What Aren't We Teaching Our Students: critical pedagogy and the co-op education curriculum

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Abstract

Co-op programs enjoy a unique relationship with employers in business, industry, and governments as suppliers of motivated and educated students in exchange for paid on-the-job learning experiences. This partnership ensures a steady supply of *work ready* individuals to participating employers and an opportunity to get a head start in the work world for participating students. Such expectations necessarily narrow the educational mandate of co-op to the very instrumental purpose of students being placed in jobs, and ignore opportunities for other kinds of learning and development that could (and arguably should) occur through the co-op experience. This paper questions whether co-op programs have a responsibility to do more than simply ensure student employability. Is there a concurrent responsibility to contribute to broader educational outcomes including the development of active, engaged, and socially conscious worker-citizens, knowledgeable and prepared to actively critique and contribute to the workplaces they encounter? The potential for introducing a critical pedagogy to the co-op preparatory curriculum is explored in this paper along with discussion of the hidden and null curricula embedded within the co-op curriculum.

This paper is intended to start a conversation among cooperative education (co-op) professionals and researchers regarding co-op education and co-op's role in developing students who can critically think and act as agents of social change in the workplace. It introduces elements of *critical theory* from educational research to the world of co-op education, with specific references to co-op student preparation and *critical pedagogy.* Critical theory focuses on issues of power and domination in an industrialized age. Fairness, equity, and social democracy are key goals. Critical theorists seek to expose and change hidden educational and workplace processes that privilege those already privileged. When critical theory encounters education, a critical pedagogy emerges – one that embraces the development and delivery of curriculum that encourages the basic values of fairness, equity, justice, social responsibility, tolerance and civic courage (Kincheloe,1999).This notion of a critical pedagogy for co-op is explored against a backdrop of recent curriculum development experiences in co-op education at Simon Fraser University (SFU).

The question of co-op's role in this kind of education is contemplated with specific reference to the co-op preparatory curriculum. Concepts central to critical theory are introduced to help orient the reader to this perspective and to serve as theoretical lenses through which to further consider cooperative education's mandate and responsibilities within the larger project of public education. Readers who are co-op practitioners are encouraged to consider questions such as: Who controls the co-op curriculum? Who benefits from co-op and at what expense? and Who has the ultimate power regarding what is taught and learned? These questions may challenge historical thinking regarding student preparation and may also serve to reveal a hidden curriculum embedded in typical co-op preparatory curricula and practice. Critical theory readers are encouraged to consider whether and how a critical perspective could inform an educational model such as cooperative education which is so tightly partnered with the corporate community.

While the issues are complex, this paper is intended to raise the question of whether it is sufficient for co-operative education, situated as it is within the larger mandate of post secondary, to help students learn to be effective workers for the existing workplace or whether there is a responsibility to help students learn how to critique and transform those workplaces for the better. It questions the *social responsibility* mandate of cooperative education and in so doing challenges some of the very foundations and partnerships upon which co-op rests.

While the right or wrong answers regarding co-op's role may ultimately be determined by one's particular world view, responsible curriculum developers in co-op need to have at least debated the question and thoughtfully chosen their responses.

Describing and Defining the Co-op Preparatory Curriculum

What is meant by 'co-op preparatory curriculum'?

At SFU, the co-op curriculum is not generally integrated into the academic requirements but rather is offered as a complementary course of study to the various academic faculties. Because of this, co-op curriculum is rarely included in discipline specific courses. Rather, a separate co-op curriculum has emerged, largely intended to prepare the co-op student for the *world of work*. At SFU this curriculum is delivered through a blended model of on-line and face-to-face formats to all co-op students. Like most co-op preparatory curricula, the SFU model includes traditional pre-employment preparation tools and information on such topics as resume development, cover letter development, interview preparation, workplace trends, business ethics, and employee rights and responsibilities, as well as more general employability skills content in such areas as effective communication, planning, and teamwork. Additionally the SFU preparatory curriculum focuses on self-direction, and skill acquisition and transfer.

While this paper focuses on the preparatory co-op curriculum, it should be noted that a very important *natural curriculum of the workplace* has been described by Chin, Munby, and Hutchison (2000) as emerging during the work term – one which supports a significant proportion of co-op learning. This *working knowledge* occurs outside the walls of the academic institution in the many and varied workplaces in which co-op students find themselves. Chin et al (2000) note that workplace learning differs in significant ways from school learning. This learning is supported by a very interesting, complex, and largely under-explored workplace curriculum which emerges for students on their co-op terms. The focus of this paper however, is on the co-op *preparatory curriculum* -- those courses and workshops formally designed and delivered by the educational institution in preparation for the students' co-op terms.

Curricular approaches and co-op

As with many cooperative education programs, the co-op curriculum at SFU had evolved in a rather ad hoc way since the Program's inception in 1975. Over the years, there has been a slow shift from the very *transmissive* approach taken in the early years to a more *transactional*, or constructivist, approach in recent years. If co-op is to fully realize its *transformative* potential (to promote and support significant growth in learner thinking and behaviors), curriculum developers and practitioners may need to challenge some historical assumptions that underlie the current preparatory curriculum (see Table 1).

Table 1: Curricular Approaches

Transmissive approaches see the teacher as expert whose job is to effectively transmit the knowledge they have to the student. In co-op, think of a very traditional lecture style workplace trends class.

Transactional approaches see both the teacher and learner co-constructing knowledge and ascribing meaning to experiences. In co-op up this might include an interactive *return to school* group de-briefing session.

Transformative education refers to experiences that challenge the underlying assumptions behind the learner's beliefs, which often results in changed perspectives and behaviors. In many cases the learner actively participates in both personal and social reformations. This type of learning is often seen as life-changing. In co-op, may international experiences lead to such learner transformations.

(Adapted from Miller and Seller, 1990)

The goal of most co-op curricula is to inform students about the world of work and help them develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will lead to their success in that world. However, this goal within a transformational, or critical theory-based curriculum, would be quite different. A critical orientation would question whether the current world of work is a desirable one, how and why it has been constructed in the way it has, who benefits from the current construction, and how we might act as social agents to restore any existing injustices. Presently, most co-op curricula do not explicitly encourage or address such questions. Rather, they focus on teaching the student the knowledge and behaviors needed to *fit into* the world of work, versus questioning or changing it.

Critical Theory, Pedagogy, and the Neo-liberal Agenda

Seeing schools as a site of moral and political education means developing curricula and classroom social relations that teach students the basic values of tolerance, acceptance, decency, civic courage, gender equity, fairness and racial justice (Giroux, 2003, p.94).

In the neo-liberal universe, the world is intensely competitive economically, and students, as future workers, (are human capitol that) must be given the requisite skills and disposition to compete efficiently and effectively *(Apple, 1999, p.204).*

Critical theory is less a theory in the modernist sense (generalizations emerging from a body of scientific knowledge which guide and validate practice) and

more of a way of viewing the world, including a different view of what constitutes educational knowledge. Therefore critical theorists do not present sets of laws but rather present a lens through which to view information and the world in which it, and we, are situated. Henry Giroux (1988) argues that critical theory "allows teachers to see what they are seeing" (p.47), assisting both teachers and learners in formulating questions about the world and providing conceptual tools to help understand and change the social injustices therein.

This theoretical tradition finds its roots in the Frankfurt School of Social Research in the 1920's where critical theorists in post-World War I Germany focused on issues of power and domination within an industrialized, modernist age. Critical theorists are "especially concerned with how domination takes place, the way human relations are shaped in the workplace, the school, and everyday life" (Kincheloe, 1999, p.197). The goal is to raise individual consciousness about the self as a social being and, once raised, inspire the individual to see how their beliefs, opinions, self-image, and treatment of others are influenced by dominant perspectives. This self-reflection is intended to result in a changed perspective and perhaps even changed behavior within the individual. Although no set of specific strategies is provided, critical theorists have developed a framework of principles around which potential actions may be discussed and reviewed.

For co-op, a critical pedagogy would build "upon Dewey and progressivism, challenging comfortable assumptions about work and work training" (Kincheloe, 1999, p.198). Egalitarianism and social democracy are key goals of critical theorists and much critical pedagogy serves to expose the subtle and often hidden educational and workplace processes that privilege the already privileged. In this light, the idea that cooperative education simply promotes a politically neutral set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that provides students with fair and equitable socio-economic mobility appears naïve. In a critical light, co-op would more likely be seen as an educational model that supports the business and industry status quo.

Critical theorists seek to promote the individual's consciousness of self as a social being – they want student workers to be able to analyze alternatives and make ethical choices around their work/careers. They want individuals to begin to understand what forces shape their world and their perspectives of that world. In contemporary western society *that* world has become increasingly consumer oriented. The ethic of *neo-liberalism* (seen by critical theorists as underlying western society) has been described as an attempt to subordinate all human needs to the dictates of the market or the *bottom line*, while at the same time eschewing public service and the public good. In this context, human *needs* are defined and driven by the dictates of the market, leading people to act in ways which are best for them as consumers (contributing to self; more money, more stuff) versus community builders (contributing to the betterment of society). Underlying concepts include return on investment (ROI), cost/benefit analysis, and the *bottom line* – all seen purely in personal/corporate financial terms. Clearly when this ethic engages with public education (which it already has), some obvious potential conflicts emerge.

Apple, (1999, p.203) sees neo-liberals as the "most powerful element within the conservative restoration" currently underway in the United States. He believes that neo-liberals are guided by a weak state and therefore all that is public (such as public education) is bad and all that is private, such as business and industry, is good. Notions regarding efficiency and productivity as they relate to the fiscal *bottom line*, have become the dominant metrics, not only in business but increasingly now in the public sector as well.

Apple, Giroux, and others believe that the ethic of neo-liberalism leads people to act only in ways that are good for themselves -- essentially turning the world into a vast consumer marketplace where acquisition and personal promotion defines success. In the face of such a scenario, social democratic ideals around issues of justice, race, gender, and equity are at great risk of not only being marginalized, but even discarded, if the cost/benefit analysis of addressing those ideals is not favorable for those currently in power. In this scenario, which many argue reflects contemporary western society, a "relative handful of private interests control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit" (Robert W. Chesney in Giroux, 2003, p.153).

In neo-liberal policy, "[s]chools are to be driven by private needs. Education is to be a private good and is to incorporate the skills, knowledge and values necessary to perform in a manner that enhances the competitiveness of the private sector" (Apple, 1999, p.210). While clearly this presents some threat to the public good, how much of a threat is it to cooperative education? To a great extent doesn't the preparation of co-op students do precisely that – ensure the *skills, knowledge and values needed* for corporate success? If this *is* the case for cooperative education, should it remain so? Surely a program such as co-op, one that anecdotally proclaims itself as promoting transformational learning and as playing a key role in the development of engaged citizens, should support personal development and transformation through its curriculum and practices. Many institutions measure

the success of their co-programs by the number of students that successfully transition into co-op placements and post-graduate employment. But if success in co-op really is *more* than getting a job, what other attributes are developed, supported, and measured through the co-op model, and in what ways?

According to Simon, Dippo, and Schenke, (1991), programs such as co-op, which place students in work situations, create *occasion(s) in which students necessarily confront ideas, terms, procedures, relations, and feelings in order to make sense of their presence in the workplace. How students do this – how they accomplish experience – depends in part on the beliefs, ideas, assumptions, and values they bring with them, but also on the context and content of reflection and analysis that we may be able to provide in work education programs (p.10).*

An awareness of one's assumptions and beliefs appears to be critical for deriving meaning from experience, yet few co-op programs explicitly explore this in their curriculum. Reflection and analysis of co-op experiences also needs to be better supported and embedded in curriculum in order for students to *accomplish their experiences* to the fullest extent and for co-op to be seen as more than just a production line for the workforce.

Co-op students may encounter the influence of neo-liberal policies and ethics in two major environments: the school and the workplace. The nature and degree of these influences are quite variable depending upon the particular school and course of study (e.g. business versus women's studies) and the types of co-op placements (e.g. Chamber of Commerce versus Foodbank) a student experiences. Co-op employers represent a broad range of societal interests from large global multi-nationals, to small and medium sized businesses, through to the public sector, non-governmental organizations, and very small not-for-profit social agencies. Co-op cannot, and should not, control the employer environment. There is great richness in the diverse experiences and perspectives to which students may be exposed. However, in the absence of any self-awareness/self-reflection activities or critical analysis tools and opportunities specifically aimed to help students question and better understand these experiences, their full potential may remain unrealized.

As a program uniquely bridging the two very different worlds of business and academia, cooperative education needs to more fully consider the risks and responsibilities associated both with introducing, and *not* introducing, a critical pedagogy to its work preparation curriculum.

Cooperative Education: Responsibilities and Risks

"Giving primary responsibility for the definition of important 'work skills' in schools to the private sector – an act that evacuates the possibility of public criticism of the ways work is actually constructed, distributed, controlled and paid – allows a definition of work as a 'private' matter and as purely a technical choice to go unchallenged" (Apple, 1999, p.209).

The risk of co-op being (or being seen as) part of the neo-liberal agenda. If co-op is predominantly positioned as contributing to the economic agenda of the community, co-op programs should be (and perhaps have been) specifically designed to help students develop the skills, competencies, values, and attitudes to maximize their success in today's workplaces. In so doing, co-op programs deliver *appropriately* skilled and socialized workers to the system. The majority of the content of the preparatory curriculum supporting such development should appropriately be derived from employers. In this context, business and industry ought to let cooperative education programs know precisely what they value and need, so that the programs may pass that knowledge along to students, and in some cases back to the institution. In this sense, the curricular content of co-op preparatory programs is determined by those outside the academy.

If, however, co-op programs are positioned more within an academic agenda, the above noted scenario places them at great risk of being criticized for subordinating the interests of the student-workers to the interests of employers and placing "the determination of what constitutes 'useful' knowledge for working people (solely) into the hands of employers" (Brown, 2000, p.4). It also places co-op at risk of being viewed as, and perhaps in fact being, a tool of business and industry as opposed to being an integral part of the overall delivery of the educational agenda whose goals include the development of critical thinkers and engaged citizens.

Giroux (2003, p.171) argues that there is a *hidden curriculum* in higher education – "a creeping vocationalization and subordination of education to the dictates of the market". This *hidden curriculum* refers to that which is unintentionally taught in our programs; ideas, values, and knowledge not explicitly outlined as part of the curriculum but nevertheless embedded within it. For co-op, if the ultimate goal is to develop employable students, implicitly this means developing students who fit into and embrace current workplaces. The hidden curriculum in co-op therefore focuses students on understanding and adapting to these workplaces versus questioning them. All co-op workplaces are therefore implicitly endorsed.

If co-op itself is part of this larger institutional hidden curriculum, the not as well hidden curriculum

within co-op may be to create in students, model workers for business and industry. In many cases co-op is seen to succeed if it reliably produces new, well trained and socialized students that are readily employed. As these successful student transitions between school and work are facilitated by the co-op program, co-op thereby implicitly supports two important assumptions: (1) all co-op workplaces are desirable (since co-op programs approve them, and students are not generally taught or encouraged to critically evaluate or try to change them) and (2) student success is, at least partially if not entirely, measured by securing a position within the system.

Beyond hidden assumptions that may underlie co-op curriculum and practice, it might also be instructive to consider what we are not teaching our students. In co-op, this *null curriculum* (that which is not taught, implicitly or explicitly, through a curriculum) refers to work related issues, values, and critiques which are not typically part of the student preparation. Topics such as corporate social responsibility, worker/management tensions and resulting worker movements, and various workplace practices around justice, equity, and democracy are rarely included in most workplace preparation. The hidden and null curricula often serve to preserve the status quo. Co-op educators are encouraged to examine both the hidden and null curricula within their programs' preparatory curricula and consider the ways in which these either support or hinder the broadest educational goals of their program.

Co-op practitioners might also ask themselves similar questions regarding the hidden and null curricula reflected in elements of their practice. For example, consider the scenario of a co-op student in their second term working at company X (a long time co-op employer), who has been asked to participate in the hiring of the next co-op student. While never stated in policy, over the course of the process the student has noticed subtle but clear practices against hiring (or even short-listing) from a particular minority group. The student raises this observation to the co-op coordinator during the site visit and questions whether, and how, they should challenge the company owner (as otherwise the job has been a great learning experience and pays well). Imagine the conversation that follows between the student and co-op coordinator. Does it honor the student's observation? Is the student's observation also acknowledged as an injustice – or framed as a right of the business owner? What is the recommended course of action for the student? -- ensure their voice is heard or suggest they *don't rock the boat* and jeopardize what would otherwise be a great term? Did the co-op pre-employment curriculum provide any tools for helping the student make sense of such an event and choose their own course of action? Whose needs does the advice from the coordinator privilege? As the conversation was yours to imagine, each reader will have different answers to the questions. While it is quite likely that many similar scenarios have arisen in a variety of co-op workplaces, it is much less likely that the responses to these scenarios were highly influenced by critical theory perspectives. The hidden and null curricula have been quietly influential in both co-op curriculum and practice.

Co-op's responsibility to the broader educational agenda.

While typically describing itself in highly instrumental terms (i.e. co-op is a way to get a good job, co-op allows students to apply school-learned theory to real world practice, etc.), co-op also often claims to foster personal and social development in its students. Acknowledging that the utilitarian role of co-op is to help students find jobs in areas related to their studies, the educational possibilities of co-op extend far beyond this singular outcome. Co-op is a model of experiential education that complements more traditional forms of classroom studies by providing new learning opportunities, and occasions to make meaning of classroom-derived knowledge, through relevant practice and reflection. As part of the academic program at a public education institution, co-op has a responsibility to be more than a placement agency. As Giroux states:

"Situated within a broader context of issues concerned with social responsibility, politics, and the dignity of human life, higher education should …offer students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for critical dialogue and broadened civic participation" (Giroux, 2003, p.189).

From a critical perspective, co-op program goals should therefore reflect more than the securing of employment as an outcome, they ought to also reflect the broader educational goals of the institution within which the program operates. Co-op programs need to be clear about their purpose and this clarity needs to be reflected in stated program goals for student learning that are then supported by co-op curriculum and practices (Cates and Jones, 1999). At SFU, and in many North American co-op programs, program goals extend well beyond employment outcomes and include contributing to the university's commitment to "engage… in building a robust and ethical society" (SFU Values and Commitment Statement, 2004). In the fullest sense, co-op should help students develop the knowledge and skills that allow them to better understand the context of their work experiences including the power dynamics at play, the interests of those in power, and the potential implications for those not in power. Yet, due to co-op's critical partnerships

with governments, business and industry, co-op needs to be equally mindful of how such critique may affect those partnerships and/or potentially put such *enlightened students* at a disadvantage in the current marketplace. Co-op employer partners may also be wary of a co-op curriculum that could be seen to promote workplace critique and activism.

The risk of disenfranchising co-op stakeholders. Most employers, and I suspect many students as well, want a curriculum that helps students transition effectively to the work world by helping them move into it, not critique or resist it. Challenging these assumptions, within the employer-student-academic partnerships that define co-op, may be very risky. Industrial and business leaders might struggle to embrace workers whose apparent primary goal was workplace reform. "Empowered workers carrying the flag of justice are dangerous when they invade the sanctuaries of power" (Kincheloe, 2003, p.18). While this may be the case for many co-op employers, there may also be a contingent of employers that is very interested in the development of *humane professionalism* (Kincheloe, 2003) and engaged worker-citizens. For them, hiring a university co-op graduate goes beyond acquiring a compliant set of discipline specific technical skills. Many employers state that they are indeed looking for experienced critical thinkers and individuals willing to *think outside of the box* and change things for the better. The critical question is, of course, *to whose betterment and how*?

At SFU most co-op students *choose* the option of participating in a cooperative education program and do so because they want to be part of the work world. Co-op promises them just that, so to deliver something different, and potentially threatening, may in itself be unethical. While many co-op students may well be interested in larger social issues, many are also trying to enhance their learning in a way that promises some future dividends while making enough money to help them finance their education. What can co-op replace the tainted workplace with once it has been shattered by the neo-liberal critique? Would a more *critically minded* co-op program only develop jobs within *socially conscious* workplaces? -- And if that were even possible, is that the best way to develop worker-citizens? As most co-op students are indeed seeking to enter and *succeed* in the current world of work, I suspect many would find a critical pedagogy of co-op distracting at best.

Research has proven co-op to be "a very effective transition program" (Schuetze and Sweet, 2003, p.78), in no small part because most co-op programs support their business and industry partners and do not presume to question their goals or methods of operation (unless there are clear violations of safety or the law). If the notion of developing worker-citizens is compelling, there remains the question of whether it is co-op's role within the academy to take the lead. Why would one interrupt a program that has been supported by both academia and employers as having proven value? How could co-op introduce notions of critical theory all the while preparing students to succeed by training them to meet employer expectations? How would co-op's employer partners react to the introduction of curriculum designed to help workers question and perhaps even challenge their practices? In order for co-operative education programs to truly embrace a critical pedagogy, such questions must be thoroughly debated and considered within the context of the co-op model which must concurrently support the academy's, the student's and the employer's, perhaps incommensurable, goals.

The risks are indeed many. The greatest risk of all however, is never asking the questions -- never exploring the hidden and null curricula within co-op, never challenging assumptions regarding co-op's role with respect to the development of worker-citizens and never asking co-op students and employers their perspective on education for democracy.

The responsibility to a better tomorrow. As Joel Bakan points out in his 2004 book *The Corporation*, the notion of corporate social responsibility is an oxymoron, as corporate executives are required by law to maximize shareholder profits, to the detriment of all other concerns. In this sense, the notion of shareholder's "best interests" is limited to the financial realm and other more idealistic concerns (e.g. the environment, worker conditions), if not financially profitable, must take a backseat. However as Bakan also points out, the rules that govern corporations are creations of people and exist by charters, which can be revoked and changed by people. What is missing at this time, he believes, is sufficient capacity in the public sphere to precipitate those changes. There appears to be an opportunity, even a responsibility, for those of us in public education to help build the social awareness and capacity within the leaders of tomorrow that could provoke such change… or at the very least explore the possibilities.

Conclusion

This paper introduced the notion of critical pedagogy to cooperative education in hopes of stimulating discussion around an issue that has not historically enjoyed a great deal of attention in the co-op concourse. The idea that cooperative education could better contribute to the development of active social citizens, help students develop more effective critical analysis and change management skills, and encourage thinking about current workplaces and how they might be improved is educationally tantalizing, though not without its risks to the co-op model. To ignore this

potential however, is no longer possible. Co-op must examine what is best for all its stakeholders in the broadest context possible if it is to fully consider how best to move the model forward in light of a rapidly changing world. Perhaps the most difficult question underlying such a debate addresses the very heart of the model: To whom is co-op most answerable and for what?

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