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CHAPTER 2

A Utopian Methodology as a Tool  
for Cultural and Critical Psychologies:  
Toward a Positive Critical Theory

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*Introduction*

This chapter offers an introduction to a program of research, teaching, and community development that can serve as a model for what we refer to as a *positive critical theory*. *Critical theorizing* has roots in several corners of the humanities and the term means different things across discourse communities. Our use of the term marks our attempt to supersede those forms of criticism that offer no possibility for remedy or redress within the reach of people who don't benefit from reading academic texts.

We reject, for example, the position of the "negative dialectician" Theodore Adorno, who denounced "concrete and positive" suggestions for social change. Adorno's criticism of reform efforts, which he viewed as sad attempts at "administering the unadministratable," was in a word, paralyzing. Adorno thought such reforms would inevitably "call down the monstrous totality of repression upon themselves," and reinscribe the status quo (Bronner & Kellner, 1989, p. 275). Adorno's equally bitter rejection of the notion that theory and practice might productively converge is conveyed in his announcement that "no practice can ever be radical enough" (1984, p. 24); practice will never escape its dulling effect on theory.

Our project violates both of these provisos. The term *positive critical theory* is intended to reflect our emphasis on constructing and sustaining alternative arrangements to those decried in critical pedagogy, communication, technology studies, and the communities within which we work. While such efforts may be expected to fail, as Adorno asserts, they provide a crucial means through which we can deepen our understanding of the world, and an empirical basis for

critiques of our own theorizing—essential goals in constructing theory as well as in reorganizing practice.

Our discussion is located at the juncture of several critical theory discourses. We begin by reviewing the work of key theorists of communication and technology studies to frame what might be called a “standard critical theory” approach to our research area. In that review, we take up recent work on access to technology, literacy, and social justice.

Bryson and De Castell (1996) study women’s access to new information technologies. The authors seek exceptions to the rule that women and girls are marginalized in educational contexts where new information technologies are prominent. Their project is to document practices, policies, and contexts that are supportive of women’s access to, and development of, competence in using new information technologies.

Stuckey attempts to unmask and redirect “the Violence of Literacy” (1991). She argues that in both the theories and practices of research and intervention, literacy programs and mainstream research on illiteracy fail to take seriously social class as a controlling factor in framing literacy and illiteracy.

Giroux’s *Border crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (1992) offers strategies for practicing critical pedagogy to round out our brief survey of a landscape upon which to construct a positive critical theory. With these theorists and “calls from the field” in view, we describe and critically analyze our own project, which derives from a model activity system called the “Fifth Dimension.”

The Fifth Dimension model, explored at length elsewhere (LCHC 1982; Cole 1996; Nicolopolou & Cole, 1993), is our way to bring adults, adolescents, and children together to learn and play within educational activities during the after-school hours. We describe an example of how community institutions and institutions of higher education can collaborate to provide the resources to create and develop new Fifth Dimension adaptations.

Such partnerships can only be sustained if they effectively identify, share, circulate, and enhance the resources of all participants. We conclude with a critical assessment of our own success and failure to theorize, implement, and sustain Fifth Dimensions as alternatives to dominant practices in terms of the notion of a positive critical theory.

### *Review of Key Theorists*

#### *Communication research*

One of the seminal texts in the history of the field of communication is Lazarfeld’s classic overview of the purpose and direction of critical theory in the then-emerging field of communication. Looking ahead

(and at the recent past), deeply troubled over the use of media channels (radio, advertising, and cinema) for political propaganda and mass persuasion, Lazarfeld outlined his strategy for critical communication studies with four points of entry: (a) it should be informed by a theory about prevailing trends toward a promotional (advertising-based, privatized) culture; (b) it should involve special study of any phenomenon expressing and contributing to the trend; (c) it should track the valorizing of homogeneity that resulted; and (d) it should offer remedial possibilities (1941, p. 13).

#### *Interdisciplinary critical communication studies*

Subsequent critical communication research had a broad mandate to investigate the relationships between communication media, trends in culture, politics, and economics, and individual and institutional behavior. Critical communication scholars have generated many cross-disciplinary theories and methods of inquiry with ethical and institutional commitments different from those of the mainstream programs that Lazarfeld referred to as “administrative.” Administrative communication research often takes interdisciplinary forms, but remains interested in promoting technologies, methods, and content sought by practitioners and governmental and corporate clients of radio, electronic, and print forms of entertainment and persuasion.

An example of the persistence of this critical/administrative division within the field of communication is present in the clash between those who celebrate and those who condemn new communication technologies. Pool’s *Technologies of Freedom* (1983) is representative of research that finds democratized access to a free flow of information, expanded educational opportunities, new jobs, hobbies, fantasy realms, and easier living associated with these new technologies. Critical voices question this bounty, wondering if we are finding only new ways of “amusing ourselves to death” (Postman, 1995) by embracing more effective delivery mechanisms for the entertainment values that anesthetize citizens against their proper concerns. Critics following this line of argument focus on the erosion of privacy (Schiller, 1989, 1996); the neutralization of real political debate (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), the loss of jobs and whole occupational categories to automation (Shaiken, 1985); and the rise of an amorphous “service economy.”

#### *Technology and education*

Noble (1977) connected the proliferation of research and development in science and technology sectors in the United States, including communication technology, with the rise of corporate capitalism. His book established an important model for tracking and evaluating the forces, arrangements, decisions, and compromises that inform

Present-day relationships between technological innovation and higher education. Noble suggested that we interpret technology as social production rather than as a "thing." This move was crucial to understanding the foundation upon which (and machinery through which) research-and-development came to shape the character of American universities during the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Noble, partnerships between educational institutions and private concerns evolved in a way that provided a humanitarian facade for capitalists who invested in new knowledge, the future, and learning for their own sake. These partnerships were also a source of income for basic researchers to build up their facilities independent of the uneven, shrinking operating budgets of their own institutions.

The resulting norm, Noble suggests, is that corporations save or write off millions of dollars while setting the agendas of public universities, privatizing research that promises lucrative returns on the investments in the marketplace. After Heidegger (1977), scholars of new technologies in not escape the research question, technology for what—to support what ways of being in the world? Noble's analysis supports the conclusion that science and technology have developed mainly as instruments for capitalist expansion, with education funded in a hierarchy determined by serviceability of its subject matter to those interests.

In the end, Noble warns, social scientists, the public, non-hard-science users, affluent consumers, and others come to believe that the power of technology lies at our fingertips, and exult in our increasing reach through the Internet. Yet we have accepted arrangements that can only deepen our reliance on private, corporate control, and therefore implicate us in their "designs."

Twenty years later, what has been learned about how these public-private alliances are playing out, and the status of alternatives? Conley and the Miami Theory Collective of Oxford Ohio ask, "What is the rapid transformation of the humanities, especially with regard to a death," and ends with a noncommittal postmodern paean to the multiple seductions of cyberspace. The Internet is celebrated as the locus of opportunity for "rechanneling productive modes of singular and collective becoming" (1993, pp. xi-xiv).

Some of the articles in that volume have a definite critical tone, such as those on computer technology as it bears on warfare, sovereignty, and law in global conflicts. These articles critique the effects of "narcotic modernity" that characterizes technophile populations, and the dangers inherent in ignoring effects on the environment that are linked to computerization.

That volume does not give us the comprehensive assessment of the interplay between an agenda and the forms of knowledge and technology that Noble's work launched, but it is representative of the genre of the middle ground that is increasingly adopted across fields that have technology studies as their major concern. That is to say, the jury is still undecided about what is enabled and what is denied to individuals and groups in the Internet age.

#### *Gender: Learning to make a difference*

In their article "Gender, new technologies and inequity," Bryson and De Castell tell us that their research began with a critique of a familiar discourse of optimism about computer technologies. They expected resistance to implementing gender-equitable pedagogies and curricula, but still underestimated the pervasiveness of support for existing gender arrangements at all levels.

Bryson and De Castell faced censure and noncooperation from project sponsors and gatekeepers on basic issues of project design and implementation. The authors trace this resistance to the fact that they asked difficult questions and dealt with the hard and embarrassing facts of gender inequity with respect to access to new information technologies, despite their interest in finding exceptions to the rules.

The researchers call for identification of contexts and practices that focus on the inclusion of girls and women using new information technologies. Their methodology explicitly emphasizes maximizing the likelihood of optimal outcomes, as well as the use of principles, practices, and relations contributing to competence rather than focusing on explaining failure (1996, p. 125).

Bryson and De Castell report the conflict between themselves and research subjects and other project participants stemming from resistance to gender-equitable practices on several different fronts. They encountered little collaborative research on community and equity. They experienced their students' resistance to feminist ideals and discussions of gender equity (pp. 132-133). They also had to deal with the scrutiny of their sexuality. In an e-mail exchange about their recent progress, the authors say, "We positioned ourselves as researchers and yet once identified as lesbians we could no longer occupy that identity position."

Echoing Adorno, earlier they had written,

Learning to make a difference is a project doomed to fail. Let's consider why: school contexts are a) highly resistant to change b) locales where scripts for the enactment of appropriate gender identities are always already entrenched in an exquisitely fine tuned dance of heterogenesis." (p. 120)

Two years into the project, Bryson and De Castell reflect on the work.

Whereas we began . . . with the goal of creating productive links between school based and non-school based organizations, what we have learned is that by narrowing our sights to a single school community, and accepting the narrowness of having created a microclimate, we have been able to accomplish many of the goals with which we started our work. It just leaves us with a much less exciting set of stories to tell, and without any of the outputs that scientists expect, like models, bullets etc.

*Literacy, illiteracy, and community*

Stuckey, an implementer and critic of adult literacy programs and author of *The Violence of Literacy* argues that literacy programs and those who implement or study programs targeting illiterates fail those they purport to serve. She emphasizes that barriers to social mobility persist for literacy program participants following acquisition of reading and writing skills. The numerous programs Stuckey reviewed were "designed as if to fail" (1991). She concludes the literacy programs often do more violence than good in their premises and promises.

One of Stuckey's criticisms of research and reform targeting illiteracy is that scholars and policymakers assume illiteracy to be the cause and not the consequence of institutionalized poverty and social injustice. Stuckey dares to interrogate literacy as a universal good, a skill attainable by all given the right opportunity, an index of democracy, and of progress in a society. Such formulations are, for her, aspects of the myth of a classless society "doing the bidding of class."

Politicians point to literacy as an avenue to social mobility that any individual can walk down, while routinely discriminating against groups who speak nonstandard English. By cutting funding and by rolling out programs that cannot cope with heterogeneity in the goals or needs of their clientele, policymakers and implementers can appear to be "addressing the problem" without opening the field of inquiry to the intractable problem of class conflict.

Stuckey argues that a definition and standard of "literacy" couched in the rhetoric of "upward mobility" is decidedly a white middle-class standard, a red herring that draws attention away from the real sources and consequences of poverty. This tactic makes it possible to ignore the possibility of multiple literacies, or to question the way skills are valued and devalued in ways that covary with the race and gender of the people who exhibit them.

Stuckey's experience as a literacy worker and her research on the impact of adult literacy programs leads her to conclude that (1) literacy programs usually fail to accommodate the basic realities of the lives of the illiterate, (2) most programs are located outside of target communities, and (3) programs are typically staffed by volunteers (preprofessionals on their way to something better—elderly women, retired teachers, and charity groups). When paid, literacy work is done by a low-waged/high-turnover corps of literacy "scout workers" who burn out or move on when funding dries up as a matter of course. Stuckey's advice to "literacy workers" is to make connections between the marginality of their own work and the experiences of the brown and black people from the underclass who remain subject to the historical machinery of discrimination that adult literacy programs do not dismantle.

*Critical pedagogy*

For Giroux, a critical pedagogy is potentially radical when it aspires to rewrite the relationship between theory and practice as a form of cultural politics, whether this practice is teaching, scholarship, introducing new educational technologies, or research. There is an affinity between Giroux's relational approach; Noble's view of technology as social production; and Stuckey, Bryson, and De Castell's examples of gender inequity reproduced in the norms of research.

Giroux's goal is "a pedagogy that proceeds from a respect for the complexity of the relationship between pedagogical theories and the sites in which they might be developed" (1992, pp. 3–4). Critical pedagogy must also work in the "spaces between binaries" (p. 24), inherited from universalizing-prescriptive approaches to theory. Borrowing from critical work in modernist, postmodernist, and feminist traditions (p. 73) Giroux calls for attention to pedagogy as connected to the practices of scholarship, ethics, relations between the self and the other in research, and implementation of new approaches.

Giroux is also concerned with understanding "difference" in an ethically challenging and politically transformative way rather than suppressing difference. What practices does Giroux propose? Starting points are breaking down disciplinary boundaries, and engaging in critiques of the notion of reason to discover some of the ways in which people take up subject positions out of habit, intuition, desire, or affect.

In Giroux's discourse of possibility, the role of "imagination" and the "not yet" are key ideas for teachers confronting their own social and political locations, as transformative intellectuals. It is quite a challenge to verbalize what we want to happen, how we want things to be. Doing so generates reflection on the gaps between one's ideals and the practices that we are invested in even as we critique them.