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HENRY GIROUX ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ENGAGED CURRICULA

INTRODUCTION

In *Neoliberalism's war on higher education* (2014), Henry Giroux refers to neoliberalism as a central organising idea in shaping his critical view of higher education. At the time of its writing, Giroux was Global TV Network Chair in Communications and Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, Canada. He portrays neoliberalism as a mode of governance that produces identities, subjects and ways of life driven by a survival of the fittest. This ethic is grounded in the idea of the free, possessive individual and committed to the right of ruling groups and institutions to accrue wealth removed from matters of societal ethics and social costs. Also recently, another of his books, *Education and the crisis of public values* (2012), questioned the North American education system and the attack on the public school sector. In this work his observations are articulate, to the point and in many circles regarded as accurate. In addition to his vast research and publishing contributions, Giroux has an established international network of collaborators who comment on educational and social issues.

In a recent response on the threats posed to higher education by the ideological stance of neoliberalism, Giroux (2014:45) suggests that this ideology has many forms which need to be opposed by university curriculum agenda. In his words:

Once again, in opposition to the privatization, commodification, commercialization, and militarization of everything public, educators need to define public education as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of the nation. At the heart of such a task is the challenge for teachers, academics, cultural workers, and labor organizers to join together in opposition to the transformation of public education into a commercial sector – to resist what Bill Readings has called a consumer-oriented corporation more concerned about Accounting than to accountability.

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Against this background, his most recent work and choosing Giroux as one of the strongest exponents of promoting critical citizenship education, we take a step back and explore some of Giroux's earlier work on critical pedagogy; work that has proved to be most relevant to our reported critical citizenship in university curricula project and that highlights a number of its important educational conditions and perspectives.

GIROUX'S VIEWS ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy is a concept that links particularly well to critical citizenship in higher education curricula. The term "critical pedagogy" refers to a set of education principles and practices closely related to critical thinking, which was a main concern for the Frankfurt School of thought that started practising critical thinking and resonates strongly with Freire's (1993) pedagogy of the oppressed. Critical pedagogy encourages academics as educators to develop context-specific educational strategies where both staff and students use dialogue to open up a critical consciousness that involves citizenship issues (Johnson & Morris 2010).

Giroux (1992, 1997) has suggested that critical pedagogy operates under clearly defined conditions that contribute to democratic dispensations. One such condition involves a reconfiguring of the notion of authority. On the one hand, authority preserves the social order for conservative educators in terms of compliance and also preserves existing cultural forms through mystification (Giroux 1997; also see Scott 2008). For progressive educators, on the other hand, Giroux's notion of emancipatory authority opens the way for intellectuals to shape curriculum content and pedagogy in order to challenge dominant ways of thinking and acting. Such authority carries an imperative to critique and even reject approaches that reinforce divisions and disempowerment. The link is therefore established between thinking and acting critically, thereby transforming the individual and, ultimately, society.

Giroux (1997) acknowledges that emancipatory authority is an ideal that also needs particular conditions for its enactment. He therefore stresses that unless educators

[...] have both the authority and power to organize and shape the conditions of their work so that they can teach collectively, produce alternative curricula, and engage in emancipatory politics, any talk of developing and implementing progressive pedagogy ignores the reality of what goes on in the daily lives of teachers and is nonsensical.

(Giroux 1997:107)

In universities, these conditions may be relatively easy to meet, as academics and departments are relatively autonomous and can mostly act on consensual

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agreement, which leads to the second transformative activity included in Giroux's argument, namely the critical reading of texts. Such criticality pertains in particular to cultural artefacts that are produced and used in teaching and learning contexts. In Giroux's words again:

This means providing the learning opportunities for students to become media-literate in a world of changing representations. It means offering students the knowledge and social relations that enable them to critically read – not only how cultural texts are regulated by various discursive codes, but also how such texts express and represent different ideological interests.

(Giroux 1992:135)

Curriculum texts, according to Giroux, need to be treated as social constructs, embedded in history and thereby capable of being read within a number of other texts and structural forms. Curricula should not have attached to them universal and transcendental meaning, but should indicate a clear potential to be deconstructed as historically embedded artefacts. Curricula should therefore be empowering tools that open up new possibilities and insights about how the social world is and could be constructed – which is particularly relevant to the South African higher education context.

Another characteristic of critical pedagogy that Giroux (1992) endorses is related to the way student learning experiences are mediated. For him, a critical pedagogy has to acknowledge ways of making sense of the world that influences the lives of students. The discourse of a "lived culture" should interrogate the ways in which students and academic staff create activities, memories and narratives that posit a sense of determination and agency (Giroux 1992:140). Giroux describes this critical process as part of the self-production of knowledge and an interrogation of three types of origins of learning, namely the voice of the institution, the voice of the academic and the voice of the student. In the final analysis, Giroux views curricula as being socially constructed, with the implication that only extraordinarily good reasons could justify any instrumentalist and prescriptive curriculum and which brings forward a fourth important voice in higher education, namely that of the communities that higher education institutions relate to.

SALIENT POINTS LINKED TO CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Giroux highlights a series of important points – all directly or indirectly related to curricula aimed at critical pedagogy and therefore to critical citizenship education (Giroux 1992) – which include the following (also see Scott 2008):

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- How curricula are enacted or taught should include means to *reconstruct educational institutions as democratic spaces*. Relationships between education institutions such as universities and the wider society are therefore crucial and developing appropriate pedagogies becomes an essential part of critical pedagogy.
- Critical pedagogy is, in essence, *an ethical project* with its roots in critical theory and incorporates a vision of how society should be constructed on the one hand, and on the other hand how society may also exploit, dehumanise and denigrate certain groups of people. Critical pedagogy therefore reflects a sense of responsibility towards dealing with relations of power, subject positions and social practices in society and universities as institutions of higher learning in society.
- Critical pedagogy *celebrates diversity*, but it also addresses the political and other implications of such a celebration. Students and educators therefore have to engage with differences in at least two ways: firstly, to understand identities and subjectivities as multiple and embedded constructs, and then surface potentially conflicting identities to create more socially just forms of identity; and secondly, to assist both educators and students in understanding how differences among groups are embedded in history and manifest in public struggles. Curricula should therefore be deliberately planned and enacted to cease the perpetuation of any form of inequality and injustice, which is obviously an important point we want to highlight in this volume.
- Curricula should not involve master texts or structures that suppress multiple interpretations. Curricula should therefore not be treated as sacred texts and actions, but developed as part of an *ongoing engagement with a variety of narratives and traditions* that can be reread and reformulated in politically different terms. The epistemological imperative here is that curricula and pedagogy should not be culturally conservative and encapsulated in canons of influential or dominating texts.
- New and critical forms of curricular thinking should make provision for *breaking down disciplinary boundaries where necessary*. Curricula should therefore not constrain academics and students to break out of traditional delineations that artificially divide the corpus of knowledge. For Giroux, critical pedagogy can therefore break down forms of discriminatory practices and concealed historical curriculum origins.
- Rationality is not neutral, or, as Giroux puts it, “reason is not innocent” (1992:76). To him, objectivity is a cultural script that serves to provide authority to certain

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presuppositions which may be, in reality, historical artefacts. Knowledge should therefore be redefined so that the ways by which groups of people learn and take up *new epistemological positions* are incorporated into the curriculum.

- Critical pedagogy and critical citizenship education involve both political and utopian dimensions. Curricula can potentially *create conditions where students are encouraged to express risk, take future-oriented actions and generate hopeful thoughts*. A critical stance towards curricula and learning is therefore not negative, but regarded as potentially unravelling the possible imprints of essentialist and naturalised forms of curriculum language.
- Educators and curriculum thinking in higher education should *move away from the narrow language of professionalism* and beyond “a discourse of objectivity and decentredness” (Giroux 1992:78). Giroux proposes that educators embrace a language of critique and adopt educational practices that are capable of revealing the historical and ideological parameters that may confine curricula. While taking account of macro-theoretical narratives, educators can also operate at local levels, helping students to understand (in Foucauldian terms) how power, domination and resistance may influence justice and equality in immediate and wider societies.

Finally, higher education curricula and its related pedagogy should reflect the need to *allow for the student voice*. One important educator role is therefore to raise the conscious levels of students to understand how their personal narratives are embedded into wider social and political ones, which may, in many instances, be conflicting narratives. In Giroux’s words:

To focus on voice is not meant to simply affirm the stories that students tell, not simply glorify the possibility for narration. Such a position often degenerates into a form of narcissism, a cathartic experience that is reduced to naming anger without the benefit of theorizing in order to both understand its underlying causes and what it means to work collectively to transform the structures of domination responsible for social relations.

(Giroux 1992:80)

These nine points on critical pedagogy, mainly developed by Giroux from his studies on schooling contexts, appear to be quite valid for higher education contexts, particularly in South Africa with its post-conflict and emerging democratic social dispensation. In the next section we briefly explore Giroux’s views on how curricula and their accompanying pedagogies may be seen as non-neutral and powerful political devices.

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NON-NEUTRALITY OF CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY

For many educators, curricula and pedagogy are devices or tools that transmit important values from one generation to the next in order to ensure that society reproduces itself in an orderly way. Giroux, however, agrees with Bernstein (1990), who understands curricula and pedagogy as part of producing knowledge which, in turn, produces identities and constitutes social relations. Different forms of curricula and pedagogy therefore produce different types of knowledge and identities.

Giroux continues to emphasise that curricula and pedagogy are non-neutral educational devices. These devices are part and parcel of knowledge production processes with a critical attempt to influence the ways in which student identities are changed within and among particular sets of social relations (Giroux 1992:95). Giroux (1992:181) also suggests that educators who adopt a “surface” critical stance may indeed act oppressively by either unwittingly marginalising the voices of students or viewing knowledge as reproductive rather than emancipatory. Giroux therefore favours authority relations in education that enhance respect for the views of others, facilitate communication, promote an orderly exchange of views, infuse an acceptance that one may be wrong and stress the need to be tolerant of others’ viewpoints.

For Giroux, knowledge production in curricula and pedagogy is serious business (1992:98). Oftentimes an educator can be politically correct, but pedagogically wrong. He proposes that knowledge should speak for itself and that teaching should provide opportunities for texts and information to reveal itself. If guided by a concern that knowledge should be academically correct or ideologically relevant, educators may work from sound ethical or theoretical principles and still end up pedagogically silencing students.

IDEOLOGY IN CURRICULA AND PEDAGOGY

For Giroux, ideology and individual experience are connected through educational practices located in three areas: the unconscious, the realm of common sense and the sphere of critical consciousness. The first of these, according to Giroux, is not an area in which the individual is conditioned and all sense of agency is lost, but a site of both self-creation and domination. He explains the unconscious as containing “needs based on meaningful social relations, community, freedom, creative work, and a fully developed aesthetic sensibility” (Giroux 1997:79). This follows his argument that ideology does not only function in a monolithic way, but needs to be understood at the individual level of producing impulses and needs – some of which are repressive and others which may be liberating. However, Giroux

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is still concerned about the degree to which historical and societal forces leave their ideological imprint on the psyche of both students and academics. Therefore, at the cultural level, he argues for the development of a critical consciousness that transcends the determining effect of ideology working on individuals at the level of the unconscious.

In the arena of common sense, Giroux also avoids any emphasis on cultural determinism. He suggests the possibility of resistance to oppressive discourses and practices by common sense. When common sense is treated in an uncritical manner, however, resistance becomes impossible. He puts it as follows: “It is the grounding of common sense in an uncritical mode of mediation, a mode of mediation which is unconscious of its relation to the larger social totality that is its singular characteristic” (1997:82). In Giroux’s terms, common sense is therefore both limited and limiting, and needs to be transcended by critical scholarly inquiry.

The third ideological area suggests an interface between ideology and critical consciousness. Here Giroux breaks completely with neo-Marxist views of false consciousness and neo-positivist views of disparagingly comparing ideology with scientific knowledge. For Giroux, ideology can serve as a way of “illuminating the rules, assumptions and interests that structure not only the thinking process, but also the material such processes take as an object of analysis” (1997:84-85). To be critical is to examine how the process of ideology works on oneself, is socially transformative and allows for the possibility of a different future. Giroux’s position here is also opposed to mechanistic reproduction theories where education is often seen as reproducing the existing order. Two arguments underscore his position. First, within any social order there are always possibilities of breaking the cycle of reproduction and second, structural forms should be understood within history and can therefore endlessly reinvent themselves to operate in a dialectical relation with agency. In essence, educational institutions, curricula and pedagogy should be seen as elements of struggle that connect the micro level of the student’s life world to the wider society.

THE RELEVANCE OF GIROUX’S VIEWS FOR CRITICAL CITIZENSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULA

If we continue with the argument that critical citizenship education in university curricula is aimed at promoting in student learning a common set of shared values such as tolerance, respect for diversity, valuing human rights and democracy; and if, in higher education pedagogy, critical citizenship has the potential to encourage reflection on the past and the imagining of a possible future shaped by social justice

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to prepare people to live together in harmony in diverse societies; and if critical citizenship education could potentially transform thinking on a personal level, then Giroux's views on critical pedagogy clearly make sense.

His mainly social constructivist perspectives also make curriculum sense in that they revisit the problem of authoritarian curricula and power domination; they also hint at promoting emancipatory authority and that curricula should be treated not as fixed canons of knowledge, but as historically embedded and socially responsive artefacts. Mediation of learning, as importantly pointed out by Giroux, should be interrogated by the institutional, the academic and the student voice, as well as the "outside" voice of related communities, since all of these voices represent potential means of promoting critical learning.

What we have here in Giroux's arguments are a number of importantly relevant perspectives underlying educational elements of critical citizenship as derived from his earlier (1992, 1997) and latest (2012; 2014) work. These perspectives include that:

- universities and their curricula should be democratic spaces for open discourse;
- diversity is to be celebrated, but at the same time inequality and injustice should be opposed;
- disciplinary boundaries should be permeable in order to address material societal challenges;
- students and staff should be supported in taking up new epistemological positions; and
- student voices should be allowed to embed their personal narratives in wider social and political contexts, and therefore to transform potential structures of political domination.

Further valuable derivatives from Giroux's arguments and relevant to our critical citizenship perspective on the university curricula project are the non-neutral and ideological characteristics of curricula. In this respect, Giroux has argued that:

- both curricula and pedagogy are to be regarded as non-neutral devices; therefore emancipatory knowledge and practices should be promoted, but that such liberating actions should also promote respect and tolerance for the views of others, productive communication and the possibility of being wrong; and
- curricula and pedagogy contain degrees of negative or degenerative historical and societal imprints from the past, especially at the level of the unconscious; therefore, academics and students should be aware of unconsciously promoting

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the existing order (also see Jansen's 2009a idea of promoting "blood knowledge", which is perpetuating negative generational memory).

What we therefore have in Giroux's work outlined in Chapter 2 are a number of salient points on critical pedagogy that set the scene and put forward important conditions for critical citizenship to be enacted in university curricula – particularly in the social and human sciences. In the next chapter we explore a number of historical and current issues that directly or indirectly relate to universities and their curricula in South Africa.