment to, and engagement with
students creates a welcoming classroom environment and, although also quite challenging, the environment invites critical exploration of the course material in connection with students’ life experiences.

Overview of Method and Classroom Particulars

My observations of Dr. Wolf’s teaching strategies, in BECA 422: “Social Aspects of Electronic Media,” took place during the fall 1999 semester and consisted of approximately 15 total hours of logged, in-class observations. The original study from which this chapter emerged employed an ethnographically oriented methodology. Specifically, along with the in-class observations, the students were offered the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and feelings about Wolf’s approach and their own engagement with it by responding to a survey utilizing open-ended questions. The original project also included an oral history conducted with Wolf and a parallel autoethnographic account. The analysis section that follows, then, is based in all four methodological sources: in-class observations, students’ survey responses, Wolf’s oral history account, and autoethnographic material.

The population of students in this study—over 100—reflects the diversity commonly found at SFSU. The ages of students ranged from 18 to 39; the class standings ranged from first-year students to seniors; 46% of students claimed Caucasian ethnicity, while 54% claimed diverse ethnicities; and, the gender breakdown was 52% female, 48% male.

The size of the class population in 422 significantly limited the possibility for employing student-centered dialogue. Moreover, the setting—a large auditorium-like classroom with fixed, theatre seating—contributed to the difficulties because students were focused on the front of the room and the physical environment was less than conducive to discussion and more so to a lecture or performance approach. Although some limited discussion was accomplished, Wolf primarily focused on employing other strategies to critically engage her students.

The observations focused on how it was possible that, without the benefit of student-centered critical dialogue, the students in Wolf’s class were able to critically engage with the material addressed in lectures and how that engagement facilitated development of critical consciousness. In general, I observed that the level of critical engagement that would usually be reserved for smaller, more dialogically-centered classes was nurtured in this large student population. Those means—as illustrated by the categories in the following section—offered the students in 422 an opportunity to critically and actively consider the material without having to frequently vocalize their thoughts in class.

Analysis

This section illustrates three conceptual categories of teaching strategies employed by Dr. Wolf: explicit cultural critique, personal self-disclosure, and spontaneous, provocative participation assignments. I offer an exemplar in each of the three categories and analyze them utilizing praxis principles of critical rhetoric in order to demonstrate its resistance to mainstream educational psychology’s assimilationist tendencies in favor of a critical accommodationist approach.
Socio-cultural Critique

Today's class is the second part in a unit on censorship. In addition to a lively lecture about censorship precedents and implications, we watch part of a cable program featuring a woman applying lotion to her enormous (silicone) breasts, a graphic and emotional clip from a 1970's Vietnam documentary, and a short videotaped modern primitive performance in which a man recites poetry while impaling his scrotum with needles and filling it with saline. In the last few minutes of class, we watch as a man performs oral sex on his well-endowed male partner while masturbating himself. For a class of approximately 100 students, the room seems unusually silent during the last clip. At the end of the class period, the students begin leaving the room; some are very quiet, others giggle as they make their way to the door, while still others are talking to friends in hushed, somewhat frenetic tones. It's just another day in BECA 422.

Wolf’s use of controversial and dissonant media, in combination with the lectures she performs afterward, act as a model or demonstration of socio-cultural critique for her students. As a critical rhetor, Wolf unapologetically advocates for and against important socio-political issues (censorship, on this day), and her provocative media choices and analyses of them help constitute that advocacy via her socio-cultural criticism. The critical rhetorical performances stimulate students' critical engagement and reflection processes and help facilitate development of their sense of critical consciousness. In particular, Wolf’s media choices spark students' critical thinking processes by immediately engaging them on an affective level, establishing a sense of investment and commitment to the topic. This direct engagement enables Wolf to prompt her students to think more deeply and critically about those topics and facilitates an opportunity for them to make connections between seemingly unrelated media images and messages and, thus, the power/knowledge constructs embedded in them.

When choosing fragments of media to combine for presentation, Wolf assumes an active rather than passive role on the part of students as audience. As such, her juxtapositions of diverse mediated fragments encourage students to engage critically and be aware of connections between them, particularly as they relate to students’ lived experiences. It becomes crucial that students begin to read beyond the surface meanings of individual fragments (e.g., nude bodies, sexual acts, war footage, etc.) and try to envisage how those fragments might be related in and to broader socio-cultural contexts. Wolf’s choices embody critical rhetoric by recognizing that media fragments may be interpreted as polysemic (containing many meanings), instead of simply representing the one obvious meaning that requires interpretation. Students are given the opportunity—in engagement with Wolf’s choices and her own critical readings—to offer readings of their own, which may challenge dominant socio-cultural meanings by subverting the surface meaning-making processes.

From the perspective of a critical rhetor, description is always already evaluative and processes of understanding and knowing cannot be separated from processes of evaluation. Educators (as critical rhetors or not) choose what they will focus on, what aspects are emphasized, and those choices are always already influenced by what an educator brings to teaching. In Wolf’s case, her critical perspective is always already a part of her media choices, and that perspective explicitly frames the analyses she models for her students. Unlike educators
who ostensibly teach from an “objective” point of view, then, critical rhetors explicitly offer their situated points of view and invite diverse interpretations of those perspectives. Moreover, the controversial media choices, by prompting diverse readings on her part and from her students' perspectives, demonstrate the constitutiveness of meaning making through discursive processes.

Wolf’s political orientation is a starting point for many students' own opinion-formation processes and critical development. For instance, her explicit capitalist critiques, her anti-censorship stance, and her feminist analyses of mediated body images trigger in her students' responses that begin (or continue) the processes of critical consciousness development. Rather than imposing her perspectives on students, Wolf’s analyses often spark critique of them (generally in the form of written feedback). Her students catch her critical rhythm, so to speak, and undertake the act of criticism themselves. More than this, when asked to consider options for changing what can be viewed as damaging or oppressive mediated messages, Wolf’s students offer creatively fashioned alternatives, the conception of which may have been less creative if not for the critical forum in which they are allowed to develop. The criticism rendered from Wolf’s open-ended orientation is, thus, not prescriptive; rather, it is a discursive process that opens space for students’ own decisions about what counts when making critical judgments. Contingently oriented criticism like Wolf’s, rather than fixing a set of interpretations from which to choose seeks, instead, to increase the possibilities for students’ creative interpretations. For the students in Wolf’s class, generation of interpretive options to status quo constructs becomes a creative process of critical invention.

In sum, these aspects of critical rhetoric, performed by Wolf, seem to confirm the notion that the performance of critical readings can act as a way to establish a critical rhythm and create opportunities for students to envision humane transformation of social structures. Wolf’s explication and critique of the controversial mediated messages and images open up previously unexamined areas of analysis for students and foster the kind of critical thinking and reflection necessary for developing critical consciousness. Wolf’s strategies offer a way to engage with students at this critical level without making student-centered dialogue the central aspect of her pedagogy.

**Personal Experience and Self-Disclosure**

*Today's lecture begins a unit on body image and media representations and Dr. Wolf takes some time to relate her own experiences with body image development. She shares an abbreviated, but emotional narrative of several early life experiences; the first involved an incident of her own painful experience with facial disfigurement as the result of being hit in the face with a baseball bat. The story includes aspects of both her physical and psychological devastation and the sometimes-cruel reactions of her grade-school peers. She goes on to talk about her battles with an eating disorder and the negative self-perception of her own body image as it relates to media representations of the “model” body type and her childhood experiences. The students seem mesmerized; there is not a single student in the room who does not seem completely engaged with Dr. Wolf as she tells these stories.*

Critical rhetoric is decidedly, yet self-reflexively, subjective; critique takes a stand either for or against something, often in the context of the critic's lived experiences. In the case of
Wolf’s self-disclosure with respect to body image and media representation, the performance of critiquing the overwhelming, and sometimes devastating, impacts of represented (and ignored) body types in media serves to model cultural critique as a deeply personal and powerfully political process. Notably, in this context, the level of Wolf’s self-disclosure acts as a way to bridge the affective gap between Wolf and the large number of students in this classroom. A sense of intimacy is created when Wolf relates a personal narrative with which nearly all students can relate: feelings of insecurity, marginalization, negative self-concept, and personal pain. They can see reflected parts of themselves in her portrayal of her personal experiences and development. The level of connection this creates with her students enables Wolf to maintain an environment that nurtures a feeling of safety in which her students are free to critically explore various aspects of the concepts presented in BECA 422.

A key aspect of this critique, for Wolf, includes an explicit confirmation that feelings (in contrast to informal logic or reasoning) are a natural and necessary part of the critical process. This aspect of critical rhetoric reflects a move away from the strictly rational and traditional epistemic function of rhetoric based in general, abstract principles. Rather, critical rhetoric includes a doxastic sense that expands those standards to include analyses grounded in personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs. The expansion allows for a relationship between knowing and being and, in so doing, provides students with a way to explore how beliefs, knowledge, and truth are constituted. Put differently, the focus shifts away from knowledge and knowing based on abstract foundations independent of subjectivity and toward recognition of the concrete contingency of both knowledge and its constitution by individuals in relation with one another.

Wolf’s critical rhetoric, by explicitly demonstrating the power of mediated symbolic representations of body images in her lived experiences, also underscores how those signs come to possess that power. With a personal connection, Wolf’s critique connects mediated images with material effects in her lived experiences and, by extension, her students' lifeworlds. In this way, students begin to understand more than what a sign is; they come to understand what signs do in socio-cultural contexts and how they become powerful. The shift in focus helps students connect to the topics addressed in ways that are personally significant and, in the process, prompts a level of commitment to those topics.

In sum, Wolf's use of personal narratives reflects critical rhetoric’s acknowledgment that experience, feelings, and beliefs are an important part of the critical process. Her critical analyses of mediated body images also engage students in a way that includes them in the construction of transformative possibilities. By connecting with Wolf’s personal experiences as they relate to the subject matter, students are invited to question how that same subject matter affects their lives, as well. This critical engagement lends a sense of immediacy to Wolf’s lecture and helps facilitate critical consciousness development for students without dialogue being the central focus.

**Participation Assignments**

*In a unit on news coverage, Dr. Wolf begins the class session with a participation assignment, a current events survey. She asks: How do people in Iraq label their ethnic group? What is the capital city of Iraq? What is the name of one other city in Iraq besides the capital? What does the terrain/land look like in Iraq? What is the weather like in Iraq? Can you name a body of*
water in this country? What form of government will you find there? Is there a Head of State in Iraq and what is his/her title? What percentage of the population of the Iraqi people lives in the cities? During the process of asking the questions, Dr. Wolf takes on a demanding, almost aggressive tone. It feels as if she expects that her students should know the answers to these questions and that they should have no problem responding to questions about countries that have generated such intense media attention.

After the students finish and pass their survey responses forward, she tells them the answers to the questions. In general, the students appear to be surprised, even stunned, by how little they know about such heavily covered, politically significant countries. After disabusing the students of numerous stereotypes and misconceptions about Middle-Eastern peoples, their cultures, and the countries in which they live, she spends some time explicitly critiquing what seems to be an apparent lack of engagement with and attention to the news media by those who have chosen to devote their academic time to media studies. I look around the room and it seems that every student is listening intently to the not-so-subtle critique of her/himself.

Participation assignments generally consist of either written surveys administered in class and turned in immediately before a lecture, or take-home exercises that ask students to individually connect with and/or engage in a critique of some form of media. An example of a participation survey is related here; outside participation assignments also included visiting activist websites and responding to the content, critiquing new television programming, and writing a viewer/listener response letter to a media source offering a critique about what they viewed/heard. The sometimes spontaneous—and, almost always provocative-- participation assignments in this class serve at least two purposes: first, they compel students to focus attention on a subject that they, previously, may not have thought about in much depth. Second, in conjunction with Wolf’s critical analyses, they move students from vague feelings about an issue or concept to working through those feelings toward more precise, critically informed thinking and reflection.

In general, Wolf's constant probing for students' thoughts, feelings, and opinions, via the participation assignments, set a critical tone in class that activated an inclination toward students’ critical thinking processes. The students, through the written participation assignments, presented the products of those critical thinking processes; they understood this as their opportunity to critically respond to Wolf without extended in-class dialogue. The effect, immediately, was to engage students in the subject matter at hand and, as significantly, enable them to connect their own experiences and knowledge about the concepts and issues to a critical evaluation of the theoretical constructs discussed in the lecture.

For example, the participation survey recounted above allowed an opportunity for Wolf to critique the process of nominalization that occurs in mediated representations of diverse cultures. As part of this participation assignment, she demonstrated for students a way to critique mediated discourses that tend to obscure or neglect aspects of Iraqi culture and that, in the process, locate Iraqis as “deviant” from USAmerican socio-cultural standards. This demonstration, in conjunction with students' participation in the survey, served to highlight how particular mediated representations become embedded in the knowledge constructs most viewers take for granted. The students' inability to name important aspects of Iraqi culture reflects the
process of the knowledge construction of USAmerican media and their own lack of critical engagement with that construction and the assumptions therein. Wolf's lecture session afterwards challenges students to re-examine those assumptions that underlie the processes of how they come to understand mediated cultural representations.

Finally, critical rhetors also recognize that absence is as important as presence in constructing knowledge, particularly as it relates to understanding and interpreting mediated discourse. The power to discursively erase the existence, in mediated representations, of different ethnicities, genders, classes, and sexual orientations, is derived precisely from its absence in relation to what is present. Wolf's critique of mediated body images (described in the previous section) also included an account of what is left out of those images and the effects of that discursive erasure. In the context of the participation assignment in this section (along with that in the previous section), the critique served to help her students develop a more sophisticated, critical level of awareness--critical consciousness--when viewing mediated images of cultures constructed as deviant from USAmerican norms. At the same time, Wolf's performance of that critique allowed for the development of critical consciousness without the benefit of student-centered dialogue.

Some Implications and Directions

In this study, several aspects of negotiating critical engagement with a large number of students without prioritizing student-centered dialogue were explored. This exploration suggests several strategies that can help facilitate critical consciousness development on the part of a large number of students (and, perhaps, smaller student populations, as well). Wolf's intentional and risky stimulation of her students through explicit cultural critiques and controversial media choices, open and honest self-disclosure, and spontaneous, provocative participation assignments all promoted critical engagement in diverse and particularized ways in her classroom. Likewise, students' understanding of, and responses to, her intentions and approach indicates that the performance of critical rhetoric, on the part of educators, offers an alternative to privileging student dialogue while maintaining the ability to nurture students' critical consciousness development. Moreover, this case studies demonstrates that a critical approach to pedagogy can resist mainstream educational psychology’s assumptions without privileging one model of critical pedagogy. Rather, critical approaches to pedagogical theory and practice are diverse. Thus, critical educational practices, variously interpreted, can take the form of a range of schools of thought: post-formal, democratic, Socratic, feminist, hermeneutical, Marxist, neo-liberal, and/or post-structuralist. Critical pedagogical theory and practice understood from this perspective, then, is far from a homogenous approach. This case study, in the context of a classroom of over 100 students, provides some promising results in support of this view.

First, the size of this student population uniquely contributed to communicative dynamics in some surprisingly effective ways. The distinctive setting with its fixed seating and large number of students—a setting traditionally considered problematic in terms of critically engaging students—seemed to actually promote the possibility that Wolf's risky, dissonant, sometimes confrontation style would be critically effective. With respect to cultural critique and controversial media, the large room and number of students may have helped to dissipate uncomfortable feelings that, in a smaller classroom, would be more problematic. The forceful
approach may be more effective when the environment is not so intimate and the students are allowed to silently explore their thoughts and feelings around the concepts and issues without being compelled to share, publicly, those thoughts and feelings.

Second, with respect to self-disclosure, the personal nature of Wolf’s narratives takes on a public performance character that helps alleviate the potential that students will feel personally confronted. In this setting, students were able to disassociate themselves from the personal implications of self-disclosure for Wolf while, at the same time, witnessing a personal narrative in which they felt safe to engage, evaluate, and on which they could privately reflect. In a smaller classroom, the personal-academic boundary may be too blurred for comfort if the students feel too personally confronted by an educator’s personal disclosures. In this context, however, that boundary remained in place while still offering an affective bridge to critical reflection.

Finally, with respect to participation assignments, when the survey questions were consistently intended to point out a particular lack of awareness or information on the part of students and that insisted student reconceive their own cognitive frameworks, the larger classroom provided a sense of anonymity thereby fostering a sense of safety within an otherwise provoking environment. In a smaller classroom, this forceful a tactic could prompt students to feel they have an individual responsibility to come up with the “right” answer/opinion/feeling or face public exposure and embarrassment if they offer what might perceived as the “wrong” answer. In this context, however, students could recognize and respond to the challenge without being put publicly on the spot to respond to it.

The analysis offered in this chapter begins construction of only a first layer of understanding of one unique and powerful educator’s rhetorical strategies for critically engaging a large number of students without the benefit of student-centered dialogue. And, without question, Dr. Wolf’s pedagogical strategies are risky and the approach she takes may not be suitable for some educators. Diverse student populations, various classroom limitations, and institutional constraints are but a few of the contingencies with which individual educators must contend when choosing pedagogical strategies, risky or not. Moreover, utilizing intentionally provocative media, personal self-disclosure, and seemingly confrontational participation assignments requires sober consideration of possible student responses to such stimulation. Certainly, Wolf’s 25 years of experience with this approach assists her in facilitating critical engagement with her students and, by her own account, having “lots of confidence” and “knowing what you’re doing” are crucial in fostering the kinds of positive experiences she experiences with students. Clearly, the possibility that students may initially respond negatively can be uncomfortable for others with less experience or, perhaps, less of a tolerance for risk, vulnerability, and uncertainty. However, every teacher takes risks when critically engaging students and, explicit or not, those risks make each one of us vulnerable and render the “outcome” of our pedagogical strategies uncertain. It is within the fertile liminal spaces of that uncertainty that those teachers and students who are willing to risk can create the lush conditions for the possibility of transformation.

Comparison studies are needed, of course, in other settings and with other educators and students. Gradually, the findings could be pulled together and further conceptions and strategies could be added to the tentative categories discussed in this study. Moreover, for educators who
approach pedagogy critically, this study offers a starting place for theorizing how it is possible to resist mainstream educational psychology’s objectivist and abstractive tendencies and retain critical aspects of their teaching, even in the most challenging institutional settings. The theory of critical rhetoric suggests a framework from which to begin that theorizing work in order to more fully understand how to practically develop students' critical consciousness in diverse classroom contexts that seemingly preclude critical approaches to teaching.

References

