

Committed Pedagogy: Intersectionality in the Spanish Classroom

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Abstract: Representations of a nation's history work as a powerful tool to consolidate a collective identity and build trust in the nation. School textbooks are ideological products that disseminate official ideas about a collective past and heritage; their depictions have an impact on shared understandings of a nation's history. However, what is included and excluded from the official historical narrative is selective. Usually, Spanish educators have to use the materials established by the department. Unfortunately, it is very common to find in these books certain representations of Hispanic countries based on stereotypes. This presentation discusses notions of bell hooks - namely her concepts on teaching for social justice and intersectionality - and practical examples of textbooks to learn new ways to promote critical thinking of students and also educators. This has implications for classroom management, but also for curriculum design and education for social justice. This promotes cultural diversity and raising awareness of multicultural values.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Second Languages, Social Justice, Hispanic Studies.

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Introduction

My intervention is based on postulations of Critical Pedagogy. This field understands education as a form of cultural politics, since it entails power relations that privilege and delegitimize certain ways of understanding the world and acting in it. From Critical Pedagogy, we seek to make this conflict visible; we seek to give visibility to the role of preservation of the status quo that education and educational spaces have, and reflect on it in order to deconstruct and understand the systems of oppression that exist in the society in which we live. According to Paulo Freire, one of the greatest exponents of Critical Pedagogy, the objective of education is liberation, which is understood as a process of horizontality in human relations that implies constant reflection on reality. Thus, through education for liberation, subjects gain the freedom to question, understand, and transform society.

Theoretical Background

Bell hooks, critical pedagogue crucial to this paper – who does not capitalize her name –, took up on Paulo Freire's notion of awareness. This term refers to the ways in which individuals and communities develop a

critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action. Thus, awareness is a fundamental step in education for liberation. This involves examining and acting on the root causes of the oppression experienced in the here and now. hooks draws from feminist thought conjugated with the perspective of race, taking into account perspectives not raised in the characteristic meritocracy of white society, the meritocracy that excludes non-white subjects. Since the early 1980s, hooks wrote about the overlap of different factors – such as race, class, or gender – that play a role in systems and strategies of oppression. This phenomenon is known as *intersectionality*, term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw almost a decade after hooks began writing about it.

We have, then, that diversity plays an important role in Critical Pedagogy in hooks' thinking, since we have to reflect on our diversity and differences in order to explore concepts and problems of inclusion, exclusion, visibility and social invisibility. bell hooks offers very interesting tools to think about and question how the curriculum and didactic materials that we use in the classroom offer a perspective of the world that serves to marginalize certain voices and ways of life in favor of a greater institutionalization and legitimization of values of the elite. These preferences for certain types of discourse reinscribe homogenizing systems of domination that are presented as universal.

We are currently in a very interesting moment regarding the articulation between diversity and curriculum – let us think of common debates regarding Critical Race Theory or the 1619 Project. The educational reform has been quite controversial in the political arena. One of the sides in this debate wants to prohibit conversations about structural, social, and historical racism within the school curriculum, justifying its position from the question of identity. This side attacks affirmative action proposals or other strategies that seek to create more diversity in the school/academic environment. Thus, a “neutral”, “apolitical” and “objective” curriculum is sought. Along the same lines, many educators support the idea that the class has to be a safe space, understanding “safe space” as a place where political or controversial issues are not discussed.

These two positions share the notion that formal education spaces (school, university, institute, high school...) are not appropriate environments to talk about social and political conflicts. And this is a commonly accepted idea. Thus, textbooks reflect this position – let's think that publishing houses seek economic benefit, so their books need to be attractive to have the greatest number of sales possible. This is not an exception for the Spanish classroom. We then find textbooks that are divided around concepts such as food, travel or studies in a very superficial and banal way.

However, this denial – the non-inclusion of conversations around the politics of racism, sexism or other forms of discrimination and oppression –, this decision not to talk about these issues because politics is not discussed in class, is, paradoxically, a political choice. My intervention radically moves away from banalization practices in the Spanish curriculum to think about the notion of reading the curriculum as a hierarchization of the subject's knowledge. Contrary to the idea that textbooks are something “neutral”, “aseptic” and “objective”, they are oriented, to a greater or lesser degree, to show and encourage a certain pattern of civic behavior; that is, textbooks are a didactic tool, but at the same time they are cultural objects related to the business of the

publishing world and ideological products mediated by different power relations. Following hook's nomenclature, we would say that – generally – textbooks convey values and discourses produced by what she calls white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (2003, 141). That is why I believe it is necessary to reconstruct counter-narratives that confront those curricula through the visibility of diversity and the different experiences of history and society. To illustrate this point, I would now like to show two examples of materials that I have had to use in the classroom. Starting from hooks and Critical Pedagogy, I first analyze the materials as schooling tools that privilege certain types of oppression. On a second level, I offer ideas for using these materials in a didactic way with attention to diversity and learning Spanish.

Activities' Analysis of activities

The first example is a text about catcalling (see Figure 1).

NOTA CULTURAL • Los piropos

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Imagínesse la siguiente situación: Varios chicos están reunidos en un lugar público, charlando.¹ De repente, ven pasar un coche descapotable,² último modelo, de una buena empresa³ automovilística. Uno de los chicos exclama: «¡Vaya máquina!». Ahora tenemos una situación similar, pero esta vez los chicos ven pasar a una chica muy guapa y no pueden evitar un comentario: «¡Vaya monumento!». Estos chicos acaban de piroppear a una joven atractiva.



El piropo es una forma de expresión muy hispana que los chicos usan normalmente para halagar a las chicas. Cuando los piropos son alabanzas discretas, cuando tienen gracia⁴ y son inofensivos, pueden ser bien recibidos por las chicas. Por desgracia, las cosas que se dicen no siempre son una manera inocente de coquetear. Es posible que reflejen el mal gusto y la grosería de quien las dice y, por lo tanto, pierden su validez como piropos y pasan a ser algo diferente y desagradable. Cuando esto ocurre, la reacción de la chica será de disgusto y rechazo.

A algunas mujeres hispanas les puede agrandar que las piroppeen por la calle, siempre que se trate de un verdadero piropo y no de una barbaridad obscena. Es indudable que hasta los piropos más simpáticos implican una coquetería «sensual», pero cuando un chico traspasa los límites permitidos ya no se trata de un sencillo piropo, sino de una agresión que nunca será bien recibida.

Preguntas

1. En grupos de tres, comenten la costumbre de piroppear a las mujeres. ¿Son sexistas los piropos?
2. ¿Piensan que a los hombres les gustaría escuchar piropos sobre su aspecto físico mientras caminan por la calle? Expliquen.

Actividad

C En grupos de tres, lean los siguientes piropos e indiquen cuál es el más cursi, el más romántico, el más poético y el más tonto.

1. Si yo fuera pintor, te haría un retrato y lo llamaría *Perfección*.
2. Estoy celoso hasta de tu **espejo**.
3. ¡Tantas curvas y yo sin frenos!
4. Si mi corazón volara, tu alma sería mi aeropuerto.
5. Estoy buscando diosas para una nueva religión y acabo de elegirte a ti.
6. Jennifer López es una **bruja** junto a ti.
7. Eres mi príncipe y siempre lo serás, y yo tu princesa hasta la eternidad.
8. Quisiera ser gato para vivir siete vidas a tu lado.*

Figure 1. Exercise on catcalling

After reading the text, students, in groups of three, reflect on whether the compliments are sexist and on the reception of the compliments in the hypothetical case that it was men who received them. Students then have another exercise in which they categorize a series of compliments into the categories of "cheesy," "romantic," "poetic," and "silly." According to the perspective of the text, the compliments that we find here imagine that the sender a man and that the receiver is a woman. Although the students are asked the question of whether the compliments are sexist, the rest of the exercise conceives of the only possibility that this practice is something macho and heteronormative. There is no reflection on the usefulness of the compliment as a sign of the epistemological violence of patriarchy.

On the other hand, this practice is presented as something characteristic of Hispanic countries. The image that is thus created of these cultures is totally linked to misogynist practices that, on the other hand, do not exist only in Hispanic countries.

If the instructor does not pause to reflect on these points in class, even briefly, they will be normalizing images and practices of sexual harassment, and, on the one hand, a retrograde stereotyping of Hispanic cultures. If educators do not critique this text in class, it can legitimize the predatory nature of male-female relationships in the context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 141), thus conveying ideas to students such as sexual abuse is not taken seriously in Hispanic countries Hispanics.

In Spanish the present tense is used to describe actions or situations that *have been* going on *since* a specific point in time or *for* a certain period of time. The patterns are:

present +	{	desde (<i>since</i>) + point in time
	}	desde hace (<i>for</i>) + duration of time

→ Note the corresponding interrogative expressions:

¿Desde cuándo . . . ?	Since when . . . ?
¿Desde hace cuánto tiempo . . . ?	(For) how long . . . ?

Figure 2. Exercise on the preposition “from”

Now let's look at a second example (see Figure 2). In the grammar section of another textbook, to teach the use of the preposition "from", the book includes what appears to be an advertisement for the Spanish airline Iberia. The ad includes a map of America, and says “since 1492 no one travels to America as much as we do. Iberia. More than 50 years making friends”. This exercise is a fierce example of how books function as ideological and

political devices. Iberia is a Spanish company, and it says that "since 1492 no one travels to America as much as we do." The ad refers to Iberia, but it seems that, by extension, it is talking about Spain or "we" Spaniards. The exercise represents a discourse of the Spanish colonization as a friendly event ("more than 50 years making friends"). It reproduces an image of colonization as a peaceful process, not as the genocide that it was. By contrast, it hides content about other perspectives, other experiences of colonization, such as those of indigenous peoples, women, transsexuals, etc. The omission and marginalization of these subjects perpetuates a discourse of oppression, submission to values of white supremacy and invisibility of diversity.

There are several points to explore here. I currently work for a Hispanic Service Institution. In her work, the academic activist Gina Ann Garcia is in charge of dismantling the status quo of higher education, analyzing how secondary education aligns with values of the meritocracy characteristic of white discourse. In her book *Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Opportunities for Colleges and Universities* (2019), García exposes that these institutions that supposedly serve the Hispanic population do not really take into account the need of this demographic sector. The only requirement that an educational center has to be called HSI is that its population be more than 25% Hispanic/Latino/Latinx. Furthermore, there are no requirements for there to be support programs or curricular adaptations that take into account the Hispanic/Latino/Latinx population.

I was born in Cantabria, Spain. I believe it is tremendously problematic that colonization is talked about in class like this, but it is much worse if the educator is also of Spanish origin. I consider it totally unacceptable that a professor of Spanish origin, in the Spanish classroom (language and by extension culture), from a Hispanic Service Institution, communicates and normalizes to students of Latin American origin, a historical narrative about colonization which is based on the invisibility and marginalization of non-white subjects, heterosexuals, women, etc. and that perpetuates discourses of racial oppression and white supremacy. If I, as a Spanish woman, say nothing about this exercise, I am legitimizing that discourse. That entails the delegitimization and silencing of other experiences, counter-hegemonic experiences that some of my Hispanic/Latino/Latinx students may identify with. This can trigger an affective response in students, producing a feeling of rejection and non-inclusion in the classroom. Feelings and emotions should be a component of our work as educators. We cannot build community if we perpetuate exclusion.

In her work, hooks writes about the importance of an engaged pedagogy that focuses on building community in the classroom – both among students, and between students and the educator. I believe that TAs, readers, part-time lecturers or any other type of position that does not have academic freedom to choose pedagogical materials, could take advantage of the opportunities that these types of exercises offer to promote a feeling of community in the classroom.

I believe that educators should develop and implement activities to be used in the Spanish classroom so that we turn these teaching materials into opportunities to promote attention to diversity, educate in a multicultural way, and create spaces for active participation in the class. For example, an activity would be writing a counter-

narrative. In the Iberia exercise: students could write or talk about colonization from a perspective opposite to that of the exercise. For example, from the perspective of indigenous peoples.

An interesting idea from bell hooks is for students to keep a journal and read it to each other. This fosters visibility in the classroom and students' recognition of each other. In our case, the journal could include impressions and receipt of class materials by students. Their emotions, their affective responses...

In many cases, the Spanish class' curriculum includes an oral presentation in front of the class. The topics vary depending on the center and the level, but they give us the opportunity for our students to talk – more or less briefly – about themselves. These types of activities promote the visibility of our students and their cultural diversity, so that we know the heterogeneity of profiles in our class. By creating small spaces for active participation and student recognition, we will encourage the creation of community ties in the classroom, based on tolerance and respect for diversity. At the same time, these activities are very useful in the Spanish classroom, or in the second language learning classroom in general, because they would be done in the target language that students are learning.

In *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (1982), linguist Stephen Krashen develops five hypotheses about successfully teaching a foreign language to non-native speakers. His affective filter hypothesis highlights the importance of an atmosphere of motivation, self-confidence, and reduced anxiety in the classroom for acquiring language proficiency. If there is not a climate of community in the classroom, it will be difficult for learners to feel self-confident and have less anxiety over the new language. Critical thinking is crucial for this: we often talk about the importance of students developing their critical thinking, but we cannot teach a value such as critical thinking if we, the educators, do not develop it. As educators we must continually reflect on our prejudices and preferences, as this can have an impact on the way we teach and manage the classroom. For example, if we are used to teaching in predominantly white suburban areas and then start working in a predominantly non-white urban location, we must be able to think about our new students and their values, as well as the new setting, to adapt our teaching – again, to the public and to the space. For example, many of my students are Heritage Speakers who have learned to speak Spanish in a non-formal, non-academic environment – from speaking with their grandparents, for example. If you have not had experience with Heritage Speakers before, the teacher may assume that Heritage Learners have to do well in the class simply because they are of Hispanic descent. Then the mistakes they make seem more serious, since we have high expectations. Good example that teachers also have to review their own biases.

In addition, following Krashen, we must distance ourselves from the idea that the educator is the dominant voice and the privileged figure that transmits knowledge, as this can undermine the student's self-confidence. Students must understand that they can also teach the rest of the class – both the other students and the educator – thus moving from accepting a passive role to understanding the importance of an active disposition in the Spanish class. Many minority and minority groups feel that they have to assimilate into the mainstream society. For example, going back to Heritage Speakers: Heritage Speakers tend to have a negative linguistic attitude towards

their uses of the Spanish language. They may feel intimidated or embarrassed because they don't have as much knowledge of grammar. They feel that their Spanish is broken or that they don't speak well. However, they do not contemplate the cultural and linguistic richness that they have and that they can bring to the classroom; they do not recognize the implication that their own profile has in the classroom or how the Spanish in the classroom can teach them about their linguistic experience. Which brings us to David Ausubel and his notion of “meaningful learning” (1968).

Textbooks and curricula that “omit” controversial topics and reproduce images of white supremacist discourse can give the impression that the content is closed and indisputable. This can produce a perception of the Spanish class as a subject in which the student passively listens to the teacher and memorizes the contents. However, as we know from Ausubel, we must encourage meaningful learning in the classroom. Educators need to create opportunities for students to relate their interests and experiences to the classroom and to critically question classroom materials. If we have in class, for example, a student of Cahuilla origin, like I had a couple of years ago, who is interested in the use of Spanish in his Borrego Spring community, the student could talk about this in his oral presentation or in his journal. We thus encourage their interest, producing meaningful and therefore more efficient learning, but we also give them visibility in the class, creating an opportunity for classmates and the teacher to learn about their cultural diversity.

This brings us to one last point of hooks, which is the importance of the voice. The voice is a crucial concept in his theory, but one that has been misunderstood. Having a voice for hooks does not refer only to the act of telling the experience of each one, but to the strategic use of knowledge from other perspectives, from other experiences. Knowledge of various narratives, multicultural and diverse education, and critical analysis of the curricula, students will be formed as conscientious citizens – let's remember the concept of Freire that hooks later takes up on – , with awareness of different systems of social oppression.

Our students are paying for their education and in general this is a really overwhelming financial outlay, especially for those who are first generation, who come from immigrant families or from the working class, or other types of sectors that are more vulnerable economically. They are investing in their future and a crucial component of being part of society is having visibility and a voice. In my opinion, the classroom should function as a space where students can practice this visibility and their right to speak out and be socially recognized. We have to encourage the creation of a safe space in the classroom, understood as a place to share our differences and learn from them.

We are also in a moment of crisis at various levels. One of them is institutional and democratic: democratic regimes are being attacked and weakened by the rise of ideas from what we could traditionally consider the right and the ultra-right; in short, conservative ideas that reproduce hate speech directed more or less directly at certain sectors of the population that are more vulnerable (socially, politically and historically). The objective of education, according to the authors we have quoted in this paper, is to promote a series of values to coexist in a society collectively in a fair way; live together as democratic citizens. To develop a fair and mature citizenship,

knowledge of our rights, responsibilities, as well as knowledge of the history of our democracy is necessary. But we find ourselves in a moment in which the knowledge of our democratic history is being rejected. I think it is crucial then that, from our work and our position as educators, even with certain limitations regarding curricular planning that TAs, readers, or any other position that cannot select their own materials experience, we promote in the classroom ideas and values of respect, solidarity and diversity.

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