Learning to Teach and Critical Pedagogy:
Struggling with a “Do as I Say, Not as I Do” Pedagogy

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This article is a critical reflection in which I address epistemological and institutional collisions in beliefs and praxis that I’ve experienced as an instructor of English methods courses in Michigan State University’s secondary teacher preparation program. In teaching seminars and laboratories in English methods and pedagogy, I attempt to employ my understandings of—and investments in—a critically oriented pedagogy in preparing teacher candidates for work as English teachers in today’s complex schools and classrooms. In so doing, I subscribe to Morrell’s (2005) tenets of a critical English education, which “realize literacy as tied to power relations in society, and recognize literacy educators as political agents capable of developing skills which enable academic transformation and social change” (p. 313). Morrell’s argument, to be sure, elucidates teaching as a political act embedded in structures of power. In this critical reflection, I examine several ways by which relations of power play out as I attempt to employ a critical pedagogy in the context of the secondary English education program in which I teach.

In analyzing the epistemological and institutional collisions and tensions in beliefs and praxis I experience in my role as a teacher educator, I address the following questions: What are some of the institutional structures and beliefs that collide with my efforts to employ a critically oriented pedagogy in my English methods course? How does my practice, despite my critical leanings, impede my efforts to actualize a critical pedagogy? In what follows, I provide insights into the power relations, struggles, and realizations that emerge from a close analysis of these questions. In so doing, I do not provide a panacea for all that ails critical English educators; rather, I...
hope to extend the conversation about what it means to become a thoughtful critical teacher educator as one learns to teach.

Additionally, this article serves as a venue through which I encourage English teacher educators to address the ways by which institutional—and personal—constraints intersect with and impede a critical approach to pedagogy. To somewhat mimic Cochran-Smith (1995a), until teacher educators begin to more deeply examine the ways by which epistemological and institutional collisions embedded in teacher education affect our beliefs and practice, they are less likely to succeed in teaching students to reflect on and alter their own beliefs and practices in ways that are substantive and meaningful.

In attending to my questions and analyses, I begin with a description of the senior year secondary English methods course and broader teacher education program as the sites in which I struggle with various institutional and epistemological collisions. I then provide an overview and justification for a critical pedagogy in and of English teacher education by discussing the theoretical frameworks to which I espouse, citing critical pedagogy’s foundational links to social justice and, subsequently, social justice as a lens through which to explore teacher quality.

The crux of this article, however, consists of two vignettes that represent seemingly disparate corners of my teaching experience and are braided within the frame of the broader sections I outline above. The vignettes, on the surface, appear to be removed from each other: The first explicitly attends to my handling of a curricular issue, while the latter attends to the ways by which I negotiate the beliefs several preservice teachers have of students in multicultural schools. In the latter vignette, as well as the implications section, I more explicitly attend to the issues of race (mine as well as my students) that emerge in a predominantly white teacher education cohort; while this discussion is not about race, per se, I incorporate this issue to better interrogate my conceptualizations of students’ whiteness, particularly around issues of difference. Additionally, although I discuss the same senior year methods course in both vignettes, the experiences I examine below occur across two different semesters (separated by one year) with two different groups of students. While the vignettes may seem disparate at the surface level, they share a common denominator in that they bring into sharp relief the epistemological and institutional collisions in beliefs and praxis that I experience in attempting a critically oriented pedagogy.

I conclude this article by arguing that the conversation in English education must shift toward the inevitable balancing act between doing what we
feel is right, as teacher educators, and the institutional structures that may compel us to behave in ways that feel wrong, hypocritical, or even dishonorable. In this section, I defer to extant research for preliminary insights into where we might, as critical teacher educators and researchers, (re)consider the source of our struggles and perceived failures. In this, I offer brief theoretical and practical suggestions that simultaneously attend to programmatic and professional expectations for teaching standards-based content. As well, I highlight nascent research that argues for a more productive view of the white teachers we prepare for service in multicultural English classrooms.

**Course Context**

In this article I critically reflect on my teaching in a required, senior year English methods course for those on track to becoming certified to teach English language arts in secondary schools. Of the more than 40 students across two sections of this course, all but one are white; additionally, for the most part, all of the students enrolled in my courses have experienced upbringings as middle-class youth in suburban enclaves. While it would be inaccurate—even incompetent—to suggest that all teacher candidates subscribe to dominant worldviews and live lives of privilege, the demographics of those who inform my analyses and interrogate my practices are similar to those widely reported in the literature on teacher preparation for multicultural and diverse contexts (Banks et al., 2005; Sleeter, 2001). Additionally, the majority of teacher educators are also white and middle class (Sleeter, 2001), an issue receiving sustained attention in literature. I share these racial and social characteristics with my students.

Furthermore, many of the preservice teachers I discuss in the following vignettes experience unfamiliar contexts of schooling, and are learning to teach in classrooms with racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse student populations.

Finally, while issues in teacher preparation for multiculturalism and diversity have received sustained attention in education research, there are sparse analyses of the beliefs and praxis of those who work to prepare preservice teachers for meaningful service in an increasingly diverse and complex education system. In what follows, I attempt to critically examine the typically unexamined: contradictions and collisions in epistemological and institutional beliefs and practice, and its implications for the students I face, my practice, and teacher educators who espouse course goals for instilling a critical pedagogy.
Critical Pedagogy: An Overview and Justification

The literature on critical theories of education and critical pedagogy are broad and expanding. While a number of scholars have informed my approach to criticality, I largely subscribe to McLaren’s (2000) viewpoint that “[c]ritical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (p. 345).

I also borrow from Shor’s (2008) definition of critical literacy to better explicate my positionality as a teacher educator of the English language arts. Shor argues for the transformative possibilities of critical literacy, a language that “challenges the status quo . . . for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (p. 282). For Shor, teaching is social and political and should strive for true democracy, empowerment for students and their teachers, as well as transformation and possibility. Taken together, the broader tenets of critical pedagogy, as well as those of critical literacy, are embedded in goals for social justice.

Criticality, though, as I describe throughout this article using my experiences learning to teach in teacher education courses, is not a goal easily obtained as a teacher educator; nor is it a framework readily embraced by teacher candidates with deeply engrained assumptions about what teaching, learning, students, schools, and classrooms are and should be. Complicating this issue is the multidimensional nature of the term critical and the risk of its superficial application to education. To offer just one such example discussed in extant literature, it is not sufficient to employ a “Heroes and Holidays” (Nieto, 1999) rendering of multicultural curriculum, critiqued as critical pedagogy’s “multicultural equivalent” (McLaren, 2000, p. 346). That is, implementing surface-level lessons and activities around historical landmarks and figures, whatever a teacher’s intentions, bears the same tenuous, even mythological relationship to enacting a critical pedagogy as standardized tests do to determining academic achievement.

To be critical in theory, then, is not necessarily to be critical in praxis. One such difficulty, as I express above, exists in the potential to execute a curriculum that further marginalizes particular populations by isolating them in and from the texts that purport to represent and celebrate their lives and experiences, and/or implementing a superficial curriculum of feel-good fluff parading as critical education (McLaren, 2000). These realities bring into sharp relief the need to better understand the collisions between critical pedagogy and the structures and beliefs that impede goals for criticality, despite what we believe are our best efforts.
Why Critical Pedagogy?

If we are to give credence to the relationship between critical theory—from which (re)conceptualizations of pedagogy emerged—and social justice (Ndmande, 2010), perhaps the most compelling rationale for a critical theory in and of teacher education exists in scholarship that argues for social justice as a lens through which to explore teacher quality. For example, Shakman et al. (2007) endeavor to broaden politically co-opted, stringent definitions of teacher quality that espouse acquiring a standardized set of pedagogical skills and content knowledge. Instead, as they argue, if teacher quality is reframed and “reclaimed” as an issue of social justice, “[t]his means grounding the notion of teacher quality on the premise that teaching is an intellectual, cultural, and contextually local activity with the goal of enhancing pupils’ learning and life chances rather than simply preparing the future workforce” (p. 48; italics added).

Thus, in comparing the broader, general goals of teaching for social justice with those of a critical pedagogy I outline above, the relationship between the two agendas is clear. A critical pedagogy is perhaps most productively framed as an issue of teacher quality when teacher educators encounter barriers and resistance in the form of students, colleagues, and the broader institution. When grounded in this way, a critical pedagogy in and of teacher education holds potential to become a generative form of action (Howard, 1999).

I am aware that education professionals have vastly different approaches to and perspectives of their practice; ultimately, those of us espousing a critical pedagogy align ourselves with its tenets because we are not accepting of the status quo in schools. Instead, we believe that it is imperative, as teacher educators, to instill an ethos of interrogation in and for those learning to teach: questioning the structures in and around which we function, as well as a critical interrogation of our own positionalities and praxis. In what follows, I attempt to navigate several such questions as they emerge in my teacher education English methods courses.

I’ve internalized my role as going far beyond providing strategies and methods that “work” in the secondary English classroom. Instead, I theorize my role as a teacher educator as one that helps students to question the impact of their “strategies,” and the ways by which English teachers are complicit in what our curricular decisions overtly offer, covertly offer, and decide not to offer altogether. As teacher educators, challenging our assumptions about what teaching English is and should be requires learn-
ing to theorize our positions and roles—and those of our students—in the context of a broader, value-based system, and is a process that cannot be accomplished in isolation from its broader context. In other words, theory and practice are not dichotomous, isolated exercises; rather, “it is theory that permits students, teachers, and other educators to see what they are seeing” (Giroux, 1988, p. 47).

Learning to theorize, then, is an integral component of teacher education, such that it holds the potential to “[achieve] congruence between our message and method” (Adams, 2010, p. 60). In revisiting the connections between critical pedagogy and social justice, theorizing one’s practice may allow us to move beyond simple acknowledgment of dominance and inequities. It may push a “business as usual” (Sleeter, 2001) model of teacher education toward a critical pedagogy of education and level of awareness and action required for social justice. The benefits are both theoretical and practical: To this end, “Acts of acknowledgement, in themselves, can serve a strong educative and transformative function” (Howard, 1999, p. 78). Deconstructing our dominance and place of privilege as white teachers and teacher educators allows us to better realize that the day-to-day decisions we make for and about our practices and curriculum have real implications for students, equity, and social justice (Howard, 1999).

In other words, theorizing one’s practice, when converted to a form of action, potentially yields transformative outcomes for teacher educators and those they are preparing for service in today’s schools. Here again, if we are to give credence—as I do—to the relationships between a critical pedagogy and goals for social justice, then learning to theorize, as a component of critical pedagogy, moves teacher education in a necessary direction. As Vinz (2008) argues,

> Part of preparing teachers is to help them learn to negotiate ways to disrupt, critique, and challenge accepted practices and beliefs rather than simply trying to survive the school day or assuming that curriculum will engage students in social justice understandings and practices. (p. xxii)

Teaching prospective teachers how to “survive the school day,” as the above quote suggests, is theoretically and pedagogically insufficient. So too is reinforcing the assumption that curriculum alone will accomplish the important work required in today’s schools. Perhaps, then, the children for whom we are all ultimately responsible are the most important beneficiaries of pedagogical practices that emerge from a deep, critical theorization of our positions, roles, decisions, and practices in the context of a broader, value-based system laden with educational inequities.
When a Critical Theory of Teacher Education Collides with Practice

In the following vignette I examine my role and complicity in complying with and perpetuating a grades-focused, teacher preparation culture of “business as usual” (Sleeter, 2001), despite an entire semester geared toward critical engagement (or so I thought). Our final course assessment came toward the end of a term during which I encourage students to rethink the role of assessment and grades in the English classroom. Students engaged discussion around the nature of assessment to which they were exposed as grade school students, the types of assessment they envision for their future classrooms and students, and the student populations their (preliminary) visions for assessment benefit and exclude. They gave these issues careful and sustained attention; I gave them opportunities to envision schemes for more democratic modes of assessment, which I believed they might apply to their final assessment in my course.

Vignette #1: “I’m trying to get a better idea of what you’re looking for.”

“It seems that when we have questions you can’t answer them because you’re not the one who created the assignment and do not really know how to answer us.” These are the paraphrased words of an astute teacher candidate who, in tears, expresses her concern to me during a review of our final assessment. While I had not created the assignment in its entirety, I did attempt to tailor it toward “critical” purposes. For the most part, though, it was a regurgitation of assessments sanctioned in previous years, decided on by professors and instructors of students unknown to me. Moreover, and because students and their individual and collective needs vary from year to year, it is precisely the kind of tactic I have (perhaps hypocritically) asked my teacher candidates to avoid in their practices, to the extent possible.

Ultimately, the vast majority of the students in this class did not seem to know what I “wanted” from them in this assessment, a yearlong conceptual unit plan evidencing differentiation for their diverse students and reflecting some degree of critical engagement with text. The objective for the assignment is stated in the course syllabus as follows:

The culminating work of the semester will be to individually delve into and design certain aspects of a yearlong conceptual unit. During this unit, you will include reflective writing that “shows your work” and displays your understanding of instructional design for a variety of students, backward design, engaging students, incorporating dialogic classroom discourse, effective assessment, and writing instruction.
While focused on the more traditional aspects of methods coursework (understandings of instructional design in a general sense), I would be remiss, perhaps even negligent, if I did not acknowledge that teacher candidates must learn to engage these elements of instructional design. After all, the schools in which they will eventually work expect that teachers have a sound understanding of instructional design. Our own programmatic standards see to it that we, as course instructors and professors, adhere to such expectations. I, too, consider it a necessary focus of my curriculum.

While traditional in nature, I envisioned this assignment to engage the concepts we explored as a group throughout the semester. I imagined my students’ engagement to be in the form of a carefully constructed thematic unit (perhaps on racial, social class, or gender issues related to English language arts), or a smaller sequence of (in)formal assessments such as writing prompts that go beyond superficial journaling and freewriting, prompts that instead address real text-to-world issues. Or perhaps they would reconstruct their district-sanctioned curriculum so as to better attend to issues of diversity, context, politics, and the realization of schools and classrooms as sites of struggle and possibility (Giroux, 1988). Thus, after a semester-long engagement with the works of Freire, Giroux, Apple, Hillocks, Smagorinsky, and others for theoretical ideas and practical application for teachers broadly and English teachers specifically, I had hoped that the final assessment—despite not being of my own design—would nicely encapsulate their evolving criticality, to be used with their future students.

A handful of students, frustrated, responded to their final assessment review in such a way that suggested a sort of pedagogical malfeasance and hypocrisy on my part for promulgating a philosophy with which I was not epistemologically aligned. Other students laughed it off (I respect their capacity to do so), reminding me that they’ve never received under a grade of a 4.0 in any academic endeavor at any point in time, and that now was not the time to introduce them to such a world of academic mediocrity—and this is presumably despite the work/thinking they do or do not do. After all, many students apply for academic scholarships and entry into advanced study. Mediocre grade point averages make these efforts more challenging—and students less competitive—than they might otherwise be. The realities of a grades-focused, competitive culture of schooling make challenging traditional notions of grades and assessment exceedingly difficult. The institutional structures—and realities—within which I encourage students to challenge such a culture speak to one way by which these structures and my epistemologies seem to collide, and seemingly at the expense of my credibility as an instructor committed to a critically oriented pedagogy.
This particular vignette reveals several ways by which my attempted critical theory of education collides not only with institutional expectations for what a secondary methods course should offer, but also my practice. To begin with, there are clear shades of irony: It is more than a little ironic that I assigned a final, heavily weighted assessment in my English methods course to “rethink” the role of assessment and grades. There is irony in the expectation that perhaps the work that emerges from this assessment might be used with theoretical students in theoretical classrooms, and again, is precisely the kind of tactic I have repeatedly asked the teacher candidates enrolled in my course to avoid. All of this is tied to programmatic expectations for administering an assignment preapproved by the broader teacher preparation program, with pre-established goals for students in contexts with which I am not likely to have direct involvement.

Furthermore, while I encourage students to question and rethink grades-focused cultures of schooling, and with that, traditional notions of assessment, I do nothing to question the same kinds of structures in which I practice. My goals collide with institutional beliefs in which finals are an expected feature of higher education, mandated and preapproved by those in authority. Furthermore, expectations for good grades are instantiated and reified by frameworks for scholarship competitions, advanced study, and in this, the students’ expectations that their grades will help them to remain competitive. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the students in my course appear to resort to familiar ways of negotiating assignments, evidenced in repeated questions about what I wanted from them, as well as reminders of the grades they need and expect for their own competitive purposes. In this, the purpose and utility of the assignment (however initially problematic) appears lost.

As a function of not questioning the institutional structures in which I teach, I too resort to the familiar narrative of expectations for supporting a preplanned curriculum for theoretical students unknown to any of us. In this, my epistemologies collide with my pedagogical practices. Said differently, I expected my students to challenge and prevail in a structure I, as their instructor, did nothing to change or interrogate on their behalf. I suspect that one of the unintended pedagogical messages taken away from my approach might have been interpreted as follows: “Do as I say, not as I do.” In other words, they, as vulnerable students of teacher education, are to challenge normative aspects of a system when I was not even willing to
design—or co-construct—their assessments based on what I’ve come to know of their strengths, interests, and needs. Therefore, not only was I unsuccessful at practicing what I preached, but the status quo prevailed, evidenced in the reactions to our final assessment review.

These collisions and tensions bring into sharp focus my erroneous expectations for a level of gumption that I did not employ in my own practice. After the tears, jokes, nervous questions, and frustrations that defined our assessment review on that day, I left the classroom in complete astonishment, and not because I failed to understand; to the contrary, I understood quite clearly, and somehow managed to let it come to this, despite my purported critical leanings and what I really believed was my wholehearted effort to instill in my classroom a culture of questioning, rather than a culture of asking questions; a culture in which purportedly democratic systems are called into question. I had hope that our engagements with these issues would shed light on the sad sort of irony in which some of the nation’s most dilapidated, neediest, and seemingly forgotten public schools are named after prominent civil rights leaders. Instead, I foregrounded the ironies and contradictions embedded in my epistemologies and practices, and the institutional barriers within which they functioned.

While I purport to encourage my students to become literate in a broader, political, civic, and social sense, and to take into account how their beliefs and knowledge shape their practices, it occurred to me—upon some intensely difficult reflection—that the assignment featured in this vignette, in so much as it was of the recycled, tried-and-true variety, was hypocritically disconnected from ideas of challenge, interrogation, and possibility that I had hoped to instill throughout the semester. This is not to say that there is not value in the assessments we ask of the students, by way of planning, management, and engagement; again, they are aligned with most school district expectations that novice teachers will have had some experience with lesson planning for various types of English instruction. More to the point, however, is that the students I faced that semester did not have any say in the construction of the learning and experiences thrust upon them by me, their course instructor, and a larger program in which they are virtually unknown until the first day of class. I silently—and perhaps erroneously—accepted these ironies and contradictions as the reality to which I must succumb, as a novice course instructor.

The above vignette sheds light on several collisions between my epistemologies and that of institutional expectations, as well as collisions between my pedagogy and practice. As a function of my having resorted to old, familiar institutional narratives of grading, assessment, and pedagogy,
it should not come as a surprise that my students did the same. I suspect that the implicit messages embedded in my pedagogy and practice did little to help the students enrolled in this course to navigate and interrogate the epistemological and institutional collisions they will come to experience as they learn to teach. In fact, I believe it is likely that, when the time comes, they will continue to resort to familiar, comfortable, dominant narratives, having not learned—at least in my course—how to problematize and negotiate such narratives for the purposes of recognizing curriculum and assessment as a product of politics and deeply embedded in structures of power.

When a Critical Theory of Teacher Education Collides with Dominant Worldviews

The racial and cultural disparities between the teaching force and the students they teach is well-documented in the literature on public education (Banks et al., 2005). Given the changes in American public schools and society in general, teacher educators cannot any longer justify a business as usual model of teaching and learning. Sleeter’s (2007) work in preparing teachers for diversity brings into sharp focus the need to prepare prospective teachers for work in increasingly multicultural and underserved schools. According to Sleeter, teacher candidates “bring to teacher education very little cross-cultural knowledge and experience” (p. 172). These realities underscore the necessity of teacher educators to espouse pedagogies that allow for opportunities to critically reflect on and interrogate teachers' beliefs and practices, as well as the institutional beliefs and structures within which they are perpetuated. As Morrell (2005) reminds us, “teachers and teacher educators need to be advocates for and models of social justice and equity by functioning as change agents in classrooms, schools, and communities” (p. 553).

In fast forwarding to the subsequent academic year, I focus less on my struggles with the teacher preparation curriculum and assessment, and attend more closely to my interactions with students around difficult questions comprising race, culture, and assumptions about “certain” students’ capacities for academic success. In this vignette, I offer a retelling of snippets of classroom discourse in which I am less troubled by notions that I must adhere to institutional expectations for what my course offers, is, and should look like; as a more experienced instructor, I have become somewhat more courageous in assuming a transparent epistemological stance, and am more transparent in my efforts to “indict the shortcomings and failures inherent in traditional views of schooling” (Giroux, 1988, p. 3), thereby making
room for sustained discussion in which I encourage students to interrogate their conceptions of the students they face: conceptions that I presume are based on racial—and other forms—of difference. While I do not quote from any student directly, the following vignette offers a fictionalized account of classroom discourse which is symbolic of the kinds of struggles I’ve experienced as I’ve worked to get students to challenge their assumptions about literacy and learning.

Vignette #2: “I’m sorry, but week after week I am more and more convinced that these kids don’t care.”

Perhaps as a consequence of the students’ perceived lack of experience with populations and contexts that differ from their own, many of our weekly field debriefings consist of sentiments such as “it saddens me that students do not want to learn,” “these kids do not care,” “I do not know how they’ve gotten this far,” or some variation of these. For many of the students I teach—as with many preservice teachers who fit their mold—there is a right way and wrong way of being a student. My conception is that their interests seem largely focused on how best to “deal with” the “problems” caused by populations who “do not care” while tending to the needs of those students who evidence normative engagement with learning and achievement.1 For many, this means learning about methods, strategies, and acquiring the coveted bag of tricks that will get them through the school day with a minimal degree of grief and student resistance. Students’ opinions of the efficacy of teacher education and educators, in my interpretation, often hinge on the extent to which their professors, instructors, and teacher preparation program provide concrete access to the strategies that will guarantee universal engagement.

The quotes with which I begin this section—and the dialogue which follows—are not based on actual classroom data. Instead, they are based on my retelling of interactions I’ve had with numerous students over time. In what follows, I profile “John,” although John is not an actual person. He, and our interactions, form a fictional narrative which is symbolic of my experiences as an English teacher educator. For me, my interactions with John are as real as they are a fictional account used for the purposes of telling the following theoretical narrative:

For John, one particularly vocal student enrolled in my course, acquiring an imagined bag of tricks—or perhaps some sort of magic curriculum that transcends the complexities of diversity and multiculturalism—is perhaps the antidote to teaching the diverse student populations comprising his school placement. The following interaction is emblematic of a fairly common occurrence in my secondary English methods course:
“I’m sorry, but week after week I am more and more convinced that these kids don’t care.”

John slouches in his seat during our weekly Tales from the Field portion of my course, a component of which addresses issues related to learning to teach as students confront them in the field. John does not speak with any discernible degree of anger. Instead, he seems to emit a combination of dejection and disappointment with what he has constructed as “the truth”: about his placement in a culturally diverse and high-needs school; about the students he faces in his placement; perhaps even about what it means to learn to teach. I am somewhat surprised by John’s statement, as only several weeks before, he gave a touching talk to our class about how one of his biggest inspirations for becoming a teacher was a refugee student with whom he worked closely just the year before. During that time, John established a relationship with this student, assisted him with English language development and homework, and was inspired by this young man’s life of struggle, adaptation to a new language and culture, and his interminable resilience. John clearly admired this student. These valuable experiences, though, only seemed overshadowed by the obvious tensions embedded in what John believed to be the truth about what he was seeing in his classroom.

When I—carefully, yet so very intentionally—ask John to explain how he knows that his students do not care, he responds without hesitation: “They could care less about their DOLs. Oh, and I saw the grade book and everyone has either a ‘D’ or an ‘F.’ What am I supposed to think about that?” After some additional—and careful, deliberate—prodding, John describes the nature of the daily oral language (DOL) assignment: “They’re supposed to write sentences for the words listed on the board. Sometimes the teacher reviews [the assignment], sometimes she doesn’t. But they’re supposed to do it and they don’t.” Moreover, John admits to only having peeked at the grade book. It is no surprise that, given his visitor status in his mentor teacher’s classroom, he is not knowledgeable about the nature of the assessments used to inform the grade book; the grade book, though, along with his brief observation of a “Bell Work” assignment (that being the DOL), is the basis upon which his perceptions of students he hardly knows is informed.

As an English teacher educator, I have yet to encounter a DOL in practice that does little more than ask students to engage in acontextual, mindless activities involving abstract grammar, vocabulary, and syntactical regurgitation. I am not apologetic in my stance that there are more meaningful and relevant ways by which to engage students in genuine opportunities for learning. This, though, is a difficult line to walk, given the reality that we at the university must not undermine that which is taking place in schools,
for programmatic and deeply political reasons. Admittedly, I find that this is a line I often walk at the expense of student learning.

The above interaction underscores the need for ongoing conversations in the teacher education classroom around the following questions: To what extent are their students being evaluated on their engagement with busywork disguised as assessment? In what ways are the assessments representative of genuine opportunities for learning? To what extent have the students John observed checked out of a curriculum they decided was irrelevant to their talents and worlds and thus not worth their effort? In what ways are the practices to which they are exposed revealing a hidden curriculum of negotiation, obedience, and control, sans substantive opportunities for critical and relevant engagement with text? These questions (of many) bring into sharp focus the need for teacher educators to provide sustained opportunities for reflection upon the beliefs and assumptions about students, as well as how they are positioned within normative conceptions of curriculum, learning, and achievement.

“Well, you might want to consider the very real and likely possibility that your students do care, and deeply,” I respond, with caution. “They just might not care about what you want them to care about.” While I notice nods of approval among a few students, most, including John, remain unresponsive to—perhaps even unreceptive to and disengaged from—what I postulate is, in their minds, a ghastly, inconceivable, even inexcusable counterargument offered by a teacher educator who should know by now that “certain students” either cannot learn or do not care to learn. I offer this interpretation cautiously, though, as I do not truly know whether their silence equates disengagement, lack of receptivity, or neither. I am hopeful, though, that their silence reflects discomfort: with ideas about learning to teach that they may not have encountered or considered before.

This particular vignette attends to a different kind of collision: between what I presume to be students’ worldviews and placement experiences and the perspectives and commitments I espouse in the context of their teacher preparation course. There is also yet another possibility: Given my position as a white, middle-class female, also skilled in “doing school,” I often wonder whether students take seriously the act of questioning their dominant beliefs and unearned privilege when the one encouraging them to engage in this critical practice looks and is just like them. This reality begs several questions: As a function of our privilege, which questions, ideas, conversations, or issues do I fail to engage with students? Which opportunities for critical reflection lay dormant as a function of my own fear and discomfort with difficult conversations that do not bring us, as a class, any closer to navigating racial,
sociocultural, and other forms of diversity in schools? In this vignette I do not intend to blame students for their worldviews or inability to interrogate the practices and perspectives that surround them (and that I sometimes inadvertently perpetuate in practice). Instead, this vignette speaks to the theorizing with which critical teacher educators must engage to provide sustained opportunities for students to deconstruct their beliefs and practices in ways that are substantive, meaningful, and sustainable. I further theorize and critique my conceptions of students’ beliefs below, by arguing for a more productive view of the white teacher candidates in our care.

The above vignettes, while detailing different aspects of my practice, share a common denominator in that they bring into sharp focus the epistemological and institutional collisions in beliefs and praxis that I experience in attempting a critically oriented pedagogy. They are reminiscent of McLaren’s (2000) warning that criticality in theory does not equate criticality in practice. In the first vignette, my own failure to question the structures in which I practice results in resorting to familiar institutional narratives of grading, assessment, and pedagogy, despite my intentions.

The second vignette foregrounds the work teacher educators must do in navigating epistemological and institutional collisions between students’ worldviews and placement experiences with the perspectives their teacher educators espouse. It sheds light on issues of race, privilege, and positionality, and the need to teach those learning to teach to critically reflect on all of these. As I attempt to demonstrate above, I suspect that the implicit messages embedded in my pedagogy and practice—and the institutional structures in which they are embedded—did little to help the students navigate and interrogate the epistemological and institutional collisions they will come to experience as they learn to teach.

Implications and Conclusion

Those learning to teach in English classrooms must understand the ways by which they position their students in and around curriculum, as well as the ways by which they perpetuate relations of power in classrooms and schools. Teachers of English assign and grade papers; they implement grammar lessons employing Standard English; they teach lessons using canonized literature; they are in a position to define acceptable notions of language and text and can opt to eschew engagement with nonstandard languages and texts. Even if they strive/desire to implement critically oriented pedagogies, they may become members of school communities that sanction and shun curricular materials and ideas about teaching and learning, as well as the
capacities of particular students, at the whims and behest of those in power.

Furthermore, a teacher’s propensity to question, interrogate, and support students may depend on other institutional structures, such their tenure status, or it may depend on the nature of the broader discourse around accountability and assessment infiltrating schools at the time of their employment. It may depend on their school’s record of government-sanctioned benchmarks for Annual Yearly Progress, or even how open-minded their superiors are, regardless of their school’s standing and the factors influencing such. Indeed it is a powerful position to hold, as their epistemologies, pedagogies, and practices can either serve to divide students into predetermined tracks, or they can prepare students equitably for life’s chances while recognizing that some students naturally have more advantages than others by virtue of race, class, culture, and other factors. These realities are precisely where the work of teacher educators is brought into sharp focus.

As Boyd et al. (2006) argue, “the first step toward creating equitable literacy classrooms—and to leave no student behind—is to acknowledge that English teachers and teacher educators are complicit in the reproduction of racial and socioeconomic inequality all across U.S. schools” (p. 351; italics added).

I do not claim to offer a panacea for balancing and navigating the difficulties embedded in a critical pedagogy and goals for social justice, for this issue will vary between contexts and educators. However, the conversation in English education must shift toward the inevitable balancing act between doing what we feel is right, as teacher educators, and the institutional structures that may compel us to behave in ways that feel wrong, hypocritical, or even dishonorable. Moving forward, I am inspired to defer to extant research for preliminary insights into where we might, as critical teacher educators, (re)consider the source of our struggles and perceived failures. I offer brief theoretical and practical suggestions below.

I am inspired by a chapter titled “A Story for Social Justice” (Hutchinson & Romano, 1998). In their chapter, the authors argue for “a more holistic model” (p. 255) of teaching for social justice, and discuss one teacher’s use of the storyline strategy with third-grade students after the teacher and students noticed a high degree of homelessness in a local community park. The students were, initially, responding insensitively and negatively to the misfortunes of others by taunting the homeless on their way to school. Using the storyline strategy, their teacher (Mr. Greg)—who was all too aware of the homeless-shaming occurring with his students and failed at previous attempts to address their behavior—directed his students to collaborate in telling and writing a story in which they create characters within the narrative of homelessness, while inventing and taking personal ownership of individual
characters. Their characters will eventually become homeless, at which point the lesson truly becomes personal and transformative. Using storyline, Mr. Greg carefully encourages critical thought about what homelessness means for the day-to-day life of their characters and reveals how several students’ initial reactions to the problem emerged from unexamined fear. Students gained invaluable experience in collaboration, “critical thinking and critical questioning” (p. 264), and problem-solving relative to social justice issues and their initial behaviors and fears with regard to homelessness.

Using this chapter as a model, I notice potential to negotiate a curricular space for teaching for social justice through the use of narrative and stories, while maintaining my professional obligations to the program in and for which I serve. As Beliveau, Olgilvie-Holzer, and Schmidt (2008) argue, “[S]torytelling can contribute both to the holistic objectives of reading, writing, listening, and speaking and to an actualization of social justice within a secondary English classroom culture” (p. 26). Thus, engaging future English teachers with narratives and stories can provide opportunities to explore social justice–related topics that simultaneously attend to programmatic and professional expectations for teaching standards-based content.

As we continue to find ways to perform—and report on—our work, I am compelled to reconsider my initial stance toward the aspiring teachers who inform my analyses. The teacher candidates with whom I work, as I describe above, are predominantly white and from middle-class backgrounds. My previous approaches to critical pedagogy with these students was, regretfully, painfully condemning (see Lowenstein, 2009, for a comprehensive discussion of the ways by which teacher education has positioned white teacher candidates as deficient in resources and experiences for learning about diversity). While I encourage students to interrogate their conceptions of the students they face, I do little to interrogate my own conceptions of the teacher candidates in my course; it is possible that I’ve homogenized my students as emerging from places of racial isolation and devoid of educative multicultural experiences by virtue of their whiteness. For these reasons, I now turn to a critique of whiteness in teacher education.

Moving forward, I am inspired by Lensmire (2010) in better interrogating my conceptualizations of students’ whiteness, particularly around issues having to do with difference. According to Lensmire, “Critical educators have begun to worry that the very way that we have imagined and conceptualized white people and their racial identities is contributing to our critical education failures with them” (p. 169). Lensmire’s work argues for a more nuanced treatment of white teachers and their conceptions of—and experiences with—diverse student populations, and describes white teach-
ers as emerging from inherently ambivalent selves as a function of “acts of violence by white authority against its own white community” (p. 160). Moreover, and as Lensmire argues, the perceived resistance to our pedagogical efforts “is not always a straightforward defense of white privilege” (p. 170). We, as critical teacher educators, might (re)consider the source of our perceived failures when it is possible that the acts of violence Lensmire describes extends to the predominantly white teacher education community, in which we essentialize white teachers’ stories as collectively embodying privilege and ignorance.

I am admittedly complicit in essentializing students’ whiteness and perceived lack of experience with diversity. To offer a brief, anecdotal example of the deleterious and counterproductive impact of my assumptions about my students’ histories (and, in particular, their whiteness), I recall discussing chapters from Hillocks’ (2007) *Narrative Writing: Learning a New Model for Teaching* with one particular cohort of teacher education students. In this research, Hillocks works with African American students to improve writing outcomes. He argues that “significant gains are achievable among students . . . for whom little in the way of achievement is the standard expectation” (p. 144). His work is thoughtful and inspiring and is exemplary of what is possible for historically disenfranchised students.

However, something went wrong in our discussion on that day, such that one student raised his hand to say, with mock contrition, “OK, Christina, I’m sorry that I’m white, but there isn’t anything I can do about that.” While I cannot recall the nuances of this exchange, I trust that my approach to my students left a great deal to be desired. Thus, when teacher educators construct their students as ignorant and inept in their whiteness, however unintended, we have the potential to harvest feelings of bitterness and guilt that may undermine intended goals of productive action toward meaningful change.

It is perhaps more productive, then, from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, to consider teachers’ stories in those important discussions about what it means to be early-career white teachers with ideas about teaching for social justice, rather than essentializing their whiteness as a collective experience replete with privilege and devoid of nuance and substance. As Nieto (1999) thoughtfully reminds us, “Just as the identities of people of color include more than simply being victims, the identities of whites are about more than being victimizers” (p. xiv). I do not wish to pretend that students do not bring assumptions about others—based on race, culture, class, and other elements—to their teacher education programs. Instead, I argue that if English teacher educators were to engage in their own
powerful brand of storyline around these issues, perhaps we would uncover powerful opportunities to accomplish our critical goals.

Finally, the balancing acts that might occur as one learns to teach critically do not have to be made more difficult by seemingly losing battles between self and other, that is, between one’s epistemologies and the institution, or epistemologies and practice. In the examples I provide above, there are feasible pedagogical practices and nascent research that have made important contributions well within institutional boundaries and expectations. In Mr. Greg’s case, students engage in literacy acts to deconstruct their treatment of—and fears about—homelessness. In the latter example, research is beginning to reveal how commonly held assumptions about the white teacher candidates who enter our classrooms are perhaps functioning to undermine our important work as critical educators. While more research is needed in both areas, these brief suggestions are well within our rights to internalize, negotiate, and ultimately put into practice.

The vignettes I provide above reveal ironies, contradictions, and collisions between epistemologies, institutional structures, and practice. Honoring stories and engaging with storylines might be a first step for those who desire to better understand how to navigate institutional barriers. They may provide optimal spaces within which to instill an ethos of questioning and interrogation, transformative acts that I believe must begin inward. As I have attempted to illustrate, it is not enough to recognize, as critical pedagogues, the problems in public education stemming from racism, standardization, narrow conceptions of teaching and learning, etc. A critically oriented practice, if this is the goal (and I believe it should be, lest we continue to ignore the harsh realities of schooling and the society in which—and for whom—it functions), must first begin with sustained critical reflection on how we, as teacher educators, situate ourselves as a part of the problems we purport to address. Perhaps, then, what was at one time a resulting a “Do as I say, not as I do” pedagogical dilemma becomes a “Do what needs to be done for all students” form of action.

Notes

1. I offer a necessary critique of my conceptions, as well as a critique of the ways by which teacher candidates are positioned in extant research, toward the conclusion of this article.

2. Please keep in mind that this chapter is not about critical literacy, per se. The students do, though, engage in and with narrative and storytelling, which is inherently tied to literacy development. Readers are invited to engage with the chapter for more nuanced detail in terms of the origins of storyline as a strategy, as well as the powerful dialogue and transformation that ensue in Mr. Greg’s classroom.
References


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