

Toward a Reconceptualization of Needs in Classrooms: Baudrillard, Critical Pedagogy, and Schooling in The United States

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Introduction

The needs of students are often used as justification for actions in schools and in school policy. The concept of needs, however, and the role that the formulation of needs currently plays in the maintenance and reproduction of capitalism in schools is woefully under theorized in the field of education. While this claim may at first seem unfounded, or over exaggerated, we can see the evocation of the needs of students everywhere from individual classrooms to the nation's highest office within the United States. In a speech delivered on August 9, 2010 at the University of Texas at Austin, President Barack Obama told those in attendance,

We also know that in the coming decades, a high school diploma is not going to be enough. Folks *need* a college degree. They *need* workforce training. They *need* a higher education. And so today I want to talk about the higher education strategy that we're pursuing not only to lead the world once more in college graduation rates, but to make sure our graduates are ready for a career; ready to meet the challenges of a 21st century economy (*my emphasis*, Obama, 2010).

We can see the very same move, of making public education explicitly serve the needs of the capitalist economy, in classrooms across the country. This process works as follows: the teacher explains to her fourth grade students that they must learn x because they will need to know x for fifth grade. The fifth grade teacher explains to her students that they must learn x plus y in order to move on to sixth grade, which they will need for seventh grade, and so on. This notion of needs permeates the public school classroom from the very earliest grades through college. The entire structure of school operates in this way: deferring "need" on to the next grade and the next until those grades are replaced with college and work. In this way student needs are never authored by students themselves, rather they are inscribed on students from their very earliest experiences in classrooms.

The concept of "needs" in education, therefore, is divorced from the actual *human* needs of students and rather confers on students an economistic conception of needs that positions students as commodities in the national and international economic order. These needs are reinterpreted and reinscribed on students as if they were students' own individual needs. The actual needs of students, tied to the critical pedagogical project of becoming more fully human (Freire, 2000), are mystified and abstracted to the point that student needs are no longer student needs at all: they are the needs of the capitalist economy and the needs of the state.

In this paper I review Marx's (1990) conceptions of use value and exchange value before turning to Baudrillard's (1981) critique of both in the capitalist construction of needs. I then use Baudrillard's conception of the 'system of needs' to identify how this same process works in schools and classrooms. Namely, how students become conceptualized as commodities and how schools as the sites in which these commodities are produced become complicit with capitalist social reproduction. Finally, I take up the pedagogical project of redefining (humanizing) needs in a

critical pedagogy that is decidedly anti-capitalist, while accounting for the various structural mechanisms in place in our present school system within the United States that work against such a critical pedagogy.

Use Value and Exchange Value in Marx and Baudrillard

Marx (1990) tells us that the commodity is an external object that satisfies human needs. The “physical body of the commodity itself” constitutes the object/commodity’s use value (p. 126). Here one might think of examples such as yarn, potatoes, or iron as examples of commodities with use value. The use value of a commodity is not tied to the labor required for its production. Thinking of potatoes once again, the use value of a potato does not take into account the labor of the farmer who planted, grew, and harvested the potato. Exchange value enters here, as the way in which “use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind” (p. 126). Again thinking about potatoes, a potato can be exchanged for other commodities through its exchange value, what it is worth in relation to other commodities. This ratio fluctuates and changes over time and is not necessarily tied to the *use* value of the commodity. Rather, the commodity’s exchange value emerges from the labor power that went into the production of the specific commodity. Marx writes, “What exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production” (p. 129). Marx also notes that this labor is “equal human labour,” meaning that “The total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities, counts here as one homogenous mass of human labour-power, although composed of innumerable individual units of labour-power” (p. 129). That is, in a given society the amount of labor-time that goes into a commodity can be understood as equal in terms of “socially necessary labour-time” or the amount of time in a given society to produce a commodity that is considered normal given the society’s conception of the skill and intensity common for that particular society (Marx, 1990).

Baudrillard (1981) elaborates on Marx’s conception of use value by stating that “the status of use value in Marxian theory is ambiguous,” and shows this by detailing the process of “commodity fetishism” (p. 130). To understand this point, Baudrillard explains,

It appears that commodity fetishism (that is, where social relations are disguised in the qualities and attributes of the commodity itself) is not a function of the commodity defined *simultaneously* as exchange value and use value, but of exchange value alone (*emphasis in original*, p. 130).

We find here a problem with the ambiguity of use value, because use value is a “fetishized social relation.” That is, it is not only exchange value that leads to commodity fetishization, but rather both use and exchange value that are both fetishized and come together “to constitute commodity fetishism” (p. 131). It is from this point that we can see that Marx has underdeveloped the socially constructed nature of use value. Baudrillard next moves to critique the notion of needs (the system of needs) and utility as caught up in the very same oppressive reality as exchange value. In doing so, Baudrillard posits that we must examine more closely the ways in which use values are themselves also rationalized and abstracted in order to enable the exchange of commodities with varying levels of utility. Framed another way, in order for a commodity to be exchanged, its use must also be understood in relation to other

commodities. Commodity fetishization thus results in a conception of needs divorced from actual human needs, as these needs are socially constructed and thus the whole of the capitalist economy bears down on these needs, warping them into the needs of the capitalist economy. It is from this vantage point that needs become a central focus of Baudrillard's elaboration of use value.

Baudrillard tells us, "use value is very much a social relation" (p. 132). To understand this, we need only think of how we learned what the utility of a given commodity is, and question to what extent we came to the conclusion or valuation of the commodity on our own, or whether cultural and social perspectives from outside ourselves as individuals constituted our conception of that particular commodity. This practice shows the absurdity in thinking our own conception of utility (and of use, and of needs) comes from either nature or our own unmediated desires. We are born into symbolic systems of meaning; examples include the marking of gender and race on birth certificates (Lewis, 2003), and the ways in which we learn what we "need" in schools. Because of this, it becomes essential to uncover the ways in which utility and the system of needs that utility responds to are not in any way natural but are rather constructs of the social realities in a given society. It is specifically to this task that Baudrillard turns to.

An individual's concept of utility, and of use value therein, is in fact a product of the economic system in which said individual finds herself. Baudrillard shows this by flipping the seemingly apolitical concept of human needs leading to the exchange of commodities on its head. He writes, "Far from the individual expressing his needs in the economic system, it is the economic system that induces the individual function and the parallel functionality of objects and needs... The individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms" (p. 133). It becomes impossible, then, to formulate an individual's needs outside of their social reality and the social conditions that determine(d) that reality. From this, Baudrillard posits that there exists a "metaphysic of needs and use values" wherein "abstraction, reduction, rationalization and systematization are as profound and as generalized at the level of 'needs' as at the level of commodities" (p. 135). As socially constructed actors in the current political economy of the United States, we are unable to ever retreat from the capitalistic formulation of needs.

Emerging from Baudrillard's critique of use value is the notion that in a capitalist society human beings are defined by their needs, that needs constitute what it means to be human, and that the use value of a commodity is seen falsely as emerging solely from these natural needs. From this he writes, "Every revolutionary perspective today stands or falls on its ability to reinterrogate radically the repressive, reductive, rationalizing metaphysic of utility" (p. 139). To me, this implies a pedagogical project: one in which the constructed nature of utility is thrown open for students to probe and question the "metaphysic" of needs and come to know their world more wholly by interrogating the ways in which needs in a capitalist economy are not natural, but conferred onto human bodies. Before proceeding with this line of inquiry, however, we must first better understand how Baudrillard's conception of use value and of needs plays out on students in classrooms.

Toward the Student as Commodity: What Students Need

It is not necessarily new or novel to talk about the student as a commodity in the current system of education in the United States (see Barrier-Ferreira, 2008; Lewis, 2003). Additionally, critical work has examined the ways in which education itself has been commodified and marketized to suit the needs of both local and global

capitalism (Trnavcevic, 2008). What one does not find in this work, however, is the case for a link between the concept of student needs and how those needs are not in fact dictated by the individual student, her parents, or even her teachers, but rather by the political economy of the society in which she finds herself. Baudrillard can help us make better sense of how students' supposed needs are used to oppress them, and in so doing, can point to pedagogical responses for critical educators dedicated to combating oppression in classrooms.

The notion that all students need an education is a bourgeois invention emerging out of the Enlightenment. The notion that young people have not always been receiving an education, that is, learning from peers and adults their entire lives, also stems from a Western tradition which limits the worth of what students know to what Michael Apple (2000) has called "official knowledge." The fact that we refer to learning only certain prescribed facts and skills as "receiving an education" is then laden with innumerable socially constructed assumptions and biases which serve to oppress students who do not come to school with the requisite knowledge of the dominant-oppressor class (Freire, 2000; Kumashiro, 2009). If one were to concede that young people are always already learning - that from the very moment they are alive they are making meaning from their experiences - the notion that the sole purpose of school is simply to learn would seem nonsensical. Rather schooling, and public state-funded schooling at that, serves to teach students a particular set of meanings and relations. More so, schools exist as determiners of students' lives. That is, schooling in capitalist societies determines students' lives in oppressive ways and then uses the notion of the needs of students to justify and legitimize the process.

Returning to Baudrillard, needs emerge as a concept in schooling because of the seemingly natural human proclivity of needing an education. The value of such an education, however, is rarely elaborated in terms of the individual student in and of herself, but rather value is given to education because of the collective social good(s) of having an educated populace. Students ought to know how to read, so this logic goes, in order for them to make informed decisions as voters in a participatory democracy. Let us take account then of how this particular conception of needs, the need to know how to read in order to vote, is imbued with the effects of the political economy from which it emerges.

First, students are not encouraged to be producers of knowledge, rather only consumers of knowledge with which to base their votes on. Second, the fixity of the form of governance is held intact, as without time or place, as the thing students must adapt to, rather than as a form of organizing human beings in response to the demands of those directly impacted in the present historical moment. Here we see Baudrillard's critique of use value emerge explicitly, "value in the case of use value is enveloped in total mystery, for it is grounded anthropologically in the (self-) 'evidence' of a naturalness, in an unsurpassable original reference" (p. 139). Learning to read is depoliticized even as it is defended for its use in the lone political act deemed worthy in the United States. This is the status of the needs discourse in schooling.

The needs of students, were we to actually ask of them what they needed from school, would likely be far closer to Deweyan (2007) progressive education than it would be to our current practice. Dewey emphasized the need for learning to be for what is at stake presently for students, to take account of their world as they are currently experiencing it, and to ground all education in the lives of those engaged in the educative process (Dewey, 2001; 2007). The value of education, then, would truly rest in the lived experiences of individual students. Students as commodities

moves us away from such a conception, however, as students are quantified to gauge the relative worth of teachers, of schools, and according to the President's remarks, the worth of an entire country. Yet if we consider the very first definition of commodity, as an object that satisfies human needs, we are left with two possible conclusions as to whether or not students may be rightfully regarded as commodities.

In the first sense, they are commodities because they satisfy the needs of a state engaged in social reproduction. They maintain the status quo and ensure that American hegemony will not falter in the coming decades, and in this way must be produced very specifically in order to ensure that there is no break with the current model of producing workers for a capitalist economy. The use value of students as commodities in this way stems from their future surplus labor that will be exploited as part of their work in a capitalist economy. But upon further consideration, students – human beings – can never be fully reduced to the status of objects. While banking education (where the teacher deposits information into the students to later reap the benefits of said information) objectifies students, a problem-posing education grounds all interactions in classrooms on the basis that students are dynamic subjects who create knowledge from their lived experiences (Freire, 2000). It is imperative that we understand how banking education as a *pedagogical practice* in classrooms emerges from a school-wide *system* of banking education that determines life chances of both students and teachers. For a pedagogical project of reimagining needs to become possible, we must know what we are up against in classrooms to fully understand what becomes possible with a richer account of needs for and with students.

Determinism in and as Schooling

It is crucial before proceeding to the pedagogical project of producing a richer account of the needs of students that we not lose site of the oppressive reality of schooling in capitalist systems. We can view Bowles and Gintis' (1976; 2002) analyses of schooling in the capitalist economic system of the United States as well as the work of Luis Althusser (2008), on ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), as exemplars of the conception of class determinism and the role that schooling plays in determining outcomes for individuals in a capitalist society. For Althusser (2008), schools exist as institutions (ISAs) that reproduce the current class relationship and relations to the means of production. These institutions, rather than exerting the state's control via force⁴⁰ instead control through ideology. The school in modern times has become the most dominant ISA in terms of the state's role in the reproduction of the relations of production. This has not only been well theorized, but can be seen using empirical economic data in the United States.

Bowles and Gintis (2002) for example, in their article "*Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited*," write of their original work,

We showed that parental economic status is passed on to children in part by means of unequal educational opportunity, but that the economic advantages of the offspring of higher social status families go considerably beyond the superior education they receive (p. 2).

Bowles and Gintis showed the ways in which social class, "economic status" in their terms, is maintained intergenerationally and the role that schools play in this

⁴⁰ For Althusser, direct force on the part of the state falls into the realm of the Repressive State Apparatus, which is distinguished from ISAs because it does not rely solely on the manipulation of ideology, but rather seeks to repress through brute force. Examples include the military and police.

maintenance. Specifically, they argue, schools are structured to enable “the legitimacy of being subservient in the workplace, that benefit in this case employers, at the expense of another [group], the employees” (p. 20). Schools are then conceptualized as training grounds for the class-based future employment of students. This is precisely what Jean Anyon (1981) found: classrooms are set up to model the dominant expectations for students’ future employment, enabling different kinds of school activities based on the income of students’ parents. In the United States, one is extremely likely to remain in whatever social class they are born into and in this way, students’ lives are determined (Sullivan, 2010). Schools therefore work in such a way as to train those who are to be subservient to be subservient and those who are to be executives to be executives.

Schools can thus be understood using the following framework: people are born into a class, attend schools where they are treated in ways that prepare them to have their labor exploited while remaining in that same social class, and then have children themselves and the whole cycle repeats seemingly without end. In this way schools are as much a determiner of student lives, as they are themselves already determined by the social class of those attending them. Thinking of modern day state terminology regarding schools, “failing” schools can be read as a stand-in for working class or poor schools. Using a determining framework, these schools are in economically depressed areas where they seek to train students for jobs that largely no longer exist in this country, manufacturing being the most prescient example (Anyon, 1981). They do this seemingly without care or notice to the shifting economic realities outside of the school, and thus the status quo is reproduced ad nauseum.

Deterring Determinism

As a framework for conceptualizing life in a class-based capitalistic society, Marxism sheds light on the structural forces that shape people’s lives in material ways. Marx’s own use of the concept of determinism stems largely from the inherent flaw in capitalism, that its anarchic pursuit of profit produces economic crises, which then also determines a response from the subjugated proletariat to social revolution. Raymond Williams (1977) adds to this, writing, “A Marxism without some concept of determination is in effect worthless. A Marxism with many of the concepts of determination it now has is quite radically disabled” (p. 83).⁴¹ Williams is pointing to an uncertain middle ground here, a place between a determined “economism,” “the setting of limits,” and “pressures” (p. 86-87). Economism here refers to the notion that the economic system dictates the social conditions and actions of those within it, denying agency and the Marxist doctrine that we, as human actors, make our own history. William’s definitions of determine as both the setting of limits, the laws of a capitalist economy for example, as well as the exerting of pressures, as a compulsion to act, are especially useful here because they point to two different but interconnected processes. That is, the setting of limits is solely negative, negatively determining the lives of individuals within a rigid and fixed economic system. Pressures, on the other hand, convey what for Williams can be understood as positive determinants. They are positive here in the sense that they are productive (of social relations and other social processes), rather than solely restrictive (negative) as in the case with the setting of limits. The danger, for Williams, is that economism leads us

⁴¹ Williams’ use of determination can be seen as synonymous with Marx’s and my own use of determinism in this context. While the word is different, his critique is one that is helpful for the present discussion.

to only see the negative determinants of limits rather than both the setting of limits and exertion of pressures as both being essential characteristics of determinism. Limits are rigid, whereas pressures are more fluid and vary over time and space. While this distinction is extremely helpful, it can be more concretely understood by looking for examples in school settings.

In Paul Willis' (1977) now infamous *Learning to Labor*, we see a group of young white working class men who construct what Willis terms a "counter-school culture." The students who embrace this counter-school culture reject the standards and norms of traditional public schooling and position themselves in opposition to the students who are receptive and responsive to the authority figures within schools. The lads, as Willis refers to them, refer to the students who do not embrace their counter-school culture as "ear'oles." Willis' ethnographic work shows the ways in which these students' counter-school identities actually make their transition to work in shop floors all the more seamless as the essential relationship they develop to work as school-aged students is maintained in their work after leaving school. Willis' findings, therefore, seriously complicate the easy narrative discussed earlier of the economic determinism which schools feed into in order to reproduce the existing status quo. That is, if schools function to instill in students the attitudes that are essential to their future exploitation as workers, how do students who completely reject school still find their way into the types of work that the school is supposed to be sending them to?

It would seem that if students completely reject school and the culture it asks them to fit themselves into these students would not go on to occupy the position in the capitalist system that school is structured to lead them to. Willis discusses this, writing,

The fact that kids from the counter-school culture nevertheless do go forward relatively willingly to wage labour – the final Reproduction effect which I do accept – suggests that schools work through contradiction and *difference* from other social sites rather than through reflection, correspondence, similarity, or whatever (*emphasis in original*, p. 206).

It is my contention that we can understand this process by incorporating Williams' (1977) notions of the exertion of pressures. The limits imposed on the lads are continually refuted and superseded as they consistently challenge the status quo imposed in their school. The lads perform subversive acts such as never writing anything in class, to sneaking into bars to drink and dance, to simply leaving school to smoke a cigarette with their friends. Each of these acts refutes the limits imposed on student behavior in school, which in economism are the mechanisms that lead students to their essential attitudes regarding their position to the means of production. Thinking about pressures as opposed to limits on the lads, however, opens up the possibility of understanding their lives in a way that avoids a simple economism.

As the lads come from working class homes, they must work while in school to afford things like beer and cigarettes. Work is seen as something required for material survival, and we can thus imagine the *pressure* of finding ways to pay for these habits. While the limits imposed on students are real, the lads' refusal to accept these limits (a very literal example is the legal drinking age limit) point to another way to understand how the lads end up in the types of jobs the school is set up to train them for. Willis (1977) contends that the lads end up in shop floor jobs because these jobs, "allow the fullest expression of [the lads'] developing cultural skills" (p. 95).

That is, shop floors represent sites for the lads to maintain their counter-school cultural selves in that they are able to demonstrate masculinity, to celebrate drinking and sex, and generally avoid ear'oles (p. 96). These are not limits on the lads, but rather cultural pressures, that contain within them the lads' own sense of agency in that they are able to carve out their own sense of self even in spite of their exploitation and the abuse of their surplus labor.

Carving Out A Pedagogical Stance on Determinism

There is a danger, in my interpretation of Willis' account of the lads, to view the lads' choosing an exploited line of work as false consciousness on their part. That is, one might make the claim that the lads' choice to work in shop floors stems from their embrace of hegemonic bourgeois capitalism. But Willis responds to this fear, writing,

The working class is the only class not inherently structured from within by the ideological intricacy of capitalist organization... The working class is the only group in capitalism that does not have to believe in capitalist legitimations of its own survival" (p. 123).

This is what Willis characterizes as the "potential [of] working class cultural creativity and insight" (p. 122). The fact that the working class is in no way legitimized by capitalism, unlike a middle class or owner class identity, enables working class people to not "mystify" themselves and to maintain a sense of creativity which leaves the potential for alternative realities, for revolution, intact. Further, it makes an account of actual human needs possible, as the needs of the working class, while exploited, are not identical to the needs of the capitalist economy. This creativity of the working class is determined to an extent, but not solely by economism and the structural limits imposed on working class people. That we are even able to imagine alternative realities, alternative ways of being outside of capitalism, is evidence of the creativity of the working class which cannot be wholly determined by either pressures or limits otherwise it would simply cease to be. And this creativity must be the starting point of a pedagogical project aimed at reconceptualizing the needs of students.

It is in fact creativity that is the antithesis of determinism. Creativity, born of human agency, is the active motivating impulse of the lads. It is also the limit of the setting of limits. The lads' creativity in finding ways to "have a laff" in utter opposition to the limits put on them by the school is not necessarily evidence of a revolutionary impulse, but rather proof that that impulse is still possible. Determinism is an extremely useful concept, but when placed in the right light, fails to account for all the messiness of life and the ways in which structures *actually* reproduce oppressive reality. This reproduction does not occur in the same fixed way endlessly, but rather is constantly shifting based on material human action. We must never lose sight of creativity, of agency, and the insistence that human actors make history. Our task then, as critical teachers and researchers, is to not be seduced by neat and tidy accounts of determinism but rather to continually name the ever-shifting complex forces and human actions that make up our oppressive reality. It is no longer sufficient to hide behind deterministic accounts of reproduction, or to write off schools as simply reproducing the existing means of production based on the classed identities of the students that attend them. And revealing students' true needs and their inherent conflicts with the capitalist order must become a central animating project for every critical educator working to combat the oppressive and

dehumanizing reality of capitalism in their classrooms.

The New Needs: A Critical Pedagogical Project

From our work to carve out a position on determinism that both acknowledges the very real structural “setting of limits” as well as productive determinism that accounts both for human agency and creativity, we must make one more pivotal distinction. This distinction hinges on the fundamental differences between schools and classrooms. Classrooms, even while part of an oppressive school system, have the potential to subvert oppressive standards and engage in a humanizing project for students to become critical of their world and of their needs. Schools may well be a failed project for those seeking the abolition of capitalism, but classrooms remain as sites where transformation remains possible and where dedicated individuals can and do affect change. To this end bell hooks (1994) writes,

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

It is from hooks’ contention that classrooms, despite their limitations, remain as sites of radical possibility that we find hope. From this point, with both the systemic account of schooling and transformational potential of classrooms in mind, we can look for openings to pedagogical possibilities to reimagine needs as a humanizing project for students and those committed to students’ pursuit of becoming more fully human (Freire, 2000).

The task that emerges from Baudrillard’s (1981) critique of use value and the socially constructed “metaphysic of utility” is to develop a richer account of human needs. This is a pedagogical project that must be grounded in the lives of *students* in classrooms, those whose needs must be regarded as penultimate in the context of education rather than the demands inscribed on students in the capitalist order. A rearticulation of needs, a radical intervention in the way that needs are defined *for* us and not *by* us as human actors, would lead to a reevaluation of the purposes of education. This systemic overhaul of needs, however, will not be possible in the present reality of the United States. President Obama’s suggested pedagogical response to the United States “falling behind” other countries in college graduation rates, for example, is “tying the skills taught in our classrooms to the needs of local businesses in the growth sectors of our economy” (Obama, 2010). The above account of the ways in which students attend school in order to reproduce the current class-based relations to the means of production ought to indicate that we are already doing exactly what the President is asking us to in schools. Because the task of producing a richer account of needs is counter to the current operation of schools, we must instead ask ourselves how the reevaluation of needs can take place at the classroom level. In doing so, a radically more human account of needs is not only possible, it is essential if our commitment to human beings engenders in us the desire to abolish capitalism. Like Freire (2000), I do not believe such a pedagogical intervention is possible on a systemic level if we are not living in a revolutionary society (p. 86). However, the fact that we cannot at present systematize a critical interrogation of needs and their relation to capitalism in schools cannot and must not deter us from doing so. It is for this reason that I now turn to the classroom level, knowing that humanizing education

and education as the practice of freedom compels us to action and reflection, to praxis.

Many of my students in the teacher education programs in which I have taught have been moved by the work of Freire, hooks, Kumashiro and other critical pedagogues but have worried that their students are not yet critical enough to learn in anti-oppressive ways. I always respond to this fear the same way, by asking my students to think of what the most common question they receive from the students we most often perceive as subversive is: “Why do we have to do this?” This is precisely where the concept of needs enters the classroom, when the teacher is asked to justify her lesson(s), to explain why the students in her room need to do what she is requesting of them. This happens almost everyday in classrooms, which is why students and teachers can internalize the dominant construction of needs that leads to the evocation of needs to justify oppressive measures that restrict both students’ and teachers’ freedoms in classrooms. The critical educator, however, does not respond to the student who asks, “Why do we have to do this” with an account of why the student needs whatever information is contained within the learning activity that the student is questioning. Instead she asks, “Good question, why do you think we ought to do this?” Or, “why shouldn’t we be doing this right now? What do you think we should be doing instead?” While it is not difficult to imagine a flippant response from the student, these questions do two things that are fundamentally different from the needs-based response I am critiquing here.

First, these questions ground curriculum in the students’ lives and ask them to think deeply about how the content they are learning connects to them and their experiences. This practice is one that takes surprisingly little time away from content knowledge and instruction, but makes this instruction all the more rich because it is centered on the student as human being, as themselves, rather than the student as commodity or the student as passive recipient of a banking education. Asking students to analyze the content of a classroom, to evaluate their experience as they are in the midst of experiencing it, brings to the forefront of the classroom the *actual needs of students*. That is, needs that emerge from the student themselves come to replace needs that are mapped onto the student. The classroom becomes a space, perhaps the only space, in which the needs of the capitalist order can be set aside and even critiqued openly for the ways in which they impose their will on students. It is essential here to note that the potential critique of capitalism emerges from the students initially and not from the teacher. It is up to the teacher how she responds and whether or not she will invoke a capitalistic account of needs to silence the student and legitimize whatever task the student is critical of.

The second fundamental difference between these critical questions from the teacher and the needs-based capitalistic response is that they position the teacher in solidarity with students rather than with the State. For example, if a teacher’s response to the question “Why do we need to do this” is “Because you will need to know this so that you can get a job and be happy” the teacher has positioned herself as on the side of capitalism, as advocating that the purpose of pursuing knowledge and learning is to enable the ongoing reproduction of the current relations to the means of production. If the teacher instead responds with a question that validates the student’s concern, that shows in fact that the question has value and is worth pursuing, she is now in a position to work with students in subversive ways to counter the oppressive formulation of needs as currently experienced in schools. In positioning herself in solidarity with her students, the critical teacher is thus able to open up the underlying processes and political realities that play out in classrooms around needs. An entire

lesson, an entire curriculum even, can emerge from the question, “why do we have to do this?” If given the opportunity, students will be able to pose problems of the school system and other political institutions they encounter. They will be able to see the disjuncture between their embodied felt needs and the needs they are told that they have by others in positions of authority. Classrooms are perhaps the only places in which this kind of interrogation can be sustained for any serious amount of time, and the seemingly trivial question from a student provides the opportunity for the crucial political work of producing a richer account of needs.

We can look to accounts of school-based practitioners for entries into this work of reimagining the felt needs of students. In his work to name the ways practicing teachers are working to incorporate Freirean pedagogies into their classrooms as they stand in solidarity with their students, Finn (1999) tells us that these teachers, “take sides. They are on the side of democracy and justice” (p. 188) and thus on the side of their students as well. As he details, curricular decisions are inherently political regardless of content. Therefore, teachers maintain a choice in sides: to be with their students, or on the side of the state and the status quo. Linda Christensen (2009), both in her work in the practitioner journal *Rethinking Schools* and in her writing elsewhere (see Christensen, 2000) provide additional examples of what is demanded in a dialogic classroom where students are not only speaking, but where they are heard. Such dialogue in classrooms is essential, as it is from such a dialogue that humanizing moves toward recovering the actual needs of students as human beings, rather than as commodities, are possible.

From an elaboration of student needs as felt and experienced by students in their present historical moment, the classroom is transformed into a space where the needs of capitalism are not placed before the lived needs of human beings. Developing a pattern in a classroom whereby every text and topic undergoes interrogation - who believes we need this, why do they believe we need it, what does the system of capitalism require of me, what is my relationship to the needs of the capitalist order? – This is how the richer account of needs can be developed by those directly engaged in the process of education. While my suggestions for pedagogical responses may not seem terribly elaborate, I do so because of the need for all critical pedagogy to be grounded in the lives and experience of those who are *presently* engaged in it. A pedagogical orientation towards uncovering the ways that needs are manipulated and manufactured without taking into consideration the *actual* human needs of students will lead to innumerable other moves in classrooms than what I have sketched out here. This is more than constructivist pedagogy; it is dialogical humanizing work that places a critique of the dehumanizing impacts of capitalism on the lived realities of students at its center. The disposition to question seriously every claim made on behalf of students will engender the critical reflexive praxis mandated by a critical pedagogy which aims to combat capitalism’s dehumanizing effects on students in classrooms. Baudrillard (1981) enables us to see the flaws in a naturalistic account of human needs as divorced from political economy. Uncovering this process in classrooms is the crucial first step in elaborating a more human conception of needs and education, and it is to this task that we must turn in our work with students and teachers at all levels to combat dehumanization in all of its forms.

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