Critical Community Service Learning: Combining Critical Classroom Pedagogy with Activist Community Placements

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In this paper, we share an example of how community service learning (CSL) has been taken up within the framework of critical pedagogy in order to assist educators thinking about moving toward a more critical CSL. We draw from theoretical perspectives on critical pedagogy, data from a research study, and instructor and student experiences to explore the pedagogical dimensions of our experience with critical CSL. These dimensions include: course/placement integration, critical pedagogy in practice, the intricacies of recruiting and supporting activist placements, and ethical considerations. We conclude that while critical CSL requires careful design and consideration of the risks involved, it can be an effective approach for critical educators.

In recent years, community service learning (CSL) has become a prominent pedagogy in higher education (Speck & Hoppe, 2004). CSL combines "real world" experiences and academic learning, encourages moral development, promotes citizenship, and facilitates a sense of social responsibility. It is not surprising, however, that what constitutes citizenship and social responsibility is the subject of debate. There is no agreement, for instance, that social justice is an intended outcome of CSL (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Zlotkowski, as cited in Chambers, 2009). In fact, critics have suggested that CSL too often is comprised of community experiences maintaining a charitable or voluntary orientation, fails to explore and address the root causes of injustice (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), and ignores critical issues such as the presumption of neutrality, privileging of "whiteness," and imbalance of power relations that support social inequalities (Butin, 2003, 2007). In this paper, we share a model of CSL that responds to these criticisms—*critical CSL*. We use the term critical CSL to invoke an association with the critical theories that have informed both a justice-oriented perspective and the development of critical pedagogy. Critical CSL can be understood as an approach that embraces the explicit aim of social justice. As Mitchell (2008) explained, the goal of critical CSL is to "deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (p. 50). Thus, critical CSL is potentially effective when paired with a critical pedagogical approach. However, few authors have shared detailed accounts of how critical CSL might function and how critical pedagogy might work with critical CSL to support students' learning.

The critical CSL that we explore in this paper was used in a graduate seminar taught by Donna Chovanec, one of the paper's authors. In 2009, with support from the University of Alberta Community Service-Learning Program and approval from the University Research Ethics Board, the instructor initiated a qualitative research study, asking the question: How might a critical/radical CSL pedagogy inform a critique of conventional service-learning in post-secondary contexts? The research team[1] reviewed CSL literature and collected the following data: three written homework assignments completed by students as part of the course; a short online survey adapted with permission from J. Westheimer; and individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 students who had completed the course six months to two years prior. In addition, the instructor and one student completed written anecdotes on specific aspects of the course experience. Phenomenological analysis of the data revealed that the course/critical CSL experience facilitated students' willingness to go deeper into social issues by analyzing root causes and enabled many students to develop an awareness of systemic inequality, power inequalities, the beliefs and practices that support domination, and their own positionality in the social system (Chovanec, Kajner, Mian, & Underwood, 2012). These research findings prompted the research team to interrogate the pedagogical dimensions of the course that combined critical classroom pedagogy with activist community placements.

Focusing this paper on the course pedagogy, we draw from critical pedagogy theory, research study data, and instructor and student anecdotes to explore the pedagogical dimensions of our experience with critical CSL. Four dimensions are included: course/placement integration, critical pedagogy in practice, the intricacies of recruiting and supporting activist placements, and ethical considerations.

While critical CSL requires careful design and consideration of the risks involved, we conclude that it can be an effective approach for critical educators.

Course/Placement Integration

Effective CSL engages the community as partners in student education and tightly integrates the academic part of the course and the community placement (Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, & Toms Smedley, 2010; Bringle, Hatcher, & Games, 1997). The critical CSL explored in this paper operates through an integrated approach whereby the instructor ensures a tight cohesion between the class materials and activities and the community placement experiences. It is difficult to capture this integration in its complexity. We begin with a discussion of the course and placement integration because of its central importance to effective critical CSL.

The Faculty of Education offers this course, entitled "Learning in Social Movements," every second year as part of a graduate program of study about the teaching and learning of adults. The course is focused on the learning in, about, and because of social movements, including experiential, transformative, social, and political learning. Course objectives aim for awareness raising, theorizing, reflection, and praxis related to learning in social movements. Students are expected to become familiar with diverse expressions of social action and a variety of progressive social movements, including feminist, labour, global justice, indigenous, anti-poverty, and environmental movements; gain basic knowledge of the historical trajectory of theorizing to explain the processes and purposes of social movements and to critically engage with the field of study about learning in social movements; develop an understanding of the intersections between power and privilege based on race, class, gender, and other processes of marginalization and how these relate to social movements and social action; contribute skills and knowledge to an activist group; and, gain awareness and experience through engagement in a social action project. Students in the course have a variety of backgrounds, though most have spent some time as teachers or professionals before undertaking graduate studies.

The course instructor has based her pedagogical design on the principles of critical pedagogy, which involves facilitating the development of students' critical consciousness by enabling them to identify, question, and challenge oppression, hierarchies of power, and the beliefs and practices that support domination. While critical pedagogy is diversely operationalized and contested, with no homogenous metanarrative by which to offer a clear and static account, it is broadly considered to be an approach concerned with the inevitably political nature of educational practices (Allman, 2001; Darder, 1995; Giroux, 1994, 2006; Horton & Freire, 1990; Kincheloe, 2008). Educators employing principles of critical pedagogy aim to develop their students' capacities for critical judgment and commitment to the social world (Giroux, 2006). Central to the definition of critical pedagogy is the task of educating students to become critical agents actively questioning and negotiating the relationship between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change. Though somewhat similar to critical thinking, critical pedagogy differs in that it not only asks students to attend to epistemological questions related to assumptions, logic, and clarity but also positions knowledge within power structures. Thus, critical pedagogy requires investigating knowledge claims in a way that reveals the systems of belief that support these claims and then, to unearth oppressive practices, asks, "Who benefits from these beliefs?" (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Such pedagogy facilitates healthy skepticism about power, opens space for students to question and comprehend their own privilege, and provides conditions for students to understand their positionality in relation to the "ongoing project of an unfinished democracy" (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007, p. 2).

To support these aims, the instructor selects course materials and designs class activities that challenge students to examine privilege and power. For the community placements, the instructor recruits activist organizations oriented toward root causes of injustice. While all CSL experiences may disrupt students in some way, critical CSL is intended to specifically disrupt students' understanding of social systems and facilitate self-reflection of their privilege and participation in systems of oppression. The course and placements seek to challenge the "feel good" nature of forms of volunteerism that involve helping those "in need" without critiquing one's own thinking, practices, or positionality within the larger social context.

While the instructor recognizes that activist placements are significant for shifting the student's experience away from a savior approach, she also understands that community activities cannot by themselves facilitate awareness of the existence and perpetuation of systems of domination. Community placements are most effective when supported by critical theories that enable deconstruction and learning in the classroom. Combining a critical, social justice curriculum with activist community placements enables students to simultaneously confront and reframe their views of privilege, power, and difference (Butin, 2007; Conley & Hamlin, 2009). In the following section, we demonstrate how the design, materials, assignments, and instructional approach in

this course are tightly linked to the activist place-ments and are structured to facilitate students' critical awareness and action. We invite the reader to keep in mind, as we discuss various individual components of the course, that the activities inside and outside the classroom are experienced concurrently by students and are designed to reinforce one another.

Critical Pedagogy in Practice

The pedagogical design of this course follows a critical/radical adult education model, using the works of Paulo Freire (1998, 2004, 2007) as a key reference point. Early in the course, the instructor provides an overview of her understanding of critical pedagogy, focusing specifically on the disruptive nature of such an approach. She explains that critical social theories (e.g., those of Gramsci, Habermas, hooks, and Marx) and Freire's critical pedagogy are the dominant theories employed by adult educators studying the learning in, about, and because of social movements. These theories generally reflect a stand *against* repression, poverty, oppression, and injustice as well as a struggle *for* justice and equality. She also identifies post-structural critiques that enable a more nuanced and complex understanding of the intersec-tion among multiple oppressions and between oppression and privilege. As the following anecdote demonstrates, the instructor then clearly positions her own theoretical framework within this critical schol-arly tradition and the radical practice of community-based adult education:

> I explain to students that this is my position as an adult educator and the position from which I identify what to bring forward in this class. The students' position may be similar or vastly dif-ferent. In this class, we will be respectful of dif-ferent positions, leaving space for people to express them and to work out new ways of think-ing and looking at the world. BUT, this is not necessarily a comfortable process; it can be dis-ruptive, destabilizing, and disorienting. Students are asked to question what has been taken for granted, challenge "received wisdoms," and uncover hidden/underlying assumptions. Certain kinds of learning, I believe, happen when we don't feel good.

Key aspects of the instructor's practice of critical pedagogy include disrupting power and co-construct-ing knowledge, encouraging praxis through course assignments, and reflecting on the social world. While it is impossible to capture all of the intricacies and nuances of the course, in the sections below we share key aspects of the instructor's use of critical pedagogy in the classroom and provide explicit examples of in-class activities, facilitation methods, assignments, and course materials.

Disrupting Power and Co-constructing Knowledge

Substantive opportunities for reflection on power and positionality, whether undertaken explicitly or implicitly, are vital to a critical pedagogical approach. In this course, the instructor attends specifically to power differentials, including those based on linguis-tic and cultural knowledge. As an example, in gradu-ate seminars an invitation to students to reflect and respond to questions in an open forum privileges those students whose first language is English, those who are acculturated to "jump in" with their ideas and demonstrate their competence, and those who may be convergent thinkers. To disrupt this privilege, the instructor first asks students to take a few moments on their own to gather their thoughts and feelings (this may sometimes involve reconnecting with their reflective homework assignments). She then invites them to share their responses in small or large groups, sometimes using a group round,[2] or to take their reflections into an activity. By allowing time and space to collect their thoughts and feelings before sharing in an open space, the instructor attempts to mitigate the effect of some students' social capital. However, the extra time this takes in a classroom environment also creates a challenge for the instructor who attempts to cover the course con-tent within a 13-week semester.

As indicated in the example above, the instructor's pedagogical approach subtly invites students to become conscious of power dynamics. Simultane-ously, she explicitly brings attention to the institu-tionally sanctioned power of the instructor who is responsible for structuring the learning experience and grading the students' assignments, as well as the power of technology and how it functions to shape the classroom space and learning opportunities. For example, she might point out the limitations of doing a group round in a setting where the instructor/com-puter/projector triumvirate is positioned in the front of the classroom creating a U-shaped seating arrangement instead of a circle. As a means of inter-rupting the institutionalized power embedded in the physical space, the instructor designs activities that utilize the entire classroom space and sometimes spill into the hallway, department boardroom, or stu-dent gathering areas.

The instructor also invites students to examine the varying structures of power and privilege operating within the classroom environment. For example, as students bring their differing worldviews and experi-ences into the classroom, the instructor highlights how these are imbued with differing levels of social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this way, students learn to respect each other's experiential knowledge and

thereby "make space" for everyone to contribute. Occasionally, the instructor disrupts power dynamics very overtly. One such instance is captured in the instructor's written anecdote:

> If you really believe in disrupting power in the classroom, sometimes you have no choice but to cut someone off! I remember how Bev, a young woman from a visible minority, was sharing her experience of living in three different countries throughout her childhood and the effects this had on her sense of identity and place. In the midst of describing her experience, Jack, a White male Canadian-born student, who also worked as an instructor at another postsecondary institution, interjected his thoughts about such an experience in relation to the theories studied in class, effectively silencing Bev. For me, this was an excellent opportunity to challenge how power plays out in the classroom—in this case, based on gender, age, race, and status. So, I interrupted Jack. I told him that I thought it was more relevant for the student with the lived experience to continue at this time. Jack stopped talking, Bev carried on and I felt confident that, even though it felt "rude" of me to do so, I had taken a small step in disrupting classroom power dynamics.

In this example, the instructor's interruption, while somewhat uncomfortable for her and possibly for Jack, Bev, and/or the other students, invites Jack to become aware of his embedded assumptions regarding his privilege to speak as a knowledge holder. In her written anecdote, a student in the course describes another instructor strategy for disrupting power:

> I was trying very hard to impress the professor by answering every question posed to the class and ensuring I jumped in and interjected when I saw an opening. The professor gently helped me realize how much space I was taking in the course by placing me in a group with two other students who also took up a lot of space. In the small group, we three were competing with each other to get a word in edgewise and it became very exhausting. After about 20 minutes of trying to talk over one another, we realized how we were silencing everyone else by always being the ones to talk anytime there was an opening. We didn't even complete the group activity because it took us all that time to come to the realization that between the three of us we were taking up all the space in the course! After that group activity I began to interact very differently and attempted to carefully monitor myself.

This is one example of how the instructor interrupts the competitive individualism that has become a hallmark of many graduate programs and disrupts the students' experiences of themselves as experts, thus facilitating a shift toward co-learning and col-lective construction of knowledge. Indeed, one of the instructor's key course objectives, informed by critical pedagogy, is to create a sense of community by encouraging students to build on one another's knowledge and inviting an experience of collective learning. By way of moving from a one-way "banking" (Freire, 2007) dissemination of knowledge to a co-construction and co-learning approach, the instructor plans very few lectures in the course. Instead, activities that invite co-learning are facilitated and then deconstructed. For example, a student's written anecdote captures such an experience using an activity from popular theatre:

> My favorite course activity was the day we covered the Horton and Freire reading. We went into the hallway and there were all these pieces of newsprint up. The instructor asked us to use stickies to identify words, phrases, or quotes from the text that we felt were most important. Then we categorized each of these quotes on the newsprint and organized them thematically. I remember the instructor then asked us to stand by the theme that resonated with us the most. This left us in groups of about two or three. The next activity was to work with our theme partner(s) to create a sculpture using our bodies to encapsulate the theme, or a related emotion. As each pair performed their sculpture, the rest of the class commented on what they noticed and what they thought certain things meant. After much creative speculation on why this hand was in a fist or this person was kneeling, the performers explained their sculpture.

Another example of a cooperative activity is the final paper blog. For this activity, the instructor sets up blogs on the course Web site for students to assist one another in constructing their individual final papers. She establishes dates for posting their topic, thesis statement, outline, and first draft for the other students and the instructor to provide feedback. Classmates offer feedback and suggest resources, generating some excitement for each other's work and scholarly development, as evidenced in the following student's written anecdote:

> Toward the midpoint of the course, the instructor asked us to do a series of blog entries related to our final papers. Based on our chosen social movement, the instructor placed us in groups of four other students. We would post our entry by answering questions that the instructor posed while we simultaneously responded, commented, and reflected on the posts from other group members. I had done poorly on my mid-term and because of this blogging process, was able to achieve a new level of critical analysis that I had been previously unable to achieve. I loved this part of the course so much that I have main-

tained this approach with a group of fellow Ph.D. students. We think of writing papers and doing research as a solitary and individual process but this really challenged that belief. Now we help each other with everything from course papers and conference proposals to scholarship applications. Even if we are applying for the same scholarships!

While on one hand the instructor is encouraging cooperative work, simultaneously she problematizes the competitive nature of grading and reminds students that, despite the evident contradictions, she is institutionally bound to re-create this competitive practice.

Encouraging Praxis through Course Assignments

The instructor designs course assignments to encourage students to reflect deeply and make connections between theory and practice in the form of their individual lived experiences. Over several course iterations, the instructor has modified course requirements; however, three key assignments have remained much the same: a pre-course reading/reflection related to CSL, an action/reflection assignment, and a final reflection on one's own learning in social action.

In the pre-course assignment, students reflect upon their own experiences and commitments in relation to "three kinds of citizens", a framework that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) developed by analyzing a number of CSL programs.[3] The instructor asks students to review the material and indicate which form(s) of citizenship they currently practice. For example, one student reflected on how her increased levels of formal education corresponded to her transition between the three kinds of citizens. She charted her transition from simple contributions such as learning to compost as an elementary school student, to more complex activities such as organizing fundraisers as a junior high school student, to developing research on representation in policy as a graduate student. Alternatively, another student critiqued the notion of "citizen" and problematized each of the three kinds of citizens based upon her personal experiences with politics and her conceptions of citizenship, capitalism, and community.

Just past the course midpoint, students complete another assignment wherein the instructor asks students to undertake an action of their choice that is slightly outside their comfort zone. The instructor provides sample actions, such as writing a letter to a newspaper editor or government representative; engaging in direct action by attending a protest; starting a petition; organizing an event; or joining and attending an activist group, a political organization, or the board of a social agency. She encourages students to select an action that is linked to their com-

munity placement, though this is not required. Some of the actions chosen by students include: writing a letter to US President Obama about the Lubicon Cree, attending a rally at the provincial Legislature, getting their child's school involved in Earth Hour, and creating and distributing a zine on sizeism and body issues. The students then are tasked with asking some critical questions about the issue, the action, their own reactions, what they learned, and how this is connected to the learning in, about, and because of social movements. In her written homework assignment in which she reflected on the chosen social action, one student wrote:

> I suppose this activity has me reflecting on more things than what I expected. But then again, I come back to what I've come back all semester, how do you foster awareness and significance? I knew that the opportunity was there all along but I never even considered it. Or perhaps I didn't realize that the opportunity was there. All in all this has been an empowering assignment.

Because the instructor recognizes that this assignment pushes students outside their comfort zones, she pays particular attention to nurturing the students when they hand in and debrief their assignments. She ensures a slower-paced class by holding it in an informal study space with couches and beginning with a round in which students can share their experiences of the assignment openly and without interruption.

In the final assignment, students write a reflective narrative in which they self-examine their own experiences of learning in social action in the past, present, and future. The students consider whether and how they learn from participating in or being exposed to social movements, how theories in the course connect to their own experiences (including in the activist community placements), and the potential future of their own learning in social action. This assignment has proven to be a powerful tool for students to capture their learning. For example, one student wrote in her reflective homework assignment:

> I think that I have been a sub-conscious protector of the status quo for the simple reason that the status quo has been reasonably good to me and to those near me. I hope that I am able to teach citizenship in a new way by actually examining a particular issue and causes of the injustices before simply being charitable to the issue.

Another student wrote:

> What I learn in the classroom provides some of the analysis that I use in social action. I then draw on my experience in social movements to interpret the theory. Round and round it goes. We do this learning collectively in social movements regardless of a formal university. Much of

the theory is organic; the world must always be read and re-read.

Reflecting on the Social World through Course Materials

The instructor purposely facilitates critical reflection about the social world through the course assignments and during class time. In class, she repeatedly asks the students to "tilt the box" (referring to their taken-for-granted ways of looking at the world) and then consider the social world anew, even momentarily, from this "tilted" perspective. However, this also occurs organically as a result of the manner in which the readings, films, theories, and other course materials interrogate common hegemonic understandings of the social world. Readings cover sociological concepts, social movement theories, and models and theories of the learning in, about, and because of social movements. Many of the readings explore praxis, or the theory-practice connection.

The instructor selects books reflecting a critical orientation in their content and published by independent and alternative, mostly Canadian, publishers. The central textbook for this course is Cynthia Kaufman's (2003) *Ideas for Action: Relevant Theory for Radical Change*.[4] Because many students enter the course without any background knowledge or experience in social theory, this book functions as a primer of relevant theories (e.g., Boggs' grassroots coalition politics, Gramsci's hegemony, Marx's historical materialism, and Hall's cultural studies) and concepts (e.g., colonialism, empowerment, and neoliberalism) and situates them within examples from specific movements, demonstrating how theory might be useful within diverse activist contexts. The instructor recognizes that *Ideas for Action* may be a bit "radical" or "one-sided" for some students, but she reminds students that no course material is "neutral."

The course also includes selected documentary films that are coupled with reflection questions to address diverse pedagogical objectives. First, the students are encouraged to uncover the various dimensions of learning related to the social movement portrayed in the documentary. After viewing a film, students might design a pedagogical activity linked to what they have seen. For example, after viewing *A Little Bit of So Much Truth*,[5] the instructor asks students to prepare a message for the Oaxacan movement using a form of media, such as radio, TV, or a blogcast. Second, students learn not only about the social movement and the actors within it, but also about police intervention/brutality and the power of the media in shaping public awareness of political events. By combining the Canadian-produced *Bye Buy World* with *This is what Democracy Looks Like*,[6] students' under-

standing of the role of the state is challenged and they begin to appreciate the role and purpose of social movements in civil society. Third, audio-visual media reach the students at multiple levels, often raising emotional reactions experienced viscerally as the instructor describes in the following written anecdote:

> I remember one student whose whole conception about the world was deeply challenged when we watched the films at the start of the course. She worked for an administrative department within a police service. She was so shocked that small expressions of dismay kept escaping her lips as we viewed the films together. In the end, she was one of the students who took the most risks in her placement and was the most excited about the potential for transformative learning in social movements.

Incorporating particular musical selections serves a similar purpose in the course. For example, through the song *They Dance Alone*[7] by Sting, students begin to identify the role of organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) within the Chilean women's movement during anti-dictatorship activism in the 1980s. Singer/songwriter Maria's Dunn's *We Were Good People*,[8] a song about Edmonton's 1932 Hunger March, provides an excellent example of learning about oppression and resistance across generations and the role of parents in activist learning. The instructor supplements the audio with images and photographs from the Alberta Labour History Institute's website.[9] These materials support students' learning about social movements, power, oppression, and complicity. In addition, students' experiential learning achieved through activist placements complements the critical pedagogy materials, assignments, and classroom experiences.

Activist Placements

Given her critical pedagogical approach, the instructor seeks service-learning placements that will further support students in their analysis of structures of power and oppression at work in society and provide experiential learning of social action oriented toward root causes of injustice. Within the 20 hours of community placement, students complete a project for their respective activist group. Students are also encouraged to participate in other organizational activities such as group planning meetings, group events, and coordinated group actions. In the following section, we explore two considerations that the instructor deems crucial for successful activist placements: recruiting activist organizations and supporting the placements throughout the course.

Recruiting Activist Organizations

Looking for a tight pedagogical connection between

the activist placements and the critical classroom ped-agogy, the instructor aims for "edgy" activist place-ments that would reinforce a focus on social systems, the critique of power, and radical social change efforts. She seeks local, grassroots activist organizations that tend to be smaller, less institutionalized, and more rad-ical as compared to larger, established activist organi-zations. She defines a group as "radical" if they are focused on tackling the root causes of social issues. Within such placements, students work with others who challenge dominant power structures so as to have the chance to experience what it is like to be working on the "other side of power."

At the University of Alberta, support for CSL is provided through the Community Service-Learning Program. However, given the common emphasis within CSL on charitable and service-oriented volun-tary organizations, it is not surprising that, initially, there were no activist organizations registered with the Program. Therefore, the Program directed the instructor to the Alberta Public Interest Research Group (APIRG), a campus-based, student-run, stu-dent-funded, nonprofit organization for community-based research, education, and social activism. Through the connections that APIRG and later the CSL Program facilitated, the instructor recruited a number of activist organizations that are now part of the CSL partners list at the University. The organiza-tions now include a number of APIRG's "working groups," for example, Friends of the Lubicon Alberta and Palestine Solidarity Network, activist groups from the wider community such as the Trans Equality Society of Alberta, and two anarchist groups—the local Anarchist Bookfair Collective and Anarchist Black Cross.[10] In the past, CSL projects have included developing a legal rights card and pamphlet, a curriculum regarding the land claims of the Lubicon Cree in Alberta, and materials for pro-moting the local Anarchist Bookfair.

While the importance of establishing relationships of trust has been emphasized in many writings on engaged scholarship (i.e., Bryson & Hand, 2007; Fogel & Cook, 2006; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003), it bears repeating here. Without trust-based networks, it would be impossible to secure participation from many of these organiza-tions. Establishing and maintaining direct contact with anarchist groups, in particular, is next to impos-sible unless the instructor has a means of connecting with contacts that these groups trust, or she herself is already involved in the group's work.

Recognizing both her position of power as an aca-demic and the groups' opposition to institutionalized structures of power, the instructor always meets with the organizations and carefully presents herself by explaining her interest in the learning in, about, and

because of social movements; her values; her con-nection to the community; and her critical pedagogi-cal perspective. She also shares the course objectives, and some examples of potential placement activities. She emphasizes that, should they participate, the organizations would have a rare opportunity to expose a group of students (who would most likely never rub shoulders with the organization or its issues) to their work. By participating in CSL, these organizations might educate and influence students who would in turn influence the latters' networks and, given that many of the students are also educators, their own students as well. Additionally, as with any service-learning placement, the organization would have an opportunity to move some projects forward and potentially learn from the students along the way.

The instructor also offers community placement groups a number of supports and access to the learn-ing environment. For example, in line with her criti-cal pedagogical philosophy of disrupting institution-alized structures of power, the instructor invites members of the activist groups to attend and partici-pate in the class even though they are not registered students. She provides all organizations with a copy of the course outline and offers to copy any articles of interest. Only one activist group member thus far has participated throughout the full course. This member assumed the role of a graduate student audit-ing the course, engaging in discussion and assign-ments no different than other students. The instructor provided feedback but not a grade on assignments submitted by this person. A handful of other mem-bers of the activist groups have dropped into the classroom on occasion for a particular film, activity, or discussion. Members' involvement as non-regis-tered students in the classroom has seemed depen-dent on their comfort with educational institutions and familiarity with the instructor and/or other stu-dents. The instructor's relationship building has proven successful in that, to date, all of the organiza-tions still in operation have continued to participate in subsequent course offerings.

Supporting the Community Placements

As indicated in the literature (Bowman et al., 2010; Bringle et al., 1997), the more that community expe-riences are integrated into the classroom experience, the more satisfying and successful the placement experience will be for the students, instructor, and participating organizations. In the instructor's experi-ence, one of the biggest challenges facing students is establishing and maintaining adequate communica-tion with community partners. Therefore, while indi-vidual placement group members can drop in as they wish for their own personal learning and growth, the instructor establishes an expectation that a represen-

tative from the community placement group will meet with students in the classroom for a part of every class (held every other Saturday) to discuss placement activities. Partners present their placements and projects in the first class, attend a project work bee at the course midpoint, and attend student presentations in the final session. In the classes between, the final hour of class is available for work with partners. In the instructor's experience, such high demands for involvement during class time have been more easily accommodated by activist groups whose members are typically working on these activities outside their regular jobs in contrast to most other service-learning placements where students work with staff members of the nonprofit agency.

In addition to dealing with communication issues and creating a supportive environment for the successful completion of placement projects, the in-class work with partners also contributes to the collective knowledge construction described earlier, de-institutionalizing the physical space, and opening the academy to the community that actually "owns" this public university. In her written anecdote, the instructor recalls one particular experience:

> I always schedule a half-day project work-bee with the partners to occur midway through the CSL courses. Come one particular Saturday, the place was electric! The students and I brought in refreshments and set them all out on a big table in the hallway. Folks helped themselves and, at intervals, I went around the floor with a trolley to top up coffee and distribute snacks. I had commandeered all of the learning spaces on the floor. In each one there was a group of partners and students working energetically on their projects together. Some of the seven partner organizations came in groups that day. For example, the whole volunteer Board of the Trans Equality Society of Alberta showed up to work and then took their placement students with them to a board meeting across campus.

Ethical Considerations Regarding Activist Placements

Engaging students through critical pedagogy and disruptive learning raises questions about how students are affected when they see their own complacency and complicity in systems of oppression. Critical pedagogues, such as Freire (2004), have demanded that students become "indignant" about the social world in order to challenge assumptions, ask critical questions, and make change. By facilitating students' participation in unfamiliar settings, "new information, situations, and perspectives are not simply assimilated into students' existing belief system but serve to disrupt those systems in such a way that

they themselves become the subject of examination" (King, 2004, p. 136). Because immersion in a culture makes it difficult to achieve a critical perspective, an encounter with unfamiliarity is helpful to unearth how culture operates. It is vital, however, that this encounter be accompanied by tools to help students analyze their experience (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). Critical pedagogy is not a technique to be treated lightly. Rather, it is a delicate and nuanced approach to unearthing tacit assumptions about the social world in order to identify and address oppression.

Ethical Approach to Disruption

As Bickford and Reynolds (2002) asked, if students are too comfortable, too safe, and too invested in the status quo, how can instructors provide opportunities that make them uncomfortable without creating a punishing pedagogy? How can instructors engage in an ethical and sensitive disruptive pedagogy? In this course, the instructor undertakes a sensitive disruptive pedagogy using the strategies and materials discussed above. In addition, she designs the community placement to be sensitive to the disruptive learning that may result from placement with an activist group.

As mentioned above, students complete a pre-course assignment that exposes them to thinking about how CSL might function to inform social action. On the first day of class, each activist placement group provides an overview of their group and what they have in mind for a project. Students are then given the choice between 2-3 organizations. Due to some students' inexperience with activist organizations and the short timeframe for selecting a placement, students sometimes experience an uncomfortable disruption related to constrained choice (Chovanec, Kajner, Mian, & Underwood, 2011). In the following anecdote, the instructor relates what happened when the course was offered with two anarchist placements included in a mix of only three activist options:

> It was the first day of class. The community partners had just given their presentations. I asked the students to think about which group they would like to work with. Suddenly, I felt the tension in the room rising and I began to worry about how the partners would respond. What do I do now?! After a moment of panic, I decided to move my students into a study area across the hall to check in with them away from the partners. I knew that it was probably best to engage directly with the students' reactions by opening the space for them to talk. So, I told them that I was sensing some tension and initiated a round so that each student could have an uninterrupted moment to share what was going on for them. It was immediately apparent that the students were

disturbed about the two anarchist placements. Drawing on common misconceptions about anarchism, they envisioned a very scary placement. After all the students had spoken, I explained that I had purposefully sought "edgy" placements that were willing to engage with the academy, that I had met with all the groups, and that I was confident in the groups' suitability for the course.

Taking a deep breath, I asked the students to give me an idea of how each of them would like to proceed and I initiated a second round. To my surprise, all but one of the students selected a placement, some purposely choosing to take a chance with the anarchist groups. Although we were subsequently able to move on from there and return to the partners, we continued to engage with disruption about the placements throughout the course.

For the instructor, such disruption creates an excellent opportunity to engage students immediately and begin the process of challenging assumptions.

The instructor emphasizes that the community experiences and projects will be negotiated between the student, activist organization, and instructor. This helps to mitigate feeling forced to choose an activist placement and creates a sense of power to shape the form their participation will take. She is clear that a completed project of some sort is required that will further the work of the group through the contribution of the students' unique skills, abilities, and according to their comfort level. However, she does not evaluate the project nor does she establish any specific parameters for how the students will engage with the organizations. Decisions related to participation in the groups' activities are addressed through negotiation between the students, partners, and instructor (when needed).

There are instances where students are limited in the scope of their involvement due to such things as, for example, employment contracts. Often students set these boundaries clearly and successfully negotiate the parameters within the placements. In her research interview, one student shared an example of this negotiation:

> [my involvement] is gonna look a certain way… if it can't look this way, [I] can't participate. It's that simple. And, well again, to the group's credit, they understood that and we were able to kinda compromise… [so that] it's not asking me to do something outside of my comfort zone.

A community partner also described the negotiation process:

> When we worked on something new, we'd talk about it, and [we'd] brief about it and what people thought was right, what was wrong, people's

concerns… I was very, very careful to make sure that we checked in with people on a fairly frequent basis.

Sometimes, questions about direct action or civil disobedience arise. The instructor is adamant that the students are not required, nor expected, to engage in any particular form of activity. At the same time, however, she continually encourages the students to use the placements as an opportunity to step outside their comfort zones, to try new things, and to look at things differently. Furthermore, the instructor creates many opportunities for the students to process and address their feelings of discomfort through homework reflections and in-class activities. These purposeful practices aim to achieve a sensitive and ethical disruptive pedagogy.

As students are confronting their power, privilege, complacency and complicity within systems of oppression, they often struggle with difficult emotions such as guilt and/or helplessness. The reflective assignments and activities such as rounds encourage students to address and process those feelings while the activist placements allow the students to interact with individuals who are challenging and resisting oppression. The activists placements serve as a tool to move students beyond feelings of guilt and helplessness toward taking action for social change and, in this way, are a crucial element of the instructor's critical pedagogical approach.

Formal Mechanisms for
Ethical Community Placements

The University of Alberta CSL Program provides information for instructors seeking to work with CSL in their courses. Ethical considerations, when raised, centre on research ethics, confidentiality, and safety issues. For example, instructors can access guidelines on timelines regarding University ethics approval for CSL research, means of communicating research aims to community organizations, and how to instruct students on confidentiality issues related to research with community organizations. University policies on research ethics and research involving human subjects are highlighted in the CSL instructor guide. Safety considerations largely relate to students conducting research involving human subjects.

In terms of community safety, some placements require students to provide a child welfare and police check, a procedure certifying that the volunteer does not have a criminal record. The CSL Program facilitates the process of securing these checks and covers the application fees. In this course, the activist groups typically do not request an additional confidentiality agreement nor do they ask for criminal record checks. Students sign a CSL contract, a standard practice at

the University of Alberta, which includes a summary of the service activity, a communication plan, learning objectives, and confidentiality expectations.

While there are no explicit policies on risk management in CSL placements at the University of Alberta, the instructor gives careful thought to the risks and benefits of placing students with activist placements. Given the age and maturity of students in this course, they are encouraged to think about their comfort level with various activities and to communicate their concerns directly with the instructor and placement partners. Some students choose to participate in direct actions, such as protesting at the provincial legislature or marching in demonstrations, while others choose to adopt a more behind-the-scenes role. No injuries, arrests, or unwanted public attention have thus far occurred as a result of student choices. The instructor recognizes that any off-campus placements, for the purposes of CSL or job practicums, have risks for students. However, activist groups, unlike formal registered nonprofit organizations, may not have their own protections in the form of liability insurance to deal with volunteer injuries, for example, so care is required on all sides.

Indoctrination or Critical Pedagogy Education?

By declaring their values, assumptions, and political orientation, and explicitly acknowledging their position of power, critical pedagogues make explicit the position from which they teach. As Kincheloe (2008) argued, this process invites critical appraisal and is therefore less a form of indoctrination than the hidden position of mainstream educators who purport to be neutral in their orientation yet engage in a selective process of what to include in and leave out of their teaching. As Kincheloe (2008) explained, seeing the declaration of one's pedagogical orientation as problematic is:

> tantamount to saying that one who admits her oppositional political sentiments and makes them known to students is guilty of indoctrination, while one who hides her consent to dominant power and the status quo it has produced from her students is operating in an objective neutral manner. (p. 11)

Given that unequal power relations shape experiences, critical pedagogues believe that failing to name these relations and identify one's own position within them is to support oppression.

The same can be said for community placement activities. When students are placed with mainstream organizations that do not position themselves explicitly in terms of their political orientation and power, claiming instead to be neutral organizations, students are more likely to assume this represents a non-polit-

ical orientation and that other organizational approaches, such as those of activist groups, are linked to pushing a particular agenda. Organizations communicate their values in diverse ways and an activist community placement invites students to ask questions about who is benefiting from the work of the community groups.[11] Throughout the course, the instructor clearly states that students do not need to *agree* with the perspectives presented in the course materials or held by the community organizations, but they do need to *consider* them. She reiterates that students are not expected to become activists but rather to look more critically at the world and their own taken-for-granted assumptions about it. This approach actually subverts and helps to prevent indoctrination.

Outcomes

The results of our research project suggest that pairing critical classroom pedagogy with activist placements has enabled students to successfully meet course objectives. Students have realized that people examine the world from particular positionalities in a way that greatly affects engagement and involvement in social issues. Acknowledging that everyone is positioned in the social structure in some way, a student wrote in her reflective essay: "I hadn't actually seen that before…neutrality does not really happen. So like it's not only ok to be not neutral but it's in fact your moral obligation to be not neutral." Another student wrote about the realization that the choice to live openly and visibly as a sexual minority, an identity that is not always recognized in the state's laws and policies, is to position oneself in a way that is an open challenge to the status quo and a claim for social justice.

In course assignments, students expressed becoming more conscious of their privilege in the world and their complicity in systems of oppression. For example, one student explained:

> Presently, this has been my experience of working with [my CSL placement]. I am part of the oppressive force as a white Canadian having lived in reasonable privilege. Despite my ignorance, I am a part of this society that consumes cheap oil, and ignores the plight of many. It took a while to come to terms with this. I don't know if I even have.

One student who was new to activism noted: "The class has broadened my critical lens for looking at issues…as a result of this class and my experiences, I will not be able to turn a blind eye to issues as easily as before." Another student, teaching in the school system, remarked: "I came out a little bit more willing to look at the depth of what we do in the classrooms…I think I'm a little more committed now to

mourning Chilean women who dance the Cueca, the national dance of Chile, alone with photographs of their disappeared loved ones in their hands.

8   This song explores the stories of working people in Western Canada—tales of resilience and hope through experiences of immigration, internment, exploitation, and the Depression (released in 2003).

9   See http://www.labourhistory.ca/ defaultTimeline2010.asp?mode=timelineflash

10   The instructor selected the following organizations for CSL placement positions: Friends of the Lubicon Alberta (FOLA), an advocacy group formed to promote awareness of the plight of the Lubicon Lake Nation and demand that the federal government negotiate on self-government, land claims and restitution; Albertans Demand Affordable Housing (ADAH), a non-partisan coalition of individuals and groups who use direct action to address the issue of homelessness in Alberta; the Anarchist Bookfair, an organization which provides anarchists, activists, and others the opportunity to learn, share ideas, and connect with others; the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), an organization that recognizes the prison system as an oppressive and inhumane tool of the state that exists not to cure social ills but to reinforce class and race privilege; Trans Equality Society of Alberta (TESA), which advocates about matters concerning trans-identified Albertans; and the Palestine Solidarity Network (PSN), a nonprofit, grassroots collective aimed at advocating and upholding the human rights of Palestinians.

11   Students were never asked to participate in party-based formal political activities, a request that would contravene university policies on instructor facilitation of political partisanship.

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