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Critical Food Pedagogy and Sustainable Development



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Definition

The definition of *food pedagogy* is the knowledge and skill interactions of learning within the fusion of food-related content and experiential process as one co-occurrence.

Introduction

Food pedagogy is the fusion of food-related content and experiential process as one co-occurrence. Coupled with the critique of, and solutions to food-related issues, society forms *power relations* that serve as the foundational underpinnings of critical theory. The combining of food pedagogy and critical theory equates to *critical food pedagogy*. Situated within experiential learning theory (Dewey 1938), sustainability education (Capra 2002; Capra and Luisi 2014; Wals et al. 2017; Edwards 2005, 2010; Jickling and Sterling 2017; Lange 2002, 2010, 2018; Sterling 2001; Stibbe 2009;

Orr 1992, 2004, 2016), and adult learning theory and higher education (Campbell 2006; Dirkx 1997, 1998a, b, 2008; Dirkx et al. 2006; Lange and O’Neil 2016; Hooks 2010, 2014; Mezirow 1981, 1990, 1991, 1997; O’Neil 2015, 2017a, b; Sumner 2008, 2012, 2013a, b, c, 2015; Taylor 2006, 2008), *critical food pedagogy* problematizes social, environmental, and economic power struggles as they relate to dynamics of food systems and socio-ecological food justice.

According to Wals et al. (2017), “educators need strategies for anticipatory engagement with changing socio-ecological realities – both in present and future – in order to be effective within their various embodied contexts” (p. 19). Through the context of critical theory, food pedagogy provides a space for researchers and practitioners to investigate social, environmental, and economic power struggles as they relate to dynamics of food systems and socio-ecological food justice, including, but not limited to, food security; food sovereignty; globalization; oppression; food literacy; health – including hunger and obesity – loss of knowledge and deskilling; environmental sustainability; restoration; and even transformation (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008, 2016; Flowers and Swan 2012, 2016; Freeman 2013; Guthman 2007, 2008a, b, c, 2009; Harris and Giuffre 2010; Hernandez and Sutton 2003; Julier 2004, 2008, 2013; Mezirow 1991; Sumner 2008; Swan and Flowers 2015; Wever 2015). These areas of research interlace with many of the 17 United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Education for Sustainable Development Goals (2017), specifically those which address hunger, health, equality, opportunity, responsibility, and sustainability in regard to ecology, natural systems, climate change, and food systems.

Food pedagogies typically take place through adult learning experiences. Mezirow (1991) asserts that such experiences provide an opportunity for critical reflection of assumptions which can trigger transformation. Such transformation is also cited by Sterling (2001) in his breakdown of deep learning and change, where he surmises, "third-ordered learning happens when we see things differently" (p. 15). Food pedagogies are well positioned for adult learning because of the importance of food to humanity. As adult learning educator, Sumner (2013a) affirms, "food is central to human existence and learning – people eat everyday" (p. 194). By considering the causes of, and solutions to, societal injustices through the teaching of food, critical food pedagogy has recently provided opportunities for researchers to dive deeper into these constructs. Works by sociologist, Julier (2004, 2008, 2013; see also Julier and Gillespie 2012; Julier and Lindenfeld 2005), explore inequalities, morality, cultural and social implications, and food systems, while Flowers and Swan (2012, 2016; see also Swan and Flowers 2015) apply multiple pedagogical views to analyze food pedagogy and lead the field in critically analyzing the social, political, and cultural complexities of food teaching in "learners" lives. In higher education, environmental scientist and sustainability educator, O'Neil (2015, 2017a, b), builds on the work of Belliveau (2007; see also Trubek and Belliveau 2009) to explore cooking, kitchen pedagogy, and transformation, which is strongly rooted in Deweyan Pragmatism. While these authors do not explicitly draw from critical food pedagogy to inform their theories and pedagogies, they employ the lens of critical food pedagogy into the subject matter of sustainability and food. When these concepts are developed through a critical lens and deployed in an experiential cooking pedagogy, O'Neil's research indicates transformative change can be achieved (O'Neil 2015, 2017a, b).

Sumner (2008), inspired by Wendell Berry's 1990 claim that eating is an agricultural act, reinterprets his concept as "eating is a pedagogical act" (p. 352) and critically investigates the field of food pedagogy through political economies and cooking, while others, such as Gruenewald (2003), hone in on place-based learning, and newcomers like Wever (2015) research school garden programs, each with a critical view. Further, many garden-based pedagogy theorists have probed different paths of inquiry to build an assemblage of research in the field (Blair 2009; Hayes-Conroy 2009; 2014; Koh 2012; Walter 2013; Williams and Brown 2013; Williams and Dixon 2013; Yamashita 2008). One such researcher, LaCharite (2016), looks specifically at the recent uptick in higher education institutions' use of agriculture programs to inform pedagogy and engage in issues of sustainability, food and agriculture, critical thinking, and community involvement. In a testament to how wide-ranging critical food pedagogies are, there are also numerous researchers who inform the field by looking closely into restorative effects of reflection, rehabilitation, (be)coming, and transformation, as they pertain to adult and higher education (Belliveau 2007; Curtin and Heldke 1992; Dirkx 1998a, b, 2008; Freire 1970; Gruenewald 2003; Hooks 2010, 2014; Jickling and Sterling 2017; Lange 1998, 2002, 2010, 2018; Lange and O'Neil 2016; Mezirow 1981, 1990; O'Neil 2017a, b, c; Sipos et al. 2008; Sterling 2001; Sumner 2013c).

Critical Food Pedagogy in Practice in Higher Education

Food pedagogy, absent of the critical lens, classically focuses on the theory and practice of teaching through an experiential food-related process, such as growing food, shopping at a market, cooking or eating a meal, and even composting/diverting food waste. The quality of the experience is paramount, as it must promote desirable future experiences and continued growth and be applicable universally and with continuity (Dewey 1938). Food pedagogy subjects can include food studies, food systems, anthropology

(communities and society), and skills building; however, these formats are not necessarily compartmentalized to these topics. Dewey asserted the kitchen laboratory was an ideal learning environment to teach and learn about a broad range of subjects (Belliveau 2007). The concept of theoretical learning, combined with experiential learning, was first popularized by Dewey (1938), who added that they were both essential but warned, “the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (p. 25). This framework has informed many adult and formal education researchers and is the forbearer to the field of experiential education. For example, Belliveau (2007) uses the study and preparation of food to test Dewey’s assertions, and researcher O’Neil (2017a, b) draws from Belliveau’s cooking pedagogy research, as well as Sterling’s (2001; see also Jickling and Sterling 2017) sustainable education works, to connect what she terms *kitchen-based learning* (KBL) with transformative learning systems in an educational sustainability framework. In another example, recent author, Neumann (2018), applies nutrition, cooking, and culture to sustainability through cooking classes aimed at promoting sustainable development goals. O’Neil (2017b) also dives deep into neuroscience to examine the pathways that link visceral sensing with learning – *head and hand*. In her work, the dualist paradigm that learning is separate from action is challenged as she makes a case for the impression sensory entanglements formed in consciousness (O’Neil 2017b).

A more critical analysis of the connection between hands and head is made by a number of researchers who examine dynamics of home cooking heritage, including habits, practices, and agency, to explore the connections between consciousness, memory, knowledge, skills, motivation, and their loss in a modern, consumerist, globalized age of technology, processed foods, and objectification of the concept of “tradition” (Coveney et al. 2012; Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010; Heldke 1988; Sutton and Hernandez 2007; Hernandez and Sutton 2003; Trubek et al. 2017; Welsh and MacRae 1998). The analysis of, critique of, and solutions to these forces and others

upon society – a form of *power relations* – are the foundational underpinnings of critical theory. Critical theory pioneer and philosopher, Horkheimer (1982), summarizes critical theory as being meant “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (p. 244). Capra (2002) echoed this sentiment when he tapped seminal critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, in declaring that critical theory is aimed at *emancipation*. In adult and higher education, this emancipation is theorized to occur through reflection, perspective transformation, and becoming critically aware of one’s situation (Freire 1970; Mezirow 1981, 1990).

Critical Food Pedagogy as a Method of Research

Similar to O’Neil’s (2017a, b) kitchen-based learning model, another method to engage in critical food pedagogies is by using a food-related process, such as cooking, reading about food, working on a farm, or studying the relationships between food and the human experience, as a method of research. Brady (2011), Anantharam (2017), Heldke (1988), Chiles and Coupland (2017), and Cole (2017) are all recent examples of theorists who use food pedagogy to foster deeper learning in their curricula. Brady (2011) seeks to embody self relationally through “foodmaking,” while Anantharam (2017) uses food literature to teach transnational feminist theories and practices, and Heldke (1988), also fostering feminist theory, looks to food and cooking as inquiry to circumnavigate absolutism and relativism, “to construct alternative attitudes in which to engage epistemological tradition” (p. 1). Chiles and Coupland (2017) use critical perspectives to teach the “epistemological, ethical, and empirical assumptions that characterize contemporary food controversies” (p. 49), and Cole (2017) cultivates transformative change in his students by giving them experiential educative experiences on the farm. Miller and Deutsch (2009) interpret food studies, where they explain, “relationships [between food and the human experience] are examined from a variety of perspectives and

from a range of places in the food system, from production to consumption, or from farm to fork” (p. 3). Because food studies encompass such a broad field of study, it can include critical perspectives.

Surveying the Field of Food Through the Lens of Critical Theory

Exploring food pedagogy through a critical lens has helped researchers like Flowers and Swan (2012, 2016; see also Swan and Flowers 2015) analyze the “significant and asymmetrical relations of power, authority and expertise” (Flowers and Swan 2016, p. 1), as they relate to teaching and learning about food in today’s globalized environment. The researchers credit feminism along with critical race theory for contributing to the field (Swan and Flowers 2015), as they review intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the context of global experiences, inputs on people, and the injustices they face (Flowers and Swan 2016; Swan and Flowers 2015). In surveying the field through this broad perspective, the researchers position food pedagogy as encompassing more than just formal education but all modes of informal food pedagogies as well. This permits them to analyze:

the specificities of ‘technologies’ of teaching about food: from cooking programs, food labelling, grower’s markets, and nutrition guides; the pedagogues who claim to ‘educate’ us about food, which now includes a growing litany of cultural intermediaries/occupational groups such as farmers, chefs, food writers, food bloggers, health practitioners and advertisers; government and corporate organisations [sic] such as local councils, health agencies, food advocacy groups, and supermarkets; media such as women’s magazines, internet sites, online short films, recipe repositories, activist newsletters and food labels; and policy instruments such as national food plans, labelling guidelines, and nutrition edicts. (Flowers and Swan 2012, p. 420)

Flowers and Swan are not alone in their critical analysis of who teaches who about food and how they do it. Critical food studies theorist, Guthman (2007, 2008a, b), examines dynamics of alternative food practices, how they are ultimately a dichotomy, their effects on social justice, and the causatum neoliberalism has on the *politics of the possible*. While Guthman scrutinizes color blindness in food politics and the naïveté of an idiomatic expression like “inviting others to the table”, she firsts asks, “who sets the table?” (2008b, p. 388). In a similar vein, scholar, Coveney (2006), questions who controls food knowledge – while he investigates the pleasure and anxiety of eating and the discourse around nutrition, ethics, guilt, and satisfaction of food. Further, he postulates that modern knowledge of science has replaced religion in guiding judgments about ourselves and others as eaters, like how foods are often used to quantify good and bad behaviors (Coveney 2006). Guthman (2007) pushes back on such criticisms, noting their reductionist prerogatives. She states, “still, the simplistic explanations of obesity, for example – too much food, too cheap – does a disservice to understanding and confronting a society where we are both encouraged to consume and scolded for showing the signs of it” (p. 262). To fellow researchers, A. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008), the morality of such judgments is only part of the influence on peoples’ food ideologies. They forerun an area of study where externalities intersect with bodily experience of food. In their analysis of cognitively aware visceral sensing, they employ critical feminist geography to better understand how eating informs “identity, difference, and power” (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008, p. 388). Philosophers Curtin and Heldke (1992) suggest, “a consideration of our culture’s popular attitudes toward the body and food indicates that the radical separation of mind and body, and an understanding of ourselves as nonrelational and disembodied, leads to illness” (p. 7).

These researchers have critically questioned the social stigma that bad food choices are due to a lack of education, which Flowers and Swan (2016) state, ignore the “social, political and

cultural complexities of food in people's lives" (p. 1). To address this gap, Julier (2004, 2008, 2013; see also Julier and Gillespie 2012; Julier and Lindenfeld 2005), who also studies food, culture, morality, inequality, and power struggles, takes a critical view to analyze the cultural norms centered around domestic hospitality. Other researchers, such as Leahy and Pike (2015), examine social scolding, such as "policing" of the school lunch box, how informal food pedagogies are formed and implemented in school health education spaces, and their effects on students.

Political Economy and Sustainability Critical Food Pedagogy

In formal adult education, Sumner (2008, 2012, 2013a, b, c, 2015) touches on similar themes as well, where she researches food pedagogy and employs it critically in her graduate classes at OISE/University of Toronto. She and her students focus on globalization forces, sustainable development, food literacy, and the concept of eating as a social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental act (Sumner 2008, 2013a, c, 2015). Through this lens, she utilizes a political economy framework, specifically, commodity fetishism, to look closer at how food production is hidden behind a "veil," the foods we eat are "disembedded," and the social, economic, and environmental information of foods' origins are suppressed (Sumner 2008, 2013a, b). In the true spirit of critical theory, Sumner also proposes solutions to these woes, suggesting that food is also informative to learning and that "it is an entrée into larger questions about how we live, how we relate to each other and how we relate to earth" (Sumner 2008, p. 356).

The novelty of employing political economies to foster connections between food and learning, combined with a sustainable development perspective, affords Sumner and her students a unique path to achieving knowledge and a sustainable worldview (Sumner 2008, 2013a, b, c, 2015). She summarizes, "to live both knowledgeably and sustainably in the future, we need a shift

in worldviews, from a state of ignorance and unsustainability to one of increased knowledge and sustainability" (Sumner 2008, p. 354). Increasing knowledge about food – *food literacy* – pairs well with adult education, which, according to Sumner (2013c), is a "critical combination" as it "is deeply concerned with social movements and social change" and "can infuse its expertise in literacy with the aspect of food. . . because in the end, we all eat" (p. 80). With adult education, food literacy, and a critical view as the catalyst, Sumner then dives into the political-economic context of today's globalized food system to suffuse her research. In this space, she joins researchers like McMichael (2000), who also critically analyzes industrialism, consumerism, the neoliberal globalized food system, and its effects on society.

Enacting a Restorative and Transformative Food Learning Experience

Reacting to the idea of food as a weapon, Wendell Berry (1977) cites food's ancient and powerful associations. He challenges his readers to "consider the associations that have since ancient times clustered around the idea of food – associations of mutual care, generosity, neighborliness, festivity, communal joy, [and] religious ceremony. . ." (p. 11). In critical food pedagogies, food is seen more critically, as Sumner (2013a) describes, "food is a cause for celebration, an inducement to temptation, a weapon for wielding power, an indicator of well-being, a catalyst for change, and a vehicle for learning" (p. 41). Further, critical food pedagogies and the act of eating also lend itself to the position of adult learning as restorative and transformative learning processes (Lange 2010). As Sumner (2008) later states, "eating can become a transformative learning experience, opening the possibility of more inclusive, and more sustainable, ways of life" (p. 352). This concept is not just contemporary; however, even in classic literature, food is often described in a restorative or transformative way:

As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans. (Hemingway 2014, ch. 1)

However, most research into transformative learning has taken place outside of the arena of food. Dirkx (1998b) once described the topic as attracting, “researchers and practitioners from a wide variety of theoretical persuasions and practice settings, yet it is a complicated idea that offers considerable theoretical, practical, and ethical challenges” (p. 1). Dirkx focuses in the adult education arena, where he has identified major strands in the transformation field. In one such strand, which he coins “transformation as critical reflection,” he cites Mezirow’s work as “perhaps the most well-known of theories of transformative learning in the field of adult education” (Dirkx 1998b, p. 3). Mezirow (1997) believes that transformational learning carries a certain set of conditions which can serve as, “standards for judging both the quality of adult education and the socio-political conditions that facilitate or impede learning” (p. 11). He further postulates, “the process involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it” (Mezirow 1997, p. 11).

Many of Mezirow’s beliefs are influenced by the foundation laid out by Paulo Freire, who Dirkx (1998b) credits for inspiring what he dubs, the “transformation as conscious-raising” strand of transformational theory. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) writes of the emancipatory effects of transformational learning among the poor in Brazil. For Freire, this paradigm shift only occurs when one faces adversity through the process of emancipation (Freire 1970). Researcher, Kane (2001), attributes Freire’s acumen to having a deep understanding of epistemology, which Freire employs through emancipatory praxis. While explaining Freire’s position on what separates humans from animals,

Kane (2001) also notes that it is humans’ “ability to step back from and reflect on their experience: when people are able to do this, it becomes, for Freire, “critical consciousness” though this is never fully achieved but is, rather, an ongoing process of “becoming” (p. 209).

Most views of transformative learning rely on constructivist approaches to acquiring knowledge and learning, such as in Belliveau’s (2007) work, where Deweyan Pragmatism is embodied through cooking experiences, or Lange’s (2010) work, which focuses on transformative learning in environmental adult education. Lange also teams up with O’Neil to build upon Mezirowean and Freirean concepts while also challenging them toward a transformative relational ontology (2016). Lange and O’Neil (2016) cite Lange (2004, 2012a, b), stating, “their conceptions have been predicated on a conventional modernist ontology that includes rationalism, cognitivism, progressivism, and a view of the self as autonomous and unitary” (p. 3). From there, the transdisciplinary duo criticizes and provides alternative viewpoints to the current modernist forms of transformative learning, which they deem “have an underlying androcentrism, ethnocentrism (specifically Eurowesternism) and anthropocentrism as well as maintaining a mind/body split and reason/emotion split which is already identified in transformative learning theory” (p. 3). In O’Neil’s (2017a, b) own body of work, she conducts research on cooking, eating, and sensing and evidences relational transformative learning through a kitchen-based learning framework. This relational transformative learning viewpoint allows her to engage food as an embodied process of learning, “towards (be)coming and (re)membering social and ecological sustainability” (O’Neil 2017a, p. 317).

Limitations of Critical Food Pedagogy

As Berry (1977) and Sumner (2013a) have observed food being used as a weapon, so too can critical food pedagogies, as a topic, be used to weaponize food. Instead of focusing on healing and restorative dynamics of food in people’s lives,

many critical food pedagogy researchers choose to focus on the divisiveness and power relations of food. Reduced and trivialized as a simple resource to fight over can diminish possibilities of food as a positive force, as well as silo people into slave/master roles when they really just want to eat.

Critical theory cornerstone positions, such as Brown's (1984) quoting of Tutu's famous adage, "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (p. 19), and its habit to treat animals and food as simple objects confirm the reductionist' and dualist tendencies' critical theory tends to subordinate people, food, and animals, in order to employ intersectionality research. Drawing a parallel with Freire (1970), by consuming food, one is either a victimizer or a victim. This politicization of people and their relationships with food has also prompted an emergence of food activists advocating for how and what to eat. As Guthman (2007) observes, "it seems like everyone is getting in on the eating-as-politics act, despite whatever qualifications they have to make their various claims" (p. 261). Swan and Flowers (2015) investigate these "pedagogues" as well while broadening their scope to include "policy makers, churches, activists, health educators, schools, tourist agencies, chefs—who think we don't know enough about food and what to do with it" (p. 148).

Paradoxically, limitations of critical food pedagogies can be evaluated through the lens of critical theory.

Final Remarks

This review of *critical food pedagogies* aimed to provide a snapshot of the concept behind the term while rationalizing its use today. Mostly situated in adult and higher education framework, the spaces where critical food pedagogies exist were charted, and the critical ills, including its own limitations, were explored. The term was also broken down into its component parts, providing a review of the origins of experiential learning and pragmatism, as well as an examination of the connection of food pedagogies to a critical theory

framework. In surveying the field, both formal and informal views of adult and higher education were presented, while a glimpse of some of the more prolific theorists, researchers, and practitioners of the term was viewed. Sustainability through critical food pedagogy was explored, and the importance of analyzing the social, political, and cultural complexities in both teaching and learning about food was proposed, and as critical theory necessitates, the research into solutions, such as restorative, transformative experiences of a relational, ontological "(be)coming sustainability" through food was provided.

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