



CHAPTER 21*

Starting Small

Practicing Critical Pedagogy through Collective Conversation

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Introduction

This activity will demonstrate how to approach critical pedagogy as an incremental, iterative process by establishing a community of practice with your colleagues. Collective conversation draws on the variety of knowledge and experience at your institution to imagine and develop new approaches to teaching and learning. Through the process of building community, you can foster a culture of support in which to discuss intellectually challenging material, work through any symptoms of imposter syndrome you or your colleagues may experience, and take risks in your own teaching. By reflecting on the following questions and facilitating collective conversations, you can discover a low-stakes entry into critical pedagogy, transform your instruction program in small but meaningful ways, and create a more inclusive, critical inquiry-driven space for your students.

Outcomes

1. Identify potential collaborators in order to get the most from available partnerships and establish the scope of your discussion

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2. Identify conversation starters and other resources in order to inform and inspire your colleagues
3. Develop guiding questions in order to propel the conversation forward, in both the short and long term

Questions

Start by reflecting on and responding to the following questions:

- What sparked your interest in critical pedagogy?
- What about critical pedagogy resonates with you? How did you initially think about integrating it into your instruction?
- How are new ideas or initiatives presented to librarians at your institution? What approaches have worked in the past?
- Who might be interested in collaborating with you? Who are “your people,” that is, the colleagues you rely on for inspiration or counsel?
- Who are the more skeptical members of your unit? How might you spark their intellectual curiosity or engage them on a personal level in order to earn buy-in?
- Where do you have cachet? For example, do you coordinate or spearhead (formally or informally) a particular area of your program? Are there meetings at which you are empowered to raise the issue of critical pedagogy? Could you call an extra meeting or host a brown bag or some other informal discussion?

After personally engaging with these questions and determining the time and place for your first discussion, reach out to your colleagues in order to prepare them for the conversation. Explaining why these conversations are valuable, how you plan to facilitate the conversation, and what you hope will come out of the experience can help set the stage and allay anxieties. Selecting and asking participants to complete a short reading is also useful in establishing context and introducing unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary. A few examples we’ve used successfully are listed in our bibliography.

So your colleagues are in a room together and have perhaps done a little homework...now what? Below are some questions you may ask to start the discussion:

- What is critical pedagogy/librarianship? What do you already know? What do you find unclear or confusing?
- Where and how are we already incorporating critical ideas, activities, or context into our instruction?
- How can we alter common activities and lesson plans we’re already using in order to incorporate critical pedagogy?

As the facilitator, you can try getting the discussion rolling in the following ways:

- Describe an activity in which you incorporated critical pedagogy in order to provide your colleagues with a concrete example.
- Highlight or compliment a way that one of your librarian colleagues is using critical pedagogy in their instruction.

Closing Thoughts

Starting these conversations can feel challenging, particularly if you're met with skepticism or apathy. We've found the following facilitation skills and strategies help us work through any resistance we encounter (self-imposed or otherwise):

- *Embrace silence:* It's tempting to talk through lulls in the discussion, as we fear silence indicates colleagues are disengaged or bored. Those moments, however, enable individuals to reflect and process. If critical pedagogy is new or challenging for members of your group, it's especially important to give people time to think and breathe. If the silence makes you anxious, try slowly counting to yourself, getting as close to 10 as you can manage before launching a new conversational thread.
- *Bring backup:* Perhaps you won't run into vocal resistance during your discussion, but it's helpful to prepare for that possibility. We outfit ourselves with three tools: questions, research, and stories. If someone asserts critical pedagogy won't work in their classroom, a good question can look as simple as this: "Can you tell us more about that?" Drawing on the extensive body of research around student learning (particularly coming out of education) can be a useful counter to dismissiveness.¹ Finally, the most effective technique is often the one with the most emotional heft: recount a personal story where critical pedagogy made a significant impact on you or your students.
- *Expect and accept non-closure:* Chances are your first conversation won't end with a unanimous expression of enthusiasm and a draft action plan. Expect the discussion to be ongoing, and plan ways of building on progress and learning from mistakes over the long term. Just as we can focus on starting small to enhance our teaching, we can concentrate on small yet meaningful steps toward our collective growth.

Note

1. See, for example, Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

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