

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY MEETS ‘SURVIVAL ENGLISH’: ONE COMMUNITY BASED WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAM’S APPROACH TO EDUCATING IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the advantages of broadening conceptions of ‘political action’ in ways that more effectively support critical pedagogical practices in adult ESL classrooms. Anchored in ethnographic and discourse analytic methods, the following analysis of formal and informal learning opportunities in one community based workplace literacy program serving low income immigrant women in California explores how educational practices and political agendas both converged and conflicted. Blending feminist critiques of ‘empowerment education,’ conceptions of resistance and agency, and critical pedagogy scholarship to highlight the challenges of moving from theory to practice, the following account reaffirms Freire’s call to honor the political as it emerges from learners’ lives and needs.

Keywords: Adult ESL, critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, informal learning

INTRODUCTION

By 9:30 a.m. on a chilly Sunday in January, in the heart of Northwood,¹ California’s Chinatown, restless drivers sat double parked for several square blocks around one of the busiest commercial districts in this large U.S. West Coast city. Amidst vegetable-laden street carts and merchants selling caged chickens and live turtles, churchgoers, and shoppers hurried about their business. Meanwhile, 30 women, some with children in tow, made their way to the third floor of a resource center, the Immigrant Women’s Alliance (IMWA), to attend weekly workplace literacy classes. As the women entered the building, teachers greeted them

with warm welcomes. Hushed yet animated hellos in Cantonese echoed in the stairwell as the women climbed up single file and proceeded down a carpeted hallway.

The entrance to the main meeting room was flanked by a wall of flyers in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Cambodian, and English – on topics ranging from citizenship and workers’ rights, to occupational health and safety. Photographs of group picnics, class parties and IMWA celebrations decorated the walls, as did posters with vocabulary lists and dialogs from language lessons. Children’s paintings, calligraphy, health tips and announcements about garment worker strikes also covered the walls. Relaxed yet busy, IMWA’s office felt welcoming. By 10:00 a.m., 15 women gathered around a table for an English class in the main room while the others drifted toward smaller offices used as makeshift classrooms.

THE IMMIGRANT WOMEN’S ALLIANCE (IMWA)

IMWA’s workplace literacy program was initially chosen as a research site because of its focus on a critical pedagogical approach to workplace literacy education. While critical pedagogy has long enjoyed the educational limelight, studies of how critical pedagogy is practiced in classrooms, especially with adult literacy learners, have been less common. This may in large part be because critical pedagogy is a philosophy rather than a methodology, and as such, approaches to its implementation vary widely across age groups, and sociocultural contexts.

Building on the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, and taking inspiration from the political work at Highlander in Kentucky during the 1950’s and 1960’s (e.g., Horton and Freire, 1990), IMWA staff made it their mission “to empower women by helping them to exercise their rights and develop the skills necessary to advocate for justice and dignity in their lives and workplaces. A community based membership organization, [IMWA], is part of an emerging global movement to improve the living and working conditions of immigrants, women and workers.” Such a vision of education for empowerment mirrors the objectives of critical literacy theorists who suggest that “concerted efforts [be] made to understand and practice reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation, for empowerment of the subordinated, the marginalized Other” (Lanshear and McClaren, 1993, p. xviii).

While IMWA’s workplace literacy classes embodied many of the promising qualities educators have identified as essential to building successful programs for adult learners,² teachers’ and participants’ diverging perspectives regarding what it meant to be ‘empowered’ revealed some of the challenges inherent in the concrete practice of critical pedagogy. For IMWA staff, taking control seemed connected to public activism, while for some of the immigrant women in the program, empowerment was inscribed in more personal and private spheres of language use and social interaction. In emphasizing overt political action such as participating in strikes, demonstrations, and rallies, IMWA appeared at times to overlook the ways in which these immigrant women’s desires to learn this ‘survival English’ already embodied quieter, but perhaps equally relevant activist intentions.

Below, I consider how broadened conceptions of what constitutes ‘political action’ might better support critical pedagogical practices in adult ESL classrooms. Anchored in ethnographic and discourse analytic methods, the following analysis of formal and informal learning opportunities at one community based organization dedicated to empowering low

income immigrant women in California explores how educational practices and political beliefs both converged and conflicted. Drawing on feminist critiques of ‘empowerment education,’³ the article concludes by turning a hopeful gaze toward conceptions of resistance, improvisation and agency⁴ as well as critical pedagogy scholarship⁵ to help us consider the complexities of language teaching and learning in such contexts.

THE STUDY

Context

Founded in the 1980s, the Immigrant Women’s Alliance described itself as “a community based organization working with low income women employed in the garment, hotel, restaurant, nursing home, and electronics industries.” At the time of this study, IMWA staff also saw themselves as political organizers of “campaigns for collective action”

Workplace literacy classes at IMWA met once a week, and all levels worked on the same lesson, with some variations in vocabulary and grammar based on proficiency. One teacher conveyed IMWA’s commitment to a Freirian perspective by suggesting that, “whatever we teach really needs to come from the community.” Because they viewed education as needing to emerge from participants’ lives, IMWA staff advocated dialog followed by critical reflection and action.

Such values were likewise reflected in teachers’ conversations about the classroom, a place to “encourage critical analysis about race, class and gender, and encourage leadership development.” And, indeed, IMWA’s classes did encourage leadership; more than half the volunteer teachers I met were former students.

IMWA also encouraged participants to look critically at the kinds of jobs available to low income immigrant women, and to question assumptions about the workplace choices accessible to them in American society and in the global labor market. For example, while many traditional adult education and job training programs assume that workers should accept low paying, unstable jobs without question, in IMWA’s workplace literacy classes, teachers and students explored the historical and sociopolitical forces that define immigrant women’s experiences. As Tara Goldstein (1995) suggests, “a critical pedagogy of ESL takes as its starting point the reality that we teach ESL to immigrant workers in an ethnically stratified society where members of different ethnic groups have differential access to valued resources and power” (p. 389).

The staff’s familiarity with social, cultural, and political issues within these women’s communities, particularly those related to gender, shaped decisions about curriculum and organizational structure. IMWA staff solicited students’ input on future curriculum, provided citizenship classes, and held all events at convenient times with childcare available. These dimensions of the program exemplify the highly supportive environment IMWA created.

Researcher Participation and Data

IMWA was one of two community based sites within a larger comparative ethnographic study of three workplace literacy programs serving immigrant adults in California where I was a participant observer for two years (see Katz, 1999).

As the grandchild of four immigrants from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union who worked in New York City's garment industry and other low wage occupations typically available to newly arrived immigrants in the early 1900s, I have always taken a special interest in how newcomers' personal and linguistic histories shape their life trajectories. While I did not share the ethnic background of the IMWA participants, my interest in the program stemmed in part from my ongoing concerns about the educational and workplace opportunities (or lack thereof) immigrants, particularly women, are offered in the United States.

At IMWA, my roles included volunteer teacher, co-class participant, and observer. I attended parties and celebrations and shared personal stories about family and work. In exchange for allowing me to participate I co-taught an intermediate workplace literacy class for six months on Sunday mornings with a graduate of the workplace literacy program, a woman from Hong Kong whom I will call Allie. Every Sunday after classes, volunteer educators (including me) and the workplace literacy coordinator had lunch together.

The data set from IMWA includes: curricular materials; fieldnotes from meetings, presentations, training sessions, social events, classes and informal interviews; one audiotaped group interview with several workplace literacy program participants and two teachers who were program graduates. I was asked not to audiotape or videotape classroom activities, discussions, meetings or social events, as some staff members, who chose not to be interviewed, saw this as potentially disruptive.

Participants

IMWA was staffed by a small group of salaried employees, many college educated in the United States, and by volunteers whose educational backgrounds varied; some had graduated from high school, others had multiple college degrees. Many of IMWA's salaried employees were immigrants or children of immigrants. According to the workplace literacy coordinator, (a Chinese American woman in her mid twenties with a BA in English from a local university) the majority of people who attended classes at IMWA had a high school education. They came from all over China, including Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, and there were also several who identified themselves as ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. The eight members of our intermediate level Sunday morning class were all from Mainland China, they spoke primarily Cantonese, and some also spoke Mandarin or Toisanese. All were literate in Chinese. The women ranged in age from late twenties to early sixties, which reflected the general spread of participants' ages at IMWA. Often, two generations of a family – mother and daughter – would attend class together while a member of generation number three played down the hall in childcare.

Participants were typically employed in garment or factory work, retail sales, geriatric or childcare, or bulk mailing services. Laboring for minimum wage, most women lived and worked within walking or bus distance of IMWA. Although some had migrated to the United States 15 or 20 years earlier, their English, even in our 'intermediate level' class, was still fairly basic. As often happens in such communities, many of the women spent most of their

days in Chinese speaking environments and thus had few opportunities to use or learn English. Nevertheless, they were eager to learn English because they felt doing so would help them find better paying jobs, which would in turn improve their family’s quality of life.

As the IMWA program has been described thus far, its goals are in keeping with those of other critical pedagogy classrooms.⁶ Auerbach’s (1993b) description of the basic precepts behind a participatory approach speaks directly to IMWA’s espoused programmatic intentions:

. . . [T]he goal of participatory education . . . is not to promise people that through education they can be assimilated into the very system which required their marginalization but rather is to create the basis for transforming that system into a more equitable one. The teacher’s role in this process is to identify problematic aspects of learners’ lives, re-present them to learners as content for dialogue and literacy work, and guide reflection on individual experience to more critical social reflection that eventually could lead to collective action (p. 544).

Reviewing IMWA’s Approach

While many have suggested that critical pedagogy helps students ‘rewrite’ their worlds both inside and outside the classroom, the data from IMWA indicate that when disconnect occurs between philosophy and practice, critical pedagogy and its practitioners can sometimes fall short. Feminist theorists⁷ have taken issue with critical pedagogical theory on several counts. For example, scholars argue that the principles of critical pedagogy espoused in the literature are infrequently reflected in classroom practice and often operate at a distance from actual acts of teaching and learning; they maintain that much critical pedagogical theory is stripped of social, historical and – quite ironically – even political contexts; and they contend (a contention explored at length in this article) that critical pedagogy has often framed students as victims of false consciousness, the supposedly naïve views that keep disadvantaged groups under a hegemonic spell which compels them to collaborate in their own oppression. Such individuals, who have supposedly succumbed to having the wool pulled over their eyes, need educators to help them analyze the world and their place in it. As Cushman (1999) explains,

The oppressed suffer, so the thinking goes, because they do not deeply understand their complicity in the terms and relations that continue their subordination; the disenfranchised need to be more critical . . . they need to stop internalizing the symbolic codes . . . of dominant groups; they need to move beyond the surface of the word to name, question and undermine the prevailing ideologies working there (p. 248).

While such views have guided the efforts of numerous critical pedagogues in recent decades, feminist theorists caution that critical pedagogy has often perpetuated the very relations of domination it was meant to not only interrogate but also alter. While it was certainly not the intention of IMWA to perpetuate relations of subordination, the analysis of discourse and ideology in the following section explores how this workplace literacy curriculum may not have been transformative in the ways its creators might have hoped; rather, the program inadvertently created a context in which some women consciously harnessed course materials for their own liberatory purposes.

Three Sample Workplace Literacy Lessons

The semester I taught at IMWA, the curricular theme chosen by staff was ‘knowledge, skills, and rights,’ with a focus on ‘how gender plays into the everyday work experiences of women’s lives.’ Topics included sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence, women’s health, the history of Chinese immigrant women, and interactions with police. Spanning several weeks, there were three related lessons (see Figures 1-3 below). The one on sexual harassment reflected an acknowledged need among workplace literacy educators to address personal safety on the job. Goldstein claims, “part of the challenge to harassment and assault is located in a woman’s ability to use language effectively . . . to respond to a harasser or to make an official complaint about harassment” (1995, p. 391). These sample lessons are representative of IMWA’s approach to curricular structure and content throughout the study.

‘Calling for Help’

Emergency: dial 9-1-1
[Northwood] Women Against Rape Crisis Hotline: dial [number]

Dialog
Tisha: Hello, Women Against Rape Crisis Hotline. My name is Tisha. May I help you?
Yi : I need to talk to someone. I was raped by my boyfriend. I am afraid to tell anyone.
Tisha: You can talk to us. Everything is confidential. Do you need to speak to someone in another language?
Yi : Yes. I speak Cantonese/Toisanese/Mandarin. (or: I need a _____ speaker.)

Vocabulary

Someone	need	afraid
Boyfriend	was raped	confidential
Anyone	was sexually assaulted	another
Everything	was attacked	
Language	talk/ speak/ tell	
Cantonese/Toisanese/Mandarin speaker		

Questions
What is happening in the dialogue?
What happened to Yi?
Why is she afraid to tell anyone?
What else may she be worried about?
Why do you think men rape?
If a husband forces his wife to have sex when she does not want to, is it rape?
Have you or would you call a hotline if you needed help and support? If not, why?

Figure 1. Vocabulary and Questions for IMWA Lesson 6.

‘Emergency Room Rights!’

[At the top there is a drawing of a hospital waiting room, in which a doctor and nurse consult with each other, a man holds a child on his lap, another man is standing on crutches, and a woman sitting at a desk writes on a pad of paper as she speaks with a patient. Above the picture the following caption appears: “Yang talks to her friend, Ping, about rape. Ping is worried that Yang may be hurt, so they go to the hospital together. They go to the emergency room. Many people are waiting in the room.” Below the picture is the following caption: “Yang is quiet. She is tired, angry, afraid, and sad.”]

Dialog
 Ping: My friend does not speak English. She needs someone who speaks Cantonese.
 Receptionist: Do you have health insurance?
 Yang: No.
 Receptionist: How are you hurt?
 Yang: I was raped.
 Ping: She needs a woman doctor.
 Receptionist: Please fill out this form and take a seat. I will call you when your doctor comes.

Vocabulary

hospital	wait/waiting	worried
emergency room	speaks/speak	many
people	fill out	tired
health insurance	take a seat	angry
form	will call	afraid
how	sad	
please	quiet	

Questions
 Why does Yang go to the emergency room?
 Why does her friend go with her?
 Who are probably the people waiting in the emergency room? (Are they white? Are they rich?) Do they have health insurance? Does racial and sexual discrimination happen in the emergency room? What are Yang’s rights at the hospital?

Exercise
 Please act out this dialogue in class.

Figure 2. Vocabulary and Questions for IMWA Lesson 7.

‘Sexual Harassment’

[At the top of the page there is a drawing of two women in conversation. Above the picture the caption reads: Ann and Diane are co-workers. During lunch break, Ann talks to Diane about the Supervisor, Joe.]

Dialog
 Ann: Joe touches me when he is talking to me. He tells me that I look sexy. I feel so uncomfortable!!
 Diane: He shouldn’t touch you! He shouldn’t talk about you sexually!
 Ann: What can I do? I am afraid to tell other people!

Vocabulary

co-workers	touch	during
lunch	look	about
break		sexy
		so
		uncomfortable
		when
		other

Questions
 What happened during lunch break? Why is Ann afraid?
 What can Ann do if she wants to report Joe? What can Ann do if she does not want to report? Do you think it is easy for men to get away with sexual harassment? Why?

Figure 3. Vocabulary and Questions for IMWA Lesson 8.

CREATING CURRICULUM AT IMWA

In keeping with IMWA's practice, all three lessons took the form of dialogs. They were initially distributed to teachers by the workplace literacy coordinator the week before class, and distributed to students on the first day the lesson was taught. Two to three weeks were spent on each lesson, and together they constituted a quarter of the semester's work.

While students provided input into curricular content at community meetings held each semester, teachers (mainly volunteers) participated minimally in developing curriculum. The workplace literacy coordinator chose topics, wrote the dialogs, assembled the visual aids, and decided what vocabulary and critical questions to include. Although as a salaried employee this was her job, the process seemed unidirectional for a program based on Freire's philosophy.

The dependence on pre-written dialogs as a defining element of classroom structure seemed to contradict the very notion of *dialogic education*. As Freire says, "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (1970, p. 81). From a language learning perspective, while the pre-written dialogs were convenient for volunteer teachers who had little time to prepare for classes, they also had the potential to undermine opportunities for students to grapple with language and ideas through composing their own conversations and questions about topics evolving more directly from their personal concerns and experiences.

NARRATING WOMEN'S STORIES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CURRICULAR DISCOURSE

Goldstein (1995) argues that "feminist educational resources and materials that can be used to provide women with opportunities to learn and practice the language, tone of voice, and physical posture associated with saying 'No' have much to contribute to an ESL curriculum for protection and control at work" (pp. 393-394) (Also see Yerian, forthcoming, 2012). To be sure, the lessons in Figures 1-3 addressed broader social issues like the disturbing link between race and poverty in the U.S., and they rightly underscored how many people in emergency waiting rooms are poor, have little or no access to health insurance, are often badly treated and are consistently given fewer options for medical treatment. The lessons also pointed to the unpleasant realities of sexual harassment in the workplace and the fact that rape is committed against women by strangers as well as by friends and family members. Furthermore, they offered useful information about how to call for help or talk with emergency room staff. Finally, the lessons challenged the cooperative nature of many ESL texts in helpful (critical) ways (Pennycook, 2004), and they took a critical stance toward an important set of problems for which they also suggested possible partial solutions (see Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987; Goldstein, 1995).

On the flip side, the vocabulary and dialogs in these lessons imply a world in which women are chiefly victims. In ‘Calling for Help’ (Figure 2) the main character is afraid to talk to anyone. Similarly, in ‘Emergency Room Rights’ one character is ‘tired, angry, afraid, and sad.’ In Lesson 8 (Figure 3), one woman is the victim of sexual harassment. Like the protagonists in the preceding lessons, she is afraid to talk to other people although she manages to share her experience with a sympathetic friend who encourages her to take action.

Although there is no doubt that these stories resonate for many immigrant (and non-immigrant) women, they repeatedly portray women who are victimized – a depiction which, according to study participants, was not necessarily reflective of their lives. The language of these lessons seemed to narrate these women’s stories from the top down – imposing rather than exploring experience. But ultimately, the dialogs did not control the conversations participants had. While not the case all the time, during these three lessons – in which vocabulary, questions and dialogs distinctly framed participants’ roles as victims – our class members remained silent and still, as if the act of reading words on the page had a direct effect on their bodies and vocal cords. Below, further exploration of classroom participation structures⁸ illustrates how not only the content of some lessons, but the prewritten interactional routines at IMWA may have, at times, unintentionally stifled participants’ voices.

CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES

Bell Hooks reminds us that “. . . professors may attempt to deconstruct traditional biases while sharing that information through body posture, tone, word choice, and so on, that perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing” (1994, p. 141). This disconnect is challenging to overcome, but my co-teacher, Allie, was a master at incorporating official and unofficial agendas.

Allie’s official style was similar to that of others at IMWA – using dialogs and simple visuals, complemented by drill oriented methods such as repetition of isolated words and phrases. In this setting, the teacher’s primary role was to model correct pronunciation and use repetition to move toward standard American pronunciation. In privileging form over content or function, this format minimized communication about ideas and made the teacher the mediating hub of a communicative wheel.

Although pre-written dialogs can certainly be useful as one form of activity within a broader curriculum, at IMWA such dialogs consumed a large portion of class time. This turned teachers into questioners and framers of the issues while students became respondents and prospective absorbers of particular political positions. Quite unintentionally, this approach had the potential to undermine IMWA’s liberatory goals by leaving scant room for women to formulate their own questions, identify their own problems, or suggest solutions – processes essential to Freire’s notion of ‘rewriting the world.’

Interestingly, though, the women did find ways to turn classroom experiences toward their own ends, as illustrated in the vignette below.

WOMEN WRITING AND REWRITING WORLDS

On the first day that Allie and I presented the lesson on sexual harassment (see Figure 3), Allie conferred briefly with the women in Chinese and informed me in English that, what our students wanted to do was discuss how to ask the price of something at the grocery store, and practice the ‘hi-how-are-you’ and ‘bye-have-a-nice-day’ greeting routines that peppered their daily encounters with store clerks. We spent the rest of class on these routines, with Allie guiding the students in setting up hypothetical situations and working to construct possible scenarios and mini dialogs while I scribed them on butcher paper taped to the wall. In the coming weeks, our class made a routine of spending a few minutes on the formal lesson (a collective nod to the official curriculum) then inventing activities of interest to the women for the remainder of class. Our students were consistently self directed and articulate about what they wanted and needed to know, as the example below illustrates.

THE POWER OF DIALOG

One concern that underlay the lesson on ‘Knowing Your Rights’ (see Figure 2) is that immigrants often experience difficulty dealing with medical professionals and⁹ medical emergencies in which accurate communication may mean the difference between life and death. Four months into the semester, we began a unit on health that included interacting with medical personnel by phone.

One Sunday, Allie related a story about her neighbor’s recent experience. Their 30-year-old son was having difficulty breathing, so the young man’s father dialed 911 for help. When the medics arrived, they spent considerable time asking the son questions about his symptoms, the medications he was taking, and his health insurance. When the father intervened, urging the medics to take his son to the hospital, they ordered him to keep quiet, saying there was certain information they needed to obtain. As Allie related, when the family finally arrived at the hospital, the doctor informed them that they were too late; their son had gone into a coma. A week after these events, the young man was still in a coma and it was unknown whether he would recover. In response to Allie’s story the class composed the dialog in Figure 4.

‘Calling 9-1-1’

Mother: Hello. My daughter fell down and hurt herself.

9-1-1 : What’s wrong with her? How is she hurt?

Mother: She is hurt badly. She cannot move her leg. Can you please send an ambulance now? She needs to see a doctor.

9-1-1 : I will tell an ambulance right away.

(After the ambulance has arrived)

Mother: Please take my daughter to the hospital. She needs to go right away. Please don’t wait.

9-1-1 : I need to get information first. You have to wait a minute.

Mother: No, she needs to go to the hospital now. Please get information later at the hospital. Ask questions later

Figure 4. Student Generated Dialog on Calling 9-1-1.

Dialogs like the one above, which emerged directly from participants’ lives, offered students richer opportunities to manipulate language and thought, mould their environments and, in so doing, more ably embody social power in critical situations. The example above also demonstrates how the women creatively revised curricular content to suit their immediate needs. In these student-authored conversations, participants placed more emphasis on a desire to acquire language they personally deemed ‘useful,’ but which may not have been considered relevant from IMWA’s perspective. The next section explores some of the complexities of envisioning and enacting a critical pedagogical curriculum.

A TEACHERS’ MEETING AND SPECIAL PRESENTATION

The gap that sometimes arose between philosophy and practice at IMWA revealed itself one day during a presentation to volunteer teachers given by a local university professor who came to discuss techniques used in literacy programs elsewhere in the U.S. During a conversation between volunteers and IMWA staff, the program director, Iris, asked volunteer teachers if they were willing to “facilitate discussions on difficult issues.” One young man asked Iris how teachers could encourage women without taking the risk of creating conflict in their families. Iris responded that we needed to “provide support to the women on a collective level,” and make sure they understood that their problems were not isolated, but rather shared by others.

I described to the group how the women in my and Allie’s class had asked to learn about making appointments over the phone with doctors, and how to exchange things at the store, and I asked about the place of such topics in the curriculum. In response, Iris said that while she knew the women wanted to learn those things, she preferred that we find ways to reframe their interests. How, Iris continued, might we move conversations about using the telephone to broader discussions of how immigrant women have a hard time making doctors appointments?

While her point is certainly in keeping with the broader goals of a participatory literacy agenda (Auerbach, 1993a, 1993b; Freire, 1970/1990), and is also consistent with the notion that we need to explore connections between everyday experiences and political positioning, the exchange exposed some troubling assumptions. IMWA staff appeared in this instance to underestimate the importance of having access to the language of everyday interaction by seeing such ‘survival English’ – as Iris and others called it – as peripheral to the daily struggles these women faced, and as secondary to IMWA’s curricular agenda. IMWA’s more overt political agenda diminished the importance of everyday language skills while simultaneously imposing a set of values that rendered insignificant what the women themselves wanted and needed. Rather than collaboratively negotiating curriculum to serve a participatory educational process (Auerbach, 1989), the program’s assumptions sometimes perpetuated precisely the kind of ideological domination it so vigorously condemned.¹⁰

Finally, the discussion among teachers about ‘just teaching language’ – that is, teaching the language of the everyday as opposed to teaching a particular sociopolitical agenda – revealed a disconcerting conception of language itself. At IMWA, language was, it seems, perceived solely as a tool disconnected from social and political contexts. Stripping language of its discursive power in this way overlooks the constitutive nature of language – the degree

to which it creates and mediates our individual and collective experiences (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Gee, 1996; Gonzalez, 2001; Pennycook, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, such a view reduces teaching and learning processes to the transmission of information or point of view, reflecting, in the end, a banking rather than problem posing approach. As Auerbach & Burgess (1985) put it, “the teacher’s role is not to transmit knowledge, but to engage students in their own education by inviting them to enter into the process of thinking critically about their reality” (p. 491).

Perhaps most importantly, it is the embeddedness of language in social contexts – the fact that the social exists in and through language (and language exists in and through the social) – that makes separating language from its social contexts a deceptive, even dangerous proposition.

CULTURALLY VARIABLE MODELS OF TEACHER STUDENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Although so far the discrepancy between a Freirian model of liberatory education and its enactment has been explored in terms of disconnection between philosophy and practice, socioculturally rooted explanations of women’s responses to the curriculum and to classroom participation structures may also have been operating. At IMWA’s teacher meeting on popular literacy described above, one volunteer, Nancy, who had emigrated from Hong Kong as an eight-year-old child,¹¹ suggested that “Chinese patterns of role identification” may have influenced the women’s expectations regarding teacher-student relationships.

In Chinese thinking, Nancy explained, “the teacher is the almighty and the student doesn’t ask questions. If a teacher says ‘I don’t know,’ then students may well wonder why that teacher is the teacher.” Students may perceive teachers who act as co-learners and facilitators rather than authoritative experts as having abandoned their professional responsibilities (Wrigley, 1993).

Nancy also pondered the extent to which there may have been conflicts between “Eastern and Western” styles of schooling where teachers talk and students listen. Setting aside for the moment objections to sweeping generalizations about “all Chinese people,” or “Western versus Eastern,” this line of thinking may offer a partial explanation of dynamics observed at IMWA – one that researchers at other adult literacy programs in the U.S. have observed (Rivera, 1999). If students were expecting, based on their own schooling experiences, to receive instruction and be directed by the teacher (Freire’s banking model), then teachers may have found it a challenge to take on a less commanding role. Although IMWA’s classroom principles were officially defined according to Freirian principles, it may have been that a multitude of conflicting interpretations based on participants’ (teachers’ and students’) socioculturally rooted beliefs about teacher-student roles and relationships were invisibly intersecting.

Another point the volunteer teacher, Nancy, raised at the popular literacy meeting was that “to be political means different things in the United States and China. With the history of China [the Cultural Revolution], being political can risk the death of your whole family, consequently many people feel that being overtly apolitical is safer.” Perhaps IMWA’s explicit political agenda posed a conflict for participants who felt that certain topics were better left unarticulated.

THE FISH DEMONSTRATION: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY SURFACES AGAIN

In contrast to the lessons described in Figures 1-3, a demonstration given at IMWA on how to prepare fish caught in local ocean waters offers an example of more Freirian dialogical learning. This special seminar highlighted IMWA's attention to the local community's health concerns. On the California coast where these women live, many people fish to supplement the food they buy. This is most common in low income communities where consumption of locally caught seafood leads to a disproportionately high intake of chemicals and pollutants from contaminated waters. To address this danger, IMWA staff invited an environmental organization to give a presentation on how to cook locally caught seafood in ways that minimize ingestion of toxins and carcinogens.¹² An analysis of this presentation's discourse and participation structures and its tacit pedagogical assumptions reveals a lesson structure more in keeping with IMWA's liberatory goals.

After workplace literacy classes one Sunday, three people from a local environmental group arrived at IMWA. In the main meeting room students and teachers from all three classes sat looking at a flipchart showing a multicolored cross-sectional drawing of a fish, labeled in Chinese. As one presenter explained in English about the increasing levels of water pollution and the dangers of eating too much locally caught fish, her colleague translated into Chinese. And as the first speaker used a knife and cutting board to clean and prepare a slippery gray fish, she queried participants about how their cooking preferences, how often their families ate fish, and whether they ate the heads and skin. As she questioned students, she linked relevant questions about their daily cooking habits with information about family health. This exchange of information continued as the fish was skinned and cleaned. Throughout the demonstration, the women leaned in attentively to get a better view of what the presenter was doing with the fish, and talked animatedly to one another.

Although the demonstration touched on broader social issues, it was presented in a way that invited participants to engage in dialog by contextualizing new information in discussions of their daily lives. Participants were engaged on multiple, multimodal levels from the very concrete act of how to safely prepare locally caught fish, to which communities were most likely to be affected by water pollution, and why. Although the presenter's role placed her at the hub of the communicative wheel, there was significantly more interaction between her and the participants – and between the participants themselves. Students brought important knowledge and experience to the subject that served as a solid scaffold for co-constructing knowledge that could help the women care for themselves and their families.

The fish demonstration at IMWA was one of several lessons that embodied a liberatory pedagogy. In such literacy events, which implicitly acknowledged the importance of using participants' experience as a basis for teaching, participants were positioned as already possessing important 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992).

THE WOMEN'S VIEWS ON CURRICULUM

Interviews revealed additional insight into participants' views of IMWA's curriculum. After the semester was over, I spoke with three students, Fae, Eve, and Mei. They agreed on

two things: first, they felt that too much time had been spent on topics like sexual harassment and the rape crisis hotline, and second, they wished that more time could have been spent on the language of daily life. Fae stated that, “telephone and shopping and the useful everyday [lessons], these are the necessary ones. Sometimes we spend time learning something like sexual harassment, but I don’t want to take two or four hours to learn. The useful lessons we can use everyday, but [the lesson on] sexual harassment cannot.” Her remarks reflect Scollon & Scollon’s (1995) claim that learning simple adjacency pairs (greetings, leave takings, requests for clarification) is a fluency marker signaling membership in a discourse community. As such, having command of seemingly simple linguistic routines can be critical to people’s attempts to alter social relationships and affect power relations.

Eve agreed with Fae that more time should be spent on “useful” topics. “I want the content of the lessons to be more related to the useful stuff The information on breast health was useful. When I had a mammogram I didn’t know how to speak about it with the doctor. Now I know. The most helpful lessons this semester were [about the] the telephone, making appointments, the daily use ones.” Eve also wanted to learn more about how to engage in daily conversation, and broaden her every day vocabulary.

Mei agreed, saying that, “usually [the women in my community] know how to take care [of themselves] if they have some sexually rough experience. They like to listen, but they don’t want to use the few hours they have to learn [to talk about that].” Instead, learning new vocabulary, understanding how to fill out job applications and medical forms, and working on reading and writing were her priorities.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The give and take between workshop presenters and participants during the fish demonstration, and the women’s spur-of-the-moment creation of dialogs on ‘useful’ topics during classes (as seen in Figure 4) might serve as models for ways to more generally restructure classroom conversations and interaction.

Goffman’s (1981) distinction between *authors* (who, in creating texts and scripts have power over the distribution of social roles) and *animators* (who give life to these roles) provides a useful framework for thinking about participation structures in a Freirian classroom. In many institutional settings, and at IMWA, more powerful members (staff) had more frequent opportunities, and thus greater authority, to author, while those less powerful (students) tended to animate. Despite organizational attempts to mitigate power and status differentials, there was an *authoritative* institutional discourse that sometimes undermined participants’ abilities to take on more agentive, dynamic storytelling roles.

One person who shifted comfortably back and forth between author and animator identities was my co-teacher, Allie. She took the official texts authored by IMWA staff (curricular dialogs) and used official institutional contexts (classes) for unofficial but meaningful purposes (determined by the women in our class). By teaching everyday language Allie ‘poached on,’ to use De Certeau’s (1984) term, the organizational discourse, inflecting it with participants’ purposes. By traversing these discursive realms, moving between author and animator, Allie not only fashioned new opportunities for herself, but created authoring

roles for fellow IMWA students, seamlessly enacting what the IMWA program was really about: empowering immigrant women.

Suresh Canagarajah’s (1999) concept of ‘safe houses’ – underlife in institutional contexts – also fits nicely with what seemed to be happening in our IMWA classroom. Canagarajah suggests that, “what motivates the learning of a language is the construction of the identities we desire and the communities we want to join in order to engage in communication and social life” (2004, p. 117). He argues as well that while “classrooms may adopt a narrower range of legitimized discourse and [pressure] students to adopt uniform identities, safe houses [provide] for the display of more complex discourses and mixed identities” (p. 124). The women in our class embodied identities as wives, mothers and caretakers in the classroom that while respected by IMWA staff, did not necessarily enjoy the same privileged status as the identities of activist or worker. But as Canagarajah contends, “hidden in the recesses of social spaces are pockets of resistance that have the potential of flowering into something profound and radical. What goes on in the safe houses simply represents a period of strategic mobilization and collaboration for marginalized groups to construct an oppositional culture” (p.134).

And ironically, what was perceived as ‘traditional’ to organizational staff – the language of everyday life – became a vehicle for these women to write oppositional stories, to author and animate new roles that might reshape their experiences outside the classroom. Perhaps IMWA’s attempted subversion of what staff perceived as oppressive, dominant societal ideologies may have inadvertently reproduced a counter but equally powerful discourse that at times nearly drowned out the voices of the very people the organization claimed to serve and protect.

In the dialogs, the women wrote under Allie’s tutelage, the roles they talked about with pride were most often those of mother, wife, and caretaker – the very roles historically viewed as negatively constraining by many feminists. And these traditional roles, while respected, honored and actively accommodated at IMWA, seemed linked at times to a certain disdain for teaching ‘survival English.’ By its very nature, such language certainly embodies, and has the potential to perpetuate the more traditional roles for women with which IMWA staff seemed to disassociate themselves.

Yet, it was through the language these women employed to tell about their daily lives that they felt most empowered. While some might suggest that IMWA participants were simply ‘victims of their own false consciousness’ – an argument which I am not alone in believing has been made all too frequently – the women’s stories suggest that such a view overlooks the ways students can take power into their own hands by engaging in the language practices they deemed most relevant. Here then, where it was least expected, a genuine critical pedagogy emerged.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON ‘EMPOWERMENT’ IN EDUCATION

Educators have struggled for decades to rethink teaching and learning in ways that fully engage participants, and critical pedagogy has provided a promising approach to accomplishing this. But, in keeping with others’ calls to rethink ‘empowerment’ (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009; Gore, 1992; Luke and Gore, 1992) we also need, once again, to

reconsider what counts as ‘political’ in educational contexts: for these women, learning everyday language clearly was.

Gore (1992) explores how critical and feminist discourses of empowerment “might serve as instruments of domination despite the intentions of their creators” (p. 54). Using Foucault’s notion of a ‘regime of truth’¹⁴ Gore suggests that the term *empowerment* implies both an agent of power (someone who has power to give) and a recipient of that power (someone who will become empowered). Such a view, she argues, reveals misguided perceptions about where power resides, and the nature of power, which some mistakenly assume “can be given, provided, controlled, held, conferred, taken away” (p. 57). But, if we accept Foucault’s notion that power is “never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth” (Foucault cited in Gore, p. 58), then power is not something one person can ever *give* to another. “. . . [S]etting oneself apart as teacher/intellectual/leader can easily foster an arrogance which assumes to know what empowerment means for [others]. And it assumes that ‘we *can* do for you.’” But, rather than assuming what empowerment might mean for others, if it is seen as an attempt to exercise power in order to help others exercise it, then the statement, ‘we *can* do for you,’ becomes a question: “‘what *can* we do for you?’” (Gore, 1992, pp. 61-62). Gore reminds us as teachers “that our agency has limits, that we might ‘get it wrong’ in assuming that we know what would be empowering for others, and that no matter what our aims or how we go about ‘empowering,’ our efforts will be partial and inconsistent” (p. 63). We as teachers may be able to foster environments in which our students feel able to empower themselves, but we cannot ever actually empower them.

While IMWA did much to foreground the voices, concerns and identities of immigrant women, participants did not view themselves as victims in the first place and thus resisted curricular content that confined them to such identities. IMWA women quietly yet steadfastly resisted the program’s attempts to empower them on two levels: resisting attempts to “teach them what they needed to know,” and actively engaged in learning – and creating – English routines that would help them more effectively negotiate immediate obstacles they encountered in daily life.

Workplace literacy participants and educators may not always see eye-to-eye on what is worth learning, but the spirit of critical pedagogy does not require such convergence. Although curriculum inherently positions learners, critical pedagogies are themselves enduring processes of reflection on and interaction with the social, cultural and political structures we navigate as teachers and lifelong learners. And because the personal in our lives is political (echoing longstanding conversations in feminist circles), we should continue to resist the seductive calls for public activism that may unintentionally superimpose counter but equally blinding regimes of truth. As Freire proposed more than 40 years ago, we need to begin with learners’ stories – stories that reflect their current concerns and wisdom, and support the identities they envision developing as they traverse home, work, and community. Easier said than done.

NOTES

1. Northwood is a pseudonym, as are all names of people and organizations mentioned throughout this article.
2. See, for example, Briton, 1996; Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Grubb, Kalman, Castellano, Brown & Bradby, 1991; McKay, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992; Soifer, Irwin, Crumrine, Honzaki, Simmons & Young, 1990.
3. See Cushman, 1999; Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993; Luke & Gore, 1992.
4. See De Certeau, 1984; Gonzalez, 2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Hull & Katz, 2006; Scott, 1985.

5. See Canagarajah, 2004; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; hooks, 1994; New London Group, 1996, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2004; Slater, Fain & Rossatto, 2002.
6. Auerbach, 1993a; 1993b; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; Freire, 1970/1990; Giroux, 1993; Giroux & McClaren, 1989; Goldstein, 1995, 2001; hooks, 1994; Lankshear & Lawler, 1987; Lankshear & McClaren, 1993; McClaren, 1989; The New London Group, 1996, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Shor & Freire, 1987; Slater, Fain & Rossatto, 2002.
7. See Cushman, 1999; Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993; hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Martin, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Weiler, 1991.
8. See Au 1980; Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1982; Michaels & Collins, 1984; Philips, 1974; Scollon & Scollon, 1981. 12. This is not to say that imitation or linguistic routines are not important; in fact, elsewhere (Katz, 2001) as well as below I make a case for how beneficial acquiring simple linguistic routines can sometimes be.
9. One of the most poignant examples of such a clash is described in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, by Anne Fadiman (1997).
10. Auerbach & Burgess (1985) make a useful distinction between problem *solving* and problem *posing*. They cite Freire’s term “assistencialism” – the desire to intervene on students’ behalves to solve their problems, arguing “that it reinforces the silence and passivity of powerless people, rather than creating conditions which allow them to identify and think critically about problems” (p. 490).
11. Nancy, who taught Chinese in a large public high school, had spent long periods of time in China as an adult, and was fluent in Mandarin, Cantonese and English.
12. Presenters cautioned pregnant women and children under six years of age not to eat locally caught fish more than once or twice a month. They explained that members of local Asian and Southeast Asian communities sometimes eat fish from the bay several times a day. Their warning was based on research conducted by local officials and by the organization itself, however, they pointed out that the official research was not cautious enough since it did not include in evaluations of chemical levels all the parts of the fish eaten in these communities, such as skin, heads, organs, etc., where toxins are most heavily concentrated. Consequently, toxins were an even bigger problem than they appeared statistically to be – such environmental hazards hitting low-income communities hardest.
13. Another example of such a case was a lesson and demonstration/presentation on breast health presented midway through the semester.
14. Foucault describes a regime of truth this way: “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (1980, p.131).

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