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Teaching in the Shadow of Sekou: Reflective Practice, Culturally Relevant and Student-Centered  
Pedagogy and the Research to Performance Method

By

Brian Lewis

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract: Teaching in the Shadow of Sekou: Reflective Practice, Culturally Relevant and Student-Centered Pedagogy and the Research to Performance Method

By

Brian Lewis

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I seek to bring the literature of critical pedagogues, reflective practitioners in education and student-centered teachers to bear on a critical examination of my own teaching methods. I reflect on and analyze my past professional teaching and educational experiences, focusing primarily on utilizing Sekou Sundiata's Research to Performance Method to teach a course on Sekou Sundiata and the Black Arts Movement at the New School in New York City. Through my teacher self-study, I attempt to convey the essential roles of educator empowerment and agency, critical pedagogy, reflective practice as well as culturally relevant and student-centered teaching in urban education methodology. Recalling my personal experiences as a professional working in urban educational contexts, and critically examining my curriculum, lesson plans, journal entries, classroom observations and students' work, I hope to contextualize my teaching within, as well as critique and problematize existing scholarship on reflective practitioners, and ultimately cultivate and contribute new ideas to the body of knowledge on urban education methodology.

## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank my students at the New School who were enthusiastic, passionate and motivated throughout this process. I appreciate all of the work they submitted for my course. They always put their full selves into their work, and from them, I learned a great deal about culturally relevant and student-centered methods.

I would also like to acknowledge my family for continually supporting me in all of my endeavors, no matter how far flung or unrealistic. I am proud to come from a family so full of faith, critical insight, and love.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my former mentor and friend, Sekou Sundiata, who continues to show me new ways to “blink my eyes” re-evaluate, reassess and re-imagine.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2007, the world lost a tremendous poet, playwright, activist and professor, and I lost an incredible mentor, source of inspiration, support, and friend. Sekou Sundiata, born Robert Feaster, was an innovative culturally relevant, critical pedagogue, who intertwined notions of social justice presented in the works of Dewey, Freire, Baraka, Baldwin, Andalzua, and Mandela with a wide range of other educational, literary, social and political influences, into his own unique blend of creative arts based teaching methodology. This methodology, which he came to call the Research to Performance Method, emphasized inquiry, collaboration and civic engagement, and aimed to enable students to utilize processes of storytelling and creative art making to learn, agitate and critique. The method almost always began with a big idea and, for Sekou, the biggest idea he grappled with, in the years leading up to his death, were the multiple, and often confounding, definitions of American citizenship and meanings of American identity in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001.

Sekou created the America Project course, which can be viewed as his own teacher research project, and debuted it at the New School in the fall of 2006. His goal was to explore the larger question of: “What does it mean to be a critically engaged citizen in a time of intensifying U.S imperial power and influence” (Sundiata 6). This larger question was explored in tandem with student generated framing questions that were meant to “lead[s] students away from the specifics of the news cycle toward a deeper discussion of abstract ideas” (Sundiata 10). The America Project course was both a classroom experience and an opportunity to gather material

and inspiration for an upcoming show Sekou was producing entitled the *51st Dream State*. I enrolled as a wide-eyed pupil in that course in the fall of 2006, and had the pleasure of being a student of Sekou's in the final year of his life.

Prior to his passing, I and my classmates embarked on a wild ride of experimental curriculum and inquiry based collaborative creative arts focused learning that asked us to make our own unfiltered, unadulterated views and experiences the core subject matter for the course. In a class that was filled with self-identified radical left wing students of color from America's big cities, as well as self-identified apolitical right wing students who came from mostly homogenous suburbs and small towns and who had limited interactions with other ethnicities and political viewpoints prior to coming into that class, and additional students who were international, self-identified LBGTQ, and everything in between, the class was rife with turmoil and conflict; but it also featured profound opportunities for connecting across barriers and labels and finding common understanding by engaging in research and performance together.

My experiences in Sekou's America Project class were a tremendous catalyst for the creation of my teacher student research project. In the fall of 2012, I created and taught a course at the New School entitled, "The Black Artist in New York City: Sekou Sundiata's World." The course employed Sundiata's Research to Performance Method to explore the spoken and written works of Sekou Sundiata and other artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts Movement as well as to create multi-disciplinary responses to the issues raised in those works. In researching and developing the course materials, I unraveled the many layers of Sekou's Research to Performance Methodology; in the process, I discovered significant historical roots and connections between Sekou and other artists and activists such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde,

Adrienne Rich and Toni Cade Bambara, to name a few. Ultimately, I would make the connections between Sekou's particular pedagogical stance, and the works of progressive educators such as Dewey, Schön, Freire, Dubois, Ladson-Billings, Delpit, West, and a range of others.

One of the primary reasons I was drawn to teacher self-study, is because the model of reflective practice, as described by Falk and Blumenreich in their book, *The Power of Questions*, closely mirrors the methodology utilized by Sekou in his Research to Performance Method. Sekou's Research to Performance method falls under the category of research Falk and Blumenreich describe as naturalistic, which they describe as

[aiming to] understand the meaning and nature of the people, places, or situations under investigation; to get to know what the world looks like for those who are being studied—what their lives are like; what kinds of structures, processes, interactions, and relationships shape their existence; what meaning all these things have for them. The goal is not, as in experiential research, to identify and harness variables that will act in predictable ways, to prove a hypothesis right or wrong, or to come up with yes or no answers that can be generalized to similar situations. Rather, the goal is to shed light on an area that has received little exploration, to gain insights into the particular issue under investigation in its uniqueness as part of a particular context and time, to enhance the reader's understanding of the multiple perspectives and interactions of those who are being studied (Falk and Blumenreich 10).

In addition to having similar aims and goals, Sekou's Research to Performance Method and the teacher student research described by Falk and Blumenreich, share some important structural

elements. Both open up space for teachers and students to engage in action research, utilize and employ personal narratives, as well as develop particular case studies and ethnographies. The use of both action research and personal narrative, are integral to inquiry based teacher student research projects described by Blumenreich and Falk and the Research to Performance Method described by Sundiata. Where Sekou's Research to Performance method distinguishes itself, is in its' focus on the creation of student generated creative arts responses to work.

Although I did not have clearly formulated questions going into my teacher student research project, I knew from the outset that I would be concerned with culturally relevant teaching, which can be broadly defined as taking into account the backgrounds, lives and identities of my students and creating course content reflecting who they are; as well as student-centered pedagogy, which can be defined as helping students make explicit the authority and power embedded in educational and social structures and seeking to actively challenge and critique institutionalized power, as well as provide a platform for students to take agency in processes of knowledge construction. While I also drew from past experience as an educator in a variety of contexts, and Sekou's Research to Performance Method, these two strains of pedagogical theory in particular, significantly informed my teaching, and guided all of my reflections and actions throughout my project, even before I was able to formerly articulate my goals. As the course progressed, and I reviewed the course journal I was keeping, I became particularly interested in the tensions between the student-centered methods I attempted to implement, and the conventional teacher-centered outlook many students consciously or subconsciously reverted to, as well as the ways personal identities, specifically those around race, gender, class and sexual orientation, manifested or didn't, in the classroom. As I constantly reflected on my work, and these trends became increasingly apparent, my two research questions

eventually concretized: 1.) How can I deflect students' gaze off of me, and back to the students, so that they look to each other to generate conversation, create across difference, inspire dialogue and build community? and 2.) How do we work through personal identities in the classroom? How important is it to understand who we are?

Although the scale of my particular teacher research study is small, involving only one classroom of 17 college students over the course of one semester, and individual classrooms' activities and experience cannot be generalized, the implications and questions associated with this project are meaningful for other educators and speak to the larger literature on pedagogy, curriculum and instruction, and teacher development by way of reflective practice. The questions that concerned me are questions that undoubtedly arise in classrooms all over America, where teachers adopt pedagogical methods that are both culturally relevant and student-centered. Educators who chose to pursue culturally relevant and student-centered pedagogy are likely to face some serious challenges to the credibility of their endeavors, based on what traditionally is perceived to constitute good and effective teaching. As I will state later, these challenges may come from students, administrators, other educators, parents or even the general public. The roots of these challenges lie in a number of factors, including familiarity and comfort with the conventional methods, erroneous beliefs that efforts to demand rigor and high levels of student achievement are diametrically opposed to instituting student centered and student driven methods, as well as the desire for students to get their money's worth from their education, to continue to keep the paid professional as the authority figure at the center of the discourse, and to attempt to utilize the education system to fit themselves into oppressively hierarchal social structures. These are just some of the reasons why an educator attempting to utilize these kinds

of approaches might face challenges, and I will return to addressing these challenges in more detail, throughout this paper.

Despite many associated challenges, the practice of teacher reflection can play a potentially powerful role in altering oppressive societal power structures and calling for student excellence and academic success. As I will outline in my literature review, many progressive pedagogues have argued for different forms of teacher reflection for the past 100 years. These pedagogues have provided us with definitions and models for reflective practice, and have also engaged in their own critical reflection on educative practices as a whole, shedding new light on fresh and innovative ways to subvert conventional educational practices. For many culturally relevant and student-centered pedagogues such as myself, teacher reflection is not merely another tool in a kit of strategies to be employed toward effective education, it is the foundation and the basis for empowering and subversive educational methodology and an approach that can potentially lead to student liberation and empowerment, as well as better relationship building and community making in the educational context.

### **My Positionality in the Context of This Study**

As an educator who understands the importance of recognizing and affirming the identities of my students, I also feel it vital to acknowledge my identity and experience in my work. In the context of performing a teacher-student research project, this can also be described as defining my positionality. In Falk and Blumenreich's *The Power of Questions*, they describe why it is helpful for an educator to state their positionality in a teacher student research study. They write,

Our own backgrounds and philosophies of education can influence how data are presented and viewed, that is why it is helpful to provide information about yourself and your own background as your study's participants, especially if you are "participant-observer" (i.e., your study is about your work in your class). Doing so will make it easier for others to interpret your findings (Falk and Blumenreich 64).

Since I am conducting my teacher student research study as a "participant-observer," beginning with my positionality in this context is essential. I identify as a Black male, who was 27 years old at the time of this study. I consider myself heterosexual, and am well versed in Feminist, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Gay, Transgender, and Queer theory and movement history. I have taught in a variety of contexts: public and Catholic schools, at the high school and college levels, in museums, public institutions, parks and neighborhoods. My past experience as an educator and student, impacts choices I've made about the types of educational roles I've pursued, the decisions I've made while employed in different roles and the organizations, and the people and resources I've sought out to inform and support my work.

My former schooling experiences can mostly be described as Euro-centric and teacher-centered. Growing up on the Southside of Chicago, my parents opted to enroll me in a succession of Catholic schools, despite the fact that neither one of them was Catholic, nor did they subscribe to the conservative politics espoused in these institutions. For my parents, Catholic schools may have represented a viable alternative to our local public schools because of their reputation for rigor, and the fact that when my parents were growing up, in New York and Chicago respectively, Catholic schools were in many ways at the forefront of social justice struggles to racially integrate neighborhoods and begin to break down entrenched racial barriers at the

community level.<sup>1</sup> Despite many Catholic schools efforts to achieve this aim, deliberate and *de facto* segregation continued, so that by the time I attended the “parish” school that was within walking distance from our house, I was one of only a handful of Black students in the entire building. In this school, which was mostly racially and demographically homogenous, I was “othered” by fellow students and faculty, because I was one of the rare Black students, and because I harnessed the seemingly bizarre ability to linguistically slip in and out of slang, or what my teacher and classmates would describe as “talking ghetto.” When I advanced to the university level, I discovered that my ability to go back and forth between “Black” and “White” modes of communicating has in fact been significantly researched and written on in academic scholarship, and would be referred to by Prudence Carter as harnessing “cultural capital”<sup>2</sup> and by Pedro Noguera as “code switching”<sup>3</sup> to cite two prominent examples.

The curriculum in these schools was as homogenous as the demographics. Few, if any of the authors in my ELA textbooks, looked like me (there were pictures of authors featured alongside stories) or wrote about topics and experiences close to mine. I remember being at odds with myself over this. On the one hand, I loved to read, write, discuss and create, but on the other, I didn’t connect to or identify with the texts. This led to acting up in class, not doing homework, underachieving and virtually ubiquitous conflict with my teachers. Almost unanimously, my teachers’ response to this rebellious behavior was to discipline and punish.

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<sup>1</sup> Dyja, Thomas. *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream*. Penguin, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Carter, Prudence L. "Black Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African American Youth." *Social Problems* 50.1 (2003): 136-155.

<sup>3</sup> Noguera, Pedro A. "Crossing Borders, Breaking Barriers: How Teachers Can Transcend Race, Class and Cultural Differences to Promote Academic Achievement and Engagement for All." *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World: A Review Journal* (2009): 50.

They doled out detentions and demerits and threatened me with low grades, suspension and the possibility of expulsion. They attempted to coerce me into going along with the curriculum and rules, teaching me not to question, unsettle, or agitate. As Gloria Ladson-Billings writes in her article, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," these tactics were not limited to the particular private schools I attended, but can instead be described as the broader aims of conventional schooling methods. She writes,

Thus, the goal of education becomes how to "fit" students constructed as "other" by virtue of their race/ ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a meritocracy. However, it is unclear how these conceptions do more than reproduce the current inequities (Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy").

Viewed from this perspective, I, and other students schooled by traditional methods, were being ridiculed for our academic successes or failures as if we were primarily at fault for the conditions in which we found ourselves. We were being driven towards vague conceptions of hard work or increasing capacity or ability. All of this precluded a much needed challenge to convention, privilege, and glaring inequalities in curriculum, instructional methods, and what we as a society deemed as the cultural, social and political norm.

In resistance to my particular enforced "fit" I searched for liberating educational practices outside of the formal schooling environment. I found a performing arts ensemble called Kuumba Lynx that, unbeknownst to me, would provide the kind of pedagogical approach needed to unsettle and critique the conventional educational methods I had been running up against. Kuumba Lynx's liberatory and discursive methods were rooted in interdisciplinary performance,

theater and art. They were committed to giving young people the tools and resources to become well-seasoned performance artists and activists. Kuumba Lynx believed in fostering a cycle of artistic creation, civic and community engagement, critical discussion and critique and, successively, more artistic creation informed by all of these processes. They advocated a youth centered approach to learning and teaching that was hands on, experiential and that asked young people and adults to be agents, acting equally to educate and learn from one another, and then bring that knowledge to the rest of the community through the performing arts. Where Kuumba Lynx advocates these actions through the arts, I was actually buying into a larger progressive and culturally relevant tradition of educational instruction. As Blumenreich and Falk write,

In real life however, the pursuit of personally important questions is what leads to new discoveries, creations or realizations (Arnold, 1995; Gardner, 1998). Many educators over the years, have called for schools to offer better preparation for such experiences: John Dewey wrote of the need for education to begin with “learners’ passions and questions” (1963, p3); Jean Piaget of how education should nurture citizens to be “capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what others have done” (in Greene, 1978, p.80); Paulo Freire (1970) of how education should be instrumental in widening horizons, opening perspectives, discovering possibilities and overcoming obstacles (Falk and Blumenreich 2).

Ultimately I discovered that instead of operating in two distinct and autonomous realms, the culturally relevant pedagogy I absorbed in Kuumba Lynx led to an overall and holistic strengthening of my character, focus, confidence and leadership skills and abilities. This led me to return to my formal school environments with a determination to transform them through

activism and the insertion of more multicultural and student-centered curriculum. The trajectory of this journey for me is consistent with what Ladson-Billings describes as the scope of culturally relevant theory: contrary to popular belief, it doesn't seek to supplant discussions of student achievement with discussions of diversity, but instead reveals the interconnected relationship between high achievement and fostering critical consciousness. She writes,

A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy. Several questions, some of which are beyond the scope of this discussion, drive this attempt to formulate a theoretical model of culturally relevant pedagogy. What constitutes student success? How can academic success and cultural success complement each other in settings where student alienation and hostility characterize the school experience? How can pedagogy promote the kind of student success that engages larger social structural issues in a critical way? How do researchers recognize that pedagogy in action? And, what are the implications for teacher preparation generated by this pedagogy? (Ladson-Billings "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy").

These questions have become a central aspect of all of the professional work I have been engaged in since graduating from high school. I have since attended college at the New School, and worked as an educator with Black and Latino young people through education programs, the parks department, and civic engagement initiatives and most recently as a University teacher. As Ladson-Billings states, culturally relevant theorists and practitioners are constantly inquiring as

to how cultural and academic success can complement each other, and how larger social structures can be critiqued and engaged. In practice, this most often means discovering what is unique about students' personal identities and experiences, as well as providing a platform for student self-expression and activism, which can serve as a launch pad for further learning, discussion, activism and critique. As I will address in other parts of my study, all students may not want to engage in this type of pedagogical discourse. They may want to look to the teacher as the figure of authority and believe that culture and personal identity have no place in the classroom. Understanding that these views are out there, and stating my own views on these topics clearly, has helped me to learn how to respond and react when I encounter challenges. This particular project, which also grew out of my experiences teaching at the college level, gave me the opportunity to utilize theory in transparent and explicit ways for the first time in my teaching career, in ways that I wasn't able to previously with younger students who did not have a context for understanding differing pedagogical styles and methods. The insights and reflections found throughout this study reflect my attempts to harness these methods with my students. I also hope that being explicit and transparent about my intents will help those reading my research to more clearly see the implications of my findings.

### **Literature Review: Reflective Practice to Research to Performance Method**

Compared to many hot-button topics in urban education, such as the use of value-added teacher evaluations, the application of high stakes standardized testing, mayoral or community control of school systems, the rise of the charter school movement, and the implementation of the common core standard initiatives, the issue of reflective practice in teaching might not appear

as provocative as these others. Certainly, the topic of teacher reflection does not find itself at the center of raging debates about how best to improve the urban education system. Despite being overlooked for the most part by education reform experts, however, teacher reflection has the potential to be a powerful tool for transformation and reform, especially in urban school systems. As a review of the literature reveals, notions of teacher reflection are not fixed, figured out or wholly understood, either within or outside of the field. There are a variety of approaches to reflective practice in teaching that reflect political and historical trends, as well as shifting understandings of culture, identity, politics and power. Exploring the issue of reflective practice in teaching, and its many manifestations, is vital to building and sustaining a movement for education reform that recognizes the primacy of the knowledge and experience of educators located at the nexus of practice and theory. In this way, notions of good teaching can be wholeheartedly questioned, tested, refined, reframed and regenerated.

Kenneth M. Zeichner and Daniel P. Liston's book, *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction*, traces strains of reflective practice in teaching backwards from contemporary methods to initial efforts to acknowledge, describe and understand how teachers reflect in their professional practice. John Dewey, historically, and Donald Schön, more recently, bring ideas of reflective practice to bear on understandings of teacher behavior, practice, theory creation and analysis. Beverly Falk and Megan Blumenreich's book, *The Power of Questions*, makes the distinction between naturalistic and experimental modes of research, and identifies teacher and student driven research as a powerful form of inquiry based learning that can convey some of the challenges teachers and students face. Finally, contemporary educator and reflective practitioner Sekou Sundiata provides further insight into the utilization and application of teacher reflection towards practices of Critical Pedagogy and Civic Engagement in *The America Project: A*

*Teaching Method for Collaboration Creativity and Citizenship*. These writers' works are situated in the tradition of student-centered pedagogy, and they each make significant and distinct contributions to the academic discourse on reflective practices in teaching.

According to Zeichner and Liston, Dewey tried to get educators to think critically about actions they may have considered routine and commonplace. In Dewey's book, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, he describes different ways of thinking from a mostly philosophical perspective and then argues that reflection should be a central and guiding aim of educational processes. Dewey, a psychologist and philosopher, outlines his argument in mostly scientific and logical terms. He argues that what sets human being apart from other animals is the ability to think in a higher realm and operate on an intellectual plane where reflection and analysis of thought can be ubiquitous. Dewey writes,

We all acknowledge, in words at least, that ability to think is highly important; it is regarded as the distinguishing power that marks man off from the lower animals. But since our ordinary notions of how and why thinking is important are vague, it is worthwhile to state explicitly the values possessed by reflective thought. In the first place, it emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity. Put in positive terms, thinking enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or purposes of which we are aware. It enables us to act in deliberate and intentional fashion to attain future objects or to come into command of what is now distant and lacking (Dewey 17).

Dewey argues that making reflective thinking an aim of education leads to several positive outcomes for teachers and students, including making it possible for “systematic preparations and inventions” and “enriching things with meanings.” After espousing the many benefits of utilizing reflective thinking as an educational aim, Dewey outlines some ways to get there. He asserts that there are certain attitudes that should be associated with reflective thinking in order to implement it as a strategy for reflective practice in education. Dewey describes three attitudes in particular as central for this task: Openmindedness, Responsibility and Wholeheartedness.

For Dewey, the attitude of Openmindedness is related to the educator’s ability to question him or herself and his or her process and to push against traditions, routines and beliefs that lack a scientific basis. In reflective practice, Openmindedness is crucial to allowing the educator to see the big picture and not get caught up on biases, stereotypes and assumptions. As human beings, we all have past experiences, beliefs, values, and convictions that have the potential to shape our present and future actions. For teachers who are committed to reflective practice in the Deweyan tradition, these habits cannot become conventional. Dewey argues that fear should not be a driving force for educational and intellectual pursuits. Dewey describes educator’s fears as being most commonly rooted in concerns of being wrong, and consequently being seen as weak by their students and peers. Dewey believes educators must be brave enough to defy convention, and dwell in the realm of uncertainty, because challenging and opposing notions we have come to think of as standard is vital to strengthening the mind and the educational process.

The second attitude, Wholeheartedness, is deeply connected to students’ experiences and also tied to the relationship between students and teachers. Dewey argues that the scholar, who is thoroughly and genuinely engaged, ultimately becomes fully absorbed by the material and is

therefore more likely to master it. Instead of engaging students, Dewey argues, schools have become places where students experience “divided interests” between teachers, textbooks, and peers. None of these entities are capable of absolutely holding the attention of the student and so the student finds it exceedingly difficult to succeed. Even if the student does succeed, Dewey argues, they do so in order to appease teachers, parents or others. In this case, whether or not they pass the test, or are able to recite the dictums they are asked to memorize, students are developing poor intellectual habits. They are not fully invested in learning for the sake of learning, for their own betterment and empowerment. Since the student is closely connected to the educator and the rest of the community in this scenario, they share the responsibility for altering it. Dewey believes educators must play an essential role as catalysts, sparking enthusiasm so that students can catch the fire and be ignited with passion to drive intellectual pursuits.

The third attitude of reflective practice, Responsibility, corresponds to what Dewey would describe as integrity, consistency, and a search for harmony and meaning. Like the other three attitudes, Dewey argues that this attitude is popularly perceived as a “moral trait” but Dewey, strives to portray it as an “intellectual resource.” Responsibility is a resource because it draws all the other attitudes, notions and potential actions associated with reflective practice and intellectual pursuits together. Dewey argues that a responsible scholar, teacher, or reflective practitioner will consider the possible outcomes and consequences of their endeavors and incorporate these projections into educational and intellectual undertakings. Dewey argues that there must be harmony between the beliefs a reflective practitioner professes and their actions. Therefore, if a reflective practitioner claims to be committed to diversity and social justice, they must anticipate the challenges to this educational aim and attempt to plot a course of action that

will, at the very least, exert the strongest effort to incorporate these ideals into practice. If a reflective practitioner is irresponsible, there is a danger of mental confusion that has the potential to obscure meaning.

Taken together, these attitudes become pillars of a pedagogical approach that seek to place the identities and experiences of students at the center of the discourse. For Dewey, intellectual and scholarly pursuits cannot be called successful unless they are driven by the passions and interests of students. This represented a radical shift because, as he notes, a more common experience for students was to encounter the necessity of adherence to tests, assessments and rules that were uniform, broad, sweeping and not individualized. Dewey writes,

Everyone knows that a moving object catches and holds the eye more readily than one at rest, and the more mobile parts of the body have the greater capacity for making tactile discriminations than those that are more fixed. Yet, under the name of discipline and good order, school conditions are often made to approximate as nearly as possible to monotony and uniformity. Desks and chairs are in set positions; pupils are regimented with military precision. The same textbook is thumbed for a long period to the exclusion of other reading. All topics are barred from recitation except those taken up in the text; 'system' in the conduct of the recitation is so emphasized that spontaneity is excluded and likewise novelty and variety (Dewey 52-53).

Although the aforementioned passage describes challenges of school system uniformity in 1933, the description could easily have come from a classroom in a high performing charter school in 2013. Behavior control and classroom management are increasingly emphasized in today's school systems, especially in oppressive structures where the school sees itself as needing to

instill order and discipline in what is often perceived to be the generally unruly lives of students who may not utilize middle class etiquette at home. A critical framework is crucial to subverting these oppressive dynamics and beginning to open up the possibilities for the kind of transformative educational practices Dewey envisions.

Working in Dewey's tradition of reflective practice, and expanding many of his concepts and attitudes to argue for the necessity of reflective practice in the current professions, Donald Schön calls on professionals to utilize reflection to elevate their practice. In his book, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* he begins by describing the "crisis of confidence" in professional knowledge that has resulted from the failure of the professionalization of numerous occupations to rise to the socio-political, intellectual and moral problems of our post-industrial society. Schön writes,

[I]n the period between 1963 and 1981, the expression of lagging understandings, unsuitable remedies, and the professional dilemmas has become the norm, and the triumphant confidence in knowledge industry is hardly to be heard at all. For in these years, both professional and layman have suffered through public events which have undermined belief in the competence of expertise and brought the legitimacy of the professions into serious question...A series of announced national crises – the deteriorating cities, poverty, the pollution of the environment, the shortage of energy – seemed to have roots in the very practices of science, technology and the public policy that were being called upon to alleviate them (Schön 9).

For Schön, a positive response to this crisis in confidence is the creation of a new brand of professionals who do not rely solely on technical know-how, but instead incorporate a

reflective stance into all of their work, one that allows them to see the interconnectedness between their professional tasks and the problems of society at large. To make this point, Schön provides the example of the engineer who attempts to build a bridge in a densely populated area. According to the traditional framework, the engineer is concerned solely with the scientific problems associated with building the bridge, such as the type of soil that will ground its foundation, the weather conditions it must sustain, the types of materials it can be built from and so on. However, where the traditional framework has failed is in its inability to take into consideration how the building of a bridge in a densely populated area might lead to massive population displacement, and how this displacement might be tied to race, class, and social and other socio-political factors. Schön argues that in order to truly remedy the problems created during industrialism and modernism, full scale reflection that takes into consideration all of the human elements of these problems must be assessed and utilized.

Although many of Schön's examples, like the aforementioned, come from medicine, design and architecture, he is also deeply concerned with educational practice. Schön argues that Medicine and Education are two fields that were exponentially expanded during the industrial age, momentarily held up as beacons of success and models to be replicated, and then in the post-industrial age, popular perception turned on them, as many people realized the limitations to the types of professional training individuals working in these fields received. For a time, it seemed these individuals and the fields they worked in did more to contribute to the problems of our society than alleviate them. Focusing on the field of education, Schön argues that a reflective stance is necessary to achieve a system that does not merely replicate the problems of the past, but is able to imagine a new reality in the present and the future. Schön expresses that his prescription for individualized, thoughtful and reflective educative processes exists within the

Deweyian tradition. He goes a step further to distinguish between two types of reflection that an educator (or other reflective practitioner professional) can practice towards establishing a critical pedagogical stance: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Reflection-in-action involves spot on decision making. It is connected to the way a teacher responds to an unexpected question or an unforeseen development that might take place in the classroom or on a field trip. It can also be connected to the inspirations and insights that happen in the moment. It is the jazz that is created in the classroom through interactions between teachers and students. It attempts to integrate the attitudes, ideas and beliefs of the present with preconceived lesson plans and previously thought out activities.

In contrast, reflection-on-action takes place at any time around the completion of the activity. There is no set time frame for completion of this reflection. It only requires that it take place before or after the educational activity has taken place. While reflection-on-action is probably best performed in close proximity (in terms of time) to the action on which it reflects for the purposes of accuracy and honest assessment of that situation, there are not many other rules about proceeding with this type of reflection. Like Dewey, Schön provides many vignettes to make his point, but does not offer examples of specific teacher reflection within his text.

Schön describes the impetus that most often drives both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as knowledge-in-action. Like Antonio Gramsci's conception of the organic intellectual, knowledge-in-action is the knowledge already inside of us, that we may or may not know is there, and rarely know how to properly articulate, but which guides and directs our

actions and is closely related to our principles, values and ideals.<sup>4</sup> Schön believes that reflective practitioners are constantly engaged in the creation and revitalization of new theories and ideas, whether they are able to explicitly express these or not, because they are embedded in their revolutionary and regenerative approach to work performance. As Schön writes,

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry. Thus reflection-in-action can proceed, even in situations of uncertainty or uniqueness, because it is not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality (Schön 68).

Part of Schön's project then, is to illuminate the often hidden understandings about our approaches to work, so that we can question and critique them. In doing so, we not only become better at what we do, but we also begin to legitimate these processes so that they can inform and influence traditional notions of pedagogy, teaching, learning and understanding.

The process of legitimating knowledge-in-action as real and useful stands in stark contrast to traditional and prevailing notions that teachers are, and should be, receivers and not

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<sup>4</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. U of Minnesota Press, 1995.

the producers of pedagogical approaches, models and concepts. In their book *The Power of Questions, A Guide to Teacher and Student Research*, Beverly Falk and Megan Blumenreich argue for a shift in perspective for the field of educational research, from a framework that operates objectively outside the field, to one that privileges the subjective knowledge of those working within it. They write,

Traditionally, research has been defined as an enterprise outside of the realm of teaching. Conducted by “experts,” who historically have been seen as the developers of theories and knowledge, educational research has been used to create policies curricula, and programs for teachers to pass on to their students. In this conception, teachers (and their students as well) are considered to be passive recipients of other people’s knowledge, confined to the roles of transmitters, implementers, receivers, or consumers of other people’s knowledge. The type of research presented in this book conceptualizes the purpose and participants of research differently—as situated in the lived experience of teaching and learning, as part of the purview of both teachers and students (Falk and Blumenreich 5).

Blumenreich and Falk go on to describe how this shift in perspective will hopefully lead to a research framework that values the ideas, theories and perspectives of students and teachers and legitimates their endeavors as they pursue solutions to the problems and questions they face. Blumenreich and Falk are clear that they are not attempting to wipe the slate clean and do away with all forms of research and question-making. They believe that well thought out and structured studies, following lines of inquiry, have the power to yield incredible data that can convey many potential solutions to the many kinds of problems teachers face. They argue that

spending time crafting and developing powerful research questions and sub-questions is still a worthwhile and meaningful task; however, unlike in the traditional framework, they argue that this task should be taken up with and involve the subject participants, namely students. This is essential, because as Schön implies in his work, theory-making should be connected and tied to practice, and perhaps no one has more experience and more at stake in educational practice than students and teachers. As Blumenreich and Falk state, finding a research question represents a potentially difficult and challenging task, but it is a task that has the potential to provide many teachable moments. They write,

You may have a burning issue you simply cannot wait to explore. However, you may, like many teachers we have known, feel at a loss about what you really want to do. We think that this happens because traditional schooling rarely provides us with opportunities to formulate our own questions. Most of the time we spend in school prepares us to answer other people's questions. When we finally get the chance to generate our own, we often have difficulty knowing what we want to ask (Falk and Blumenreich 21).

Since the predominant research model is so pervasive that it extends beyond the field of research to the way that school systems and the larger education system is structured, as Dewey, Schön and others have already noted, the task of engaging in collaborative critical inquiry projects certainly represents numerous challenges and difficulties but also has the potential to be transformative in multiple ways. As the teacher engaged in a student research project soon discovers, they are not only creating a research study that has potential to provide new theories and ideas about teaching to their peers and others interested in their work, they are also initiating

the type of innovative educational practices that can defy the conventions of the prevailing system.

In Zeichner and Liston's book, *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction*, they outline numerous schemas to categorize education reform movements that have, in turn, informed and influenced the way reflective practice in teaching has been perceived. In a chapter entitled, "Traditions of Reflective Teaching," they name and outline all of these movements.

As its' name suggests, the first tradition they describe, the Academic Tradition, is primarily concerned with content and curriculum. This tradition emphasizes reflection on the content and curriculum teachers deliver. Here we find teachers scrutinizing what is made available to them, as well as their own choices, in terms of course assignments, course materials and resources that they use to engage students. The Academic Tradition holds steady to the erroneous belief that the more a teacher knows about a subject area, the better a teacher will be. This notion has been refuted by recent research and, also, does not make sense when considered within the context of reflective teaching. Reflective teaching is just one of many pedagogical approaches – critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy and student centered pedagogy being others – that recognizes the central importance of different styles of educational engagement with students.

The Social Efficiency Tradition posits that external studies of teaching methods and techniques, mostly by professionals who are not educators, can offer the best data, knowledge, and valuable information to teachers to help them increase their performance, use their time more wisely, and troubleshoot issues that arise in the classroom. Zeichner and Liston describe this tradition as having two primary strands. They write,

Sharon Feiman-Nemser (1990) identified two different strands within the social efficiency tradition: a technical strand that attempts to get teachers to closely follow what research says they should be doing; and a deliberative stand in which the findings of research are used as one among many sources by teachers in solving problems (Zeichner and Liston 76-77).

The technical strand in this tradition is most closely aligned with efforts such as the Measures for Effective Teaching (MET) Project, pushed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This project seeks to place cameras and recording equipment in classrooms all over the country in order to gather data on teacher performance, effectiveness and efficiency, so that this data can be crunched, analyzed and assessed, mostly by professionals who are not teachers. The stated goal is to provide feedback to teachers that will help them improve their craft.<sup>5</sup> The MET project is just one of numerous initiatives that are part of a growing trend of projects associated with the social efficiency tradition. This tradition is extremely attractive to entrepreneurs of technology companies, supporters of top charter schools such as KIPP and Achievement First, that believe students' schedules should be regimented and tightly structured, as well as those who believe private company research should take precedence.<sup>6</sup>

Although Zeichner and Liston believe in teacher empowerment and advocate for increased teacher agency in decision making, they are not completely critical of the Social Efficiency tradition, primarily due to the existence of the second "deliberative" strand. The

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<sup>5</sup>Darling-Hammond, Linda, et al. "Evaluating teacher evaluation." *Phi Delta Kappan* 93.6 (2012): 8-15.

<sup>6</sup>Feinberg, Michael. "The KIPP Academy: An innovative and effective framework for public schools." (2000)

deliberative strand, unlike the technical strand, does not belittle teachers' knowledge, skills and experience, but instead, recognizes that at times teachers may seek to turn to the arts, the sciences, government, politics and other realms for skills, knowledge and expertise that help them with solving problems. The deliberative tradition does not seek to supplant teacher knowledge with these other kinds of knowledge, but instead provides space and room for all of the guiding philosophies and methods teachers chose to use, to be together.

Where the Social Efficiency Tradition seems concerned with mechanisms of study and analysis that derive almost entirely from outside the classroom, the Developmentalist Tradition hones in on the teacher, the class, and the students. Teachers who embrace the Developmentalist Tradition are committed to close and careful observation of their students, with the goal in mind to assess their particular level of intellectual and psychosocial development. Teachers working within this tradition believe their success or failure hinges on close assessment of their students' skills and levels of abilities. This close assessment is mostly external and generated by hierarchal structures that pass down modes of assessment from on high. Current education reform movements such as the Common Core Curriculum are connected with this tradition, because it emphasizes evaluating student achievement at different levels and creating educational activities that are appropriate to those levels. The Common Core claims to be based on cognitive psychology about appropriate stages of development and what students should and shouldn't be doing at certain ages and stages in their academic lives.<sup>7</sup> This tradition is also linked to the Common Core because it espouses approaches to learning that seek to exceed simple

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<sup>7</sup> Porter, Andrew, et al. "Common Core Standards The New US Intended Curriculum." *Educational Researcher* 40.3 (2011): 103-116.

apprehension of context. It seeks close reading of the text, the problems or any other materials the students are engaging.

Zeichner and Liston identify the Generic tradition as one of the most troubling and ineffective of the traditions. This tradition advocates teacher reflection at all costs, based purely on the belief that teachers who reflect are better teachers. This tradition holds sway in many teacher education programs that mandate reflection for their teachers in training. Zeichner and Lipton highlight The Ohio State University's Teacher Education Program as one such example because that program seeks to have all of its potential and future teachers take courses that will expose them to modes and methods of teacher reflection, insinuating the belief that learning how to do teacher reflection will make them better teachers. Programs that mandate these kinds of programs, like The Ohio State University program, seem to miss the irony of making necessary a practice that, the pioneers of the field: Dewey and Schön, argued needed to be chosen, embraced and integrated naturally and holistically into the lives and work of teachers seeking to make it useful and effective. Zeichner and Lipton argue that because this method is imposed and mandated as a routine practice that is not tied to critical consciousness, it becomes an activity that does not serve any intellectual or professional purpose and simply fizzles as something else in a list of things for teachers to do.

The final tradition Zeichner and Liston identify is most closely related to Sekou's Research to the Performance Method, making it also the most important for my project. The Social Reconstructionist Tradition is concerned with bringing questions of power, identity and positionality into the reflection process, and seeks ultimately to use teacher reflection as a means for achieving social justice in the classroom and in society. Zeichner and Liston write,

In the fourth tradition of reflective teaching, the social reconstructionist tradition, reflection is viewed as a political act that either contributes toward or hinders, the realization of a more just and humane society (Kemmis, 1985). In this tradition of reflective teaching, the teacher's attention is focused both inwardly at his or her own practice and outwardly at the social conditions in which these practices are situated. It is a view of teaching that recognizes that instruction is embedded within institutional, cultural, and political contexts and that these contexts both affect what we do and are affected by what we do (Zeichner and Liston 79-80).

Teachers working within this tradition are committed to questioning race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity in order to allow their classrooms to serve as a site to contest notions of democracy and participate in civic engagement. Teachers engaged in this tradition tackle issues of identity head on, in order to ensure that ingrained biases and privileges are not leading to unequal social and academic standing in the classroom. The proliferation of this critical questioning, collaboration, and forming partnerships across difference will hopefully serve to create stronger communities of learning where different modes of reflective practice are embraced.

Being most closely aligned with the Reconstructionist Tradition, the Research to Performance method also seeks to have practitioners reflect inwardly and outwardly, to critically question their experience, identity and position in society, and to attempt to build bridges of collaboration across difference between artists, teachers, activists, students and others working in the fields of Community Engagement and the Arts. The late Sekou Sundiata, developed the method as a way to bring together his passions and interest in the arts and activism. A native of

East Harlem, and a product of Black and Latino Nationalist Movements of the 1960s, Sundiata was a poet, playwright, professor and Artist-in-Residence at Eugene Lang College, the New School for Liberal Arts, for more than twenty years. The Research to Performance method mirrors Sundiata's long personal and public journey of self-reflection and critical questioning. Similar to other self-reflective methods and models I have reviewed previously, it offers an alternative model and method of self-reflective practice in educational engagement that can be utilized by all people. It deliberately seeks to take the method beyond the scope of professional teachers and artists and expand these practices democratically to rest of society.

In a curriculum guide compiled by MAPP International Productions entitled *The America Project, A Teaching Method for Collaboration, Creativity and Citizenship*, the research to performance method, developed by Sekou Sundiata, is outlined. The Guide explains,

Sundiata taught and created The America Project course as a year-long seminar (2006-2007) at Eugene Lang College, the New School University in New York City. It was a course that could be seen as the culmination of Sundiata's two decades of teaching poetry and writing at the College. Engaging students with world events through his ongoing exploration of the intersection between the academy, arts, and community, Sundiata was able to combine different subjects and genres—social change, race, history, poetry, music, theater; the spoken and written word. The class enabled him to combine his roles as teacher, writer, performer and mentor. It allowed him to bring his active art-making process into the classroom. As a performer and poet, Sundiata's pedagogical methods were grounded in improvisation and collaboration and were responsive to what was happening in the nation and the world, as well as the classroom. For many years he had

been working at what he called “the intersections of Art, Imagination, Humanities, and Public Engagement” within the space of the university as a place of intellectual engagement, play, and diversity. Sundiata helped students engage with “real world” concerns in both private and public ways. Students combined thinking and writing, reading and talking, individual reflection and public action, creativity and critical thinking, through group projects and classroom sharing (Sundiata 6).

The guide goes on to more specifically depict the activities associated with this method. Compared to some of the other reflective practice strategies, such as those reviewed by Zeichner and Liston, the Research to Performance method is incredibly detailed and offers very specific elements that are central to the process and that can help facilitators carry out the aims of this method.

One aspect of this method, Readings and Discussions: “Founding documents and framing questions,” brings together a series of texts written in a variety of styles of genres, all focused on the big, central idea, around which the course is organized. In the America Project course, these readings are all related to meanings of American citizenship. The founding documents included texts such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, as well as essays by Cornel West, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Gloria Anzaldua, Sekou Sundiata and others.

Another aspect of the method, Writing: “Notes Toward” & First Person Plural, attempts to get students to record their thoughts, as part of a process of mapping reflections, and attitudes. The data students record in this journaling process is meant to help them develop performance pieces that will ultimately be shared with the public. The types of writing students are expected

to create as part of this method can be broken down into four parts. 1.) The Informal writing: “Notes toward” journal, is a notebook of responses to all of the activities and events within the course, which include class discussions, guest lectures and performances. Students are asked to record short responses that can be in any style or format, but are meant to capture their feelings as they are exposed to the central ideas of the course. They are meant to help students sort through their ideas and discover their personal passions and interests within it. 2.) Viewpoint and context: First person plural, asks students to consider themselves in relation to their networks, communities and immediate and larger social contexts. It asks students to peel away the many layers of identity in their experiences and critically question how these layers are connected to privilege and oppression. Students are asked to develop prose writing to reflect how they are implicated in all of these questions and in the big idea of the course. 3.) Building ongoing work: Developing the portfolio, pertains to the way the entire process is meant to mirror the artists’ process of creation and working towards building a portfolio of their work. Students are not only asked to perform close readings of the founding documents and other texts and works chosen by the facilitator, they are also asked to mine their own writings for important ideas and concepts, to edit, revise and remix and re-write to reflect the trajectory of the development of their changing attitudes. All of this work builds up toward 4.) sharing in public. Sharing in public can be seen as an extension of students’ sharing throughout the course. In building their portfolios, creating their notes towards journals, and creating their first person plural essays, students have already become experienced in sharing their work in small peer workshops, in class and larger writing assignments and group projects. All of this is also part of sharing in public, since the classroom is itself a public space. The research to performance method seeks to expand the perimeter and parameters of that public space beyond the walls of the classroom and beyond the boundaries of

the university campus to include more individuals in processes of community engagement and democratic participation through the arts.

In order to make the Research to Performance Method a truly democratic endeavor that engages and involves individuals across different settings such as the university, community, artistic, educational and political communities, collaboration is key. As the MAPP document states,

The America project methodology encourages, even relies on, collaboration with guest scholars and artists giving lectures and/or working directly with students. For example, Sundiata's class collaborators included Jullie Ellison, Professor of American Culture, English and Art and Design at the University of Michigan. Ellison spoke to the class about "the life of the anecdote," the power of a short, personal story as it is told and retold, linking the individual with the group by illustrating common interests and common humanity. Jane Lazarre (writer and former Eugene Lang College professor) did a three-class workshop on writing about race, encouraging students to think and write critically about whiteness (Sundiata 13).

Collaboration extends beyond the guest lectures and facilitators brought in for the course, it is an organizing principle and extended metaphor for the method itself. Collaboration exists at every level and between all individuals involved with the process. There is student to student collaboration, teacher to student collaboration, teacher collaboration with other teachers, artists, facilitators and community members, and hopefully, if all goes well and the bridges can be built, eventual collaboration between students, artists, partners, and community members. The performance that students have been working toward throughout the course serves as the point of

intersection where these linkages and connections can be made. Artists, partners, and the public, all of whom are potential collaborators, are involved at different stages of the creation and preparation for the performance. These collaborators are also invited to attend the final performance, to ask questions about parts of the process that interest them and which they may or may not have been involved in, and to push students to always consider the public's role and involvement in their work.

This collaboration, like other parts of the process such as writing and conversation, are not meant to be without challenges. In true reflective practitioner fashion, Sundiata anticipates and expects challenges to arise within the process and asks students and teachers to take time to examine these issues and strive to grow and learn from them. In a section of the booklet entitled, "A pedagogy of challenges, frictions and silences," Sundiata outlines some of the specific challenges of the America Project course so that others wishing to pursue it can learn from his experience. Sundiata breaks this issue down into three categories: Structure, Discussion and Race. 1.) Structure. One of the biggest challenges the research to performance method faces is its own unorthodox and unconventional structure and the way it stretches traditional notions of the classroom, teaching and learning to their limit. The course does not follow traditional guidelines in terms of procedures, assessment and, most importantly, how it asks students to make their own experiences, views and perspectives available for conversation and critique. The subjective nature of the course might at first appear appealing to students, but as conversations become personal, and more difficult, they may decide it is too uncomfortable and remain silent or give up. Sundiata expressed that although enrollment in the course was full the first semester (perhaps due to Sekou Sundiata's own name recognition and rock star status on campus) these numbers had dropped by almost 30 percent for the second part of the course. Although there was no exit

survey to determine precisely why students dropped, Sundiata surmised that the challenges of the unconventional course structure played a large part in it. 2.) Discussion and friction. In line with the Deweyan tradition, the Research to Performance Method recognizes that a break down or lack of communication is a key indicator of problems that exist in the classroom and in society, and it seeks to have students and teachers turn these frictions into learning opportunities.

Sundiata described chronic shyness, reluctance to speak and express how individual students really felt. Students were overcome with fears that they would offend each other or be misunderstood. Sundiata would sometimes call on students to share work they had written, pushing them outside of their comfort zone, and at times forcing reflection and dialogue. Past these initial uncomfortable experiences, students began to open up even more and found that the outcomes of their work were improved by their willingness to discuss and engage with each other more freely. 3.) Race & challenges. Sundiata's America Project course attempted to get students to grapple with questions of American empire and influence, of multiculturalism and diverse perspectives; however, the class kept getting caught in traditional black vs. white American race dichotomies. Conflicting notions of racial identity, treatment, behavior and history stood in the way of discussing the topic of American imperialism that Sundiata initially wanted to explore. This was one of the unexpected and unintended consequences of the course, which Sundiata spent significant time confronting and addressing both in class and outside of class activities. Sundiata called for special and extra class sessions between students experiencing racial conflict and he also spent time mentoring frustrated students individually. Ultimately, students worked these challenges and frictions into one of the outcomes which was a final project of the course: a documentary theater project that dramatized and highlighted these issues for the public and was accompanied by a critical discussion.

Although Sundiata's America Project course was geared toward raising and examining critical questions about the meaning of American citizenship post-9-11, Sundiata and MAPP International Productions clearly articulate that the methods espoused in this guide can be utilized toward the study of a variety of other subjects and topics. The America Project course produced a variety of outcomes that reflected the study of the big idea the course was organized around: meanings of American identity and citizenship post 9-11. The outcomes produced included a visual arts exhibit, a documentary theater project, and a writing anthology. These outcomes are not necessary to the method, but were instead what students chose to pursue based on their passions and interests. Other outcomes could be created, generated and pursued as well.

## **Methodology and the Context**

As teacher, I held a privileged position within the classroom that was connected to my ability to assign work, lead activities, shape conversations, and set the tone for rules of engagement in weekly seminar discussions and assign grades. The aforementioned facts might appear obvious, and need to go without saying, however, Lisa Delpit argues that elucidating these facts, is essential to critiquing and subverting traditional Euro-centric and teacher-centric paradigms. In her essay, "The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children" she provides five points to express this need:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."

3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of — or least willing to acknowledge — its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence.

The first three are by now basic tenets in the literature of the sociology of education, but the last two have seldom been addressed. The following discussion will explicate these aspects of power and their relevance to the schism between liberal educational movements and that of non-White, non-middle-class teachers and communities (Delpit, “The Silenced Dialogue”).

Since I seek to challenge, and not replicate the teacher-centered model, it is important to clearly state my privileged position as teacher as well as describe all other elements of the structure and format of the course.

My study was conducted for 13 out of 15 class sessions, during one Semester. Classes met once a week, for an hour and a half. Students received two credits for successfully completing the course and were graded on a standard A through F scale. There were 17 students in the class at the outset, and 16 when it concluded. All of the students were freshmen, and required to choose one of 10 courses offered within our department to fulfill a requirement to

take at least one class throughout their tenure at the New School that explored and engaged New York City through the social sciences. From the beginning of the teacher student research project, students were made aware that we were conducting collective research. Students verbally agreed to participate in the project and also agreed that examples of their work, without the use of their names could be featured in my research. Because every student agreed to have their work used, I was able to sift through examples of students work and decide which pieces best fit the questions and themes explored in the project. Examples of student work included polemical essay, personal essay, student journal entries, written poems, spoken word poems, dance, song, and personal blues montage.

Demographically, my class could be described as “diverse” by New School standards, despite the fact that it was predominantly White and middle-class. Since I graduated as a student from the New School in 2008, I expected to walk into a classroom with similar demographics as most of my courses when I was enrolled there, meaning I expected one, maybe two Black students, with the rare interspersions of an Asian or Latino student. I was surprised to discover on my first day of class that 12 students identified as White, 3 as Black and 2 as Latino. One male student, who identified as Asian-American, dropped the course half-way through. Eleven students identified as female, and 6 as male. Three students openly identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Queer. The majority of students at some point in class conversations or in their writings, identified as coming from middle to high income homes. Two students were from New York City, the rest from various parts of the country. One student was born in Israel and another in Honduras. All were American citizens.

As a critical pedagogue, working in the tradition of teacher reflection laid out by predecessors such as Dewey, Schön, and Sundiata, I constantly sought ways to think and act critically, in and between class sessions. This entailed spending time before and after class sessions evaluating and assessing what went on, pondering expectations for myself and for my students, and re-imagining our relationship to each other and the trajectory of our work, with students' attitudes, insights and experiences always in the forefront of my mind. In service of this goal, I wrote weekly journal entries within two or three hours of wrapping each class.

These journal entries were usually completed in the quiet space of the teacher lounge, where I went after each class to fulfill my office hour duties. Adjunct Faculty at the New School share office space in a common lounge with computer stations and desks. This space is rarely utilized by more than two or three people at a time and is often silent and empty. Following weekly class sessions, I set up in the space, waiting for students to come to me with questions and concerns. (They only came to see me on two occasions, toward the end of the semester, which I believe was connected to an initial lack of student openness and trust, which improved as the class progressed). I used my mostly vacant office-hour appoint times to intermittently chat with colleagues, as well as to reflect, think and write critically about class sessions. When I sat down to write, I did not have a specific set of questions guiding me. I sought to write in a stream of conscious style, attempting to capture all of my thoughts about the previous session, without filter. As I wrote, I thought about the writing assignments Sekou had assigned, when I was his student. In his 2007 America Project course, he asked his students to write without fear or worry of how our ideas would be received. I tried to bring this attitude of being unflinching, to journal writing. I wrote six weeks of Journal entries, and my process of critical thinking and reflection continued well beyond the conclusion of the course.

The data for my study included six weekly self-reflexive journal entries, random self-performed class observations, student submissions of Notes Towards journals, student submissions of personal essays and student submissions of final performance pieces. My analysis included deep and careful readings and re-readings of all of these works until I discovered common threads and themes that connected them and began to write about these as findings in my research. Reflecting on student work as I collected it, and assigned it, helped me keep Sekou's impassioned plea, to gaze unflinchingly at issues of racism, sexism and exclusion, as the context grounding all of my work. Students were assigned weekly readings (for discussion) as well as a 5 page midterm essay, exploring conceptions of American identity represented in Sekou Sundiata's 51st Dream State project, an interdisciplinary performance piece students watched a video of in class. The final project was a multidisciplinary production of student work and a public event. In the following passages, I will connect the themes of my reflection to journal entries and examples of student work.

## **Themes and Analysis**

My project consisted of one semester of teacher self-study research which fed the formulation of my research questions and research strategy. As Blumenreich and Falk describe in *The Power of Questions*, developing research questions can be a long and difficult process. Even in my case, where I knew what my passions and interests were, it took a substantial amount of time reflecting, writing about my experience and reviewing my own notes and observations in order to hone in on a couple of particular topics and craft those into workable research questions. Specifically, I reread the journal entries multiple times; I highlighted the themes or questions that

emerged over the entries, and eventually arrived at the two themes that guided the further analysis of my data. Those themes were related to student-centered and culturally responsive teaching as well as reflective practices in teaching. Specifically:

**1.) The unexpected conflict: student centered teaching vs. teacher centered students.**

Many of the educators I cite in my literature review espouse a student centered approach as an essential component of reflective practice in teaching. Dewey, Blumenreich & Falk and Sundiata all argue that student experience, insight and perspective, should be acknowledged, sustained and integrated into processes of critical inquiry and collective knowledge construction. Looking back at my journal entries and students' work, I notice a pervasive tension between my attempts to implement student centered methods and pushback from students seeking, consciously or not, to keep me at the center of the discourse. Student centered teaching is an ideal I strive for in my educational practice, even though I am aware of its potential challenges and shortcomings. My strong belief in student-centered pedagogy can be traced back to my own experiences as a Black student who struggled to locate my own identity and articulate and subvert traditional power dynamics in a schooling experience that can mostly be described as Eurocentric and teacher-centered. These experiences led me to become a professional educator who is committed to the ideals represented in critical pedagogy and student centered teaching. Yet, as I learned, implementing student-centered methods can certainly be a challenge. As I reflect on my experiences teaching the course on Sekou Sundiata and the Black Arts Movement at the New School, I am confronted with the many ways this approach crashes up against traditional beliefs that the teacher is the expert, the one with the knowledge to impart, the leader and the head executive. This theoretical tension, confronted by many

other critical pedagogues before me, became very real, as we went “live” with the syllabus that I had pored over for months, prior to beginning the semester, and attempted to set in motion processes for student learning in my classroom. As I reflected on and in action, over these experiences, I began to critically inquire as to: How can decisions I(’ve) made/make about course materials, the order and structure of assigned readings, development of seminar discussion and journal questions, as well as student assignments, deflect students’ gaze off of me, and back to the students, so that they look to each other to generate conversation, create across difference, inspire dialogue and build community?

**2.) Manifesting personal identity in the classroom.** Another question I explore from the New School course is: to what extent should issues of personal identity, namely race, class, gender and sexual orientation, be integrated into class discussion and course assignments? Since the course was entitled: *The Black Artist in New York City, Sekou Sundiata’s World*, I assumed students initially understood that issues of race and identity would be tackled head on. Despite this assumption, students sometimes seemed hesitant to engage issues of personal identity, especially regarding race. This dynamic began to change in the middle of the course, and by the time the course concluded, I became surprised to discover the multiple connections students made between their own lives and works of Sekou and other writers and thinkers of the Black Arts era. This was most evident in the work students produced for class, both at the halfway mark, on their midterms, and in their final projects. While the class was centrally concerned with responding to and critiquing the works of well-known and established artists and thinkers, it also attempted to make students’ own views and experiences pillars of the course. This led to my mostly White, middle and upper income students who were too

young to experience the 1960s and Black Arts Movement, and who had little to no context for the era, effectively assessing, articulating and critiquing racism, sexism and the status of oppressed peoples in American society through the lens of the poetry and prose produced by thinkers and artists of that time period. My students and I became concerned with questions such as: How do race, class and gender and sexual orientation always matter? Do these issues change over time, or are they in a sense universal? And, does bringing issues of identity and experience into hyper focus through readings and discussions ease or exacerbate existing tensions around difference? Can difficult conversations (such as those about stereotypes, hate, and language) be worked through in ways that empower all those involved? While my students and I wrestled with these questions constantly, as the course developed, I began to see that these were sub questions, connected to the underlying questions: How do we work through personal identities in the classroom? How important is it to understand who we are? And how can we create the artistic, intellectual and political space to be ourselves? These bigger questions became the crux of my teacher-student research project.

### **Themes in Practice**

The theme of student centered teaching/teaching centered students, presented itself frequently throughout the course. From the first class session, I sought to work alongside students, to construct an atmosphere that would enable critical engagement and discussion, and facilitate students' agency in exploring course themes. A journal entry that features a snapshot of that initial class session, captures the tensions inherent in attempting to implement a strategy of

student centered teaching in the context of an institutional environment (even one with a reputation for progressivism, such as the New School) where educators who pursue these kinds of methods, risk potential backlash from students and administration. There are two dangers in one. First, I am asking students to take more responsibility for more of their own learning than they are likely accustomed to, especially if they have spent their lives figuring out the answer the teacher wants. Second, I am asking students to bring their personal identities to the classroom, which again, is new and unfamiliar terrain. There is an imminent danger that students might reject the unfamiliarity of this approach, since so much of it is antithetical to learning processes they have undergone previously. A story told by a graduate student in Lisa Delpit's article, "The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children," also expresses these points. The student, a Black male, frustrated with his experience in a White professor's writing class that utilized a "process" oriented approach, meaning the course relied heavily on peer editing of essays as well as peer to peer dialogue and critique, came to view this process as insufficient. He says:

I didn't feel she was teaching us anything. She wanted us to correct each others' papers and we were there to learn from her. She didn't teach anything, absolutely nothing.

Maybe they're trying to learn what Black folks knew all the time. We understand how to improvise, how to express ourselves creatively. When I'm in a classroom, I'm not looking for that, I'm looking for structure, the more formal language. Now my buddy was in [a] Black teacher's class. And that lady was very good. She went through and explained and defined each part of the structure. This [White] teacher didn't get along with that Black teacher. She said that she didn't agree with her methods. But I don't think that White teacher had any methods. When I told this gentleman that what the teacher was doing was

called a process method of teaching writing, his response was, "Well, at least now I know that she thought she was doing something. I thought she was just a fool who couldn't teach and didn't want to try (Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue").

This student's specific sentiments speak to more general student cynicism. Delpit connects this to White and Black socialization. She cites literature that describes how White students become familiar with coded power and hierarchy from a very young age, since White parents often communicate with their children through processes of inquiry and option-exercising. For example, a White parent who wants their child to take a bath, tends to ask, and then attempt to coax and cajole their child into doing this, until the desired outcome is achieved. In contrast, Black parents tend to deal with their children in explicit and imperative terms. If a Black parent wants a child to take a bath, they will directly command, and may even verbalize ominous consequences the child should incur, dare they fail to comply. Although it is unwise to essentialize or describe racial experience in terms that are monolithic, when taken together with Delpit's five points of pedagogical power (cited earlier), understanding these different modes of acculturation might help explain how students from oppressed or marginalized backgrounds can make the rules of the culture of power more explicit, and therefore make acquiring power for them easier.

While Delpit's analysis provides a powerful lens for analyzing the different ways Whites and Blacks might perceive and utilize power, this view is not sufficiently varied and nuanced. I can look to my own experience with acculturation in Black and White environments to realize its' limits. I am a Black teacher, who was a once a Black child raised in a Black home, but who attended my fair share of predominantly White schools, had primarily White teachers (with the

number of exceptions I could count on one hand) and who encountered a white-washed and Eurocentric curriculum throughout my academic life. But in my later development, I became an educator, committed to culturally relevant and student-centered pedagogy, working mostly with Black students from low-income backgrounds. I have internalized double-consciousness, the struggle, described famously by W.E.B. DuBois, of utilizing and rejecting, embracing and subverting codes of power-in all of my teaching.<sup>8</sup> Although, this time around, the demographics and setting is a departure from my professional norm (because teaching this course at the New School provided my first opportunity to teach at the college level, as well as my first chance to teach a class that was predominantly White and middle-class), the fact that double-consciousness has become an integral part of my practice, whether I always realize it or not, is evident from the journal entry that captures a snapshot of my thought processes during my inaugural class. I wrote,

I take my time with forming syllables, sentences, phrases. I pause frequently and ask if there are any questions. There are none. I expected a wealth of questions, to be challenged, engaged, critiqued, even on the first day, but there is none of that energy in this room. I continue, not sure how strict I should be, how firm, I tell corny jokes as I go over the rules and we laugh together, but I'm serious. I want them to know I take this class, this material seriously, but also that I have a personality. I look out at them as I attempt to manage this balancing act, letting them know they will be graded and evaluated, that the course is A through F standard grading, and I will be paying attention to things like class participation, that they will write a five page essay, short response and

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<sup>8</sup> Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

produce a final project, but underneath the surface of it all, wanting them to understand that there are ideas in the material, that go beyond the grade, that may teach them something about their lives, themselves, that they might learn more about this sprawling metropolis we've all come to live and work in, that they may reconsider their position in this nation that appears to be at a crossroads as it figures out its awkward way forward as a simultaneous symbol of oppression and freedom, of autonomy and empire.<sup>9</sup>

Delpit's analysis does not go far in enough in accounting for the ways educators such as myself find ourselves at the intersections of overlapping identities and multiple modes of acculturation. Hopefully, this analysis can add an extra layer to already powerful notions of culturally relevant pedagogy.

In the actions displayed in the journal entry I convey my own personal acculturation as a Black American male who has been educated in predominantly White contexts, as well as the pedagogical skills and approaches I have acquired as an educational professional, who has mostly worked with Black and low-income youth. While race is certainly a significant factor, I believe it also speaks to the broader challenges inherent in trying to implement a student centered approach. The passage represents my coming to terms with the tensions inherent in attempting to implement student-centered methods. How does a critical pedagogue embark on a student-centered journey of collective inquiry? Do we jump in right away? Test the waters first? There is no singular or definitive answer, but there are examples of varied approaches, and this passage represents a form of engagement I found effective. By using a mix of humor, and a serious tone

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, Brian. Journal Entry-Week 1 January 30 "Blink Your Eyes"

and demeanor, I am trying to convey to students that I possess the ability to harness poise and exercise control over anything that might come up in the class, even if my ultimate intention is to devolve power. As important as attitude and demeanor, are articulation and clear communication. A lasting lesson I took away from my first year of classroom teaching at the high school level was that if my students failed to understand any concept, this was most likely due to a result of my failure to communicate it effectively, not their inability to grasp it. This meant frequently tweaking, reassessing and coming to terms with better and more powerful ways to communicate to and with my students. Now, as a college professor, I found myself employing some of the same methods that made me effective as a high school English teacher, because my goal in both situations is the same: to build trust and rapport. As Delpit's article describes, this kind of trust and rapport building activity is essential to working toward a culturally relevant and student centered practice. In my course the level of student-centeredness grew over time as the trust I spent time cultivating continued to develop.

The next theme pertaining to manifesting personal identities in the classroom and the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, presented itself in an incident that took place during the second week of class. On a visit to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I encountered a problematic exchange with two older volunteers, both Black women, who were working there. My account of this exchange is recounted in the following passage from my journal:

When I went back to the two elderly African American women at the front desk and asked them if it would be ok for the class to sit by the window to conduct a brief class session, one said sure, and also made a comment about there "being a nice tanning machine over there by the window." I looked at her for a moment, perplexed. At first, I

didn't understand, and thought she might be taking a shot at me, indicating that I was too light skinned or was acting "white," but when she repeated it, and said for your students, I realized she was referencing the fact that most of my students were white. Unsure whether my students had heard this, I walked away without saying a word. I decided it was best not to address this as it might escalate the situation and lead to more conflict. My students seemed not to hear, not get it, or not care, so we convened by the window and commenced our first class discussion.<sup>10</sup>

The two Black women's comments are examples of challenges. They are situated in the context of challenges, as described by Sundiata. The challenge is an unforeseen obstacle or complex problem that must be worked through in collaborative art making and civic engagement initiatives, such as the one my students were engaged in for the New School course. In Sundiata's *The America Project: A Teaching Method for Collaboration Creativity and Citizenship*, he writes,

The America Project Course was full of challenges, and projects that interpret this methodology will likely face their own set of challenges. Some challenges are more difficult than others, but all have the potential to contribute to the depth of the conversation and work in which teachers, artists, students and community members are engaged (Sundiata 8-9).

For Sundiata, challenges represent opportunities, because they open possibilities to further explore the issues standing in the way of diversity and democracy. Viewed from this

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis, Brian. Journal Entry-Week 2 February 6 "Coming From Where I'm From"

perspective, the incident at the Schomburg was a potentially powerful teachable moment; however, I chose instead not to bring light to the issues inherent in the women's statements. With the space allotted to reflect on, and not just in action, I could have had a more productive response to these events. Perhaps, in the spirit of Sekou's "America Project" methodology, this event could have helped students open up and be more honest and straightforward, talking about race. Instead, my fear of allowing the potential conflict in this situation to escalate, as well as my own initial shock, precluded a potentially powerful site of discussion and critique.

A successful instance of students talking about race, on the other hand, took place during the third week of the course. In a class session where students prepped by reading selections from Adrienne Rich and June Jordan, and which featured a guest lecture from David Henderson (press secretary for City College during the 1969 student take over of the south campus), students finally began to express their views on these topics and not hold back. I wrote afterward:

I was glad to hear the students being straight up about race, gender and class. I heard a Black male student disagreeing with a White female student about how important a factor race was for personal identification. She didn't see herself as White, and didn't think it important to label herself as such, even though she knew the rest of the world saw her that way. One of the students, a Latina young woman, vented that she was proud of her Hispanic heritage, and hated it when people tried to pigeonhole her and write her off as "just white." Although she was aware that she looked "white" her identity as a Colombian was also important to her, and she did not want that exoticized or stereotyped. I heard an African-American female student sharing with another African-American

female student with pride that she was from New York City, and how happy she was to be reading other Black writers, intellectuals and artists from NYC, and how it gave her a newfound sense of belonging in a city in which she had been born and raised. I also heard a young white male beginning, although timidly, and choosing his words very carefully, to discuss his white male privilege and his economic privilege coming from an upper middle class family that was able to pay for his schooling, and how lucky he was that he didn't have to hold down a lot of jobs while he was in school. As these conversations picked up, and the intensity of them began to magnify, I tried to turn these conversations from small insular circles, and open them up to the wider group.<sup>11</sup>

In this instance students' comments about identity and race appeared to be empowering and self-affirming. Students finally began to topple the invisible walls that previously stood in the way of working across boundaries of race and difference. In another way, I was still left with many challenges and questions, because students kept the discourse at the level of the highly personal. One of the primary goals of Sekou's Research to Performance Method is to get them to begin to think of themselves as public entities, connected to each other and the institutions in which they engage, through their identities and their actions.

The two themes and the questions that came out of them, which I explored for my teacher research project, are inextricably linked. They feed off and work and in tandem with each other. Both a critical pedagogical, meaning a pedagogy that clearly defines and seeks to subvert traditional dynamics of power in the classroom and empower students to place them at the center

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Brian. Journal Entry-Week 3 February 13 "Harlem University"

of the discourse and culturally relevant, meaning that content, course materials, and approach should configure to, and empower the identities, backgrounds and experiences of students, guided my teaching. Consequently, it is no surprise that when I reflect on journal entries and examples of student work, these themes are the ones that present themselves most consistently. What is surprising, and what can help me to improve my practice and become sharper in my critiques and focus, is the ways students picked up and ran with the material. These approaches ask students to step out of their comfort zone and stand on uncharted ground in attempts to discover something new about the topic being researched, while also requiring each person participating in the project, including the teachers/facilitators, to discover their own uncharted ground, and learn anew. This is a critical juncture. In this course, I felt I was constantly trying different permutations in order to get all of the moving pieces to interlock and work together. I knew, from my past teaching experience, that the syllabus could be an important tool utilized toward this end. However, I also found that utilizing a culturally relevant and critical pedagogical approach, required being open to switching things up, adding or dropping and content, and possibly changing the direction of the course mid-semester.

Sekou was adept at this, as when I was a student in his course, he would often table the scheduled conversation, to do what he called “dealing with the turkey,” addressing the most pertinent and pressing issues for students, in the room, at that moment. One day, he had scheduled a conversation on the Bill of Rights. We were assigned to read the Bill of Rights, as well as some supplementary readings and interpret what it had to say about American freedom in the context of American citizenship. However, when class began, Sekou and his partnering professor, Kym Ragusa, could sense that there was something wrong, something unsaid that needed to be addressed. Kym asked us to take out pen and paper and write down the number one

thing that was troubling us, right at that moment. Then without warning, she called randomly on students and asked them to share. Quite a few of the Black students were upset about the shooting of an unarmed young Black Male named Sean Bell, who died at the hands of New York City Police officers. A few students expressed that they found it impossible to have a productive conversation about the Bill of the Rights, when the pain, fear and chaos associated with this experience were still fresh. Although this did not result in universal agreement among White or Black students that this conversation was appropriate or what was needed, it did get all students to talk openly about race and other issues of concern. Although this incident, and the conversations that ensued, were not an aim or objective of the course, I remember these events vividly, and Sekou and Kym's decision to remix class activities and allow for uninhibited expression and discussion of events that were pressing and real for most of us, ultimately did enrich our understandings of meanings of American citizenship, despite what might have been lost from not performing the day's scheduled activity.

Where some educators find it useful to sweep difficult conversations and issues such as the aforementioned one, under the rug, Sekou and other educators modeling a critically reflective pedagogy seek to meet students where they are, even if it means you don't make it through all of the pre-assigned readings and pre-scheduled activities for the day. These kinds of excursions are only useful, however, insofar as students are willing to partake in them. In my course with Sekou, students spent long hours after class discussing the arguments and debates that had arisen around race, gender, language and meanings of American citizenship. Sekou tapped this energy to schedule some special Saturday sessions, where we hashed out differences and tried to get at the heart of what made us tick, as Black people, White people, Latinos, Immigrants, Americans and students at the New School. My students did not share the same level of passion and interest

in these topics, meaning that a primary struggle for me was to cultivate a sense of urgency. I had my guest lecturers (some were former students of Sekou's as well) express what this energy looked and felt like, in hopes that it might spur their passions and interests. Despite my best efforts, I made slow progress getting students to open up and speak about these issues. The fact that a minority of my students were willing to fully embrace this method and approach early on in the course (this would change in the second half) was a source of frustration for me, that constantly sent me back to the drawing board, engaging in further personal and collective reflection in order to alter this dynamic.

One of the programmatic requirements for my course, linked to its position within the New School's First Year Writing initiative, was to have students develop at least one personal essay, as well as a more substantial semester long project delivered in the format of the instructor's choice. Following these guidelines, I assigned a 51<sup>st</sup> Dream State midterm to fulfill the essay requirement, as well as a performance piece/public event to take place at the end of the semester to meet the demands of the semester long project. The guidelines for the 51<sup>st</sup> Dream State assignment were as follows,

There are numerous narratives represented in Sekou Sundiata's 51st (dream) State project. After viewing the 51st (dream) State and hearing from Ann Rosenthal and the students from The America Project class, decide which of these narratives, you believe speaks most powerfully to your meaning and conception of American citizenship. This will be a polemical essay (you will make an argument). Your essay should contain a clear thesis, supporting paragraphs and a conclusion. The essay should reference: 1.) The 51st Dream State video (required) 2.) Readings from class (required) 3.) Class discussions and

guest lectures (optional) 4.) Contemporary media coverage that dovetails themes from the 51<sup>st</sup> (dream) State (optional).<sup>12</sup>

We watched the hour-long 51<sup>st</sup> (dream) State performance piece together in class during the third and fourth weeks. During the performance, students were asked to record their responses to the 51<sup>st</sup> (dream) State piece in their Notes Toward journals, so they could draw on these insights later when crafting their essays.

Notes Toward journals, a critical aspect of the research to performance method, serve as students' individualized black boxes, capturing activities, quotes, thoughts, reflections and points of interest, throughout course. These journals then become the blueprints for all outcomes associated with the Research to Performance project. Students are asked to complete Notes Toward reflections as homework assignments. These reflections are checked in, not read verbatim (unless I was asked) and are evaluated as part of students' overall participation grade. Unfortunately, Notes Toward journals were not utilized properly or effectively by all of the students in the course, and some of their grades suffered because of it. There was certainly a strong correlation between students who kept more detailed, extensive and better organized Notes Toward journals, and students who turned in thoughtful, creative and critical 51<sup>st</sup> (dream) State midterm essays. Recognizing that not all students were utilizing their Notes Towards Journals to their full potential (or at all) early on, I tried to take every available opportunity to emphasize the importance of this aspect of the process, encouraging students who I knew were doing strong work to share, and also sharing a few short insights from my own personal journals

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<sup>12</sup> Course assignment. The Black Artist in NYC: Sekou Sundiata's World. Professor Brian Lewis. March 13 2013.

(where specific examples were left out and coded for confidentiality purposes) in order to help all students understand the importance of journaling and give them some examples of how scaffolding their work, might be of assistance to them.

This frustration was emblematic of the tensions expressed in the first theme, between student centered teaching and teaching centered students. Realizing that not all students wanted to journal and were not finding it helpful, I considered throwing this out and not making it a requirement. The last thing I wanted was for students to scribble down gibberish, just to show it to me so that I could mark it in as complete. I wanted journaling to be a productive, enlightening and inspiring process, one that could help them come to terms with their own internal struggles, and help them to commit to expressing their ideas and opinions, and ultimately assist them in connecting and looking to each other to build conversation and dialogue. I hoped that having a written record of their thoughts would provide incentive for students to share because they could read from their entries, rather than try to go off the cuff in expressing thoughts and opinions that may have been nervous to put out there.

I believe students were not journaling because when assigned as a regular activity, it began to feel tedious. Needing to journal after every class, and not always being zealous or enthusiastic about this myself, I could empathize with the feeling that journaling could wait, be put off, or might not be vital to the creative process. What I found, however, was that keeping a journal served the dual purpose of providing a record/blueprint for my final project, and expanding space, in the sense that it exponentially multiplied my opportunities to take a deep breath and reflect on my students, on how my course was going, on decisions I'd made, and on the best ways to support my students and move forward. In other words, the discipline involved

in the process, actually served to liberate me in many ways, and even though it might have been difficult to get started, once I did, it became an inspiring and therapeutic exercise that ultimately made the rest of my work easier. Putting myself in my students' shoes and viewing this from their perspective, I decided that although there might be some initial pushback and resistance, if they could get into a rhythm and routine of journaling, they too would benefit from increased access to these opportunities.

Ultimately I decided to stick with the journaling, in part because it was a requirement of my department, but mostly because it was such a critical aspect of the Research to Performance method. Sekou considered writing a subversive act, one that would allow us to go from the personal to the political, from understanding ourselves as private people, to figuring out how we fit into complicated schemes of community and democracy. *Notes Toward Journals* assisted in facilitation of difficult conversations around identity, race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Since students had committed to their stories, thoughts and reactions to questions about these issues in their journals through writing exercises, it became easier to discuss ideas about these topics about which students might have otherwise not have spoken, because they felt they struggled with the proper language to express themselves in this medium. I had previous experience attempting to facilitate these kinds of difficult conversations, and was fully aware that this uneasiness was often connected to fears that the person speaking might say something to make them appear insensitive or offensive to others. Having a script committed to paper served the purpose of giving students a path to follow when speaking about these topics, making them feel safer and more confident when sharing their thoughts.

The intellectual space opened by continued commitment to writing and reflecting in these Notes Toward Journals is highlighted by various examples of students' work on their 51<sup>st</sup> (*dream*) State midterm essays. One student, a White male from the Los Angeles area, who was extremely quiet (not just around issues of identity, but rarely uttering more than a word and appearing disinterested and bored) in the first three weeks of the class, began to turn things around by the time he submitted his 51<sup>st</sup> (*dream*) State midterm and was much more engaged and open to discussing his views by the end of semester. In his midterm, this student identified one of the texts written by one of our guest lecturers as having a profound impact on him, and said that he identified with her experience as a privileged White female from the Los Angeles area who began to notice disparities in her hometown due to some of the critical ideas Sekou Sundiata had helped expose her to. He wrote:

Some of this can relate to the reading we did in class, "Disintegrating General Public: Waking Up in the 51st (Dream) State." In the first essay of that reading by Alanna Bailey she explains her confusion as to why her parents sent her to a predominantly white school. Her parents go on to explain their personal experiences and she then realizes the importance of it. Now it is during her essay that I saw she had written about that she suspects that white parents tend to keep their children away from predominantly non-white schools out of assumptions that it is weak when it comes to teaching. I tend to agree with her on that statement and feel that, that can as well be seen as racial profiling. The fact that people would assume that based on the majority of the student body being of another race is ignorant and a total sign of racial profiling that still very much exists in our country today. Being from Los Angeles I've seen my share of this kind of thing going on in the public schools back home. It's not only racial profiling, but it shows what it's

like to be a citizen in the United States of a different race other than Caucasian. It shows the lack of respect and maybe even dignity that these people are given in this country.<sup>13</sup>

This student was able to take a reading from the course and contextualize it in his own experiences. By reading an essay by another person from his geographic locale, Los Angeles, who had experienced White privilege and recognized it in the education system, he was able to open his eyes to inequality and begin to come to terms with the struggle and plight of a marginalized segment of our society, that until then, had not been a point of focus for him.

Another student, who was similarly quiet, but not as apparently disinterested or disengaged as the first, also demonstrated an ability to connect her experience to readings in the course and critical notions of American meaning, through her midterm essay. Unlike the White male student from L.A, who connected with someone from a similar socio-economic background, this student conveyed solidarity with the experiences of James Baldwin, one of the great poets and writers of the civil rights era, who identified as a Black gay male. This student, a White female from the Boston area, found solace in a sentiment expressed by Baldwin that she believed correctly assessed the bigotry and absurdity of racial stereotypes. She wrote,

In middle school many of my friends were black. They weren't my black friends, they were just my friends. I soon discovered in high school that your friend was your gay friend or your black friend before they were recognized solely as friend. Unfortunately, my high school was set on a foundation of prejudice that allowed race stereotypes to be implemented in the beliefs of students. In my sophomore year of high school I began

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<sup>13</sup> Student excerpt. *The Black Artist in NYC: Sekou Sundiata's World*. Professor Brian Lewis.

dating an African American student. I consistently received snide remarks in the hallway. That was the tipping point. From then on, I completed high school as an observer. When I found myself in conversation where I needed to defend my beliefs against racism, homophobia and prejudice I did, but it was hopeless, people were far too comfortable to remain in the barriers of ignorance and what they already knew. Baldwin took himself out of the equation of Harlem life to provide a subjective view of the environment he was so used to. I found myself doing the same thing in high school.

The student goes on in her essay to do an excellent job contextualizing her experience alongside Baldwin's, demonstrating that there are many points of entry, for students from a variety of racial, economic and geographic backgrounds. Like most of my students, this student did not have any exposure to or familiarity with Baldwin's work, prior to taking my class. When I discovered that these students had no context for the Black Arts Movement, I wasn't sure if they would embrace the writers from that time period. Since students' own experiences must also come out, and be laid alongside the experiences of artists and intellectuals from that era, it is crucial that students find a point of connection somewhere, otherwise the project will not work. I discovered that students identified most closely with the question asked by artists and intellectuals from the Black Arts Era of "How can I be who I am." This is an underlying theme of the Black Arts Movement, a question asked of virtually every artist and writer of that era. This question has to do with self-expression, self-love, and self-preservation as well as acceptance in families, communities, nations and the public sphere. Considering the age group I was working with, college freshmen, many of whom leaving home for the first time, coming to go to school in New York City one of the biggest and fastest paced cities in the world, and attempting to discover themselves, to find and build community beyond their familiar home and high school

environs, it is understandable why this particular theme resonated so powerfully. As the course progressed and I began to consider the different ways this theme spoke to each particular student, I came to realize the many ways this question, is both deeply personal and profoundly political and public.

Another example of student work that exemplifies culturally relevant and student-centered themes is found in the following passage. The student who authored this passage, a Latina female from the NYC area, remained quiet and reclusive for much of the course. She did not turn in a midterm on time, and after an intervention with her academic advisor, very late in the semester, began to work diligently. This student remained silent for much of the semester; however, I noticed that she had wide eyes and an apparent curiosity during many of our class discussions. I could tell that she was certainly interested, and perhaps impacted by the themes, questions and issues that came up in the course, however, for some personal reasons which she never disclosed, she did little to none of the assigned work early in the course. Once she did get going later in the semester, she contributed substantially. She wrote,

Racial profiling is ignored due to institutional racism, colorblindness, or most commonly an unconscious but socially enforced White privilege. I have seen racial profiling myself in the city in which I live, and like Sekou Sundiata, I love the ideals this country represents, yet I hate the inequality present in our society. How can we ignore how someone's entire life could change in just a blink of an eye due to the practice of racial profiling? We need to make ourselves aware of the amount of people who have been stopped-and-frisked by the police (in particular people from communities of color) who have been stopped and patted down in search of a weapon and many times even arrested

without a justified cause. It is ridiculous how in only NYC, the Police Department has stopped and detained for seeming “suspicious” around 5 million people. The NYCLU reported that 86 percent of these stops were of Black or Latinos.<sup>14</sup>

This student contextualizes her experiences with police brutality in a framework of civic and national citizenship, exploring the dissonance between racial profiling and policies such as stop and frisk, and the professed values and ideals of equality in law enforcement. The catalyst for this exploration was our class watching a poem by Sekou entitled “Blink Your Eyes” that was posted on YouTube. In the poem, Sekou recounts an episode of racial profiling and stop and frisk, from the perspective of the police and citizen. He explores the impact of these kinds of incidents on the physical and psychic level, and concludes by asking the audience to “blink your eyes” and reflect, rethink, and re-envision stereotypical, harmful and dangerous labels that criminalize people generally, and Black men specifically, falsely believing that this somehow cracks down on crime and keeps us all safe.

### **Final Performance Piece**

Due to the interconnected nature of the methodology I used for class instruction, the final performance piece can best be viewed as a continuation and extension of the other outcomes and activities of the course. For the final piece, students were asked to capture and convey the trajectory of their thoughts on the central themes (The Black Arts Movement, The works of Sekou Sundiata and The Research to Performance Method) addressing, what they believed were

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<sup>14</sup> Student excerpt. The Black Artist in NYC: Sekou Sundiata’s World. Professor Brian Lewis

the most important ideas, notions and concepts arising in the course, and expressing these in the creative and artistic format of their choice. Students were asked to draw from their Notes Toward Journals and prior assignments in order to develop their performance pieces and tie them together in a public event.

The public event and final performance piece consisted of forty-five minutes of student produced interdisciplinary artistic and intellectual expression and incorporated staged readings of monologues, original music, interpretive dance, poetry readings and video montage, followed by thirty minutes of talk-back. Two performances that stood out, and aptly captured the two themes of tension between student-and teacher-centered pedagogy and manifesting personal identity in the classroom, came from a Latina female student from NYC who created a personal/blues video montage, and a White male student from Israel who created an original poem that he performed as part of his work. From the beginning of the course, I had been fascinated with this White male student's interaction and engagement with the course materials. He was critical and outspoken, and always brought a subversive bent to our conversations, especially as they related to issues of race. Since he did not grow up in America, he considered himself an outsider; however, he understood that this position was complicated due to his immersion in Western/European/American culture through the media. He would tell us that, like the rest of us, he had grown up watching American T.V., listening to American hip-hop and pop music, and consuming other popular forms of American media. He believed this gave him a certain insider/outsider status, because as much as he was inundated by at least the superficial markers of American identity, he always knew that these were not his own, and argued that this may have accounted for his critical consciousness around the consumption of these notions. A poem that he wrote and performed for his final piece captures this internal/external struggle. He writes,

They want me to open my eyes/So I can look at all the colors/ They'll regurgitate some ambiguous truism like "society is built from images"...maybe/Look at the colors, you can pick one/It's America, and in America, you get to pick/ Any Color! Your phone case? Your shoes? A cute sweater for your dog/They come in any color the scientists, could possibly imagine/ Black! White! Red State! Blue State! You have to pick, It's America, and in America you HAVE TO PICK/ Their blogs and talk shows and bumper stickers keep trying/ to open my eyes and look at the colors, to look at the/Black flags for the anarchists, red flags for the communists/ and red carpets for the celebs/ Brown bags for recycling if you're going green...tired/and meanwhile, purple bags form under my own eyes/ I have opened them, but they refuse/ My eyes refuse to pick a color/ They refuse to look at the colors, they cannot see them/ All they can see, is the culture.<sup>15</sup>

Like this student who wrestled with his positionality in American culture, the Latina female student who created the video montage/personal blues statement found strength and support from the works of Sekou Sundiata that dealt explicitly with multiple and overlapping meanings of American identity and citizenship. This student grew up in Florida, had Colombian ethnic roots, but struggled with people's perceptions of her as White. She was an outspoken and engaged student, and mentioned that people's misperceptions of her identity had helped trigger a deep desire to learn more about her own ethnic heritage and history. She was extremely critical of sexism and misogyny and mentioned on several occasions that she hated being seen as a "piece of meat, when [she] walked down the streets of New York City" and that she was extremely tired of the catcalls and inappropriate comments. Despite this student's brilliance, she suffered from

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<sup>15</sup> Student excerpt. The Black Artist in NYC: Sekou Sundiata's World. Professor Brian Lewis

sporadic class attendance and at times fell behind on course readings and her work. Her final piece utilized still and moving images of her body wrapped in Black paint and tape. There was audio of her reading original poetry that riffed on people's perceptions of her based on her identity as a Colombian/American woman, who appeared White, and who was subject to a sexist/misogynist oppressive gaze that attempted to stifle her creative and artistic being. She argued that she was greatly empowered by her exposure to the works of Sekou Sundiata and the other thinkers she encountered in the course, because the central question(s) that these thinkers were trying to figure out, "Who am I, and how can I fully be, who I am," overlapped precisely with her own struggle for self-definition and her personal search for meaning. In a short reflection paper that accompanied her video, she wrote,

It started with the question, "how do I identify?" and from there my piece was created. This work is about myself and allowed me to demonstrate an ounce of what goes on in my head. I'm basically saying, "here I am, physically and mentally, and I hope you can take something away from it."...Sekou Sundiata inspired me to continue living. He understood my frustrations with this bullshit society but he had the strength to communicate the issues to others, to bring people together and learn in love. I used to have such strength but now I've forgotten how to speak. Now the only words are when I weep. This is my work. Photo documentation on everyday sights and myself. I'm covered in electrical tape and paint. I am a human canvas.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Student excerpt. *The Black Artist in NYC: Sekou Sundiata's World*. Professor Brian Lewis

In the student's final piece, a saxophone solo wails underneath images of the student wrapped in electrical tape. The student poses in various spaces all over the New School campus, from dorm rooms, to cafeteria spaces. Some of the poses are serious and imply danger, threat and fear. Others are silly, she is smiling and laughing. The student's images blur the line between what is a safe and dangerous space, and also blur the lines between oppression and liberation. The student reads her poetry and personal essays as the still photos and video plays.

In both content and form, this student's final piece was a powerful expression and response to Sekou's work and exemplifies the themes in practice. The student's pictures, response paper, poetry and prose explored her personal identity in terms of her Colombian heritage, her current existence in the United States of America (New York City and Florida) her gender and sexuality in terms of being a young woman caught in and fighting back against a misogynist male gaze. Additionally, the style and format she chose to convey her thoughts, a self-produced video montage and personal blues statement, represented her wrestling and asserting her power and placing herself (quite literally in this sense, since her body featured so prominently in her work) at the center of the discourse. Nowhere in my syllabus or class instructions did I mention anything about students creating video montages or personal blues statements, and yet this student's final project turned out to perfectly synthesize all of the different elements of the course about Sekou's life and work, all while daringly mixing in her own insights and perspectives.

## Discussion

For myself, and for my students, the reflective process has enabled more critical inquiry. The tenets of reflective practice engagement in this project, namely journal keeping, reading and annotating works orienting us to different modes of reflective process and reflection through critical conversation and creative art making, have helped to make the goals, aims and objectives of this project more clear, as well as facilitated the generation of new student and teacher theory in this realm. As Falk and Blumenreich argue in *The Power Of Questions*, there is a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice, the production of either or both can and should be the aims of educators, researchers and students. This concept balks against traditional notions that theory exists exclusively in the Ivory Tower, far away and isolated from real world activities and engagement. Taking this view of theory opens up new realms of possibilities of drawing from a wide range of methods and approaches in our work as students and educators.

Considering the theories generated by this project, I'm struck by how difficult and complicated utilizing culturally relevant and critical pedagogical methods can be. Although the thought of altering power dynamics is attractive, the messy work of implementing change can be daunting and confusing. While we have Black Power, Civil Rights, Feminist, and Third World Organizing Movements, to study, draw inspiration and learn from, and while we must acknowledge the substantive impacts these movements have had on altering the terrain of inclusion in Academic discourse, there is still not universal agreement about what these movements mean, what their impact has been or if there is a need to expand and push the central arguments of them in our contemporary society. The individuated nature of our complex and diversified democracy means that everyone has a different experience, different perspective and different say. For educators, this can create even more challenges when it comes to creating curriculum that adapts to and fits the needs of all of our students. I believe the responses created

by my students provide a fuller and deeper picture of what the works of Sekou Sundiata and other writers and artists of the Black Arts Movement, can mean for all of us in our contemporary lives. Rather than being the isolated thoughts of radicals from a foregone era, these artists' productions, according to my students' responses, still resonate in a myriad of ways. Indeed, revisiting their works can reveal new meanings of conceptions of citizenship and identity, art and community making.

Since my teacher research project falls more in the category of naturalistic as opposed to experimental research, according to the terms laid out by Blumenreich and Falk in their book, *The Power of Questions*, the goal of the research is to shed light on issues that are not commonly illuminated in academic research, and to discover new meanings and generate new theories. Although somewhat limited by the scope and size of my study, my findings have broader implications for my future practice and additionally make a potential contribution to conversations around culturally relevant and critical pedagogy, as well as reflective practices in teaching and what constitutes effective educational engagement and practice overall. I came into this project trying to answer two questions, essentially: 1.) How do I implement a student-centered pedagogy? And 2.) How do I implement culturally relevant pedagogy that takes into account the personal identities and positionalities of my students?

Looking back at my findings related to the first question, I am struck once again by how challenging generating student centered discourse can be. For the most part, I can trace a trajectory in my teaching from greater reliance on teacher-centered instruction in the beginning to more engaged student centered methods toward the end of the course. My journal entries, where I recorded my thoughts and class observations, document the earliest aspects of this

struggle, and my students' work and responses demonstrate the shift that began to take place by the end of the course. Despite what I would describe as an overall progression in my methods from teacher-centered to student centered, it would be inaccurate to describe this movement as clean or orderly. There were several challenges and setbacks in this struggle, some of which I anticipated and reflected on, before practice. Based on my prior experience as an educator, I was able to anticipate potential disruptions to implementing student centered methods, with this particular age group. I knew from my previous work with teenagers, many of whom had never been exposed to student centered methods, that they would likely be skeptical of this approach. For this purpose, I initially chose to present myself and perform in the role of an authoritative, teacher centered figure. As someone who has a background in theater and performance and who had previous successful experience doing this, I felt that it was possible to take on some of the body language and cues of a teacher-centered authoritative pedagogue, while making sure my content, course structure and all other aspects of my pedagogical approach, continually pushed towards student-centered methods. In hindsight, some of this performance may also have been related to my age, race and gender. I was under thirty years old at the time of this study, and a Black male, teaching in a predominantly White middle to upper income, class and institution for the first time. In this sense, my performance might also be viewed as utilizing cultural capital, or code switching, adding another interesting layer and dimension to this project.

There are several dangers inherent in performing this kind of approach. For one, there is the obvious potential that my anticipation that students had not been exposed to student centered methods or would be reluctant or even resistant to embrace them, could be miscalculated, and that I, in fact would turn off the majority of my students by my initial authoritative, teacher centered stance. For this particular research study, this was not the case, but had it been, I was

ready to utilize what Donald Schön describes as reflecting-in-action, and make the necessary adjustments. Another, and perhaps more severe, potential pitfall to this approach is the possibility that by presenting myself as the authoritative, teacher centered figure, I may in fact reify that position, and be unable to break away from it and pull myself away, so that the students could assert themselves more freely and claim the space at the center of the discourse. Again, this was not the case. I found that, in this particular project, as I've found in the past, once students began to embrace student centered methods, get excited about them, and realize how empowering it is to have the ability to choose how they want to present their work and findings, that they become passionate and enthusiastic, and demonstrate increasing confidence in themselves and each other. Subsequently, it became less important what I, as the professor, was thinking or doing, such that an important goal of student-centered pedagogy began to be achieved, as they took ownership to construct their own knowledge and looked to each other for knowledge.

The fact that this happened in my classroom for the most part does not mean that this was a simple or easy process. There were numerous moments during my student teacher research project, when I was fearful of class mutiny, when the majority of students were not keeping their journals, and days when one too many students were absent from class. At one point, prolonged absences began to pile up and I worried that students were losing trust in me and each other. In these moments, I doubled down and refocused. I attempted to forge stronger bonds with these students on a personal level, tracking them down after class to talk to them one on one, and scheduling talks with their counselors and academic advisors about their needs, interests and progress. I found that this allowed me to build authentic bonds with my students, which was crucial to the overall functioning of this project, and I would argue, should be a more common

goal of critical educational practice. Critical pedagogues such as Paulo Freire<sup>17</sup> and Cornel West<sup>18</sup> describe how important an ethos of love, care and understanding are to achieving success in student engagement. Once again, in this teacher student research project, it was reaffirmed that in order to engage in a prolonged project with a student or teacher, especially one where material as sensitive as your personal identity and past experience are shared and where vulnerability is the norm, genuine trust needs to be established, full effort needs to be exerted by teachers and students to discover who they are, where they are coming from, and what their intents and purposes are.

The second question, of how personal identities are worked through in the classroom, represented a particularly difficult challenge in the context of this study. Sekou's Research to Performance Method asks students to be completely uncensored, even if that meant troubling traditional notions of what many educators working in support contexts would call a "safe space." As a student in Sekou's classroom, that meant that I witnessed moments when issues erupted, when racial slurs and offensive language were thrown out, and when it seemed at times that things were out of control. Some of this made for some great theater, and the students in the America Project course relished the opportunity to turn our conflicts into performance pieces that brought us closer together.

In comparison to Sekou's course, my class was not nearly as confrontational. Teaching at the college level for the first time, I was not as willing to take the risks that Sekou, a seasoned

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<sup>17</sup> Freire, Paulo. "Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire." *Language Arts* 62.1 (1985): 15-21.

<sup>18</sup> West, Cornel. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. Penguin, 2005.

and tenured professor who had more than twenty years of experience teaching these issues and utilizing these methods, did. Knowing this, I did not structure my course to have as much possible antagonistic confrontation. Where Sekou's course was heavy on personal narrative and having students go head to head with their personal experience, I chose to rely more heavily on course content, to have students stick to the text, when writing papers and engaging in seminar discussions, especially early on. I tried to keep students' personal narratives relegated to the end of the course, giving them all of the space to tell their personal stories, in the context of the other works they had read, but not as much in the context of each other's views and experiences. In this way, students got to experience each other's voices and work, and work together to create, but I made sure that they had spent enough time going on field trips, engaging in course readings, watching films and doing other activities together first, so that by the time they collaborated around their personal narratives and experiences, they liked each other enough not to insult or hurt each other.

I could say this strategy worked, as I received some of my highest marks on student evaluations distributed by the college at the end of the course, in the areas of "being respectful of diverse students' views and opinions" and "creating a positive environment where critical learning is encouraged." While I was happy with these high marks, and am glad that my students found my class to be an amicable environment and a place they looked forward to coming each a week, I have mixed feelings about the safety of the space I created. It is possible that my students may have missed some of the critical challenges of the Research to Performance Method, because they did not have the opportunity to collectively process and unsettle some of their deepest fears and desires and link these to concepts of race, gender, sexuality and identity. The final pieces they turned in were powerful and a tremendous effort, yet there is still much more

work to do, in terms of getting students to examine themselves and their views in the context of their oppression and privilege, in the space of the classroom, in the university and in the wider society. This is something that I am committed to examining in my own teaching and my artistic work throughout my career. It is a persistent struggle and I strive to achieve the high level of experience and ability to address these issues that an expert such as Sekou Sundiata has achieved.

There were many successes and failures tied to findings related to my second research question. While I was surprised and satisfied that virtually all of my students, many of whom were White and came from middle and upper income homes, found common ground and were able to situate their own experience in the context of artists and intellectuals associated with the Black Arts Movement, and with Sekou, I don't believe the connections they forged got to the root of the kinds of deep personal explorations that Sekou and other educators in this tradition called for. Still I was happy with the connections my students made between their own experiences and the issues raised in the course materials I chose for this class. For a handful of my students, these works even became life changing and life affirming, such as in the case of the young woman of Colombian heritage who had a particularly difficult time adjusting to life in New York City and the many instances of personal struggle and societal oppression that confronted her. These students were able to work through their personal identities in the classroom in extremely productive ways, ways that touched much more closely at the essence of the ethos espoused by Sekou and other artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts Movement.

My struggle, moving forward, is to try to discover how I might be more effective in reaching more students and making this aspect of my work even more effective, as I continue to

teach this course, and as I continue to teach around these issues in the future. I do not come away with definitive answers about how I will approach issues of race and personal identity the next time they are encountered in my teaching, but I have new questions, including: Is a traditionally defined “safe space” the ideal in terms of confronting questions of race and identity, or is it possible, or even desirable to move beyond that? How important is it for me to understand and articulate my own identity and experiences along with my students, in a project such as this? As I have mentioned earlier, I utilized my cultural capital, double consciousness and code switching in this project, and have used these throughout my educational career, both to protect and advance myself, as well as to be effective as a culturally relevant and critical pedagogue. These notions are complex, and I have only begun to explore their ramifications for myself, and other educators like me, who have a foot in one, two or multiple cultural worlds and who seek to utilize their privilege and power to empower other students and engage in liberatory educational practices and contribute to critical educational discourses.

### **Conclusions/Implications**

Both culturally relevant and student-centered teaching methods, the dual focus of this study, provide considerable resources and tools, to address inequalities in the contemporary education system and engage students who might otherwise be disenfranchised. These strands – culturally relevant and student-centered teaching – are connected and interrelated in that they both seek to transform conventional educational methods and devolve power and authority from the teachers to the students. They are distinct in that culturally relevant pedagogy is primarily concerned with cultural competence and curricular materials, while student centered pedagogy

focuses on politically empowering students through critical consciousness raising and knowledge construction. In the current educational milieu, where standardized tests, authoritative teachers, school administrators and even police in schools, and a top down Eurocentric curriculum reign supreme, there are numerous students who are pushed to the margins. Both culturally relevant pedagogy and student centered pedagogy, offer a students a way back in, to simultaneously challenge these oppressive forces, deepen their understandings of themselves and their world and increase their opportunities for successful critical engagement.

Student centered-pedagogy is both promising and challenging because it appeals to students who might be considered drifters or abstract thinkers, students who would not normally make it and be successful according to traditional metrics for assessment that measure knowledge in terms of how much they can memorize and regurgitate. For these students, experiential, hands on learning is key, along with projects that give them an opportunity to demonstrate their passions, interests and creative abilities. In a system that increasingly relies on standardized tests, that do not measure intelligence, but instead judge how well students take the test, there are increasing numbers of students with high levels of intelligence and incredible potential for future success who are ranked low and devalued, and subsequently made to feel abject and defeated. For these reasons, implementing a student-centered approach is increasingly important for a widening circle of students who might rely on it as a critical pedagogical model that can increase opportunities for success.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, builds on student-centered pedagogy. It begins with student passions and interests and invites them to become agents in their educational processes, by making students' identities and experiences the foundation of that change. This strand is vital in

the context of school systems that increasingly serve Students of Color, while teachers are increasingly White. For these students, who bring their cultures into schools and classrooms with them, they are not encountering curricular materials that reflect their cultural heritage and experiences. Even worse, many are finding that schools are hostile environments, where their cultural expressions, represented by their style of dress, speech, or modes of behavior, are often under attack. For these students, pushed to the margins because of who they are, a discourse that explores and affirms their identities is crucial to being included as part of a community of learners and to increase their opportunities for academic excellence and further success.

Culturally relevant and student-centered methods are essential for educators to pursue, because they offer methods for critiquing oppression, for opening up space for empowerment and increasing student agency. They are also vital because by subverting conventional, stifling educational methods, they provide opportunities for students to pursue academic excellence, cultural and critical consciousness, and allow for increased opportunities to build skills in public speaking, literacy, facilitation, curriculum creation and a host of other areas. As Gloria Ladson Billings writes in her article, “But That’s Just Good Teaching, The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy”:

I have defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition (1992c) not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through

which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just Good Teaching!”).

The culturally relevant/student-centered pedagogical definition of academic success goes beyond traditional notions of a merits based system where homework must be done no matter how boring, times tables and poems by dead White Men must be memorized, and rules must be followed at all costs. A culturally relevant conception of academic success acknowledges that students do their best work when they are passionate, interested and invested, and recognizes that this will only happen when students’ identities and cultures are supported in the academic context. Academic success and skill building is still important and emphasized because, as Ladson-Billings writes, “all students need literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and political skills in order to be active participants in a democracy.” Culturally relevant pedagogy is not merely about making students feel good about themselves and feel included (although that is part of it); it also gives them useful and practical skills that they will find necessary to survive and thrive in our society. As Ladson-Billings argues, culturally relevant pedagogy also has the ability to instill cultural competence in students and teachers. It has the potential to unsettle a Eurocentric and middle-class dominated educational environment to make it a place that is supportive to all people regardless of their racial and ethnic heritage or income. Lastly, culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential to instill critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings describes critical consciousness as a “necessary component of democratic participation.” Since schools are meant to prepare students for professional life and citizenship, culturally relevant pedagogy is one of the best tools for providing this critical view. Students who have teachers who practice culturally relevant and critical pedagogy are taught to question the world around them and mobilize to address social inequalities. A traditional or conventional pedagogical approach may

incorporate and advocate the first two elements of academic success, and even cultural competence, but attempt to use these in the service of strengthening the current hierarchical and oppressive educational order. A conception of critical consciousness is crucial because it seeks to transform these dynamics, and provides students and educators with real tools to do this.

Despite the allure of potentially positive outcomes associated with culturally relevant and student-centered pedagogical methods, these strategies tend to be underutilized and underemployed. A primary reason why culturally relevant methods might be underutilized in particular is the positionality of most teachers in the current education system. Although there have been some demographic changes in recent years, teachers are still predominantly middle class White women, who do not subscribe to critical racial consciousness. For the most part their teacher preparation and education programs do not focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and they are never asked to critically examine their own race and culture in relation to their students or do the difficult work of trying to figure out how to instill cultural competence through instruction. A central reason why student-centered methods might be under-utilized is that schools, for the most part, are funded by and situated within contexts of government or big business. It is difficult to perpetually sustain a subversive methodology within the same environments it seeks to critique and transform.

Even for those who embrace the political ideology of these methods, there are still potential struggles to implementing culturally relevant and student-centered pedagogical methods. It is extremely difficult to forge authentic bonds between teachers and students, often in the short amount of time and limited space allowed for interaction. On average, a high school teacher, if they are lucky, sees their student for one period per day, a college instructor sees their

student even less. Trust is not simply given away by students, and educators must work hard to earn it, to establish a rapport and sense of ease that will allow students to share their experiences, to open up, and to buy into the project with the parameters that the educator has set forth.

Despite these challenges, a culturally relevant and critical pedagogical approach allows teachers and educators to recognize and deal with the humanism in each other. Unlike conventional approaches to education that see students as empty vessels to have knowledge deposited into them, these methods recognize the full potential of students, advocating knowledge construction as a project to be taken up by educators and students alike. While the teacher is still the leader of these projects, in a culturally relevant/student-centered context, there are exponential opportunities for students to bring their skills, abilities, stories, perspectives and lived experience to bear on the project, to enliven it, reinvigorate it and make it more exciting.

Currently the notion that race, culture and identity is and should be downplayed as the best way to support and empower the oppressed is picking up steam. In the law and in politics, we find that race, identity, and personal experience are being ignored, despite increasing indicators of inequality and disparity along these lines. Despite the *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>19</sup> ruling more than 50 years ago, schools and neighborhoods are increasingly segregated by ethnic and racial lines. The Supreme Court's current answer to this problem is to impose a strategy of race blind reform, to ignore identity and culture when deciding what is lawful and in terms of ensuring all students receive fair and suitable education. Many educational administrators and politicians are following suit, supporting teacher education and preparation

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<sup>19</sup> Warren, Chief Justice Earl. "Brown v. Board of Education." United States Reports 347 (1954): 483.

programs that do not address issues of race and personal identity for teachers or students head on, and advocating a proliferation of charter schools where racial separation is becoming more acute than it ever was in our nation's history.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the work of culturally relevant and critical educators such as Delpit, Ladson-Billings and Sundiata has renewed urgency and should be given new focus in this current socio-political environment. As I have outlined in this paper, these educators demonstrate that academic excellence and culturally relevant teaching can and should go hand in hand, that students who feel supported based on who they are, who are provided course materials that reflect their culture and experiences, and who are given the opportunity to make explicit, implicit codes of power, can and will subvert their subjugation by asserting their own agency and pursuing their own passions and interests. These contributions are timely in a contemporary context where implementation of culturally relevant and student-centered methods face an imposing set of direct challenges, including: scripted curriculum that asks teachers to account for every minute of their instructional time, standards that put increasing pressure on teachers to teach to the test, increasing numbers of teachers who, due to their positionality, do not fathom the necessity of culturally relevant and student-centered methods, and lastly, the difficulty of serious and authentic community and relationship building between students and teachers, young people and adults.

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<sup>20</sup> Orfield, Gary, John Kucsera, and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley. "E Pluribus... Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students." Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles (2012).

Despite these challenges, I am confident that culturally relevant and student-centered methods will persist because a discourse that recognizes the importance of critically engaged citizens must recognize the vital contributions made by culturally relevant and student-centered methods. Examining the current popularity in funding around civic engagement and civic participation initiatives provides hope of increased support for activities that fly under the banner of engaged citizenship. Even advocates of traditional educational methods are starting to come around to the fact the world is increasingly globalized and that a diverse set of skills and abilities are needed by all students, so that they can adequately participate in an increasingly internationalized and interdependent world. In many ways the shifting demographics of our country, which will be predominantly comprised of people of color in the next fifty years, and our world, which is showing increasing spheres of influence in countries outside of the United States and Europe, is fast-forwarding this awakening and rise of consciousness to the needs for culturally relevant pedagogy in particular. These trends will only help culturally relevant and student-centered methods continue to catch on, as the demand for the skills and outcomes associated with these approaches, continues to grow.

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