# Chapter 5
# Critical Pedagogy Across the Curriculum

## 5.1 Caveat

This may be the most ambitious chapter I have written in this entire book. As I wrote it and revised it I had to make sure I wasn't getting in over my head. Throughout the preceding chapters I explained how this is not meant as a "how-to" book, that such prescriptive dictates are against the grain of critical pedagogy. At the same time I thought back to my first year in the classroom, when I had discovered Freire and sought ways to implement critical pedagogy in the classroom. I think of my struggles with that task today. I know there are people reading this book who, based on the title alone, will look to it for such suggestions. And that is all I can provide. In the end the specific context of your classroom, your students, your subject, and your personality—what you're comfortable and not comfortable with—will help shape any critical pedagogy in your everyday classroom.

Here I'd like to look at a few of the major subject areas in American elementary and secondary schools as well as practices such as assigning homework and grades. I'll discuss where and how they get it wrong and I will offer examples of what a critical pedagogy might look like in these classrooms. Some of the examples are my own, but most are from others and I attribute them as such. Any failures or shortcomings in this chapter (or this book for that matter) are indicative of my lack of imagination, my lack of familiarity with the extant literature, my practice and resources. That said, my hope will be that you go from this chapter with more resources to explore, thinking of your own ways to implement a critical pedagogy in your classroom with your students.

## 5.2 Critical Pedagogy and Math

In my experience as both student and teacher there seems no other subject that perplexes those in schools the way math does. Those who *get* it *get it* while those who don't often view math as worse than any foreign language with none of the allure. I'd like to discuss a few ways where mathematics education goes wrong and then look at how teachers working in the critical pedagogy tradition can and have taught the subject.

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A major problem with math education in the everyday classroom is the manner in which math is approached. Instead of exploring the underlying ideas and patterns of mathematics, the subject is taught as a form of mere puzzle-solving. A student approaches a problem, figures out what kind of problem it is, decides what skill in her repertoire of math facts and formulas is applicable, applies such, and gets an answer. For example, a student reads a problem on a test about a light pole placed 10 feet from a wall on a street and if they recognize the puzzle they go "Ah, the Pythagorean Theorem" and plug in the numbers they have. Some students don't get past step one. They don't know what the problem is asking them to do. That was my problem with math in school. Day by day I'd do well in math class, but when I sat down for a test by myself and had to figure how to solve a problem, had to discern what it involved, I'd get stuck. My mind would draw a blank. It isn't that math *doesn't* involve solving problems and puzzles, it does, but there is much more to mathematics than this capacity which schools seem to dwell on.

Bob Peterson blames mathematics education in the United States for "number-numbness in students." Number-numbness is marked by "rote calculations, drill and practice ad nauseum, endless reams of worksheets, and a fetish for the 'right answer' " (Gutstein & Peterson, 2006: 10). The back-to-basics movement promotes a form of mathematics instruction that results in this number-numbness, with advocates decrying students' inability to memorize multiplication tables. Back-to-basics supporters often deride as "fuzzy mathematics" approaches that do not emphasize rote memorization of facts and skills. They paint a biased picture of "the new math," *any* new math, as one in which "children learn what they want to learn when they're ready to learn it" (Lewin, 2006a: A20). This criticism of mathematics instruction resembles criticisms of "whole language" instruction in reading as it is often the same people and organizations leveling these arguments.

The back-to-basics folks often look to Asia for inspiration, deriding American schoolchildren, teachers, and mathematics education in favor of the Japanese way or the "Singapore style" (*NY Times*, 2006). Their criticisms usually mask a conservative agenda, a regressive, domesticating ideology. Knowing your multiplication tables is a great thing, but that's what they make calculators for. While we should encourage students to have a grasp of things like the multiplication tables, we shouldn't penalize them for not. Calculators and similar tools are there so we can get beyond the basics and into the deeper stuff. Sometimes students don't master their basic math facts because they did not study and were not encouraged to do so at home. Other times organic reasons interfere with the rote memorization of facts. Whatever the cause, by the time a student reaches high school, shouldn't we stop beating him up and provide him with the tools so he can continue to pursue higher mathematics? Though I can add and subtract with facility I use a calculator to balance my checkbook so I can spend more time doing other things in life. I also regularly use my fingers when I count aloud or in my head and I am not ashamed to admit it.

Mathematics is a subject that is usually segregated in schools today. Students learn math in math classes. (Gutstein & Peterson, 2006:19-28) describes several of the undesirable messages this conveys. Students learn that math does not matter

unless you're concerned with success in math classes or becoming a mathematician or someone else who needs math for their work. Segregating math in math class results in math being divorced in student's minds from their social realities. Math becomes an abstract endeavor. It appears we don't use math in our everyday lives, that math isn't at play all around us at all times. And if students see math this way and can't use math in their daily lives that's one less cultural tool that can help them participate fully in their societies, one less tool that can help humanize them.

## 5.3 Mathematics Unbound

Math must be taught across the curriculum and connected to students' lives. For example, when I was teaching economics at the high school level I would introduce the topical theme of the minimum wage. I'd ask students if anyone knew what the federal minimum wage was. Usually nobody knew and we'd get guesses that were much higher than the real thing. The federal minimum wage at the time was $5.15 an hour, whereas the NY State minimum wage was $7.15 an hour. Students were surprised to learn that the federal minimum wage was lower than their state minimum and this led to discussions as to why this was so, discussions that branched off into the feasibility of the minimum wage itself, with me playing devil's advocate and presenting the libertarian and conservative views on why a minimum wage works to undermine the labor force and productivity.

With the knowledge that $5.15 an hour was the federal minimum wage, I asked students to figure out what they would make working a 40-hour week and a 52-week year at that amount. I asked for volunteers to think it out loud and show us their work on the board. When students objected that 52 weeks a year didn't account for vacation, this led to another informative tangential conversation about vacation practices in the American private and public sector versus the amount of time workers in other countries get off. Students were more surprised to learn that the United States is the only industrialized country that does not guarantee its workers any vacation time whereas workers in any European country can look forward to 20 annual paid vacation days and those in France get 30. I introduced statistics on vacation time, such as that 68% of low-wage workers in America get paid vacation time versus 88% of higher wage workers versus the 13% of workers nationally who get five or more weeks off (see, for example, Ravn, 2007). This, in turn, led to students talking about teachers who get summers off plus all the other holidays and whose work day officially ends at 3 or 3:30 in the afternoon and I encouraged the students to talk to other teachers and find out what their work day was actually like and what they did with their summers. Most teachers work in July and August, viewing summer not so much as cushy time off but as unemployment season. At times these facts led right into the idea that Americans are workaholics and I urged students to think about their own family members and their jobs and to decide if this was by choice.

Back to the federal minimum wage. After figuring out weekly and annual earnings I'd ask students to bring in a local newspaper the next day or go online if there were any computers in the classroom and search for apartments where they

hoped to live. Some students chose local New York neighborhoods, others perused apartments and homes in other locales. Sometimes individually, other times in small groups, I asked students to find a place to live that interested them and to note the monthly rent. They then calculated the money they'd be shelling out annually for their rent and subtracted that from their calculated income. Some students were left with negative numbers.

A variety of objections immediately rose. Someone inevitably pointed out that there were other bills to pay, electric and gas and oil, cable and cell phone, car insurance and groceries, every imaginable necessity and frivolity. Someone also invariably said they'd have a roommate or a spouse working or they expected to make more than the minimum wage. The class came to a halt once when one girl stated she expected to live on welfare like her mother. She was not kidding around. That led to an interesting reaction from the white males in the class (the girl was black) and a whole other discussion. Someone also always pointed out that they'd be working in New York State, where the minimum wage was $2 higher than the federal one, so I encouraged them to go back and do the math, to figure out weekly and yearly salaries based on the higher wage and to subtract their rent and necessary living expenses from that. Again, many students wound up with negative numbers.

I explained to the class that when I grew up it was considered common among the working middle class to spend 30% of one's income on housing or rent. I'd bring in articles that appeared explaining how people were paying more and more for rent and housing (Fernandez, 2007). I then asked my students to figure out what percentage of their paychecks would be going toward the rent of the houses and apartments they'd chosen. The students were usually much more comfortable with the addition and multiplication computing weekly or annual pay involved and these ratios and percentages often threw many for a loop. I'd ask for volunteers to come up and show the class how to find the numbers. Once we had done so students were able to compute for themselves their percentages using their numbers, sometimes with a little help from me or another student. What students learned was that—$5.15 or $7.15 an hour—most would be paying much more than 30% of their salaries for housing. A challenge using more math that spun off that was to figure out exactly how much money they'd need to earn so that the number they'd derived as 30% would indeed be 30% of their annual salaries. I asked students how we could determine this which led to discussions of setting up proportions.

Once students ascertained how much they'd have to make to live where they wished with rent comprising 30% of their income, I asked them what jobs they knew that paid that type of money. Some students knew what family members and friends made and volunteered that information. Others lived in fantasy lands where they quoted inflated salaries for jobs that actually didn't pay that much, so I encouraged them to go online to the US Labor Bureau and find the median annual incomes for various professions. Other times I brought the numbers in myself. This gave way to a whole other discussion of how much education if any was necessary for some of those jobs. Then there were those dreamers in class—and I do so hope their realities live up to their expectations but experience has taught me to be wary—who announced that they'd be rap stars or highly paid athletes. I always encouraged an

aspiring Jay Z or A-Rod to pick a career they could fall back on and find out what that career paid in real life.

Does it appear that I have gone off task and rambled these past several paragraphs? I haven't. Recall this was an economics class where little or no mathematics was expected to be taught (interestingly enough it's a whole other ball game in college and grad school). Nevertheless, we were able to apply multiplication, percentages, ratios, and proportions to real life situations that students were or would be facing. In case you're wondering, lessons like the one above usually took on a life of their own and wound up spanning days or even a week or more as one thread gave way to another and we pursued leads and topics of interest, always tying them back to the original concern. Because I wasn't tied down by an official economics curriculum at the time I could afford to spend several class periods on the subject and follow where it took us.

## 5.4 The Romance of Mathematics

But back to Bob Peterson's original point: mathematics in the everyday classroom is beset by "number-numbness" and segregation. Where and why did math education go wrong? Aside from the fact that education in the everyday classroom *isn't* aimed at humanizing students, there are other reasons math education continues to look the way it does. George Lakoff and Rafael Nunez (2000) speak of a "romance of mathematics" which they liken to a mythology. Attributes of this romance/mythology hold that math is abstract and disembodied but at the same time somehow real, existing objectively with human mathematics reflective of this transcendent mathematics (xv); because mathematical proofs allow us to discover mathematical truths, mathematicians are the ultimate scientists (340); math's effectiveness as a scientific tool proves that math inheres in the physical universe and that math at heart is the language of nature (3). A further philosophical position relevant to what we discussed earlier in Chapter 2 is that because mathematics is disembodied and reason is a form of mathematical knowledge, reason itself is disembodied (xv).

There are several problems with this conception of mathematics. In Chapter 2 we looked at the relationship between reason and emotion, between reason and the body. In Chapter 3 we discussed embodied cognition, how "knowing implies a knower." This romance of mathematics intimidates people at the same time that it serves the purposes of the mathematics community (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 341). The romance of mathematics is indeed romantic for the initiated. But for all too many of the rest of us math seems beyond our capacities. Math really does appear like something out there in the universe and not in here in human brains and bodies. Goodness knows I thought so at one time. Once I had no truck with issues of the social construction of knowledge for everything *but* math. My thinking these days is quite different, in large part due to the persuasive work of people like Lakoff, Nunez, Varela, Maturana, and others. For those who hold to the romance of mathematics, whether teachers or students, math becomes an item of faith and not of empirical verification (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 2).

If math isn't out there, then *where* exactly *is* it? And here we return to the theme of embodied cognition. Math arises from "the nature of our brains and our embodied experience" (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: xvi). As a species we appear to be born with certain rudimentary math skills. Human beings, notes Hauser, "are born with two quantificational systems, innate machinery that enables infants to compute small numbers precisely and large numbers approximately" (2006: 256). Three- to four-day-old babies are capable of subitizing, of telling at a glance whether there are one, two, or three objects in front of them. At about four and a half months of age it has been shown that babies know that one plus one is two and two minus one is one (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 15–16). Animals other than humans also show apparently inborn rudimentary mathematical skills (for example, see Dehaene, 1997). Basic skills such as these are what the human species builds upon to develop the often amazing and awe-inspiring mathematical abilities we have come to collectively possess. Our mathematics capacity is much like our species' facility with language, in which a few innate basic rules of grammar allow for vast and complex expressions of language. Human beings use existing cognitive mechanisms such as conceptual metaphors for mathematical purposes (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 33). These are features of our distinctly human brains that allow us to do mathematics (Devlin, 2000). To boot, much of our everyday math is part of our cognitive unconscious, the stuff we know without realizing we know it.

This line of theorizing was difficult for me to swallow as I imagine it must be for more than a few readers out there. After all, even with my limited knowledge of mathematics, math just *seems* to work and to work *so well* with such great effect. How is this possible if mathematics is embodied in human beings and our brains? Lakoff and Nunez (2000: 345–346) posit that there are regularities in the universe existing independently of us. We've created reliable forms of mathematics that are sometimes successfully fitted to the ways we conceive these universal regularities. Characteristics of mathematics like universality, precision, and consistency make it look like math is "out there" somewhere when in fact math looks the way it does because of the way we are and our culture's ability to pass information down to future generations who build on preexisting knowledge.

Such talk of embodiment risks smacking of relativism. Though we create math it is not arbitrary. Our brains have evolved in the world around us and it is within these brains that math has developed. Again, human beings see the clear sky as blue whereas other species do not. Joey doesn't see it as green while Greg sees it as red. We share certain mathematical abilities because of who and what we are as a species. Embodied cognition is marked by basic conceptual mechanisms that are shared by members of our species and it is with and through these mechanisms that mathematics has and continues to develop.

If math is embodied there are consequences that follow. For starters, rote learning and drill, hallmarks of behaviorist learning theories, do not take into account actual understanding (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 49). Further, if math is embodied then mathematics is potentially a human universal, which means we are all probably capable of greater knowledge of and facility with mathematics than we now possess (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000: 351). We may not all be potential Einsteins, but we can all

probably understand more about math than we do. Of course there are those with guarded interests who may not appreciate the democratic implications of embodied cognition in general and embodied mathematics in particular.

## 5.5 Four Goals of Critical-Mathematical Literacy

Marilyn Frankenstein, a professor at the University of Boston's College of Public and Community Service, provides four goals of critical-mathematical literacy. Confronting a problem or issue, Frankenstein expects students to understand the mathematics itself, the mathematics of political knowledge, the politics of mathematical knowledge, and the politics of knowledge (in Guttstein & Peterson, 2006: 19–28). The social construction of knowledge and the politics attending have been explored throughout this book. Here I'd like to present Frankenstein's first three goals and explore each with examples.

Understanding the mathematics means that students comprehend what is asked of them when they are presented with math in their classrooms and lives. Frankenstein explains that she enters her math class with what she intends to teach that day (a "skill of the day") in mind and will begin by having the class peruse a chart or graph or reading excerpts where a main idea is supported by mathematical details. The class will discuss what the article is about and how the numbers in it support or contradict the main idea. Questions about math skills arise during the discussion at which point Frankenstein stops and teaches the skill, giving her students an edge when that skill later comes up in the course.

Frankenstein says that understanding the mathematics of political knowledge means "students need to learn how mathematics skills and concepts can be used to understand the institutional structures of our society" (in Guttstein, 2006: 24). For example, a teacher can provide students with a map of the United States that shows education spending per state like the one printed in the *New York Times* on May 30, 2007. Students can figure out the difference between the highest paying state (New York with $14,119) and the lowest (Utah with $5,257). In my experience students are usually very surprised to learn that education spending varies as much as it does and some have no idea education spending *isn't* uniform across the country. The class can discuss the implications of state education spending being apportioned district by district. Using the map, students can locate the highest spending states (in the Northeast) and discuss reasons why the greatest education spending may be in this area. Conversely, students can locate the lowest paying states (in the west and south) and reason why these states spend as little as they do.

Students can consult the website of the United States Census Bureau (from which the *NY Times* map was derived) to ascertain the median and mean incomes of individual states in the nation. The usefulness of the median income versus the mean can come up (because high incomes can skew the mean, the median is a more accurate indicator of state income taking as it does the middle of all incomes). Students can even look at how much individual districts in their areas spend on education and contrast that with the income of these districts. They can be encouraged to take the

data and create mathematical problems, tables, and graphs with it and their work should be shared and discussed with the rest of the class.

Here's an example of how students might begin to understand the politics of mathematical knowledge. Present students with an excerpt from a newspaper article detailing the correlation between scores on state math tests and district income (for example, David Herszenhorn's October 12, 2006 *NY Times* article). What do students learn studying these numbers? They learn that the greater a district's income is the better students living there do on standardized exams. What does it mean when the scores on ostensibly normed and valid state and federal assessments fluctuate according to income? What does this say about these tests? Students can be asked why they think higher scores accompany higher incomes. Are there factors at play aside from income that students think may be responsible for the discrepancies? What steps could be taken to raise test scores in the lower scoring areas? And why are test scores so important anyway? Are test scores an accurate indication of a good education? Do other countries rely on standardized exams the way the United States does?

Mathematics can also be used to expressly teach ethics. While I was writing this book I had the pleasure of attending a *Conference on Math Education and Social Justice* (see www.radicalmath.org) where Kate Belin of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in the Bronx and Kelly Gadis of Bard College presented a lesson on "fair games" that they've used in the high school. We're used to playing games with distinct winners and losers. As teachers we can introduce a moral vision into our classrooms by having students construct "fair games" where the object is comprehending the mathematics without winning or losing. Belin showed us how she uses the three-diced gambling game cee-lo to teach students probability using math skills. For example, how much would a triple (the same number on three different dice, like 2-2-2) have to be worth point-wise to balance out the winning combination of 4-5-6?

## 5.6 Social Studies and Language Arts

They're called different things in different schools: world history or global studies, language arts or communication skills, social studies or global history. They include courses covering literature and American history, government and economics, diction and grammar. They're your traditional elementary through high school core academic subjects in American schools. In high school you can usually get away with 3 out of 4 years of math and science, but these are subjects you're expected to take all 4 years. They are the subjects I am most familiar with as a teacher, having taught the one explicitly and the other implicitly going on 10 years now.

Whatever we call them, critical pedagogy sees much in common between language arts and social studies courses. One can be taught through the other and critical literacy can be taught in each. For instance, a US history class should be much more than facts and names. It should include (when possible) writing and reading and art and science and math. Discussions and debates and role-plays are

readily implemented. Academic themes will be a large part of a US history class but a critical teacher will find ways to introduce relevant topical themes from the world she and her students live in that bears on the course material. A US history class is also a study in character creation. It's where we learn who we are as a people or who we and our teachers and administrations and boards of education and curriculum and textbooks designers want to believe we are as a people.

Social studies and language arts were classes I always enjoyed for numerous reasons. A boy, I'd been raised with toy soldiers and guns and G.I. Joe comic books and action figures complete with kung-fu grips, and reading about George Washington and the Revolutionary War and the mythology of the Alamo (I cried when John Wayne's character died in the late-night TV movie) easily grabbed my interest. I remember thinking John Paul Jones with his "I have not yet begun to fight" and Nathan Hale's bravely facing his own death regretting only that he had but one life to give for his country, I remember thinking *these were men*, that these were what my students today would call real-G's (gangsters). Because I liked to read and write I engaged in both inside and outside of school and got better at each and fit right in with the way material in my social studies and language arts classes was presented via textbooks, lectures, selected readings, and writing. Interestingly enough, the books I enjoyed reading as a middle school student were "men's adventure" series with titles like *The Executioner*, *The Survivalist*, and *S.O.B.s* (*Soldiers of Barrabas)*. These were high-octane formulaic shoot-'em-ups where the good guys were good guys and the bad guys, well they were usually Russian or Russian stooges (this was the Cold War era mind you). I see the world differently now than I did back then and it's good I do, for if I didn't I'd probably write off critical pedagogy as anti-American communist drivel which it assuredly is not.

Social studies and language arts like any other subjects need to be made relevant to students' lives as much as possible. Because one of the titles I wear is that of social studies teacher and another is freelance writer this is a subject I am comfortable with. Further, from my reading of the literature it seems these are areas where a lot of articles and books in the critical pedagogy tradition have been written. In their excellent resource *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States* (1988), Bill Bigelow and Norman Diamond present a "Who Makes History" lesson that I often use. Students are encouraged to list on a piece of paper the names of the ten most famous people in US history. They're asked to share some of the names on their lists and why they chose to include those they did. In small groups or as a class students are asked to make generalizations about the names on their lists. Are these the names of political and military figures? White men and dead people? Explorers and celebrities? A class discussion about what makes the individual people on the lists famous leads into the discussion of fame in American history. Are those listed famous for their accomplishments at war or for their parenting at home? Are they famous because they led other men and women and if so how effective would they have been if these others hadn't followed and supported them? Students are asked if there are other categories of people in American history who have done important things but gone unrecognized.

Bigelow and Diamond (and myself following their lead) at this point give students a copy of the Bertolt Brecht poem *A Worker Reads History*. I have also used Paul Fleischman's poem *Honeybees*. The poem is read aloud with the class. With the Brecht poem I have found I often need to prep students before we read it, to make sure they know what Thebes, Byzantium, Babylon, the Caesars, and the Seven Years War were. We then, as per Bigelow and Diamond's suggestion, discuss the poem, with me asking them who Brecht thinks gets most of the credit in history versus who else is important in history and why are they considered important. We discuss the way history usually avoids studying workers and "commoners" and sum it all up by my asking them how many working people were on their list and if they know what any of the jobs the people on their list had were. If we're using the *Honeybees* poem we discuss the lives of the worker bees who awake at dawn, make wax, hunt nectar, and feed the grubs compared to that of the queen bee who is fed, bathed, groomed, and spends her time laying eggs.

Because I have traditionally used this lesson with students who are usually averse to writing any more than they have to, I rarely implemented Bigelow and Diamond's final suggestion for this lesson. Bigelow and Diamond (1988: 32) suggest teachers ask their students

> To list a number of things in their daily lives in which the people who do or did the work are 'hidden.' For example, a baseball, a television program, a piece of fruit or a record album each represents a great deal of human labor, which we don't usually see. Or they might think of jobs with which they are familiar—bakeries, janitorial or secretarial work, food preparation—that are isolated from the ultimate consumers.

Bigelow and Diamond then have their students use the lists they've compiled to write their own poems.

The Bigelow and Diamond lesson is one I've used as an introductory activity on the first day of US and world history classes but it can be used any time throughout the year. Another potential opening day activity that is also suitable for any time of the year is Margo Okazawa-Ray's "Personal Cultural History Exercise" found in *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* (1998). This is a very interesting lesson that asks teachers and students to think about their racial identities and the history of their ethnicities through art work and discussion. Okazawa-Ray's lesson encourages students to think about themselves as "cultural beings whose lives have been influenced by various historical, social, political, economic and geographical circumstances" and "make connections between their own experiences and those of people different from themselves" (1998: 66).

I've also paired students up or asked them to pair up and have them interview one another with the goal of creating a personal historical time-line about the other. Another spin on this is having students go home and interview family members or family friends and report back to the class what they've learned from parents and grandparents and friends of the family. We've also gone over the significance of famous dates in US and world history like the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated (April 4, 1968) or the 2 days in August 1945 when nuclear weapons were dropped on Japan's civilian populations or September 11, 2001, and then students have gone home and asked friends and family members where they were on these

days and what they remember about them and how they felt when they heard the news. The next day in class we discuss the responses students have garnered. The point of all these exercises is to allow students to see that history as largely written and traditionally studied is not objective, it is biased, it eclipses the contributions and masks the importance of the billions and billions of everyday folks like ourselves who fight and die in the armies and march in the civil rights movements and get up in the morning and go to our jobs.

History tends to focus on famous individuals, imparting the message that it is the individual person capable of action and change in history. So students remember Bismarck united the nascent German nation state through "blood and iron" *realpolitic* while little or nothing said of the millions who followed him and perished. Students study the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and don't always grasp that there was a movement before there was a Martin Luther King Jr. and a movement behind the man. We are individuals and we form collectives of individuals and it is this collective action that makes and propels what is later studied as history though these simple facts usually go unnoticed, unappreciated, or ignored.

One idea I have used in class is an "unsung heroes" meet and greet I've borrowed from Bill Bigelow's "Racial and Gender Justice Hunt" activity (2001: 37–41). I type up descriptions of characters from history that most of my students are unfamiliar with. Bigelow, for example, has typed up descriptions of Caesar Chavez, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Harvey Milk. The descriptions provide a paragraph's explanation in the first person of who the person was and what they struggled for. The descriptions are printed, cut out, and glued to index cards which can then be laminated for future use. Each student in class receives a card and is encouraged to read the description provided and get to know his historical character. I also distribute to each student a "Meet-n-Greet" chart, usually a page of five-by-five squares with descriptions such as "I fought against racism," "I was born a slave," and "I was a professional athlete/singer/entertainer." The students spend the next 15–20 minutes circulating around the room introducing themselves to other historical characters and using the information they find to fill in the boxes on their sheets with the names of these historical actors.

When I see that everyone is done or the time I've allotted is running down I ask students to finish up and then they return to their seats and we discuss their findings. After we run through some random categories (e.g., "So who did you guys find that took part in a revolution?") I start a discussion with the class where I ask them if there were any people on this list they hadn't heard of and if there were any people they might like to learn more about throughout the year. And the key to this exercise, so far as I implement it, is that the character descriptions each student has is of a person or a person involved in a movement that we are going to study later that year.

This meet-and-greet exercise allows teachers to introduce historical characters to students that they are probably unfamiliar with. It's useful to contrast these "unsung heroes" with the ten names students listed in the Bigelow and Diamond activity described above. I'll ask the class a question like "Why did I include labor activists" like Bill Haywood or the Wobblies in the unsung heroes meet and greet but none of you came up with any figures from labor history on your lists? Students respond

that they're unfamiliar with labor activists whereas they know about people like Rockefeller and Carnegie. I ask students why they're unfamiliar with individuals like Haywood and groups like the IWW and they respond that they've never been taught about these folks, that these were not people they read about in their textbooks. I follow up by asking them why they think *I* think labor figures are important people to study in history and a discussion will ensue about work and how all of us are going to have jobs and how it's important that our jobs are meaningful and allow us to enjoy life with things like a fair wage, health insurance, and adequate vacation time. So why doesn't the history profession as it is traditionally practiced and written spend time studying these "unsung heroes," I ask, to which some student will inevitably answer "they're not important." Another student usually asks before I do, "Not important to who?" We've had very deep and at times very heated discussions in some of these classes.

My point with exercises like the "meet and greet" is to show students that history is more than the famous dead people they read about in their textbooks. Issues from students' daily lives, from a lack of adequate health and dental care for all citizens to the disparity in female versus male pay to world hunger and global warming, these are historical issues people struggle over day in and day out. Teaching history critically also means looking at what students know and re-examining it with a critical eye. When we get to the Constitutional Convention in American History I distribute to students a list compiled by Bigelow (available online from http://www.rethinkingschools.org) of the 55 people who attended the constitutional convention in Philadelphia. In small groups students skim their lists and brainstorm what the attendees had in common. We get back together and discuss our findings. Students usually aren't surprised that the "founders" were all men, that many of these men owned slaves, and that most were well off. But details like George Washington being the richest man in the colonies and the actual number of human beings each founder owned and the number of lawyers, merchants, and plantation owners versus those with "job–jobs" in attendance casts the convention and its participants in a whole new light. Hence we critically re-examine an event of mythological proportion in American history, uncovering the class interests that united the founders of our nation.

I focus on American History here for the sake of clarity and because of my familiarity with the subject. American history since the late 1800s has been written and taught as "consensus history," with the consensus being that we Americans are one people and one nation with one history. Traditionally if your story didn't fit into the grand narrative of American consensus history you were excluded which is why women, blacks, Indians, and the entire working class were usually ignored. American consensus history was "winner's history read by the winners" and often written by them too (Hoffer, 2004: 30). Even self-described "progressive" historians like Charles Beard (one of the sources for Bigelow's list of the founder's economic interests above) worked within the consensus history tradition (Hoffer, 2004: 42). The 1960s brought a "new history" which challenged the orthodoxy of consensus history by bringing new figures and classes into focus, figures previously shunted aside and ignored. However, much of this new history was written *by* professional historians

*for* professional historians, not for a general audience, and borrowed obtuse social science methodologies. Fortunately we live in an era where historians like Howard Zinn, Ray Raphael, Peter Irons, Clifford Conner, and Vijya Prashad among others focus on the historical roles of the everyday men and women who propel history in accessible prose.

The problem with consensus history is it gets much of American history *wrong* and downplays its less savory aspects. One of the purposes the history profession serves is helping us understand who we are as a people. The consensus history tradition should be studied not only for what it tells us about who we are but also for what it tells us about what we want to believe of ourselves. There is much good in America and the promise of America. But what purpose does ignoring the bad—from the enslavement of blacks to the genocide of the native population, from the inordinate power wealth and capital bring in our society to the nuclear bombing of the Japanese—serve? I always think of it in the following way. When my grandfather was alive he was loved but not always liked by our family. When he died I watched family members' attitudes about him change. Suddenly his less savory aspects, the things people complained about and even fought with him over when he was alive, were forgotten or glossed over. In death the man took on a saintly cast he never bore in life. I loved my grandfather and am not knocking him, but he was human like we all are and had his faults as we all do. What purpose does overlooking or erasing the negative characteristics of a person or a nation serve for those who do so?

## 5.7 Propaganda in the Everyday Classroom

Is consensus history propaganda? There are Americans and historians among us who truly believe America is a force for good in the world and any evidence otherwise is anomalous, mere deviations from our country's overarching righteousness. Whether they choose to downplay the ugly episodes in American history or are unaware of them they do Americans a disservice. The attitude should not be Commodore Stephen Decatur's "My country right or wrong" but General Carl Schurz's "My country right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right." Howard Zinn points out that truly patriotic Americans understand the Declaration of Independence and its right of revolution against tyrannical government as a living principle and not an historical curiosity. All too often, however, critics of American government policy are dismissed as unpatriotic and anti-American.

Our students are exposed to propaganda on a daily basis. To understand how propaganda works in American society, see Herman and Chomsky (1988). As I wrote this book a retired three-star general was publicly chastised for the events surrounding the death of Pat Tillman. By all accounts Pat Tillman was a man of honor and integrity. As a professional football player with the Arizona Cardinals Tillman turned down a 5-year, $9 million contract from a rival team out of loyalty to the Cardinals. Following the September 11th attacks Tillman turned his back on a 3-year $3.6 million contract with his beloved Cardinals to enlist in the United States

Army as a Ranger. Tillman died in Afghanistan in April 2004, a victim of friendly fire. Hours after his death the Army shut down communications on the incident and posted guards with one of Tillman's wounded fellow soldiers. Tilman's family had no idea that their son died by friendly fire until 5 weeks after the fact. The US government spun his death to their advantage, painting him as a patriotic G.I. (which he was) who died battling an enemy to keep his fellow soldiers and America safe. The Tillman family was disturbed and disgusted by the way their son's image was used following his death (Dewan, 2006). The government played up an image of Tillman's end that suited their pro-war purposes while ignoring family members of dead soldiers like Cindy Sheehan and Tillman's brother Kevin who wrote an essay criticizing the government and noting that "Somehow American leadership, whose only credit is lying to its people and illegally invading a nation, has been allowed to steal the courage, virtue and honor of its soldiers on the ground" (Archibold, 2006).

I have to wonder how many teachers taught their students about Pat Tillman and his sacrifice shortly after his death and got the story *wrong* because the government *lied* to us about it. I also have to wonder how many teachers went back and taught those same students and other classes *about* the lies and deceit that were constructed and perpetuated around Tillman's death. Did teachers ignore the whole thing, blaming a retired three-star general or giving the government a pass for getting it wrong this time? I have to wonder how many parents who were on the fence were swayed that the *No Child Left Behind* legislation was a good thing for their kids by Armstrong Williams, a conservative black commentator who accepted $240,000 from the Education Department to tout NCLB (NY Times, 2005).

The US government understands the power of propaganda, how it can be used in its service and against it. In an Independence Day speech President George W. Bush completely misread history by likening the Iraq War to the American Revolutionary War, "a bloody and difficult struggle that would not end for six more years before America finally secured her freedom" (Rutenberg, 2007). As Howard Zinn points out, a better comparison would have been US aggression in Vietnam and Southeast Asia (McKissack, 2007). With hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dead the US government tries to deny culpability and blame civilian deaths on roadside bombs, fearing "a potential public relations problem that could fuel insurgent propaganda against the American military" (Zielbauer, 2007). The problem from the government's perspective *isn't* that huge numbers of civilians are dying in Iraq and that some American troops are behaving themselves like barbarians on parade; the problem is that people in the Middle East and around the globe might see these civilians dying by American hands and sour on the happy horseshit the American government sells its people and the rest of the world.

The US military conducts inquiries finding—surprise, surprise—that an American public relations firm paying Iraqi news outlets to print articles written by Americans in Iraqi newspapers (while hiding the sources of course) did nothing wrong (Shanker, 2006). The Defense Department warned "that paying Iraqi journalists to produce positive stories could damage American credibility" (Cloud, 2006). In other words, spreading propaganda itself isn't wrong but avoid at all costs the repercussions of

getting caught doing so. In early 2007 the number of US casualties in Iraq plunged from over 50,000 to 21,649 because of the way the Pentagon chose to redefine "wounded" (Grady, 2007). Though it has the audacity to disavow regime change after going into Iraq and hanging Saddam Hussein, the US government is actively trying to discredit and overturn governments around the world, from Latin America to Africa. When Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was briefly overthrown the US government immediately welcomed the new government with open arms. The United States' Office of Cuba Broadcasting has paid ten Miami journalists to speak out against the Castro regime (Goodnough, 2006). The United States is actively working to undermine the Mugabe Regime in Zimbabwe (MacAskill, 2007). These are but a few examples from a storied history (see, for example, Blum, 2003).

Propaganda manifests itself in the hobbling of American scientific research and science education in schools (see, for instance, Mooney, 2005; Shulman, 2007). Evolutionary biology has disappeared from the list of acceptable fields of study for low-income college students seeking federal education grants (Dean, 2006). As of this writing President Bush has vetoed four pieces of legislation, two of them promoting embryonic stem cell research (Stolberg, 2007c). In US classrooms teachers skip over evolutionary biology to avoid conflict or attempt to give equal time to "intelligent design" or other forms of creationism while biology textbooks bear disclaimer labels (Dean, 2005). Despite evidence that it is not effective, abstinence-only sex education is approved by the American government while it goes out of its way to stifle any other form of sex education (Associated Press, 2007c; Freedman, 2007). Former U.S Surgeon Generals C. Everett Koop, Richard H. Carmona, and David Satcher all testified in front of Congress that they felt politics was outweighing sound science. Carmona explained that the Bush Administration muzzled him on stem cells, sex education, emergency contraception, and other issues and watered down reports like one on second hand smoke (Harris, 2007a). A former oil industry lobbyist, appointed White House Council on Environmental Quality, edited climate reports to downplay and cast in doubt the human role in climate change while the American Enterprise Institute, an oil industry-financed think tank, offered cash payments to international scientists to dispute a UN report on climate change (Goldenberg, 2007; Revkin & Wald, 2007; Sample, 2007).

Governments do good things and bad things. Don't kid yourself though. What good they do they do because people *demand* their governments be responsive to *their* needs. They do the bad things they do to protect the interests of the most powerful in the state, interests that are foisted off on the rest of the population as the "national interest." It's important to realize there is a difference between the government of a country and its people. Unfortunately many citizens overlook this simple fact and take criticism of their governments personally. Governments look to sugarcoat the bad things they do and make these palatable to the people who wind up suffering when such schemes backfire. So the United States of America arms and supports a group of murderous religious fanatics in Afghanistan in the 1980s and then when some of these same thugs attack us on September 11th we're told

they hate us because of our freedom. Check out *Rambo III* (d. MacDonald, 1988) to see how Hollywood was depicting Mujahideen like Osama bin Laden during the Cold War.

## 5.8 Critical Multiculturalism in the Everyday Classroom

Governments *should* be responsive to the needs of their people. To some extent democratic governments *have* to be. But to the extent that it is responsive to the needs of its people the US government reflects the interests of some citizens more than others. Institutions like schools mirror this responsiveness in the fact of "white privilege," Ruth Anne Olson differentiates privilege from prejudice and defines privilege as a "passive advantage that *accrues to* an individual or group" (in Lee et al., 1998: 83). Olson provides numerous ways white privilege benefits white students in schools even when they are not aware of it. For example, when white students pick a topic of study they're going to find resources that link white people to accomplishments in that field; white students can expect to open textbooks and look upon classroom posters and decorations and movies that feature white faces; white kids know that "flesh"-colored crayons, paints, and bandages are the color of *their* skin; white kids never have to listen to school critics complain that problems of a school are due to the large number of white students in it (in Lee et al., 1998: 83).

Racism and sexism are in the English language we encounter in the everyday classroom. Enid Lee (in Lee et al., 1998: 167) describes how universal concepts are affixed positive and negative connotations corresponding to race and gender. Thus shepherd in the Scottish hills live in "cottages" whereas African villagers live in "huts," when cottages and huts are pretty much both the same things, small dwellings. Europeans and Americans have "religion" but Africans and Asians and others have "superstitions." Male executives who are forceful are "assertive" and confident whereas forceful female executives are "aggressive" and bitchy. We refer to the United States as a *developed* nation, an adjective that "paints pictures of a social or economic process that is somehow complete," whereas *developing* and *underdeveloped* "implies only a deficit status" (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002: 6). Teachers and students use these words and make these distinctions without realizing it. It just seems "natural" to refer to a peasant Irish dwelling as a cottage in a developed first-world town and a Zimbabwean dwelling as a hut in a village in an underdeveloped third-world country. But this kind of language use reinforces racism and stereotypes, validating some at the expense of others.

Power plays itself out in the everyday classroom in the forms of the language allowable there. "Standard" English is privileged as "proper" or "correct English" over "black English" and other non-standard forms of the tongue. College-tracked foreign language education classes enjoy a status and respect bilingual education classes do not. Earlier in this book we discussed hate speech in the classroom and how much of it goes unchallenged and is simply not recognized as such.

Critical pedagogy in social studies and language arts classes should work to deconstruct texts and textbooks, with a text understood as “any entity open to analysis and interpretation” (Kincheloe et al., 1999: 24). For instance, language is a text, films and TV shows and commercials are texts, accepted canons in English and other classes are texts, and the layout and seating arrangement of a classroom is a text. Students can be encouraged to think about the words they use and the meanings behind those words. Ask students which word they would use to describe the simple clothing of an American woman, *clothing* or *costume*. Then ask them which word would be used to describe the simple clothing of an Indian woman. Any guess what they’ll say? Discuss with them why they think the words used are attributed to the ethnicities they are. What does this say about the power of language to name and portray? Why is it so unnatural for us to describe an American woman’s dress as a “costume”? When American women wear “costumes” they do so for dramas and pageants, to represent someone they are not or some time long ago. When Indian or African or Asian women wear “costumes” they’re wearing the clothes of their contemporary lives, clothes that define who they are now. Language is never neutral (Lee et al., 1998).

We mentioned earlier how canons in a field can be critically examined with an eye to who and what is included, who is excluded and why. Critical pedagogy also examines the texts of students’ lives and the everyday classroom to uncover privilege. What does it mean that heroic characters in Japanese anime have very Euro-American features including round eyes and light skin? What message does it send when the good guys in Disney movies sound like white people even when characters like *Aladdin* are not white or Simba *The Lion King* is not human and the bad guys in these films speak with heavily accented English? What do little boys and girls learn when their parents lie to them about Santa Claus and the tooth fairy and they read fairy tales and watch cartoons where women wait around looking pretty for royalty (usually a prince) to arrive? How do school mascots with names like the Redskins, Braves, and Red Storm effect students’ thinking about Indians (see, for example, Miner in Lee et al., 1998)? How would they and their communities feel if their school team was the “fighting whities”? Why is the idea of the “fighting whities” so absurd to us but the Washington Redskins and Atlanta Braves don’t strike us so? When cartoons and movies like *Pocahontas* and *The Patriot* take history and historical figures and re-write and revise them for entertainment purposes how might this effect children’s historical literacy (see Roderick in Lee et al., 1998)? What effect does it have on a non-white child’s self-esteem and self-image when all her dolls are white?

A critical multiculturalism needs to be part of social studies and language arts classes. Unlike other forms of multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism goes beyond paying lip service to non-dominant cultures and ethnicities in throwing these cultures a sop. Black history isn’t relegated to February in a critical multiculturalism, nor women’s history to March. Critical multiculturalism “is concerned with the contextualization of what gives rise to race, class and gender inequalities” and champions “equality and democracy in the economic sphere of society” as in all others (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997: 25). Critical multiculturalism asks students

to study the ways power in the classroom and society shapes their consciousness. When other forms of multiculturalism study black contributions to American history or literature, it often seems for white students that blacks are being separated out for special consideration and treatment, much the same way—not incidentally—that these white students and their families often view affirmative action programs. A critical multiculturalism helps these students see that such a separation is only cognizable against the totality of an all-encompassing white privilege. This broad backdrop is examined as the power evasion it is. Critically studying it helps these students understand that white privilege even serves white people differently. Working class white folks like my grandmother who grew up in Queens saying "ter-let" for "toilet" speak a different dialect and live different lives than the Astors.

Multiculturalism as it is practiced in the everyday classroom today is largely a self-serving failure. It's self-serving in that it allows staff and community members who consider themselves "liberal" to feel good about themselves by not excluding blacks, Hispanics, women, and other minority groups in American society. It looks inclusive in fact. But it's a failure for two reasons. For one it marks minority groups out for distinctions and honors that often backfire and feed into racist resentment. Secondly, such multiculturalism fails to bridge the gap between minorities and the dominant culture, leaving students unaware of the systemic nature of oppression and the ways we all suffer in different kind and measure. In short, multiculturalism as it is usually implemented often makes it look like white people have it made and everyone else doesn't. Try asking a working class or poor white kid to swallow this. Are we asking him to assume white guilt?

A critical multiculturalism exposes power at work. It not only shines a light on any privilege accompanying race and gender but also critically examines class relationships. A critical multiculturalism teaches Mumia Abu Jamal alongside Leonard Peltier and Sacco and Venzetti and makes explicit that these are all examples of oppression and domination.

Just as critical multiculturalism seeks to expose the ways dominant culture shapes the discourse of our everyday lives, it does not hesitate to expose and condemn features of other cultures that are dehumanizing. For example, female genital mutilation (sometimes discussed under the euphemism female circumcision) is denounced for what it is, a barbaric practice, a crime against women and humanity. Arranged marriages and the forced veiling of women and girls among immigrant groups are exposed as limitations on personal autonomy. Critical multiculturalism looks to other cultures for inspiration where it is deserved but does not unquestioningly reify other cultures. A critical multiculturalism recognizes there is much in the American social tradition to be lauded and looks to expand these positives while addressing and correcting the negatives.

## 5.9 Pledging Allegiance

At the end of roughly every second period in my high school, at about 9:10 AM, there is a planned interruption of class by announcements over the P.A. system. The announcements always begin with a student volunteer asking students and staff to

"please rise" and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I am always torn by a sense of ambivalence when the pledge is recited. As an atheist I take offense to the oath's line about "under god" and see it as a clear violation of the line separating church and state and therefore unconstitutional. As a progressive I realize the extent to which the words "with liberty and justice for all" ring hollow and have yet to be realized. As a critical educator I see the propaganda purpose behind the pledge. As a champion of democracy and critical thought I think actions speak louder than words and loyalty oaths that are compelled aren't worth the words they're composed of. As the teacher in the classroom and an adult in the school I want to set a good example of what it means to be patriotic and critical at the same time.

I stand for the pledge. I don't recite it and I don't bust the chops of any students that don't want to participate in it. The only time I do say something is if students are being disruptive during the pledge because it is something that some people take very seriously so out of respect to them I don't want anyone making a mockery of the proceedings. I'm not religious but that doesn't mean I would enter a church or mosque or temple and disrupt the proceedings or cheer on people who did. I'm an atheist but I say "bless you" (not *God bless you*) to someone who sneezes because I think it is the right thing to do. Though I do face the flag I do not put my hand over my heart. And according to a 2003 US District Court Judge's ruling I don't have to.

The Pledge of Allegiance was written in September 1892 by Christian socialist Francis Bellamy for a children's magazine. Bellamy's original pledge went *I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all*. The pledge has changed over time. In 1923 *my flag* was changed to *the Flag of the United States*. In 1924 *of America* was added. Congress recognized the pledge as official in 1945, though interestingly enough to this day public school children in other democratic societies are not expected to pledge allegiance to a symbol of their nation state. *Under God* was added in 1954. The manner in which it is recited has also evolved. Up until World War II the pledge was recited by students who extended their right arms out in front of them palm-upwards, a gesture abandoned when it came to be seen as a little too reminiscent of the Nazi salute. Custom today holds that one faces the flag with right hand over the heart.

The Supreme Court has flip-flopped on the issue of the Pledge's constitutionality. In 1940 it ruled that school students could be compelled to recite the Pledge but reversed is decision 3 years after. In 2003 District Judge Lewis Babcock ruled that students, teachers, and other staff members cannot be compelled to participate in the Pledge. A year before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco decided that the phrase *under God* was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court, responding to appeals filed by all 50 states, weaseled out of deciding the constitutionality of the pledge in 2004 by dismissing the case on procedural grounds.

As a progressive educator you have to do whatever you're comfortable with when it comes to the Pledge. Maybe you're religious and you view the Pledge's *with liberty and justice for all* as a promise of what America is striving for, in which case you may have no problem reciting the Pledge. Maybe you agree with me on one or two points and don't want to participate in the Pledge's recital. Whatever your decision and whatever your reasons, I'd only hope you're respectful of the students

and other staff members in your school while your actions provide a reasoned, thoughtful, and critical example. Otherwise you stand to isolate and alienate yourself and any ideas—including your critical pedagogy—you champion.

## 5.10 All the World's a Stage

Speaking from experience there is plenty of room in social studies and language arts classes to get students involved and actively participating. Improvs and role-plays are big favorites. Some students just love to get up in front of the class and act. Others don't but enjoy watching their classmates do their thing. Bob Peterson presents a constitutional convention role-play (in Bigelow et al., 2001: 63–69) that he uses in his fifth grade classroom. I have adopted it for use with my high school students and it proved very successful—the kids enjoyed it and learned from it. After studying the class, race and gender of the actual delegates to the American constitutional convention (for example with the economic interests of the founders handout discussed above; Peterson also has his kids critically examine a Howard Chandler Christy painting of the gathering) students are assigned to various groups that will "attend" a new constitutional convention. Unlike the original convention, these groups include enslaved blacks, white workers, and indentured servants, Indians from the Iroquois Nation, and white women. There are also male southern plantation owners and northern merchants and bankers. Peterson presents mini-lectures on each of the small groups. I've found with my high schoolers that distributing the group description handouts that Peterson provides and having each group of students discuss theirs works well enough allow us to get into the role-play quickly.

Students are told that they will be attending the constitutional convention and this time around they would be considering two questions of importance for the new nation: should slavery and the slave trade be abolished and escaped slaves returned to their owners? And, who should be allowed to vote and what role if any should race, property ownership, and gender play in determining suffrage? I've implemented this role-play twice with an entire alternative high school of 40 kids plus staff (I always assigned staff members as facilitators to each small group which proved very helpful). The groups discuss among themselves their answers to these questions and once they've hammered out something they can all agree on each group sends delegates out to visit the other groups seeking to forge alliances. Some of the alliances—like that between the northern merchants and bankers and male southern plantation owners—were predictable but the students never cease to surprise with the alliances they form and the reasons behind them.

After alliances have been built and positions firmed up we all meet together in one central location where each group presents itself and delivers a speech (sometimes written, sometimes extemporaneous with students who are confident speaking in public) outlining its positions on the two questions under consideration. Once each group has presented its position the debate begins, with members of different groups questioning other group members. When I sense the time is right (when the debate is ebbing down or getting too rancorous) I bring the groups to order. We lay

out the positions possible for each question and by a show of hands vote on them. When we're done we know how our new constitutional convention resolved the two issues at hand. We debrief by discussing the role-play, what students liked about it versus where they thought it could use improvement, and how history would have been different if the actual constitutional convention represented all of the groups in the role-play. I always point out to everyone involved that what we'd been doing was participating actively in a democratic experiment and I ask them how they felt as group members making decisions and struggling to bring those decisions to life.

A couple of words about the context specificity of this role-play for my students. A day or two beforehand I'd always explain to students what we'd be doing, list the groups they'd be representing, and ask students to number 1-2-3 on a piece of paper for me their group preferences. I did this because I wanted every student to be comfortable, and I wanted to avoid situations where a male student would be embarrassed being in the white women group or a black student felt uncomfortable being a slave. That said, there were boys who played women and there were black students who played slaves (as did white and Hispanic students). I also figured out the students who could potentially sabotage this role-play. These are often the loud and obstreperous kids in a class and they usually have a following. I'd always approach these students, explain what we'd be doing and ask them if they'd mind being "leader" of whatever group it was I assigned them. I don't recall any one of them turning me down and each rose to the occasion.

This role-play worked best with my students when we spread the actual role-play out over 2 days and spent a morning on each day at it. Other teachers might find they can get it done in one whole day or several periods over many days depending on their students and their schools. Bear in mind the times I did it the role-play was a school-wide activity involving all the staff (who were pretty happy about not having to plan as I did all the planning ahead of time and briefed them a day or two before). If I ever implement this role-play again I'd like to involve other teachers as more than just facilitators. Peterson, for example, describes how art classes can help prepare costumes and decorations for the role-play and that the individual speeches to be presented can be worked on in language arts classes.

## 5.11 Critical Pedagogy and School Science

Speaking of Jesus, a youth pastor from a Baptist Church, David Paszkiewicz said, "If you reject his gift of salvation, then you know where you belong. He did everything in his power to make sure that you could go to heaven, so much so that he took your sins on his own body, suffered your pains for you, and he's saying, 'Please, accept me, believe.' If you reject that, you belong in hell" (Kelly, 2006). Problem is Paszkiewicz wasn't addressing a group of like-minded believers in Sunday School. Paskiewicz is also a public high school history teacher and he told this and other things—such as dinosaurs were on Noah's ark and that the Big Bang is not scientific (Kelly, 2006) —to his 11th grade history class in New Jersey. We know Paszkiewicz said these things because a student in his class recorded him doing so. Interestingly

enough, the student drew the most condemnation, everything from death threats, calls for his suspension from school, and a letter to the editor of the local newspaper accusing the kid of ignoring the First Amendment (Kelly, 2006). Go figure. Only in America.

There is a strand of "progressive" writing on science that goes something like this: Western science is a totalizing discourse that seeks to impose itself at the expense of other cultures' ways of knowing. The explicit or usually implicit message behind this reasoning is that Western science is no more legitimate than other forms of science, that Western science is somehow bad. In Chapter 2 we looked at scientific paradigms and revolutions in scientific thought. While critical pedagogy does not dismiss the contributions of non-dominant cultures and peoples to science and celebrates them when appropriate, it cannot turn its back on the Western scientific canon and its positive contributions and developments over the last several hundred years. Western science rooted in the scientific method of constant verification and refutation teaches us much about our lives and the world we live in.

As critical multiculturalists, on the one hand we need to appreciate the beliefs and contributions of other peoples and all cultures. That said, there is no room for beliefs like Pazkiewicz's in American science or history classrooms. In a very real sense our students are captive audiences, and ours is a great responsibility what we will teach them. Proselytizing of all forms should be avoided as abuses of our authority. Religious proselytizing necessarily excludes because religions are like clubs and you don't get the benefits unless you are a member. Imagine being an atheist or Muslim or Jewish or non-fundamentalist Christian in a classroom like Pazkiewicz's and hearing his message. Children are impressionable and want to believe adults they respect, which is why so many of them grow up believing some guy housed at the North Pole actually climbs into a sleigh once a year and makes the transatlantic flight to deliver presents under their Christmas trees. Imagine telling children of any age that they will burn in hell if they don't accept Jesus Christ as their lord and savior.

While we strive to respect cultural differences, we recognize certain cultural beliefs and practices as dehumanizing. Others we see as allowable in their proper place. Religious ideology has no place in public school classrooms. That said, American fundamentalists organize to have their version of human genesis—whether they call it creationism or disguise it as intelligent design—adopted in public schools and taught alongside evolution. Creationism and intelligent design are belief systems. They're not falsifiable, which means they're not science. Evolution is supported by a rich fossil record and is falsifiable, making it scientific.

None of this means that science is not without its problems. Science has been misused and abused to justify all sorts of dehumanizing practices. Science once "told" us that menstruation rendered women less capable and efficient workers and students than men (Houppert, 2007). Critical pedagogy recognizes that science is not neutral and wants to use science to further humanization. One way this can be accomplished in the everyday classroom is by adopting an issue approach to chemistry. The book *Anti-Racist Science Teaching* links chemistry concepts to social issues. For example, entry issues on the topic of food and fertilizers could

investigate the world food problem through questions like “Is there a world food shortage?” and “Are there side effects to fertilizers?” while incorporating chemistry concepts like N cycles, the Haber process, and pH (see Lee et al., 1998: 321). In this way the study of nitric acid and the chemistry of ammonia takes place in the larger context of a concern with the environment and the well-being of the world’s population.

Students can learn to appreciate the ways science can work for or against different groups of people. Lynette Selkurt (in Lee et al., 1998) provides a middle school science lesson that seeks to help students understand the effects of environmental racism. Selkurt’s students use maps of Wisconsin’s soil, growing season, and Indian reservations to comprehend the relationship between the location of reservations and the arability of farm land—Wisconsin’s Indian reservations are located on land with poor soil and short growing seasons.

All too often school science confronts our students as something divorced from their everyday lives. Students see science as a fixed body of knowledge looming over them (Tobin et al., 2005). Science in schools has served as a “pipeline” to funnel the “best and brightest” students into higher science education programs and jobs (Aikenhead, 2006: 4). School science in the context of critical pedagogy seeks to help students understand science as something useful to their daily lives and to identify as people who can “do” science (Tobin et al., 2005: 29). This can be worked toward in a couple of different ways. For one, Okhee Lee recommends science instruction that follows a “teacher-explicit to student-exploratory continuum,” where “teachers move progressively from more explicit to more student-centered instruction” (2006: 77).

Where possible teachers can start from students’ lived experience of science and tie that experience into the larger intellectual discipline. Kenneth Shaw and Mia Lena Etchberger (in Tobin, 1993) discuss a way fifth grade teacher Jessica brought school science to her students. In preparing a lesson on ants, Jessica had her students go outside the school building in small groups and find some ants to watch. Jessica told her kids to write down and draw pictures of anything and everything about the ants, from how they looked to how they moved. Back in the classroom the student groups were eager to share their information about the ants. Their observations were recorded on the class’ chalkboards—they filled three of them! Jessica supplemented the students’ observations and discussion about the ants with information from their textbooks and her own knowledge of ants. Her students’ on the spot enthusiasm and attention to task pleased the teacher, and the information the kids garnered about ants stayed with them.

## 5.12 Critical Pedagogy Beyond the Core

This section is a miscellany, a hodge-podge of *do’s* and *don’ts*, suggestions a teacher may find helpful. Some of it might seem like common sense, but don’t assume common sense is common. Speaking from experience, I was oblivious to these “obvious” things and learned them the hard way.

Let's start with talking. Dialogue is essential to critical pedagogy and the everyday classroom. *Talk* to the parents and guardians of your students. When and where possible, get to know the people your kids live with. If it's the beginning of the year, if you're a new teacher or if you have new kids in your class, get on the horn and make phone calls home. Don't wait until you have something negative to report. Sometimes it seems parents and guardians expect negative news when the phone rings from school. And truthfully you're probably so busy as a teacher that though you'd like to call home and let parents know what a great student Julio is, chances are you won't be dialing those seven digits until its something pressing and probably negative impelling you to do so.

When you do have to call home with negative news—and you will—always preface reporting why a student is in hot water with something good about the kid. Further, encourage parents and guardians to come up and visit you on parent–teacher nights and by appointment. When my wife was teaching in the South Bronx she got to know some of her parents very well and would actually invite them up to observe classes (after clearing it with the proper administrator of course). This worked very well with certain students who were disruptive in class. Having their moms in the classroom put them on their best behavior. It also helped keep a lid on other students who may have been disruptive.

Students in our schools spend a lot of time in our classrooms and buildings, 6 or 7 hours a day, 5 days a week. But the majority of their time is spent outside of school, at home, with their families, and friends in their communities. Too often there is a massive disconnect between home life and school life for our kids. An open line of communication between school and home, between teacher and parents, is a must.

Talk to your colleagues. Whether you've been working in your school 10 years or 10 days, don't hesitate to seek the opinions and suggestions of your colleagues, including other teachers and administrators. You're sure to be working with some talented people in your school. People like to be looked to as authority figures. They like to share their take on situations. As much as possible, try and visit different classrooms in your school to see how other teachers teach. At best, you might learn how better to engage certain students or present subject matter in a way you hadn't considered. At worst, you will see teachers doing things in some ways you don't like and walk away promising yourself never to do things in that manner.

And while we're on the subject, get to know the maintenance staff and teaching assistants in your school. They're your colleagues too. Treat them the way you'd want to be treated, with dignity and respect. You may be surprised how someone working in the same building as you that isn't a teacher or principal has a whole different perspective on things (e.g., students, other staff members, administrators, district and community politics), often encouraging you to think about something or someone in a way you'd never have thought of before. Working people in general and teachers in particular don't get paid what they're worth. That said, if you're a teacher griping about your paycheck keep in mind who is around. I guarantee you the teachers' aides and instructional assistants and security guards working in your school make much less than you do. Imagine how it sounds to them if *you're* complaining about how underpaid you are.

It goes without saying but it has to be said, don't ever talk crap about other staff members or students in front of your students. It's just not professional or humane. Granted, there will be staff members and students with whom you have issues, legitimate issues. But what are you accomplishing by complaining about Mr. Cupolo or Ms. Taylor to your tenth grade world history class about? Are you so insecure that you have to tear others down to make yourself look good? What are you accomplishing by encouraging students to talk trash about fellow students or teachers? Students will come to your class with complaints about other teachers and students. The way to address these students is the way you'd want them addressed if they were going to another class complaining about *you*. Even when you know the complaints are warranted, you should ask the student if they've tried talking to the other person about their gripe. You might have to explain to students how this is best done, along the lines of, "If I were you Tommy I'd try and catch Ms. Silverman either right before or right after class. Ask her if she has a minute to talk to you about something or when a better time would be. Don't be confrontational or rude. Let her know something you really like about her class, how she teaches, or how she makes you feel. Then let her know what it is that concerns you."

There have been times when I have had to cut off students and tell them the staff member they're ranting about is a friend and/or colleague of mine, that I would be happy to discuss their concern with them after class or even go with them to talk to the other person, but that they'd have to stop their complaining about that teacher or administrator in my class at that moment. There have also been times when I've had to stop students from talking junk about other students in the school, explaining to them that if someone isn't in the room to defend themselves it isn't appropriate to attack them, or that their concerns were noted and we could continue discussing them privately later.

At least until you're tenured, when administrators see you, you want them thinking, "Ah, there's someone who makes my job easier. She never gives me any trouble." You don't want them to see you coming down the hall and start thinking, "Oh man, here comes the rabble rouser." You will see things in *any* school and *any* school district—even the best ones—that will vex you. Try seeing if it's something you have some control over and can change. Remember, critical pedagogy is a praxis: it's not good enough to just criticize; we aim to change and transform. If you can't, try talking to a fellow teacher about it. If it really irks you, go to your union rep. If it is truly egregious, there will be people other than yourself who will be equally bothered. These individuals will probably be in a better position than you are to bring it to the attention of an administrator. Unless it's something really dire that threatens the well-being of students or staff in your school, it might be best that *you* not be the one approaching the higher ups. Remember, part of your ability to serve as a change agent in your classroom and school is to *be* in your classroom and school. Without tenure, you can be sent packing at any minute for any reason, and then you won't be facilitating any change.

Your classroom is going to have rules about what is acceptable and unacceptable. Some of these rules will be dictated by the school you teach in, others are of your own personal preference. If time and the maturity level of your students permit,

some rules can be negotiated in the classroom at the beginning of the year. In general you want to keep the rules as few and as simple as possible. Rules can be learned and made up on the spot. For instance, inevitably every year I mean to tell my students about my classroom bathroom policy beforehand but I get so busy and caught up I never do. Then some kid asks to go to the bathroom and I use that as an on-the-spot opportunity to explain my bathroom rules. In case you're interested they go something like this. Students don't need to raise their hands. They can get up unobtrusively, sign out, and take the pass (my school has a bathroom sign-out rule). If we're right at the beginning of learning some new material I prefer students wait unless it's an absolute emergency and I will ask them to wait if I feel it's necessary, otherwise they're going to miss something important.

Also inevitably every year I have to help model what an appropriate classroom conversation *looks* and *sounds* like. This means when Ishik is addressing a point brought up by Tricia the rest of the class should be paying attention to Ishik. Depending on the size of the class, students will either raise their hands to address Ishik's point and add their own perspective or I will see one of them that looks like they want to say something and I'll prompt them by saying something like, "What do you think about this, Jamille?" If a student pipes up and tries to cut off another I have to intervene with something along the lines of "Christian, we'll get a chance to hear what you think but let's allow Fantasia to say what she was going to say." I think it is very important to model appropriate classroom conversations for students early on and often. Otherwise you'll be dealing all year with students shouting each other down and over one another.

While we're on the subject, be careful you're not constantly picking on the same five or six kids who have their hands raised or on only the boys. Everyone in your class has something to say though they sometimes lack the confidence or interest to say it. Encourage without pressuring them. "What do you think about this?" "What's on your mind?" "How do you feel about what so-and-so said?" "Why do you think this is important or not important?" Ask open-ended questions that encourage a student to open up and share her thoughts and opinions. At the same time make sure the noise level in the classroom is such that the rest of the class can hear her.

We're social animals. That means we enjoy talking to each other. Students like talking to one another. But what noise level are you comfortable with in the classroom? Here's what works for me. I always explain to students that when someone in class is addressing us I expect we will all be giving that person our undivided attention. Side conversations will not be tolerated as they are disrespectful. Other times, such as when students are coming into class or working together in groups, conversations are fine as long as the volume is kept in check.

What do you do about the kid who just isn't paying attention? It happens. The disruptive ones get most of our attention, but more often than not they keep quiet and fly under our radar. What do you do when you have a student who is physically in class but is checked out, not listening to a word anyone is saying? You want to bring this student back into the classroom humanely, without embarrassment. Instead of "So Mike would you please tell me what Nicole just said?" and having Mike look like a dolt in front of the whole class, try "Hey, Mike, I want you to listen very

carefully to what Maria is *about* to read because I am going to ask you to explain it afterwards in your own words, okay?"

As time allows, get involved in your school. For 3 years now I have been working exclusively with a dozen kids in a high school of 1300. A lot of students wouldn't know who I was if it wasn't for my involvement in the school outside of my program. After-school clubs, sports teams, drama programs, and tutoring are all excellent ways to branch out, to make yourself known, and to get to know students you otherwise wouldn't have. Further, become familiar with the communities your students live in. Many teachers don't live in the neighborhoods their kids do. I teach in the Bedford Central School District, a district serving affluent neighborhoods like Pound Ridge and West Patent where Martha Stewart, Chevy Chase, and Susan Sarandon have homes. In other words these are neighborhoods most of the teachers I work with cannot afford to live in. But this is also the district of Maple Avenue and subsidized housing on Amuso Drive, both of which are literally on the other side of the (Metro North Railroad) tracks. Mt. Kisco has a population that is one-fourth Hispanic, mostly immigrants. I teach students with second homes in the Hamptons and others who "chill on Maple." I teach kids who have been to Europe and Africa and others who leave school to go to work in the afternoons to help their families with the bills. Having some knowledge of these things and places helps me understand where the kids are coming from and allows me to be more in touch.

If you can, have some idea of youth culture. We teachers are often significantly older than our students, and tastes seem to change with age. I remember my first year teaching back in 1998. The rapper DMX had just exploded on the scene. One day in class I quoted him, "Yo, you think I'm funny? Then you don't know me money." The kids in the class who recognized the song (Ruff Ryders Anthem) thought this was the greatest thing they'd ever heard. Oddly enough the school district I work in today is where DMX lives, but I don't keep up on Hip Hop now like I did then. Still, if I need to know who the newest members of G-Unit are or what the beef between Fifty Cent and The Game or Kayne West is, there is always Wikipedia. Of course youth culture is going to vary with time and location, but hip hop today is what rock and roll was in the 1950s and 1960s. That said, youth culture is much larger than music. When you're old enough that your frame of reference includes Walkman, ten cent pay phone calls and pagers, having some idea of what iPods and iPhone are and who Tila Tequila is only helps.

It isn't always possible but I'd suggest eating lunch with your kids if and when you can. I worked in a middle school where teachers took their students to the cafeteria for lunch halfway through an 80-minute block. There was a table for teachers in the middle of the lunchroom and each class had its own table or area. After watching fights break out among the student tables (and inevitably having my lunch interrupted breaking them up or keeping my class out of them) I started sitting with my sixth graders and eating with them. It worked out very well for all of us. Breaking bread with my students, we got a chance to know each other on a more personal level, outside of the order and business of the classroom. Further, being with the students gave me a better feel for what was going on around us and allowed me to de-escalate situations long before they got out of hand. On the other hand, there

were teachers at that center table who probably thought I was snubbing them. If that was the case, too bad. You can't make everyone happy all the time, and as a teacher your main responsibility in the school is to your students, not to gossip and socializing with staff (though there is room for that as well).

And by the way, if there is no separate line for teachers, think before you cut all the students to get to the register just because you're a teacher. Think what students learn when they see you waiting patiently in line with everyone else versus what they learn when you barrel your way to the front of the line and cut in. Personally I think that's a dick-move, an abuse of your authority as a teacher.

Taking a sick day when you're not sick is defrauding your school district. But ask any teacher and they'll tell you there are those times when you just *need* a day off. It happens. So when the pressures and stress of the job are getting to you, consider calling in sick. You're better serving your students and school if you're fresh and eager, not frazzled and thinking only of Friday. On the other hand, don't abuse absences. Students (like people in general) get used to routines and enjoy order, structure, and a certain sense of predictability. You're *being there* goes a long way to ensure these things.

## 5.13 Critically Using and Examining Texts

In Section 5.8 we discussed how a text in critical pedagogy is more than a textbook. Though there are things we wish we could shield our students from, there are times that to do so is negligent on our part. This section looks at four commons texts—textbooks, homework, tests, and grades—and how they can be used and examined critically.

The textbook industry in the United States is a $4 billion a year business at the elementary and high school levels. College level textbooks often sell for up to $180 or more each. The prices of used books aren't much better; because used texts quickly swamp the market publishers look to make their profit on the first sale (hence the extravagant price) (Granof, 2007). Authors names are seen as marketing tools and it's not uncommon for texts to be written by people whose names are not on them (Schemo, 2006d). A Florida law passed in 2006 stated that "American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed" and "shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable" (Norton, 2006). I'd like to examine a common US history textbook in light of patriotism and the notion that history as a discipline must be knowable, teachable and testable (what, pray tell, is the alternative?).

McGraw Hill publishes *The American Vision* under its Glencoe imprimatur, a textbook used in United States history classes in my school. Five Ph.D.s are listed as its authors. Students in my district use the New York State edition of the textbook. As soon as students open up the book they face an "Honoring America" section on the front page which details flag etiquette, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the "American's Creed." I consider myself patriotic in my own right but somehow I'd made it through 13 years of kindergarten through high school without ever having encountered the American's Creed. A note from the authors (do any students actually read

these?) explains that they want students "to succeed on the New York State Regents Exam" and there is an entire section "Keys to succeeding on the Regents exam" that follows, containing the New York State core curriculum in History.

McGraw Hill's ties to the Bush Administration run deep (Metcalf, 2002). Prescott Bush and James McGraw Jr. were friends in the 1930s. Today Prescott's grandson is President of the United States and James' grand-nephew Harold III runs the show over at McGraw Hill which enjoyed record revenues of $6.3 billion in 2006 (http://investor.mcgraw-hill.com). NCLB has proven a boon to the publishing giant. McGraw Hill has the most contracts of any test developer with more than half the states of the Union to develop their standardized assessments. McGraw Hill's CTB is the leading publisher of standardized tests, scoring more than 20 million such exams annually (www.ctb.com). As I write this, McGraw Hill reports 2007 third-quarter earnings of $452 million with earnings from their education segment up 9.9% to $2.2 billion (Reuters, 2007). NCLB backs phonics-based reading instruction and McGraw Hill markets products such as Breakthrough to Literacy and SRA's Open Court series, which bills itself as "the only reading program based on a generation of intense, empirical research..." (www.mcgrawhill.ca).

I had a history professor in college named Jay Kinsbruner who'd occasionally lament that students in university weren't reading anymore, that he could assign $x$-amount of pages each week and they'd complain. At the time I felt great sympathy for his position and plight. I was in my second or third year as an undergrad, coming from a working class background where I was the first one in my family to go to college, and here I was applying myself and doing well at CUNY's Queens College when I'd spent the last couple years of high school and my first year or so in college wondering if I was "college material." I quickly discovered I was indeed, college material, whatever that is. I like school and reading and writing and gladly did what I was told to do. I'd been taught to respect education and the educated when I was a kid (and I still do, though in a more nuanced way) so I held guys like Kinsbruner who had published books and had Ph.D.s in high esteem. There was a mystique about men and women like him from my perspective, and part of that mystique was the massive amount of work they'd done to get where they were. My attitude was what else should students in classes like Kinsbruner's expect, especially those who wanted to go on to be historians and teachers themselves? As an aside, just to show how people develop and their views change, I recall a student in Kinsbruner's class telling me that based on my comments and observations in class he thought I'd really like what this guy LaPen over in France was saying. Yikes!

Fast forward 10 years. I'm still in school, CUNY's Graduate Center this time, and I'm taking a class where the professor is assigning 200–400 pages of reading a week. And this isn't fun stuff. I'm teaching full time and have a family, so needless to say I'm not reading most of this dreck or even half of it every week. I'm prioritizing, reading what I think the professor is going to discuss (she's not going to be able to cover 300 or more pages in a 2-hour weekly class except in some sort of superficial way), raising my hand at the beginning of class to comment on a reading to get it out of the way (so she won't pick on me again because I look like I read what I was supposed to and know what I'm talking about), do what I have to do to get by, write

a good paper at the end of the semester, and get a good grade for the course. Now why do I tell you all this?

Homework is out of control in American public schools (see, for example, Bennett & Kalish, 2006; Buell & Kralovec, 2001; Kohn, 2006). I work with kids who are overwhelmed with homework assignments on a nightly basis and on weekends. Students and their parents have to fight with administrators to lessen the homework load and be able to enjoy their time off from school (Berger, 2007c). I work with kids whose IEPs specify modified and abridged homework. Teachers at my high school generally work with 120 students in each day. There is no way you're going to collect, take home, grade, and make any kind of meaningful comments on 120 different assignments, whether it's a draft essay or the answer to five or more questions. Yet students have five to eight different teachers assigning varying amounts of homework every night.

Homework is a text students and teacher can critically study. Before a teacher assigns homework, he should ask himself why he's assigning it. The best answer and the most justifiable one is that the assignment either reviews and reinforces what was discussed in class or sets the stage for what will be introduced the next day. Unfortunately much of homework is given for the wrong reasons. Teachers often feel enormous pressure to assign it. Homework is something students, their parents, and many administrators *expect*. When teachers were students we had homework and often a lot of it, so doesn't it just make sense that we'll assign homework and a lot of it to our students? Some school districts have policies that mandate homework. But homework is often assigned as busy work, which is a misuse of homework.

I think there's something wrong with a middle school or high school student having to go home and work on assignments for 2–3 hours a night every night. The kids quickly get overwhelmed and either don't do the work or, like I do in graduate school today, prioritize what they feel they can't get away with *not* doing. I'm not against homework. There are times it can and should be assigned, and I have little tolerance for excuses about why it wasn't done, especially when the homework was assigned well in advance and the due date was no secret. That said, I always accept late homework assignments up to a certain point (e.g. the end of the week, end of the unit), but make sure I impress upon the students that I'm assigning homework for a reason and if they don't do it they really are doing themselves a disservice.

The best kind of teaching and assignments are often ones that are self-guided. Some students are so interested in a topic that they take it upon themselves to further their study of it through reading books, visiting the library, researching online, and watching documentaries and films about the subject. Unfortunately because so much of what we introduce students to are academic themes divorced from their daily lives, it's often difficult to help spark that native interest that will motivate a kid to further study on her own. Also, students need guidance in furthering their study of a subject, and homework often models this guidance. So it's a tricky balance we strive for. On the one hand we don't want to overwhelm kids and turn them off any more than they already are from schooling; on the other, we need to help them acquire the intellectual tools and habits that make for success in education, tools and habits that extend beyond the everyday classroom.

Like homework, tests and the idea of tests are such a part of the way we think of schooling and life that their absence would seem to leave an enormous void. We talk about events and trying periods of our lives as “tests” that have the potential to prove our mettle and enhance our sense of self-worth. I’ll mention here that these are situations and circumstances I think we as teachers, parents, and human beings need to prepare the children and students and other adults in our lives for. In the next chapter I’ll be critiquing some extremely solipsistic tests championed by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky’s characters. In case I didn’t make this clear in the second chapter, I am not against tests. I am against an overreliance on tests that should serve as assessment tools and not the final arbiters of student’s grades and futures. Tests have a place and can be used constructively. Tests should be used to guide students toward further growth, to assess where they are and where they need to be. Tests shouldn’t be used to punish students but they are, all in the name of “helping” them.

That said I’d like to examine one of the biggest, nastiest tests hovering over my high school students’ heads—the SAT. What is the SAT and how important is it? These are questions that can be considered with your students as they prepare to sit for the exam itself. SAT once stood for scholastic *aptitude* test but when the organization that administers the test (the College Board) were forced to admit this standardized exam revealed nothing about academic capacity in college the acronym was re-worked to stand for the scholastic *assessment* test. Questions of what the SAT supposedly assessed led to the jettisoning of that acronym and today the initials SAT stand for nothing. “That the SAT does not actually stand for anything today is somehow revealing,” notes parent Kate Stone Lombardi (2006: Section 14:1).

Its lack of meaning has not diminished the SAT’s importance or ubiquity: 2.2 million SATs are taken annually by students forking over the $41.50 registration fee. The SAT serves as a gatekeeper to America’s higher education system, with colleges rating the SAT scores as the second most important factor in the admission decision after transcripts (Bick, 2006). Like other tests, the SAT serves as a socializing device, with millions of high school juniors and seniors sweating out its nearly 4-hour administration. Students compare and contrast scores and retake the test attempting to get a higher score. I know adults who to this day brag about their SAT scores.

There are some serious problems with the SAT. Like other standardized tests that are supposed to be objective and unbiased, cultural capital and economic well-being impact this exam. Race correlates with higher and lower SAT scores. The average scores for critical reading, math, and writing are 537, 536, and 519 for whites; 454, 465, and 452 for Americans of Mexican descent; and 434, 429, and 428 for blacks. There is also a direct correlation between average SAT scores and a test-takers’ family income level. The more money your family makes the better you are likely to do on the SAT. For example, the mean scores for the critical reading, mathematics, and writing subtests for students from families earning less than $10,000 a year are 429, 457, and 427, respectively; average scores for students from families with incomes of more than $100,000 are 549, 564, and 543. Of course this doesn’t stop 21st century Social Darwinists like Charles Murray—who has come out against the SAT as a “corrosive symbol of privilege”—from explaining that “the children of the

well educated and affluent get most of the top scores because they constitute most of the smartest kids. They are smart because their parents are smart" (cited in Cohen, 2007b: B6).

What does it say about a standardized test that you can prep for it and do better on it? SAT prep yields a 35-point average improvement in scores (Berger, 2007b); 12–17% of students taking the SAT spend from $400 into the thousands of dollars on prep classes, tutors, and books (Bick, 2006). The two biggest SAT test prep companies are Kaplan and Princeton Review. The 6-month Princeton Review test prep program will set you back $1,700. Special accommodations on the SAT like extended time have doubled in the last 15 years (Franek, 2006) and there are middle and upper class people who pay for the psychological and educational evaluations that lead to special educational labels for their children (learning disabled is preferred), all to ensure their kids get time and a half to double time for the exam. The number of rich people taking the SAT is increasing, with 24% of test takers coming from homes with incomes greater than $100,000 a year, while the number of students from homes with lower incomes taking the exam is declining (overall, 19% of test takers are from homes with incomes of up to $30,000 a year) (Jaschik, 2006). All that aside, overall SAT scores are actually falling.

Maybe it's due to a problem that was revealed in 2006. The company that scores the exam, Pearson Educational Measurement, was screwing up. The October 2005 administration of the exam resulted in 27,000 of the 495,000 exams taken having to be rechecked for errors. Mistakes became apparent when students who had forked over the additional $50 to have their SATs hand-scored noticed a discrepancy between the two scorings. Turns out 4,400 students were scored too low and 613 lucky ones too high, with a maximum error of 450 points (Lombardi, 2006). When the initial exams were checked for errors 1,600 were overlooked; when these were examined they yielded a greater error rate than the tests already re-checked (Arenson, 2006b). What might look like a comedy of errors and ineptitude to observers—with an administrator at a college in California noting that "It looks like they [Pearson] hired the people who used to do the books for Enron"—had real-world effects on the thousands of students who sat for the October administration, with SAT problems impacting college admissions and scholarships for students in the class of 2006 (Arenson, 2006c).

The SAT is a monster and is increasingly recognized as such. That said, we have to encourage our students who want to go to college and must take it to study for it and do their best on it. At the same time we have to educate ourselves and our kids to its limitations and organize to fight against it. An anti-SAT movement is growing in America, bridging differences between progressives and conservatives like the aforementioned Murray. The predominance of SAT scores in college admissions has waned in recent years as admissions officers look at scores on other exams (like the ACT) and place an increasing emphasis on recommendations, grade point averages, community service, and extracurricular activities (Jaschik, 2006; Lewin, 2006c).

Grading can also be viewed as a text and studied critically with our students. Grades are used to sort and rank students and place them in hierarchies. When adults start to think of students and students start to think of themselves as "A students" or

“D students” the essentializing function of grades becomes apparent. When students “need an A” the commodification of grades is clear. Much of grading is an arbitrary endeavor, varying from teacher to teacher. Recognizing this, a movement is afoot to standardize grades across schools and school districts (Finder, 2006). Teachers and students can discuss the benefits and drawbacks to alternative grading options such as credit/no credit, pass/fail, written evaluations, and portfolio assessments.

We are enmeshed in the everyday classroom. To be able to take a step back and see it for what it is, to see it as nested in hierarchies of domination and power, requires a critical perspective. At the same time we need to survive in the everyday classroom and help our students succeed when success may today be measured in ways we oppose. By treating the everyday classroom and the subject matter and relationships therein as a text open for study, teachers and students take steps toward critical consciousness. By proposing alternatives and exploring their viability where and when possible, we announce our visions of the future in attempts to give life to our utopias.