Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire uses the term “critical consciousness” in his analysis of the current model of education in action at this time in nearly all modern countries. Identified by him as the “banking concept of education”, Freire exposes the educational system as one in which the teacher is the depositor and the students are simply depositories; the teacher issues standard communiqué’s (instead of actual communication) which students passively receive, memorize, and repeat; knowledge becomes a gift bestowed by those who are certified and therefore deemed knowledgeable upon those who are considered ignorant; teachers and administrators of the system develop the instructional program content and students are forced to adapt to it; and the more students work at storing the deposits, the more they accept and excel in the passive role impressed upon them and thus are completely denied the opportunity to develop any ability of critical consciousness (Friere 257).

Many, is not all, students are very familiar with this type of “education”, as we have all experienced it at one point or another. This is, in fact, the standard, way of teaching that any of us have ever been exposed to. I personally, until recently in my academic career, have only experienced this type of education. Without much difficulty, I can recall numerous teachers who taught through this method, as recently as this semester. In one particular class I took this semester, the instructor perfectly demonstrated this concept with his unfaltering routine. Every class period he stood at the podium with his book and notes open, waiting for the class to begin. As the clock signalled the beginning of class, he began talking, without regard to anything else going on in the classroom. He lectured from his book and notes until the very last minute of
the assigned class time and then shut his, folded his notes, put both items into his black handbag, and walked out of class. Not once in the entire 50 minutes of lecture did he ever stop to ask the students questions or allow time for vice versa. Not once the entire semester did we ever do group work of any kind, class work, or even homework. Every third Friday there was an exam on the chapters that had been covered thus far and then a new series of chapters began. And not surprisingly, this is what the entire class expected from him. We have been trained to receive (from lectures), memorize (on our own time), and repeat (during the examination periods) from the foundation of our academic education.

Freire continues his analysis to conclude that the educational system mirrors the oppressive society as a whole; students are oppressed by being completely denied the opportunity to think for themselves, and therefore grow and progress through the levels of the model of critical consciousness, which will in itself be discussed shortly. As students are trained from the very onset of the educational experience to simply receive, memorize, and repeat, as anyone reading this very paper is all too familiar with, they are not actually being educated. They are instead being groomed, to graduate through this educational system and thus take their appropriate position as the “educated” oppressed in society, all the while never actually knowing that by attempting to accumulate higher education and conforming to the educational system along the way, they are actually only further entrenching themselves as the oppressed in our current societal model.

This is demonstrated a countless number of times in everyday life. Even I have been caught up in the “American Dream” I, like many others before me and many to
come, go to college to get a degree solely in order to get a better job and thus receive a higher income. So we graduate, get an entry level job, and progressively move through the employment chain, receiving more responsibility and pay with each promotion and subsequently upgrading our standard of living along the way. The first major purchase tends to be a car, then a home, then a boat or a second home or a Harley Davidson or whatever the particular toy of choice is for that individual. Then when all this has been achieved, along with the family and other factors, we have finally achieved the “great American dream”. But some dream it actually is. To be able to afford this kind of lifestyle, one must take on an incredible amount of debt. This is not freedom. What kind of freedom is it to be under that kind of (economic) pressure and obligation to others solely to achieve what has been pushed upon you as “The Dream”. How pathetic, in my humble opinion. The undertaking of debt only further completes the cycle that Freire introduced. By accumulating higher education, and obviously conforming to the system along the way in order to excel, in the end they only further entrench themselves as the oppressed, through economic obligations in this particular example. And it is through this educational system, Freire is saying, that those in power are continuing the process of oppression, and that the oppressors purposefully and intentionally perpetuate this educational system in order to control the consciousness of the oppressed.

It is at this point that Freire introduces the concept of critical consciousness. Critical can commonly be defined as having the characteristic of being crucial or decisive, or in relation to a state of emergency or crisis. While all of theses are indeed true, it is also of importance relevance that critical can also be qualified a indispensable or essential. It is in this light that we will apply the concept of critical to the idea of critical
conscious. Consciousness is obviously the state or condition of being conscious. But is also much, much more. Consciousness also includes a sense of one's personal or collective identity, including the attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities held by or considered characteristic of an individual or group. When these two terms are combined, we are left with an idea of a quality that is essential to one's personal and collective identity. Or you may chose to identify it as a level of consciousness that is characterized by a state of in-depth understanding about the world and the resulting freedom from oppression. It may also be more easily characterized as the ability to first perceive social, political, and economic oppression and then to take action against the oppressive elements of the society. Either of these explanations aim to get at the heart of the same matter, although one may be more easily absorbed than another by any individual.

Subsequently, as may already be evident to the active reader at this point, it is through this element of critical consciousness that individuals seek to change their situation as the oppressed, or to change the entire societal system as a whole.

In further delving into the concept of critical consciousness, I have referred to a text in which Freire deals almost exclusively with the topic of such, Education for Critical Consciousness. In this text, Freire describes the development of critical consciousness as a five-part model:

- With the first stage being that of a “semi-transitive state”, in which individuals are pre-occupied entirely with survival.
- The next stage in the model of progression is that of “transitivity of consciousness”, which at this point individuals are able to reflect on themselves
and their roles and responsibilities, thus allowing them to dialogue with others and with society at large.

- In communicating with others, people are initially in the third stage, a state of “naive transitivity”, which can be most commonly characterized by an over-simplification of problems, both personal and social.

- If an individual does progress further in the model, he or she will reach the level of “critical transitivity”, which results in a more in-depth analysis of problems and an increase in agency. “Agency” in this case refers to the state of being in action. It is of note, however, that this progression is not automatic in any sense and may in fact never be achieved. If an individual does not progress beyond this level, the result will be that of moving into a “fanaticized consciousness”, a reactionary state wrought by sectarianism, a narrow-minded adherence to a particular viewpoint.

- In the final stage, an individual ultimately moves into the state of “critical consciousness”, or conscientizacao, the awakening of critical awareness resulting from educational efforts and favourable historical conditions.

At this point in the paper, examples of critical consciousness would be most helpful in further discussion and understanding of this fairly vague concept. The first level of critical consciousness is very easily illustrated. The homeless man who has no responsibilities to others is in this state. He is preoccupied only with his own survival, and this is a prime example of the semi-transitive state.

In the next stage, the transitivity of consciousness, the average adolescent is found here. The teen knows that he is here, and is able to reflect on that fact and on
how he interacts with society, thus demonstrating some level of consciousness. Yet the adolescent's mind has not developed nor is he mature or experienced enough in life to begin to understand the ramifications of his actions or even his mere presence.

The third stage of naive transitivity is where the average man lies. This man is aware of himself, society, and problems relating to both, though this man does not have the educational level to analyze either. The catch 22 is that the man, at this point of consciousness, is not yet aware of the fact that he is not aware enough to analyze personal and societal problems and may indeed attempt to do so.

It is in the next stage, the level of critical transitivity, that is where the so-called educated man lies, according to Friere. Although it is Walker Percy, in his text The Loss of the Creature, who conveniently provides us with such examples. I will begin with the example of the lost tourists. An American couple, while vacationing in Mexico, decide to drive themselves from Guanajuato to Mexico City. They decide to do this because, after traveling five thousand miles to experience a new and unbridled culture, they have come to find themselves surrounded by a dozen other American tourist couples. Being aware of themselves, their roles, and responsibilities, the couple knows that they are directly in the middle of the (oppressive) system and are experiencing exactly what they are meant to, so they decide to get off the beaten path in order to enlighten themselves beyond the perpetuated commercialism of prepackaged experiences. In driving themselves to their next stop, Mexico City, they become lost and find themselves in a tiny valley not even marked on the map. In doing this, they stumble upon an Indian village that is conducting a religious festival of some sort. The couple spends several
days merely observing the Indian culture, and they are in turn, observed themselves (Percy 472). This is where the concept of critical consciousness can be applied.

The American couple, the tourists, had and “in-depth understanding about the world and the resulting freedom from oppression.” This is illustrated by the couple’s ability to perceive the lack of genuine, or authentic, experiences that were being produced and sold through the commercial tourist industry machine and in realizing this, were also able to obtain freedom from oppression by taking action against those oppressive elements. In all reality, the couple had the opportunity to take the guided tour and arrive safely at their destination in Mexico City, visiting the standard sights along the way, “accept [ing] the passive role imposed on them ... and the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.” (Freire 258), meaning that the guided tours and sights accompanied with such are not the reality of the entirety of Mexico. The couple was able to have a much more authentic, and desirable, experience by challenging the system and not passively accepting that which is presented.

Another such example of attaining critical consciousness may be illustrated by the camper at the Grand Canyon. In this case, a tourist wants to experience the Grand Canyon in all its majesty, though on his own terms. In this sense, the camper is much the same as the American couple tourists, although the camper has come to this consciousness before he even began the journey. So he planned exactly how he was to purposefully avoid the oppressive system. The camper set up camp in the back country, arose before dawn, and approached the South Rim through the wild terrain where there were no trails present and no railed-in lookout points (470). He saw the canyon, in its reality, by avoiding the ways the oppressive have deemed appropriate for seeing the
canyon. The other tourists simply once again passively accepted the reality presented to them without questioning the subjectivity behind it. The camper has demonstrated a level of critical consciousness by first perceiving the social oppression and then taking action against the oppressive elements present.

In her essay entitled Arts of the Contact Zone, the author herself, Mary Louise Pratt, demonstrates the ability to utilize the power of critical consciousness in the educational system, as Friere suggests ought to be done. At one point in her academic teaching career, Pratt was the professor of a Western-culture requirement course that centered on the Western culture both here and in South America and the multiple cultural histories in each that have intersected through various points in history to lead up the cultural melting pot that is prevalent in this global economy. This course did not function as is traditionally conceived, in the notion that the banking system of education was not present at all, nor would it have been able to be present even if Pratt had desired, which she did not. The course was a constant battle of give and take, of breaking down perceptions and of reshaping barriers. I lay claim to this by Pratt's own admonition that, due to the cultural diversity that this course attracted, she had to constantly work in the knowledge that whatever was said, by student and teacher alike, was going to be received in “radically heterogeneous” (Pratt 528) ways that were neither able, nor entitled, to predict. That is, she never knew how the particular discourse was going to be received and interpreted and this forced her to abandon the traditional university standardized banking concept of education. You see, Pratt does not believe that the faculty's traditional task, or imagined as she claims it, is to “unify the world in the class's eye by means of monologue that rings equally coherent, revealing, and true for
all.” (Pratt 528). This type of traditional, standardized thinking goes hand in hand with the banking system of education and serves only to hinder the development of critical consciousness by producing a series of products with similar thoughts and (substandard) thinking process, thus further serving as a tool of the oppressors. Once again, I revert to the example of the “great American dream” to illustrate how this tool can be effectively used.

Pratt instead, revels in her work in the Cultures, Ideals, Values (Pratt 528) course and in the knowledge that both students and teacher were forced to become aware of the oppressive element and take action against such in order to effectively communicate across the cultural, social, economic, and political barriers in the classroom, or contact zone as Pratt refers to such. This would be a direct consequence of critical consciousness and is an excellent example of how the application of such can be a powerful tool, especially in the midst of the very structure designed to suppress such action. When referring back to the criteria previously set forth, one can easily see how Pratt's example of what she terms a “contact zone” can also be used to illustrate the concept of critical consciousness, an essential element of one's personal and collective identity. The students in this class, who were finally forced away from the traditional banking concept of education, were exactly that, forced, to perceive things differently and in doing so, obtained a level of consciousness of which they were once naive of. This, this essential awakening, for it was essential for the students to succeed, can be the quintessential, and definitive moment of critical consciousness.
Works Cited


