Why Dewey Needs Freire: A Call for Critical Deeper Learning

Sarah Fine
Harvard Graduate School of Education

S o many silos.

In the darkness and confusion of these post-election days, this is one of the themes that has gained traction. While the particulars of the argument are contested, the essence is clear: silos are a pervasive feature of modern American life, and if there is any hope of addressing the ever-deepening fault lines of geography, demography, and political orientation, we must seek to break out of them.

I don't know yet what this means in terms of my personal choices. What I do know, however, is that the particular corner of the professional world that I call home—the world of scholars and practitioners committed to spreading "deeper learning" in K-12 schools—is as siloed as any other. We hold our own conferences, publish our own white papers, focus our improvement efforts on our own school-networks, and look to our own set of institutional gatekeepers for validation and support. Rarely do we make serious efforts to engage in sustained conversations with those whose perspectives do not complement or align with our own. In short, we are an echo-chamber.

I'm starting to see this as a real problem.

The particular pattern of siloing that I would like to discuss here is the division which separates those of us who define ourselves as "deeper learning people" from our colleagues and counterparts who define themselves as "critical pedagogy people." I've come to think of this as the Dewey-Freire divide.

Before I get any further, let me take a stab at summarizing the characteristics of each group.

On the one hand, in the world of those who read and contribute to blogs such as *Education Week*, you have folks whose work is anchored in a neo-Deweyan vision of progressive education. Accordingly, when we think about teaching and learning, we ask questions such as: Are students consistently engaging in sustained inquiry? Are there opportunities for them to practice "21st century skills" such as communication, collaboration, and interdisciplinary problem-solving? Does their academic work connect in meaningful ways to the world outside of school walls? Leading the charge are institutional actors such as the Hewlett Foundation, scholars such as my collaborator and mentor Jal Mehta, and project-based school networks such as Expeditionary Learning and High Tech High. As Jal discussed on *Education Week* last year, many of the key actors in this world are White. I might add that many are also men.

Elsewhere, in the world of critical pedagogy, you have those whose work is anchored in the work of Brazilian philosopher-educator Paulo Freire. Broadly speaking, Freire's vision insists that learners must be supported in learning to identify, critique, and resist patterns of oppression and structural inequality. Accordingly, when critical pedagogy folks think about teaching and learning, they ask questions such as: Are the histories and perspectives of historically marginalized groups reflected in the curriculum? Are questions about racism, classism, patriarchy, and other "isms" an explicit part of the content with which students are asked to grapple? Are students learning to see, critique, and resist power dynamics which contribute to the continued oppression of themselves and others? Leading the charge on this work are scholar-activists such as Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, as well as institutions such as the University of San Francisco, which is

working to reimagine teacher education as a space of Freirian praxis. Many of the key actors here are people of color.

These two worlds share plenty of common ground. Both seek to disrupt patterns of institutional and pedagogical authoritarianism. Both emphasize that students—all students—have enormous and too-often-untapped capacities for critical and creative thinking. Both are striving to create classrooms and schools which are fundamentally humanizing places.

From the critical pedagogy perspective, however, we in the deeper learning world are missing something important.

Here's the problem, as best as I can articulate it: the movement for deeper learning, as it currently stands, does not foreground issues of oppression and structural inequality. It focuses instead on a set of cognitive and social competencies which, while necessary, are not sufficient to support students in becoming the kinds of change-agents, activists, and upstanders that our society so desperately needs.

For example, it is entirely possible for students to master competencies such as collaboration and communication without ever using such competencies to challenge politically and/or culturally hegemonic views. Similarly, students might spend years practicing "higher-order" skills such as analysis, synthesis, and creation, without ever bringing these skills to bear on questions of racism, classism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism, white supremacy, and so on. (Joe Kincheloe, a scholar who devoted his career to the work of critical theory and critical pedagogy, referred to this as "un-critical critical thinking.") Such omissions are enormously problematic if you believe that one of the core goals of schooling should be to help students learn to resist and disrupt patterns of institutionalized oppression.

I believe that we can learn a lot from this perspective, not only at the level of theory but also at the level of practice.

I'm thinking, for example, of a project which recently wrapped up at a school that is part of Hewlett's Deeper Learning network. (I've changed the details a bit in order to keep it anonymous.) In the project, titled "Skin in the Game," a group of racially and socioeconomically

diverse ninth-grade students spent several months developing and marketing their own brand of natural sunscreen. First, they learned foundational chemistry concepts and played around with different formulations for the product. Once they had come up with a version that they felt to be adequate, they worked together to summarize the research on physical versus chemical sunscreens, create promotional materials, build a website, and set up a booth at a local farmers' market. Finally, students wrote essays in which they reflected on what they had learned about themselves, the science of sunscreen, and the nature of entrepreneurship.

From the perspective of deeper learning as we currently have defined it, this project represents a stunning success. Students had to master academic content and leverage their content knowledge into an act of production; they had to practice both written and oral persuasion; they had to communicate with each other as well as with audiences beyond school walls; and they had to synthesize and reflect on their learning. They even had a chance to try their hand at web design.

From the perspective of critical theory and critical pedagogy, all of this is good, but there are other important questions which need to be addressed. Was the project deliberately framed in terms of challenging socialized notions of who can participate in the domains of science and entrepreneurship? Were students given opportunities to think about the ways in which racism, classism, and patriarchy have shaped— and continue to shape—the nature of successful startups in American society? What about the racial dimensions of the product itself, given that sunscreens rarely are marketed to people of color? And, finally, what about the project's tacit endorsement of free-market capitalism?

I'm sure that my colleagues in the critical pedagogy world could pose sharper questions than these, but hopefully I've captured the gist of how they might critique the project.

Perhaps the critical pedagogy folks could learn something from us, too. A deeper-learning-world friend of mine recently joined the humanities department of an urban high school which is committed to teaching critical perspectives. To this end, the curriculum is carefully curated to attend to issues of racism and classism, and to foreground the history of marginalized populations. My friend is energized by

these commitments, but coming from a project-based school, he finds the form of the tasks that students are asked to complete to be limiting. As he sees it, the content of the curriculum is powerful, but the read-think-discuss-write format which serves as the department's default instructional routine does not provide students with authentic opportunities to leverage their knowledge into acts of creativity or activism. For example, reflecting on a unit about Native Americans, he wrote: "We were able to make the kids feel pretty shitty about the experiences of Native Americans throughout the 18th and 19th centuries…. but they were never engaged in learning, let alone practicing, what to do when injustices like Standing Rock happen."

Don't get me wrong: no classroom can be all things at all times. Teachers balance an enormous array of competing commitments, and it is as unreasonable to expect that they take up critical perspectives at every moment as it is to imagine that they always focus on the authentic and the deep. As a mentor of mine reminded me recently, there are many things worth learning, and many ways to learn them.

Even so, it strikes me that we in the deeper learning world need to be making a much more concerted effort to engage with our critically-oriented peers and colleagues. We could start right here, by inviting folks from the critical pedagogy world to contribute their perspectives and critiques to this publication and others like it, and then we could build outward. Because it's clear that deeper learning is not yet fully "woke." And now, more than ever, it needs to be.

(Note: This article was originally published in *Education Week*. Reprinted here with the author's permission)