

Where Does Critical Pedagogy Happen? Young People, ‘Relational Pedagogy’ and the Interstitial Spaces of School

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Abstract

The consideration of ‘where’ critical pedagogy happens typically prefaces the geo-physical spaces of practice within which teaching-learning exchanges occur. This chapter seeks to extend these concerns by instead positioning the space *in-between* educator and educand as also a site of critical pedagogy, but one that stands as socio-phenomenologically defined. Taking dialogue as central to the enactment of critical pedagogical practice and the formations of inter-relationality that shape the dialogic exchange as its theoretical cues, this chapter works through the experiences gained from the delivery of an alternative learning program designed to re-engage disengaged groups of middle-years high school learners. Relationality between the students and the students and their teachers marked the success of this program, with dialogue providing the ‘terrain’ upon which the inter-activity of the program’s sessions proceeded. It was from the dialogues that emerged between participants that a sense of ‘common ground’ materialised as a phenomenological experience of mutual engagement, and it is with this that a renewed consideration of ‘where’ critical pedagogy happens surfaced. This chapter charts how this space in-between might be conceptualised as a site of critical pedagogical activation.

Keywords

Relational Pedagogy; Relationality; Informality; Disengagement; Alternative Learning

In an early section of *Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire (1992) outlines an important element in his practice of critical pedagogy. Speaking of the experience of convening culture circles with “fishers, with peasants and urban labourers” (Freire 1992: 36), Freire relays the following exchange as demonstrative of the ways that an *inter-relationality*, as I will refer to this concept throughout this chapter, features as central to the critical pedagogical encounter:

First question:

“What is the Socratic maieutic?”

General guffawing. Score one for me.

“Now it’s your turn to ask me a question,” I said.

There was some whispering, and one of them tossed out a question:

“What’s a contour curve?”

I couldn’t answer. I marked down one to one.

“What importance does Hegel have in Marx’s thought?”

Two to one.

“What’s soil liming?”

Two to two.

“What’s an intransitive verb?”

Three to two.

“What’s a contour curve got to do with erosion?”

Three to three.

“What’s epistemology?”

Four to three.

“What’s green fertilizer?”

Four to four.

And so on, until we got to ten.

As I said goodbye, I made a suggestion. “Let’s think about this evening. *You had begun to have a fine discussion with me.* Then you were silent and said that only I could talk because I was the only one who knew anything. Then we played a knowledge game and we tied ten to ten. I knew ten things you didn’t. And you knew ten things that I didn’t. Let’s think about this”. (37-8; emphasis added)

This short anecdote provides the touchstone for this chapter. It was through dialogue that Freire’s critical practice found initiation, but importantly, it was with this dialogue that the interactions he experienced with his *educands* gained purpose. The encounter, mediated as this was *through* dialogue, provided Freire’s critical practice with its stimulation, with he and his *educands* simultaneously coming to the realisation of the place they held in relation to each other via the inter-actions they shared in this moment.

I seek to extend this consideration of the place of critical pedagogical practice by contemplating, specifically, the ways that dialogue provides a foundational context for critical pedagogical engagements. The argument outlined in this chapter will suggest that it is at the moment of the pedagogical encounter—that is, at the point of dialogic interaction—that a sense of the Other finds meaning. I suggest that it is through the act of engaging the Other that a space *in-between* educator and *educand* opens as a site of critical interrogation and inter-activity. This is a space traversed by dialogue, and via the shared inter-action that dialogue enables, the prefiguration of an inter-relationship borne of-the-moment materialises. Dialogue provides the terrain upon which this shared moment of practice finds activation, and purpose.

In terms of this chapter and its concerns for the ‘where’ of critical pedagogy, I seek to outline a sense of the place of critical pedagogy by drawing attention to the ways inter-relationship

hence feature as a site of critical pedagogical engagement. Emergent as it is from the interactions dialogue provokes, I will argue that a sense of 'where-ness' surfaces as a product of dialogic engagement, but further, that this where-ness should be considered beyond concerns of physical-geographic emplacement alone. The sense of inter-relationality dialogue provokes is, too, a 'space' in the sense that those engaged within the moment of dialogue (that is, educator and educand) will realise the connection they share and the 'common ground' that materialises between each as the dialogue progresses.

Conceptually, this positioning of the space of critical pedagogy as something emergent from the interactions that occur between educator and educand moves somewhat away from considerations of a 'where' that finds its definition in geo-physically, or indeed, 'situated' terms. Prefigured by a sense of 'emplacement', formulations of where-ness that emphasise the spatial as a singular consideration position *location* as a defining feature of the engagement. Such considerations of emplacement often infer a sense of a positioning that consequently locates the engagement *in place*, with this coming to stand as the central feature through which the critical pedagogical engagement is understood.

I will outline something beyond this formulation of the 'where' as defined by its geographic dimensions solely to instead suggest that inter-relationality, as the outcome of dialogue and inter-action with an-Other provides a further manifestation of the space(s) within which critical pedagogy happens. What I mean by this is to suggest that this consideration of the 'where' of critical pedagogy might do more than situate the 'place' of the pedagogical engagement as geo-physically identifiable to also consider how those individuals (educators and educands) engaged in this encounter come to the educative dynamic as socio-phenomenologically situated beings.

To return to Freire's experiences, it was via the burgeoning inter-relationality that emerged between he and his educands and through the dialogue that marked the nature of this exchange that the realisation of shared-knowing surfaced. It was through the desire to traverse the distances imposed by alterity—to relate with the Other and to confound the *aporia* that stood between himself and his students—that Friere's mobilisation of dialogue found its purpose. Dialogue provided the terrain upon which the inter-activity proceeded, and through which understanding formed. Through problem-posing, asking questions and developing a rapport through inquiry, a 'space' of commonality and shared inter-activity developed. Dialogue enabled this to occur, and it was with the inter-actions mediated by this dialogue that the identification of a 'common-ground' between he and his educands found definition. The *aporia* of unfamiliarity that previously stood between Freire and his students, and the assumptions of *not* knowing held by his educands receded as the consciousness-raising intent of the dialogue gained traction.

Freire (1992) reflected further on this later in the same discussion:

Educands recognise themselves as such by cognising objects—discovering that they are capable of knowing, as they assist at the immersion of significates, in which process they also become critical “significators”. Rather than being educands because of some reason or other, educands need to become educands by assuming themselves, taking themselves as cognising subjects, and not as an object *upon which the discourse of the educator impinges*. (37; emphasis added)

Through this positioning of dialogue, and concomitantly the nature of engagement and the inter-relationality that forms *between* educator and educand, this chapter will outline a

consideration of the space in-between educator and educand in terms of what I frame here as the ‘inter-relationality of critical pedagogy’. Relationality, enacted through dialogue, stands as a fundamental ‘site’ of critical pedagogy, and in making this case for the ‘where’ of critical pedagogy, a characterisation of inter-relationality will be framed as a useful conceptual prompt for considering what it means to engage in a critical pedagogy that positions mutual, inter-active relationships as fundamental to the (critical) educative dynamic.

Empirical Groundings

To provide a reference-point for this consideration, this chapter draws upon selected moments experienced during the delivery of a behaviour remediation program convened within a mainstream high (secondary) school, located in south-east Queensland, Australia. The program, *Bike Build*, was delivered as part of a wider alternative learning program for students who had disengaged from ‘formal’ education, primarily as a result of poor behaviour and problematic (*viz. violent*) interactions with teachers and peers. In collaboration with youth support officers employed by the school to work with these groups of young people, I was responsible for coordinating the ‘curriculum’ for the workshop sessions that were core to the program, and was subsequently engaged in facilitating the delivery of these sessions and the day-to-day operations in its conduct. I was also engaged in the ‘behind the scenes’ discussions with school personnel, and undertook liaison with others involved in the program including members of the school’s executive team, discussing such things as the underlying philosophies of the program and its formation and progression within the wider context of the school.

Bike Build was organised around a discrete, term-long unit-of-work that involved the ‘hands-on’ repair and restoration of a collection of donated bicycles. A space (Figure 1) was found to convene the sessions within a large, open workshop facility that adjoined the school, and it was

with the unfamiliarity of this space and its relative distance from the main sections of the school that particular affordances surfaced in terms of the way Bike Build came to be run. The workshop space did not look, or feel, *like* school, and consequently opportunities to (re)frame how the sessions would work *as distinct from* school became apparent.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

The first iteration of the program ran in Term 4, 2015, with a further two iterations of Bike Build convened in subsequent years; the second occurring in Term 3 2016 (with 8 students) and the third in Term 2 2017 (with 16 students). For some of these students, the 90-minute ‘double lesson’ within which Bike Build was convened constituted the *only* contact time with school through the week. Disengagement within the cohort was prolific. The experience of schooling for each of students had been, in separate ways, problematic if not *tragic*. Stories of violence, inter-personal conflict, boredom, despair, and hopelessness emerged in the revelations the students provided me with as we came to talk and share experiences as the program progressed. School was, in the view of the students, not something worth engaging with, and from this perspective I became both alarmed and amazed at how far the experience of school had descended for some of the students I encountered.

Bike Build and the Alternative Learning Program

It was difficult to imagine how Bike Build, formulated as it was around a very open and informal approach to pedagogy, instruction and learning, could have proceeded within the ‘formal’ (indeed, classroom-based) sites of the school. That the workshop space was an ‘open’ space provided affordances in terms of not only who could be involved, but also in terms of how these interactions proceeded. Given that this space was *technically* not part of the school, the way that interactions occurring within it proceeded gained some flexibility. For example, the students who came to Bike Build were actively encouraged to lead the development of the

‘curriculum’ of the program (a point relayed further below), to determine how the interactions they would have with each other, and with me, would proceed. The students were also encouraged to consider and voice views on how modes of address and speaking with each other, working as a team and generally conducting themselves as members of this group would progress. This was not a space in which pre-existing sets of ‘rules’ and modes of conduct prescribed the activities that could occur. The students in Bike Build were responsible for this ‘student-led’ program and were subsequently challenged to relay how they felt it should proceed.

Significantly, the fact that the workshop was visibly and spatially a ‘different’ space to the classrooms the students had disengaged from provided our first ‘in’ for progressing the program. In the way Henri Lefebvre (1974) describes, most of the spaces of the school encountered by the students were “susceptible to being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one” (167). The students were indeed expert in *détournement* in these spaces, and it made no sense to simply replicate the sets of ‘rules’ these spaces were defined by. The way we used the workshop space was noticeably different to the ways the classroom spaces of the school were typically used. Not only did these workshops require activity different to that typically experienced in school—in our case activities centred on pulling apart and rebuilding bicycles in a deeply kinaesthetic way, involving activity and movement (Favre 2009)—but the students were also positioned to determine how the sessions would proceed. While they did (and in ways reminiscent of Freire’s *educandos*) look to me for the ‘orders’ during the early sessions (‘orders’ that invariably would have been challenged and resisted), I simply set about relaying the overall purpose of the sessions, what it was that we ideally needed to have achieved by the end of the program and that ultimately, that they were in charge of how all of this would proceed. But we also spoke about why the students felt that

they were in the program to begin with, and what it was Bike Build was intended to achieve from this perspective.

The workshop space enabled activity and forms of interaction that were distinct from the spaces of the regular school, and the heavy associations these had for prescribed modes of interaction—the ‘rules of conduct’ schools are archetypally known for. Equally, the activities undertaken within this space, both in terms of the pragmatic conduct of the workshop tasks themselves, but also the day-to-day modes of interaction that this space provoked, were highlighted and posed to the students as functions they were in charge of shaping. We established early on some terms of reference for how we wanted to proceed and the limits around how it was we expected to treat each other (and be treated). We drew some early lines around modes of inter-personal behavior, the use of language and attendance. The students committed to being active in the sessions and identified a commitment to each other and the achievement of the goal of the program—namely, to have a collection of functioning bicycles by the end of the program.

Although this aspect of the workshop sessions led to speculation around the effects that physical space, student-led approaches and informality in instruction held within the pedagogies of Bike Build, it was with the dialogues that emerged during these interactions that I became particularly interested. New formulations of dialogue and inter-relationality became possible in the workshop space; not least because of the informality in the way teaching and learning was mediated within it, but also because this space didn’t ‘work’ like other spaces within the school. As a program convened in an out-of-the ordinary space, convened by facilitators who were *not* teachers, and with visits at points through the sessions by others associated with the program (community partners, for example), the Bike Build workshop

sessions were marked by a sense of ‘distance’ both literally (geographically) and figuratively (in terms of the differentiation in modes of engagement) that this space made possible. Consequently, the forms of encounter and inter-action that this space enabled were also different to those generally encountered within the ‘regular’ spaces of the school.

The Spatial Dynamics of Dialogue

It was with the affordances for deploying modes of teaching and learning different to those enacted within the ‘regular’ spaces of the school that the pedagogy for Bike Build developed. Crucially, it was with the capacity for dialogue that the conduct of Bike Build gained definition. The various encounters engaged through the delivery of the program (between student participants primarily, but also with me and facilitating teachers and staff from the school) were mediated through dialogue as *the* means for liaison and the building of shared understanding. While dialogue is of course central to human communications generally, and indeed foundational to any pedagogical activity, it was the nature of the dialogue and the assumptions that came into the sessions around how dialogue should proceed that an important point of definition surfaced in terms of the ways the Bike Build workshops sessions proceeded as *critical* inter-actions.

Firstly, the expectations the students held of the sessions, including the assumptions they had of me (and inversely me of them) and the role that Bike Build played as part of a wider ‘alternative learning’ program, opened for consideration previously unspoken beliefs around what we each felt about the program, each other and the role of schooling in these young peoples’ lives. I asked the students what they thought about the Bike Build program and indeed, why they felt they were there (Figure 2). I became amazed when some of my students relayed that they ‘knew’ what involvement in the program ‘meant’ in terms of wider perceptions that

carried from the ‘Alternative Learning Program’, and became even more surprised when others expressed confusion over exactly why they had been streamed into the program and what this was saying about who they were. As we progressed, and as we came to know each other, the dialogue increased to the point that attention each week was focussed as much on teasing out what the experience of school meant, as much as it was about repairing the bikes (Figure 3). The bikes, after all, were just the ‘in’ for something more generative, with this feature of the sessions highlighting that rarely do young people have the opportunity in other aspects of their schooling to openly consider (and question) why it is they are there.

[INSERT FIGURE 2] [INSERT FIGURE 3]

Secondly, it also emerged that a certain level of ‘disorientation’ was required early on in the Bike Build sessions to counter the (largely negative) experiences the students had had with schooling generally and with each other. I assumed that the students initially came to the sessions with a sense of impending disappointment; that they had seen it all before, and that as students who had (in most cases) been streamed through programs like Bike Build previously, were viewing this as *yet another* ‘behaviour remediation program’. Similarly, the interpersonal dynamics at work within the cohorts were potentially problematic, with instances of histories of violence and anti-social interaction marking the relationships some of the students had. Significant effort early on was given to re-frame not only what Bike Build was intending to achieve as a program but to also relay to the students that this was their space to do *as they wished*. This provided a significant point of observation for me, and I was a little surprised that it took the students some time to gain their bearings and realise that they were indeed capable as “cognising subjects” (Friere 1992: 37). For all the bravado and potential for *détournement* the students threatened early on in the sessions, it soon surfaced that they did not automatically know how to proceed. I put this down to the students having never really had the opportunity to meaningfully direct their own learning; they looked to me for direction and

when challenged to take the lead and determine for themselves where activities should proceed, became uneasy and unsure of how to continue. As such we spent quite a bit of time in the early workshop sessions working through what it meant to lead the curriculum, define tasks, work cooperatively and position Bike Build as a space for interaction. This reminded me of Freire's (Shor and Freire 1987) assertion:

At the moment the teacher begins the dialogue, he or she knows a great deal, first in terms of knowledge and second in terms of the horizon that she or he wants to get to. The starting point is what the teacher knows about the object and where the teacher wants to go with it. (103)

The students had to have their sense of place within the school disoriented in order to position Bike Build as a space that could afford inter-active participation and meaningful engagement. My prompts, while not intended to direct the activity, stood as a means for generating initial inquiry and commencing the sessions.

But just as the disorientation encountered by the students worked to reorient how they came to Bike Build and how they thought about school and their place within it, Bike Build became disorienting for me also. I had to think beyond rehearsed modes of address. I had to become far more agile in responding to questions asked in the moment. Uninterrogated, 'automatic' responses, and tried and tested methods for enacting my practice as a pedagogue required close scrutiny and cognisance of the effects they would yield. In order to remain responsive to the students, and receptive to where it is their inquiries were leading the workshop sessions, my role too, had to be disoriented. In this sense, I approached the consideration Neville (1999) outlines, in that "the role of 'teacher' requires revision" with regard the place teachers come to assume, and perhaps more pertinently, the place they hold in terms of the deployment of *organised* classroom activity.

Dialogue was central to the establishment of this climate within Bike Build and it followed that certain ‘ways of speaking’ were required in order to effect its delivery. With the students—participants who came to the program weary of school, already jaded and (in some cases) *damaged* by these experiences—it was soon apparent that the ways I and my co-facilitators came to address the students, the tone we took, and the positioning of any sense of authority implied within these modes of address required careful consideration. The students had indeed heard it all before and were just as fatigued with behaviour remediation programs that promised engagement and student-led direction, but delivered much the same sorts of experiences as those encountered within ‘regular’ classroom settings; classrooms that the students had disengaged from in the first place. It was crucial that I kept in-check how I addressed the students and how I came to enact the ideal of the student-led approach that I sought to foster. The slightest hint of ‘teacherly’ tone in my voice, or authoritarian direction would destroy the sessions and leave the students with the assumption that this was *just* another reformulation of a schooling that was all too familiar.

One student put it well when, in discussion with me about what ‘worked’ in Bike Build, highlighted the nature and ‘tone’ of participation possible within the sessions and the nature of the relationships he was able to form therein:

Facilitator [Hickey]: So is that what happens in the classroom? You just get frustrated...

Jimmy: Yeah...People just yell out stuff and I just get annoyed and then just walk out of class.

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, right. Including the teacher?

Jimmy: Yeah, sometimes.

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, that's not so good at all. You get along pretty well with 'Steve' [alternative program co-facilitator and youth support officer].

Jimmy: Yeah, 'Steve' is good.

Facilitator [Hickey]: So what is it about 'Steve' particularly that makes him a good teacher?

Jimmy: He's nice...Just stops and listens. Yeah, real calm.

This reflection comes as all the more remarkable given that this student was on his *last chance*; 'Jimmy' had been given the (stark) alternative to either leave school or participate in Bike Build. That he had successfully been able to engage in the workshop sessions of Bike Build (and would go on to transform a 'wreck' of bicycle into a fully functioning machine) was in large part due to the inter-relationality he was able to have with me and the youth support officers he had developed bonds with.

Formulating the Discourse

I reflected on bell hooks' (1994) observation that "to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries" (130). There were multiple boundaries crossed (or least negotiated) in the experience of convening the program, with each engagement requiring its own way of speaking. In learning ways of speaking with the students (and them to me), we came to develop a shared dialogue of-the-moment of the workshop sessions, that in turn worked to shape how these sessions would continue to proceed. As the students 'learned' me and me them, we developed ways of

interacting that stood as signatures of the workshop dynamic. These ways of speaking and interacting stood (in some ways) in stark contrast to ways of speaking and interacting that were typical of encounters elsewhere in the school, and it was with this disparity that crucial insights into the socialising effects of schooling surfaced. What ultimately came to differentiate the workshop sessions in this program from other learning encounters experienced in the school was the way that certain formulations of dialogue—its *discourses*—proceeded and how these then formulated the sorts of relationships that could form.

A key expression of this sort of dynamic was relayed by one of the youth support officers co-facilitating the workshop sessions. ‘Scott’ relayed the details of an encounter he had had with one of the students participating in Bike Build directly following one of the weekly sessions.

Scott: [Student A] was funny last week. They used their Thursday session [the scheduled liaison session with Shane as part of the alternative program] to do a big debrief with me about everything that’s gone wrong...

Andrew: A bit of a chat about the week?

Scott: Yeah

Andrew: That’s good that they’re doing this with you.

Scott: They said “its just stupid, stuff I’ll never use”. I said, “what are you actually talking about?”, he said, “this Shakespeare *wanker*. I don’t care about him; I don’t want to know about him. I’m not interested, you know? I’m not interested”. I said, “well, fair enough”. I said, “well you can watch movies about the Shakespeare *wanker!*”.

A first observation from this exchange is noted in terms of the focus of discussion—about experiences that had nothing to do with Bike Build per se, but for which the student had elected

to speak with Scott as a confidante. A second point extends from this and is noted in terms of the student feeling comfortable to speak openly with Scott. The *informality* and *irreverence* of this exchange, expressed by the sincere use of a word that would have led to trouble elsewhere in school—*wanker*—was received by Scott as acceptable in this context. To have admonished the student at this point about the use of *that* word would have derailed the conversation. Instead, Scott acquiesced, and while noting that he does (and did throughout the Bike Build program) set very clear parameters for the use of appropriate and respectful language, he recognised that the point of the conversation was to affirm the affinity of that moment and enable the student to express his concerns. That this student's vernacular contained an otherwise problematic word was not so much of an issue here; the real issue was the frustration with the experience of schooling at the centre of this discussion. Fixating on the minutiae of the *apparent* misdemeanour was not the priority for Scott. Identifying the larger currents of experience and the students' reception with school was the focus of this exchange, and consequently it was with this that positive relationships and mutual understanding grew.

A Critical Pedagogy of Dialogue

Peter McLaren (1999) outlines a significant consideration of the place of dialogue in terms of the rituals that constitute schooling. As McLaren (1999) notes:

Classroom life is lived within a multiplicity and plurality of shifting discourses which are anchored materially and symbolically by ritual performance... In the classroom, rituals do their work of privileging particular renderings of how everyday life should be understood and physically engaged. (128)

The significance of the dialogues encountered during Bike Build rested with the *irreverence* these expressed toward established modes of interaction that were typical of other spaces of the school. This had multiple dimensions. Firstly, I was an outsider—a facilitator brought *in* to

the school. At least initially, I had at my disposal the novelty of being unfamiliar, and although the students did on occasions in those early sessions of the program push the boundaries and attempted to test my mettle as the seemingly naïve ‘new guy’ (invariably through the enactment of language and behaviours that would have generated a swift response within the ‘regular’ classroom contexts the students were familiar with), it remained that they did not quite know what to do with me, how to wind me up, and ultimately, how to proceed ‘ritually’ (in McLaren’s sense) to enact the sorts of rehearsed interactions that typified their dealings with other teachers and figureheads of authority. I was new, and as we were yet to establish sets of practices for engaging with each other, there was an opportunity to reset (and perhaps challenge) the ways that interactions typical within the school might be considered and otherwise expected to proceed.

The workshop space that we used was, also, an unfamiliar space, set away (geographically) from the main sections of the school; a space of distanced sanctity that also provoked (and enabled) different ways of speaking, acting and being. New possibilities opened for the students to ‘try-on’ new ways of being. In terms of what Henri Lefebvre (with Enders 1976; 2007) refers to as the ‘spatial politics’ of the school, the workshop space provided the ability for the students to nuance and in some ways reject ways of acting that constituted the sorts of expected interactions that marked their experiences elsewhere in the school. In extension to Henry Giroux’s (1988) assertion that underlying a critical pedagogy is the effort to “define how pedagogical practice represents a particular politics of experience, that is, a cultural field where knowledge, discourse, and power intersect so as to produce historically specific practices or moral and social regulation” (87), I argue that the disorientation provoked by the workshop space led to opportunities for rethinking the nature of pedagogical engagement, the effects of discourse on the enactment of ritualised practice and the implications of meaningful inter-

relationality that were now possible within this different and deeply informal learning environment.

The spatiality, and in particular the distance the workshop space had to the main sections of the school, combined with formulations of dialogue that were, too, deeply distinct from those practiced elsewhere in the school. We had defined a spatial politics of the workshop space that drew on recognised modes of interaction and ways of speaking as its points of reference. This realisation of the distance the Bike Build sessions had to other spaces and practices in the school extended beyond the ‘curriculum’ the students encountered in the workshops, and the modes of pedagogy we practiced. Although these aspects of the conduct of Bike Build were significant, and indeed unique to Bike Build, there was something more at work. Within those ‘little’ moments of interaction and engagement—in these moments of inter-activity where dialogue was crucial—profound lessons on the nature of schooling and the students’ place within institutions of learning became apparent. What Bike Build did, beyond providing a counter-point for how schooling could be done, was open space for consideration of how schooling came to be experienced by each student. On this point, I recall Joe Kincheloe’s (2008) assertion that:

Students are typically not taught about the complex nature of interpretation and the assumptions embedded in power imprinted on all knowledge. Many political and educational leaders deem such profoundly important dimensions of learning unimportant. Indeed, many power wielders view such insights as downright frightening, as critical teachers begin to uncover the slippery base on which school knowledge rests. (108)

Dialogue was crucial to this, with my questions of the students' experiences of school and their questions around why it was that Bike Build was convened providing the starting point for a broader inquiry. These interactions, as points of inter-activity from which a sense of inter-relatedness emerged, provided the context upon which we engaged in the process of thinking through our respective places in school and beyond. Done well, these moments of dialogue broached a sense of inter-active *simpatico*; these were shared moments of mutual discovery and learning.

This dynamic could be easily fractured however, and one specific encounter experienced during the Term 3 2016 iteration of Bike Build stood out as a stark reminder of this. Bike Build usually involved accompanying staff from the school 'sitting-in' as co-facilitators of the program. This had the purpose of not only ensuring that further assistance was on-hand, as the program was designed to afford virtually one-to-one engagement between facilitators and students, but also as a means of providing 'authorisation' for this program to be run by me, an outsider.

It was during this iteration of the program that one of the school's 'regular' teachers, a relatively recent graduate, undertaking his position in the school as his first major posting, was assigned to the group. From the very outset, the dynamic of the workshop sessions confounded this teacher. He was uncomfortable with the 'looseness', as I called it, of the sessions and the seemingly chaotic approaches taken for ensuring that a student-led ethic to the formation of curricula and day-to-day conduct could be preserved. On several occasions, he questioned me directly about the sessions and the unruliness he saw. He, on occasion, also offered suggestions for how the sessions might be 'made better', which invariably involved the application of varying approaches for ensuring discipline and compliance. He struggled with minor

indiscretions ‘tried-on’ by the students (largely deployed by the students for the very purpose of provoking a response from this particular teacher) and expressed exasperation for why a more ordered and sequenced approach to the sessions was not enacted.

This teacher, while in-principle committed to Bike Build, and cognisant of the fact that the students participating in Bike Build were not equipped to negotiate the structures of the regular classroom, was confounded by the (intentional) informality of the workshop spaces. This approach to convening the session ran contrary to his own tacit beliefs, and seemingly, much of what he had himself been taught through his own preparation as an educator. I noted on several occasions the nature of his interactions with students, and his admonishment of students for (what were considered by me to be) minor indiscretions in behaviour—the use of the occasional, mild ‘swear’ word, moderate distraction and so on. More problematically still, he also ‘stood on ceremony’ (as I put it), requiring the students to refer to himself and me as ‘Sir’ (even though I had made it clear to the students that I was more than happy with any mode of address the students preferred, including the use of first names—I was a visitor in *their* space, after all). In all, this form of engagement and the discourse of authority through which it was delivered, had the effect of simply antagonising students. The students *knew* this discourse, and indeed were where they were in school because of their own fatigue with it.

It was with one particular instance however that the stark contrast between the approaches taken in Bike Build and the approaches he felt were required came into sharp focus. Already uneasy with what had been on this occasion a ‘disrupted’ session (I recalled this day—a cold mid-winter morning—as being ‘a bit ratty’ in my field notes), the teacher drew attention to one of the students, and in the process made something of a scene, subsequently breaking what focus there had been in the session to highlight and seek contrition from the student for a crime

that I hadn't even noticed; this student's socks were not *pulled-up*. The effect of this public charge, of course, resulted in immediate resistance from the student. Annoyed not only with the affront regarding the socks, but also clearly frustrated that the focus on the bike had been broken (this student had been one of the group who had been working actively on his bike), the student retaliated with recalcitrance. Not long after the initial admonishment had been laid, other students in the group also became distracted, lost focus on the activities at hand, and proceeded to skilfully, and without the teacher in questions being *too* notably aware (or at least not enough to allow for any formal charge to 'stick'), set about lambasting his authority with some deeply irreverent (and problematic) commentary, all of which was muttered under the breath; assessments of his capacity to teach, his masculinity and basic competence as a human being were relayed with thinly veiled chortling.

When it was considered that this distraction and problematic behaviour resulted from the admonishment of a student for his *socks*, I was left wondering whether all the hassle was worth it. This particular teacher struggled with the informality of the Bike Build sessions, and was notably uneasy with what he perceived as a lack of structure, and lack of *authority*. In my terms, he had missed the point entirely—there was indeed a profound structure in place, and focussed activity. More importantly, what was occurring within Bike Build was the development of activity that was prompted by the students themselves; activities that the students had authority to lead. To admonish students at that point on, of all things, socks ultimately led to chaos, distraction and (further) breakdown in the inter-relationship between the students and himself. If it had been that the socks *were* a major point of issue, the student might have (for example) been quietly engaged after the workshop session. Instead, the outcome of this exchange resulted in the jettisoning of any real hope for a meaningful

relationship between this teacher and the students. As it happened, this teacher had left the school by the end of the term.

Where Does Critical Pedagogy Happen?

In taking this approach to the use of a ‘loose’ curricula structure, a clear focus on the intent of the program to respond to the students’ (dis)engagement stood as paramount. In this sense, the sessions drew from an approach similar to that specified by Ira Shor (1992) (and in particular Shor’s reflections on how his own practice proceeded within a ‘situated’, student-centred learning context):

On this first day, I wondered what would happen in class. I always bring a plan and know what I want to do, but what would the students do? I had been experimenting for some time with “student-centred teaching”, hoping to engage students in critical learning and to include them in marking the syllabus. But they came to class wary and uninspired, expecting the teacher to tell them what to do and to lecture them on what things mean. (1)

Later in the same passage, Shor (1992) relays:

When students co-develop themes for study and share in the making of syllabus, the class dialogue sometimes moves faster than I can understand it or organize it for academic study. Finding a *generative theme*, that is a theme generated from student conditions which is problematic enough to inspire students to do intellectual work, can produce a wealth of student expression. (5; emphasis added)

Two important points are raised in Shor’s account. Firstly, and by using bicycles as a prompt for a curriculum, set within the broad expectations of responding to issues of behavior and interpersonal interaction, the ‘generative themes’ core to Bike Build emerged. It was with the student-led inquiry that framed the conduct of the workshop sessions that the pedagogy *and*

curriculum of Bike Build gained structure. For instance, as the students undertook the task of repairing their bicycles, discoveries emerged; discoveries relating to technical aspects of the bike's design and manufacture, technical proficiencies required for repairing aspects of the bike, and the way the space of the workshops mediated this process. These discoveries set in train new lines of activity, with these in turn generating their own inquiries and points of investigation. It was with the task of simply commencing that the generative themes of Bike Build took shape and directed where the sessions would lead.

Secondly, it was through these discoveries—through the realisation of these cumulative generative themes—that provocations for engagement and interaction developed. As the students discovered things about their bicycles, they also began to discuss what they had found, explain concepts and theories, and generally, *talk*. I find it somewhat ironic that in most classroom settings, talk is generally regarded in pathologised ways; as a distraction, a demonstration of being 'off' task. But here, talk was crucial. It did occur that some talk was off task, and I am far from suggesting that the engagement with the bicycles remained entirely focused throughout the workshop sessions. At times the students were distracted, disinterested and bored. But in general, activity proceeded, and talk was central to the inter-relationality typical of these sessions.

This did of course necessitate the deployment of, what is cast here as, a *responsive pedagogy*. As the experiences that Shor (1992) identified assert, once the students learned the dynamics of the workshop sessions and became 'involved', the self-directed nature of the repair of the bicycles combined with a responsiveness required of me to find new lines of inquiry, opportunities to 'problem pose' and points for further discussion. As the setting of tasks and direction of the sessions came to be mediated by the students, points of inquiry that derived

from discoveries made by the students emerged as further ‘generative themes’ that provoked new directions of discovery, which in turn formulated nuance in the curriculum needed for the sessions to proceed. As a facilitator of the workshop sessions, I attempted to fulfil the role of *provocateur*, posing questions for further inquiry and from which learning in the workshop sessions took cues. This was, in a Freirean sense, a dialogic ‘problem-posing’ approach to learning in which I did not necessarily assume a role in *leading* the inquiry, but took on the position of co-formulating activities defined by the students and linking these to further tasks.

Interestingly, this ‘looseness’ of interaction led to the development of deeply respectful interactions within which students engaged each other and facilitators and teachers as equal co-participants of the space. One notable expression of this occurred during the first iteration of Bike Build (term 4, 2015) in which students made a point of greeting me each week, shaking hands, and in the case of several of the students, deploying a ‘special handshake’. Although this form of ritual has become widespread (and something of a populist cliché) in education in recent years, the significance of this gesture was nonetheless expressed in terms of the respect this showed and the place that I held in the students’ view. The handshake itself was not so important as the significance this gesture held in showing that the students recognised me as an equal co-participant in the sessions.

Bike Build demonstrated that informality has a place in schooling as a function for the nurturance of meaningful interpersonal relationships. In the informal spaces of Bike Build, dialogue occurred, and a sense of the understandings of Self (and one’s positioning within the school) developed. The students talked about their lives and aspirations. They expressed a sense of the frustrations they had with school. They also demonstrated the tacit knowledges they brought with them on how to repair bicycles and engage as collaborators. But it was during

moments of informality and the ‘irreverence’ for formal modes of conduct and interaction that the significance of Bike Build was demonstrated. The unfamiliar surroundings of the Bike Build workshop eschewed the usual ways of ‘being’ practiced in other (more ‘formalised’) parts of the school, with this opening the possibility for renewed relationships and engagement with the enterprise of schooling. Bike Build in this case stood as a major ‘junction point’ in recalibrating the student learning journey, and in the case of some of the students who went on to secure school-based traineeships and apprenticeships, demonstrated how the pathway mediated via informal learning can have lasting (positive) effects.

To close this chapter, a final word is provided by one of the student participants who relayed the experience of the workshop sessions as follows:

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, thank you. It's been good?

Student: Yep. This is a good way to do school.

Facilitator: Yeah. So you learnt something though.
You've...

Student: Teamwork. Teamwork... and participating, it
was good working with each other.

This was relayed by a student who came to the Bike Build program as his only contact time in the school week. Such was the nature of his behaviour and relationships with other students, this student was on his ‘last chance’, with Bike Build positioned as his remaining opportunity to demonstrate a capacity to engage in his schooling. Relationships and the formation of effective strategies for working collaboratively, developing ‘affinity’ (Gee 2005) and finding a space within a larger collective to demonstrate expertise and find ‘voice’ was central to the Bike Build workshops. It was also central to the positive self-development of confidence, self-

esteem and capability experienced by the students; educands who had rarely had this experience elsewhere in their schooling.

To close, and to respond to the question that frames this chapter—*where does critical pedagogy happen?*—I argue that it is within those moments of inter-action that the most profound influence of a critical pedagogy finds activation. In moments of inter-action, critical pedagogy *happens* when meaningful inter-relationships are enabled to form through dialogue and shared encounter.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: The Bike Build workshop space.

Figure 2: Teasing-out where next to proceed.

Figure 3: A scene from a typical discussion.