

Where Critical Race Theory Comes From

By DANIEL BUCK | January 8, 2022 6:30 AM



(diane39/Getty Images)

Critical pedagogy is the anti-Enlightenment wellspring from which CRT and other suspect activist ideologies flow.

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THERE is a fundamental change occurring in American education. You have likely heard from some that it is critical race theory, a fringe understanding of race in America, and from others that this is just a bogeyman.

Neither assertion is correct. Rather, critical pedagogy — a politicized theory of education of which CRT is but one branch — has become the prevailing theory in American colleges of education, influencing curriculum, instruction, and policies across the country.

In place of academic skills and a worldview grounded in Enlightenment thinking, critical pedagogy teaches students political activism and a worldview of oppression. We shouldn't be surprised, then, that the results of such a pedagogy leave students angry but with a paucity of literary, mathematical, and historical knowledge — the very things they need to live a fulfilled, thoughtful, successful life.

While showing every shortcoming of critical pedagogy is beyond the bounds of one essay, conservatives need to understand that this problem extends far beyond a few racialized, politicized lessons in coastal schools. One English curriculum, the *Units of Study*, which thousands of schools use, bases its work on critical theories, including CRT, but also postcolonial, feminist, and other radical ideologies. The curriculum cites Kimeberlé Crenshaw, a founding scholar of CRT, as well as other progressive activists such as Angela Davis, a Marxist scholar, and Judith Butler, a gender theorist.

Effective propaganda can be as subtle as it is insidious. When it's obvious, loud, and galling, it's easy to identify and reject. When it's no more noticeable than a few mold spores, it can go on spreading until it has rotted entire institutions. We must absolutely confront the media-grabbing practices such as privilege walks, but picking such battles is akin to wiping away a few mold spots from rotting floorboards.

Traditional conceptions of education trace back to the Greeks and the Romantics, and comparing these ideas to critical pedagogy can isolate exactly what this philosophy is and, perhaps more importantly, isn't. In his *Republic*, Plato portrays education as the process of extracting individuals from a cave of shadows into the light of reality. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the goal of education is the forming of virtuous habits. In both cases, education directs us beyond ourselves — discovering the world as it is and aligning our characters to an objective law from without.

These beliefs dominated European thought up until and through the Enlightenment; medieval universities built themselves upon the liberal arts,

and Loyola attempted to systematize education for the youth in his *Ratio Studiorum*. Then, romantics such as Rousseau suggested that children follow their natural inclinations, that any ascription to outside influence is only corrupting, and John Dewey popularized this vision in the 20th century. Dewey went so far as to say that no content had inherent value in learning. Rather, what interests the child ought to lead the way. Education came to focus on the self.

Both Greek and Romantic theories manifest today in classical and project-based learning, respectively. We can debate their relative efficacy, but in both cases, the focus remains primarily on academics and moral formation. If traditional education asks us to step into our backyard to explore the world, and romantic education asks us to explore what's inside, critical pedagogy would have us burn down the house and trench the garden.

Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is often considered the seminal work of critical pedagogy. It has sold millions of copies since its publication — a rare feat for a niche book on education. Academic journals dedicate **entire issues** to it, and university libraries host **special events** for it. It is canon in schools of ed.

Ironically, while a tract on “education,” the book provides little practical insight on instruction. Where he does give explicit directions, Freire encourages educators to travel from town to town, observe local needs, and encourage workers into action. He cites the mass murderer Che Guevara as an example of a loving teacher and the Maoist Cultural Revolution — with a death toll in the millions — as his thought process when systematized.

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What's more, Freire mapped the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy of Marx onto the student-teacher relationship. That the "teacher teaches and the student is taught" is characteristic of the "ideology of oppression," he argues, and so no real education can happen. Instead, Freire reframes education as revolution with teacher and pupil as co-equal actors.

From this foundation, multiple subsidiary branches grow. While its proponents will defend CRT as only teaching accurate racial history or using race as a lens to better understand society, the issue is that CRT is not *just* this. Rather, CRT uses race and American history as a lens through which to condemn Western values such as objectivity and constitutional law. And each branch of critical pedagogy proceeds accordingly: using race, gender, class, or any other identity signifiers as a means to interrogate and condemn our country's commitment to classically liberal values.

As it plays out in the classroom, the *Units of Study*, one of the most popular English Language Arts curricula in the country, is a prime example for analysis. Its introductory pages state explicitly that it is "built on critical theories."

I've used the *Units of Study* in my career. Where you or I might remember from our schooling a teacher guiding a whole class through one classic text, in the *Units of Study*, students select their own books — invariably always works of young-adult fiction — and then analyze these books through various lenses, including critical race, feminist, postcolonial, and other identity signifiers. When I used these materials, it amounted to little more than independent reading time where students sat cloistered off, a few wiling away the hours on pop fiction, and the rest pretended to read.

Where traditionalist approaches to literary theory placed primacy on the meaning within the text and authorial intent, critical theories of textual analysis impose meaning onto the text, always leading a reader to the same conclusion through a chosen "lens." Texts become important not necessarily for the meaning they bear within themselves or the larger truths to which

they direct the reader, but as a means to interrogate society. In short, it builds a progressive confirmation bias into the very act of reading itself. Rather than learning from the ideas within a book, the *Units of Study* would have students come to the same conclusion about identity with every text in hand.

The instructional practices in *Units of Study* are directly influenced by the progression sketched out above: student-centered learning, a focus on immutable characteristics of the self, and reading through lenses which seek not to analyze but to impose meaning.

Critical theory affects more than just the esoteric approach to literary analysis. In Seattle, the **math curriculum** centers on themes such as identity, oppression, history of resistance and liberation, and action. Its guiding questions ask: “How important is it to be right? What is right?” and: “How can we use math to measure the impact of our activism?” Social-studies classrooms forgo learning the outlines of history, the actions and foibles of great leaders, and the basics of political philosophy to instead run action-civics projects. These take the project-based learning of the romantics and apply a radical bent. Instead of designing model bridges or performing their own plays, action civics would have students research local problems, design solutions, and propose them to their local legislatures. There’s nothing inherently nefarious about this latter project within a narrow curricular framework for high-school students, but when such activism becomes the sole focus of a classroom, the school becomes not a place of learning, traditionally understood, but an avenue for activism — much to Freire’s delight.

In critical pedagogy, every book, every historical event, every mathematical concept — everything becomes a means to advance the same progressive worldview. Thus, our problem is far larger than CRT, narrowly understood. Critical pedagogy both reenvision and demands an overt redefinition of education. And while propaganda passing as education is concerning, there’s a far more fundamental problem: This approach doesn’t lead to students who can read, write, or think well. It works against the intellectual liberation that

defenders of a liberal-arts tradition advocate for through the acquisition of true knowledge and competence.

Reviewing the *Units of Study*, professor of reading Timothy Shanahan has said that there's not a single study that supports the use of the methods within it, and its use is unlikely to lead to the literacy success of American children. If students spend their math classes learning about identity, they'll be unable to build the physical bridges and structures of society. If students don't learn American history and our structure of government, they won't even be able to comprehend a basic op-ed with any substantive understanding and analysis.

When the *Units of Study* focuses on identity rather than literacy, when a math curriculum in Seattle has students discuss power and activism instead of geometry or algebraic equations, when Freire suggests we remove the loving authority and explicit instruction from our classrooms, students are left without the foundational knowledge and skills they need to enact real change in this world. Placards are easy; building society takes profound knowledge, wisdom, insight, and skill. The tragic irony is that if critical pedagogy has its way, when its adherents have razed everything to the ground, their students will lack the very education and vision needed to build something in its stead. It's a wholly cynical philosophy.

A useful exercise in education is considering what it means to be educated. What sorts of people do we hope our students will become by the end of their schooling? One media-grabbing example exemplifies the real-life product and thereby the flaws in critical pedagogy. In February of 2019, a group of students accosted progressive Democratic senator Dianne Feinstein in a hallway, demanding, among other things, climate justice and her unqualified support of the Green New Deal. When the students offered little more than slogans and empty rhetoric, Feinstein **rebuffed** them and presented the various electoral, political, and monetary complications of which they were ignorant. The students confronting Feinstein expressed political zeal but

lacked any substantive knowledge with which to furnish that passion — a dangerous combination.

Facing this now-pervasive philosophy, our recourse is not quite clear, but it demands more than a few sanctions from governors' mansions. Some of our country's most popular charter networks, such as Success Academy, although not explicitly classical, have built hundreds of neo-traditionalist schools that give primacy to skills, knowledge, and order. Considering the ubiquity of critical pedagogy in the universities, these institutions may be our best means of confronting the ideology. Otherwise, aiming our public pressure at the universities, the wellspring of this philosophy, would put a stop to the flood. If we direct our ire only at public schools, we'll spend time scooping out floodwater while the faucet keeps on running, reproducing the same curriculum, ideas, and teachers.

Today's progressive theorists only train students how to deconstruct the beautiful and true, not how to appreciate it. In place of a teacher guiding students through the best which has been thought and said — arming them with the knowledge they need to affect change in this world — they would have students discussing whatever progressive controversy or idea is in vogue. I'll give our students Shakespeare and mathematical equations over placards and bullhorns any day.

