Critical Media Pedagogy in the Public Interest

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This article examines pedagogical issues that arise from teaching in a critical media studies program that incorporates significant experiential learning into its curriculum. In this self-reflective article, the authors explore the challenges of marrying theory and practice in an undergraduate program aimed at empowering students to help create a more socially just world. Drawing on examples of hands-on assignments, service-learning requirements, local practicum placements, and international internships within the philosophical context of a critical media studies tradition, the discussion questions how faculty can successfully teach critique rather than indoctrination, what types of impact faculty and students can have on the community, and whether faculty have a role to play in preparing students for employment post-graduation. The article concludes with a critical look at some of the difficulties inherent in this kind of pedagogical approach in an increasingly corporatized university setting, from what counts as 'service' for promotion and tenure, to the time and energy required to fulfill our obligations as 'public intellectuals.'

Academics can no longer retreat into their careers, classrooms, or symposiums as if they were the only spheres available for engaging the power of ideas and the relations of power

Henry Giroux 1991, 57

This article was born out of numerous discussions with colleagues about the challenges inherent in mounting a critical media studies program designed to integrate theory and practice in rigorous and meaningful ways. As core faculty members in the Media and the Public Interest (MPI) program at The University of Western Ontario[1], we have helped to develop an undergraduate curriculum that focuses on the intersections between political economy of communication, cultural studies, social movements, and global justice. In this article we reflect on what we teach, how we teach, and how we work to connect this curriculum to local and international communities through experiential learning opportunities and hands-on assignments. We also consider the relationship between academic critique and on-the-ground activism, a tension that is manifest in

both the MPI curriculum and our role as educators. In so doing, we have taken up Henry Giroux's (2007) call to scholars to talk more openly about how we can "engage in movements for social change, while recognizing that simply invoking the relationship between theory and practice or critique and social action is not enough" (30).

The article opens with a brief overview of the MPI program, followed by a discussion of its experiential learning components, particularly as they relate to alternative media. Drawing on a range of critical pedagogy literature, we then reflect upon some of the practical complexities arising from the implementation of this type of curriculum, focusing specifically on the role(s) of faculty members as public intellectuals and the scholar-activist dialectic.

A History of MPI

The MPI program was conceived out of the counter-hegemonic headiness surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle, combined with a cautious hope that new forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs) could be used to help advance democratic communication. Core MPI faculty were – and still are – frustrated by the increasing concentration of media power in fewer and fewer hands, the perceived withering of the public sphere, and the unabated spread of hyper-capitalism. Officially launched in 2004, the program was designed to be "rooted both in a long tradition of theoretical writings on the interrelations of power, communications and technology and also in the expanding range of media activities and analysis by contemporary social movements" (FIMS 2007). Yet, while MPI draws from conventional communication / media studies programs, it also transcends the pedagogical imperatives and directives of that same tradition by challenging the divide between the "ivory tower" and the "real world."

The MPI program begins in second year, after students have taken a slate of general first-year courses in the broader Media, Information, and Technoculture (MIT) program that provides a foundation in critical media studies. With enrollment capped at twenty students per year, each annual cohort becomes a tightly-knit group that engages in both intellectual and community-based collaboration. In years two through four of their undergraduate careers, MPI students are required to take six core MIT courses, three core MPI courses, as well as a selection of MPI-approved electives. Through this curriculum, the MPI program seeks to foster engagement with struggles over media control, technology, democracy, and representation by encouraging students to be self-reflective, to integrate theory with praxis, and to balance cynicism with hope that a more equitable, just world *is* possible. To this end, the curriculum for core MPI courses includes hands-on projects designed to "link civic action to academic learning and ethical responsibility" (Giroux 1996, 182). In their fourth year students also participate in a media-oriented practicum placement at a local non-governmental organization (NGO), non-profit, or civil society organization, and numerous students take part in credited international internships in Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe.

This type of engagement – one that has meaning both inside and outside the

"ivory tower" – invites students to take a degree of responsibility for their own learning and to move beyond complacent acceptance of injustice as an inevitable outcome of globalization. It can, however, open the door to other, often unanticipated, outcomes, some of which are discussed below.

The Broad Umbrella: Critical Pedagogy and Media Studies

First among equals: neither a 'banking' nor a pure liberatory model

Broadly defined, critical pedagogy encourages students and educators to critically examine and act to change inequitable, undemocratic socio-economic and political relationships (Kincheloe 2008). In both their teaching and research, MPI faculty members examine these relationships from a wide range of theoretical approaches and disciplinary backgrounds. Some (core and elective) MPI courses – e.g. *Media and Social Movements*, *Alternative Media*, *ICTs for Development*, *The Culture of Consumption*, and *Global Political Economy of Information* – foreground both top-down and bottom-up Marxist-oriented discussions of class issues, political economy of communication, labor struggles, and the local and global ramifications of neo-liberalism.[2] Other courses, such as *Getting the Message Out: Activism and the Mainstream Media*, *Documentary Media*, *First Nations in the News Media*, *Representing Homelessness*, *Century of Genocide*, and *African American Double-Consciousness*, draw more heavily from an analytical, cultural studies perspective to examine issues such as representations in the media, persuasion and propaganda, discourse analysis, and identity politics. The common element linking these courses is a substantive interrogation of myriad forms of resistance to, and participation in, oppression based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and sexuality.

This interdisciplinary curriculum is geared toward what Paulo Freire (1970) calls *conscientizacao* – "the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (62, emphasis in original). To facilitate *conscientizacao* for students, "problem-posing" educators must provide open spaces for critical discussion and develop experiential learning projects that encourage students to marry theory and practice in their own ways and according to their own needs (Freire 1970). For Freire, such an approach to teaching and learning is antithetical to a "banking" model of education wherein students are viewed as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with information deposited by a teacher. Indeed, in Freire's view, students come to the classroom with their own histories, experiences, perspectives, ideas, and critiques, thereby creating a diversity from which educators can also learn and become empowered. For us, however, Freire takes his "liberationist", problem-posing approach a step too far insomuch as it practically abolishes the traditional hierarchical foundation of the teacher-student relationship. As such, we tend to employ what we consider to be a more pragmatic approach to teaching that subscribes to observations made by Stuart Hall in a 2007 interview:

> I am not, I suppose, a true liberationist in the field because I be-
> lieve in the responsibility of teaching. I believe in the capacity of
> learning, and in refining the capacity of learning. In this process,
> eventually, the learner knows as much or more than the teacher,
> moving from apprentice to equal… (117-18).

Like Hall, we too believe that the "responsibility of teaching" necessitates that as instructors we retain a distinction between teacher and student in the classroom. There are at least two reasons for this compromise in our approach. First, the institutional structure of university learning requires that an instructor selects and designs the reading schedule, develops assignments, charts the general direction of the lectures and discussions, and provides numerical evaluations of student work that fit within a faculty-wide grading scheme to combat the problem of grade inflation. It seems to us that while this institutional hierarchy can be diminished in some important and useful ways, it cannot be entirely erased within the norms of an accredited degree-granting program. Additionally, educators provide a structure, both tangible and intangible for students, to learn and to develop critical thinking, research, writing, and life skills.

Second, we would argue that a strong, guiding presence is sometimes necessary, especially in those courses that deal with particularly difficult subjects such as crimes against humanity, human rights abuses, and global inequities. For example, in the MPI elective course *Century of Genocide*, students sometimes have traumatic responses to atrocity images, survivor testimonies, and revelations about inaction by the "international community" to prevent mass rape, torture, and civilian massacres. In these cases, the instructor acts as a knowledgeable facilitator for students to productively "work through" disturbing course material. She also creates an environment for students to explore and debrief emotionally charged issues in a way that allows them to move beyond intellectual paralysis, overwhelming feelings of bystander guilt or anger, and / or "compassion fatigue" (Moeller 1999).

By choosing a compromised approach to Freire's liberationist model, we work within the administrative constraints of the university system. Unlike Freire or, more recently, Denis Rancourt – who was fired from a tenured position at the University of Ottawa after exercising "academic squatting" (changing the content of an existing course outside of the usual administrative structures), teaching a pass/fail course on activism, and abandoning the university's marking scheme[3]– our teaching does not qualify us as radical pedagogues, and there is a notable disjuncture here between *teaching about activism* and *inhabiting the role of the activist* in the classroom.

Self-reflection

While it is easy to say that "we create an empowering, open environment in the classroom that encourages constructive dialogue", it is quite another challenge to ensure that this openness actually takes place. In teaching, we are often pushed to reexamine our pedagogical objectives and motivations, as well as the ideologies guiding our actions. As Kincheloe (2008) reminds us, "every dimension of school-

ing and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces" (2). We also are aware that our own subjectivities as relatively young, North American, female professors of European descent have shaped our scholarly pursuits and informed what and why we teach. We are not, however, always aware of exactly *how* these subjectivities operate and manifest themselves within and beyond the classroom. Our awareness of these subjectivities also serves to raise familiar questions about whether and how we should speak for/on behalf of others. Do we, for instance, have the legitimacy or credibility to talk about certain types of marginalization and oppression that we have not personally experienced? If so, in what ways do we convey this material to students?

When she asks if "the subaltern can speak", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explores the dilemma of the scholar/critic, who can often speak on behalf of "others" in a way that inadvertently reinforces their silence or furthers their marginalization. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), Spivak writes:

> If you are actually involved in changing state policy on the one hand, and earning the right to be heard and trusted by the subaltern, you cannot choose to choose the cut-off trail, declaring it as a hope when for some it has been turned into despair. And, if, like Derrida and Foucault, you are a scrupulous academic who *is* largely an academic, you stage the crisis relationship between theory and practice in the practice of your theoretical production in various ways instead of legitimizing the polarization between the academy and the real world by disavowing it, and then producing elegant solutions that will never be seriously tested either in large-scale decision-making or among the disenfranchised (51).

In other words, Spivak suggests that scholarly self-reflection means recognizing how academic questions about the vexed relationship between theory and praxis, criticism and activism, and the academy and the real world, can reproduce those divides through discourse.

Students within the MPI program must also engage in similar self-reflection. Some of these students have faced racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, and religious marginalization; experiences that inform how, what, and why they learn in ways they may or may not be aware.[4] Many of them also often struggle financially, working multiple jobs to help pay their way through school, which may make them more attuned to issues of poverty. Nevertheless, universities remain privileged spaces. They have, as Hall (2007) maintains, "always been selective institutions in one way or another, either formally or informally" (110). As such, many students have not encountered the forms of oppression examined in some of the MPI courses and thus must be willing to interrogate their own subjectivities and preconceptions of "others."

Critical media studies students are also in a particularly unique position. They critique media-related power relationships, learn about and engage in alternative forms of media, and deconstruct mainstream representations and stereotypes. At the same time, they are part of a demographic that is, as noted, both relatively privi-

leged and subject to intense and powerful consumerist messages (see Dyer-Witheford 2007, 51). MPI students read about, for example, labor rights and export processing zones in the developing world while simultaneously facing tremendous social pressures to, quite literally, buy into being "cool" regardless of where and how their fashionable products are made. As a result, many students appear to experience cognitive and emotional dissonance between their lived everyday realities and what they learn about in the program. Their education can capitalize on this dissonance by providing inroads for students to question the world around them and their roles and responsibilities within it.

Often, however, students are hesitant to talk about such experiences, especially in front of their peers. In the classes that we teach, we frequently acknowledge our own struggles with the very same issues in order to demonstrate that such dissonance is "normal" and that there is no right or wrong approach to addressing it. In so doing, however, we may lose "activist cachet" with some students. While we do not seek to promote ourselves (either in or out of the classroom) as idealized activists, we have found that this is precisely what some students expect from a MPI faculty member.

In one third year class, for example, I (Smeltzer) mentioned that I would be away in Europe for a week just prior to the final exam. When a student asked if I was going to a conference or conducting research, I responded that I was taking a mini-vacation to visit old friends. A dedicated environmentalist, she then asked if I had purchased carbon offsets. I admitted that I had not thought to do so and, to be honest, probably would not. For numerous students in the classroom I think (but do not know for sure) that such candor was welcomed, helping them recognize that an entirely fair trade, ethically responsible, environmentally conscious, sustainable, "authentic" lifestyle is simply not possible. For the student who asked the question, however, I likely lost some of my credibility vis-à-vis what she thought a deeply committed activist *should* be like. In the animated discussion that followed, the class used my travel example as a jumping off point for interrogating the possibilities for, and limitations to, local and global activism.

Experiential Learning and Alternative Media

If the goal of critical pedagogy is to create a more socially just world, both theory and practice must be at the heart of the educational process. Influenced by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) "philosophy of praxis", Freire (1970) advocates dialogical education that incorporates both "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (36). Freire's advancement of this form of "self-reflexive, theoretically guided practice" (Huesca 2003, 55) – of critically combining both knowing and doing – is particularly important for critical media studies students who are trained in media literacy and who both produce and consume information and communication (Asthana 2008, 3; Kellner and Share 2007, 4). Freire's work has been particularly influential in creating and understanding the benefits and drawbacks of praxis-oriented curricula that incorporate experiential and service-learning: "[t]heory in-

forms practice, while experiential and practical knowledge can be employed as a means to understanding and interpreting theory" (Breunig 2005, 109).

Although experiential learning offers useful inroads into negotiating the theory and practice dialectic – e.g. through hands-on production assignments, practicum placements, and internship opportunities – it certainly is not without its detractors. Critics such as Stanley Fish (2003, 2008) and Mark Kingwell reject the relevance of "real life" or "student experience" in the scholarly work of the university class-room. In several articles, *New York Times* op-ed pieces, and his book, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008), Fish has argued that university professors should be advancing knowledge and seeking "truth", and that any foray into politics in the classroom– from critical pedagogy to combating racism and sexism to citizenship education – is an abdication of the instructor's primary scholarly responsibilities. Similarly, when I (Grzyb) was interviewed on a Canadian Broadcasting Corpora-tion's Radio 1 afternoon show in 2002 about student service-learning placements at local homeless shelters, philosophy professor and public intellectual Mark King-well – the house guest on the show that day – dismissed the relevance of experien-tial learning. When asked to comment on the "novelty" of the service-learning component, Kingwell suggested that if he wanted to teach his students about home-lessness, he would simply ask them to read Plato's *Republic*.

Based on our experiences, we disagree with Fish and Kingwell that experiential learning diminishes scholarly rigor or limits the intellectual freedom of students. In fact, we have observed quite the opposite: experiential learning can encourage stu-dents to engage more fully with their own intellectual labor and produce scholarly work with more – not less – originality, depth, and nuance. Experiential learning also means relinquishing some of the pedagogical control associated with the more traditional lecturing / testing loop at the heart of the "banking model" of teaching because faculty share at least some of the educational burden with community part-ners and with the students themselves. The process of developing experiential learning assignments within the context of a critical media studies tradition is not, however, linear or unidirectional. Students do not simply "map" theory onto prac-tice. As discussed below, they instead undertake the challenge of both realizing media theory in the community and using this experience to (re)navigate that same theory, thus enhancing the intellectual exploration of its implications.

Alternative Media

Within our increasingly concentrated and controlled media environment, teaching about and with alternative media – or, more broadly speaking, non-mainstream media variously referred to as radical, citizens', activist, civic, and community me-dia (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008; Downing 2001, 2003; Halleck 2002; Rodriguez 2001; Waltz 2005) – is essential in the struggle to "raise consciousness, generate public dialogue and debate... and mobilize social action on many fronts" (Leistyna and Mollen 2008, 26). As part of their program, MPI students examine the political and socio-economic constraints imposed on media and com-munication systems as well as the need for, and myriad difficulties inherent in, pur-suing counter-hegemonic media practices. Students also read and critique various

work produced by local, national, and international organizations dedicated to me-
dia freedom (e.g. FAIR.org, Independent Media Centres, and Reporters Without
Borders) and study instances of media practitioners and media scholars enduring
various forms of state repression in a multitude of countries. As well, students ana-
lyze various forms of "public" media (e.g. BBC, CBC, and NPR) with the aim of
assessing the extent to which stated objectives manifest themselves in actual prac-
tice and the factors influencing this process.

Drawing on their training in media and communication theory, MPI students
then experience first-hand how media inequalities can play out on the ground.[5] For
example, in the mandatory core course, *Getting the Message Out: Activism and the
Mainstream Media*, students explore case studies such as the history of HIV/AIDS
activism, the "Save Darfur" movement, human trafficking and contemporary anti-
slavery activism. In addition to producing a traditional research paper, the students
write letters to the editor, prepare press releases, and develop press kits in an effort
to frame their messages and engage effectively with mainstream media. In the *Al-
ternative Media* core course, students must either contribute to an already estab-
lished form of alternative media or create their own with the aim of fostering a
deeper understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with producing me-
dia that is not part of the mainstream. Examples of past alternative media projects
have included: a high-end magazine targeting university students interested in envi-
ronmentally responsible fashion, beauty products, and travel; information booklets
about the GAP and Wal-Mart's international labor practices placed in waterproof
pouches slipped into the pockets of various products still on store shelves; and a
blog dedicated to raising awareness about accessibility issues for citizens with dis-
abilities (which has since become a widely used source of information and forum
for discussion, debate, and coordination of political activities). One student created
an alternative art and photography exhibition in the student union building that fo-
cused on global labor issues, while another launched a one-minute film festival
featuring politically oriented material.

Although most MPI students dedicate a significant amount of time and energy
to these hands-on alternative media projects, like any class, there always are those
who do not. This latter group often appears to underestimate the difficulty of the
assignment, to not fully commit themselves to their self-reflective weekly journals,
and / or do not effectively connect their experiences with the course readings, lec-
tures, and discussions. Students falling into this category often comment that they
find it difficult to complete their chosen projects because of heavy academic work-
loads, which suggests that they view the experiential learning experience as some-
thing that extends above and beyond, rather than something that is central to, the
curriculum.

Many students also express surprise and frustration at how difficult it is to pene-
trate mainstream media (e.g. to advertise their event) or to become involved in al-
ternative media in a *meaningful* way. Their hands-on experience engenders lengthy
discussions about what exactly "counts" as "alternative." Students reflect on
whether to define a medium as alternative according to its content, purpose / man-
date, format, size, contributors / owners, source(s) of funding, relationship with
other types of media, or some combination thereof. Students also often find that the

line between alternative and mainstream media is more blurred than they had initially realized. Concomitantly, they are usually unaware of the variety and extent of alternative media available for them to engage with, which indicates that hands-on projects play a vital role in developing a fuller understanding and appreciation of a given medium.

Service-Learning, Practicum Placements, and International Internships

A well-established, institutionalized pedagogical approach in the United States and a growing movement in Canada, service-learning is a particular manifestation of experiential learning "that directly prepares students for civic life" (Ward 1005, 220). It usually consists of classroom study combined with an extended volunteer placement in the community in a role that is directly related to course content. Service-learning is not, however, meant to simply be an exercise in "volunteerism." Rather, it aspires to be an active process of "real life" experience formation and intellectual reflection by enabling students to combine insights gleaned from their theoretical course content with their community-based learning activities.

As a particularly salient example of service-learning within the MPI program, during the final semester of their fourth year students are required to participate in a media-oriented practicum placement with a local NGO, non-profit, or civil society organization. The placements consist of a minimum of forty volunteer hours over the semester, along with bi-weekly reflection meetings led by the course instructor. Examples of past practicum placements include: AIDS Committee of London, Big Sisters and Big Brothers, Canadian Cancer Society, ReForest London, Habitat for Humanity, Humane Society, International Freedom of Expression eXchange, London Abused Women's Centre, London Urban Services Organization, Learning Disabilities Association of London, Make-A-Wish Foundation, United Way, Unity Project for the Relief of Homelessness in London, and Women's Community House. During these placements, students engage in a wide range of activities including, but not limited to, organizing public awareness events, conducting short- and long-term research on specific issues relevant to their chosen organization, writing speeches and press releases, developing educational and promotional materials, and creating web sites and other multi-media platforms.

At the end of their placement the students write a lengthy paper in which they reflect upon their service-learning experience by drawing, in large part, from the analytical tools and concepts contained within readings from across the whole MPI course curriculum. In these papers, students often comment that the practicum afforded them the opportunity to experience first-hand many of the issues discussed in class, such as the financial barriers to successfully operating a non-profit and the difficulties inherent in promoting community events and garnering media attention. For many students the challenges and rewards of working with, and for, a public interest-oriented organization foster a greater commitment to establishing a career dedicated to social justice. For other students, the placement is equally important for helping them to realize that this will not be their primary vocation. Here, again,

we see the inherent tension between the analytical skills of the scholar / academic critic and the direct action of the activist, a tension that is surmounted by some students and reinforced by others.

The international internships, by contrast, are oriented toward addressing issues of media and the public interest at an international level with various organizations in Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe. As an example of a particularly popular internship, ten students have worked for four month periods with the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), a non-profit media organization based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.[6]   During their time in Malaysia, these upper year students engage in a wide range of activities designed to marry their theoretical training with hands-on media experience in a country with only limited press freedom. Some of the activities in which they have participated include: providing radio and podcast training for marginalized citizens; conducting advocacy work for CIJ's freedom of information and expression campaign; producing media freedom video documentaries, radio features about children's rights in Malaysia, and informational pamphlets for CIJ's public education campaigns; and monitoring media coverage of major domestic political events.

In addition to the time-consuming legwork needed to mount, financially support, and supervise such a program – which faculty conduct on the side as these internships are not part of the regular MPI curriculum – our Malaysian counterparts dedicate significant time and energy to integrating the students into their organization and helping them acclimatize to living and working in an environment very different from home. As this type of praxis-oriented experience takes students out of their personal comfort zones, they face some very real safety concerns, disturbing socio-economic inequities, language barriers, cultural disparities, and the implications of severely diminished press freedoms and civil liberties. While some of these are familiar issues for other internationally focused undergraduate internship programs (Schoorman 2000; van't Klooster, van Wijk, Go, and van Rekom 2008; Wessel 2007), very few programs address the often sensitive arena of public interest-oriented media.

Students often relay to faculty that their practicum placement and internship(s) were some of – if not the most – rewarding experiences in their undergraduate career. While such feedback is certainly positive, it also raises questions about what exactly *should* be included in a student's education. If, as Sholle (1994) contends, we consider "[e]ducation as *empowerment*", then we must provide students with more than just "the tools to take up a place in an already constructed system of labor; it means providing the means by which students can rethink their relationships to the world of work and develop abilities as critical citizens, working toward a more just and equitable democracy" (19, emphasis in original). In *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar (2007) forward a similar argument, asserting that teaching in "the liberal arts is about the dissemination of knowledge *and* the preparation of well-rounded citizens" (185, emphasis added). They note, however, that this mission is in jeopardy "as more and more students have been told to use the liberal arts degree as a status symbol to gain access to white-collar occupations" (Côté and Allahar 2007, 185). Promises of

career-enhancing service-learning experiences (e.g. practicum placements) can, for some students, serve to further heighten these "job-upon-graduation" expectations.

Indeed, the tangible employment-oriented benefits of the MPI program are quite attractive to students (and often their parents), as well as to the university administration. Though the corporate, job-focused ambitions of "Academic Inc." appear "inimical to political activism" (Dyer-Witheford 2007, 50), it is not simply an issue of the corporate sector versus public service (broadly defined). This division represents a false dichotomy that fails to recognize that the corporate sector needs people with public service experience, and the non-profit sector often is starved for people with skills obtained in the corporate world. In terms of the practicum placements, for example, the experience many students acquire can "convey to future employers and institutions that [they are] socially involved and aware but not at odds with the system" (C. Martin 2007, online). The key issue here, however, is the type of post-graduation employment to which students aspire. To this end, the promotional material for MPI states that the program offers a critical, interdisciplinary education and hands-on training "aimed at those who plan to work with communication issues in civil society movements, the non-profit sector or the public service" (FIMS 2007). Some university faculty may view this type of pedagogical relationship with community partners along the same spectrum as partnerships developed with the private sector. In their desire for neutral, apolitical, "detached scholarship", proponents of this perspective often are "as hostile to activism as [they are] to commodification" (Dyer-Witheford 2007, 48-9). They also may view such activism as ideological indoctrination under the guise of producing counter-hegemonic discourses.

If, however, MPI faculty actively promote self-reflectivity and critical awareness – central components of what Giroux (1996) defines as "political education" (discussed below) – then the experiences students gain via production-oriented assignments, practicum placements, and internships can be tremendously valuable for both deepening *and* problematizing their theoretical training. Nevertheless, a question that remains for us is: how much is it our role as faculty members to help prepare students for employment opportunities upon graduation, especially in a program geared toward integrating theory and practice? As well, what are some of the challenges to productively facilitating this theory-practice relationship? It is to this latter question we now turn.

Challenges, Struggles, and Uncertainties

Dan Butin (2006), a critic of experiential learning, contends that advocates of this pedagogical approach falsely describe themselves and their work as being politically neutral when, in reality, they tend to embrace strong left-leaning politics that their students may not share. For this and other reasons, he denounces the proliferation of service-learning across the "soft" disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and instead calls for both a return to disciplinary norms and a reconfiguration of service-learning as the object of a new discipline of "community studies" (Butin 2006, 493). Other detractors – both liberal and conservative – have similarly maintained that "since critical pedagogy attempts to both politicize teach-

ing and teach politics, it represents a species of indoctrination" (Giroux 1996, 182). In responding to such critiques, Giroux (1996) distinguishes between "political and politicizing education" (182). In his view, "political education"

> ...exercises a critical self-consciousness regarding how power operates within the classroom to produce knowledge, arrange teacher-student relations, and challenge oppressive structures of power. Political education embraces the inescapable political nature of education while always being suspicious of any politics that is dogmatic, doctrinaire, or closed to critical examination (Giroux 1996, 182-3).

By comparison, "politicizing education" is authoritarian, "domineering", and unwelcoming of dissenting, critical student voices (Giroux 1996, 183).

As educators, it is our responsibility to ensure that "political education" as opposed to "politicized education" takes place both in and out of the classroom. This, however, is no easy feat. Reflecting on her own pedagogical work in teaching feminist activism, Amber Dean (2008) considers how far she would be willing to allow one of her students to proceed in an activist project that she, personally, considered politically problematic (e.g. one that was anti-choice). She concludes that there are no clear-cut answers – i.e. each situation must be contextualized and approached on its own merit.

While we, too, are unsure of how we would react to a student wanting to engage in a project similar to the one Dean describes, we have firmly steered students away from other kinds of activities which we have considered to be clearly problematic. For instance, one student wanted to spray paint (Banksy-style) anti-war slogans on public buildings, while another sought to interview people who are homeless without first considering the necessity of obtaining ethics approval. Though it was our professional responsibility to guide students away from these specific activities, their opinions about what actions are likely to lead to a more socially just world vary and may be quite different from our own. As Sarah Ahmed reminds us, activism "is about affecting or transforming the world in a way which is better, even if what we think is better, can never be fully agreed or decided upon" (as cited in Dean 2008, 357). At what point, however, can we decide that one type of activism is suitable while another is not? What if, for instance, we were personally in favor of the "war on terrorism" and thus considered anti-war sentiments politically problematic regardless of how or where they were expressed? If we steered a student away from this particular activist pursuit, could we be subject to charges of indoctrination that many on the "left" accuse those on the "right" of fostering in their classrooms?

Since the MPI program does tend to attract students who veer to the left of the political spectrum – and faculty members do *not* describe their work as politically neutral – we must be extra vigilant to encourage critique rather than simply "preach to the converted." Stuart Hall (2007) offers some sage advice on this issue: "I think the most important thing that the left, broadly defined, has to do is to actually engage, contest, and also learn from the best that is locked up in other traditions

which it is opposing. I do not believe there can just be a process of internal repeti-
tion of the left's virtues, on 'our side of the line'" (117). In the *Alternative Media*
course, for instance, students read about the success of grassroots activism along-
side material such as *The Rebel Sell: why the culture can't be jammed* (Heath and
Potter, 2005).

Authors Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter argue that counter-culture activities
are not only ineffective for producing positive societal change, but have in fact
helped to further entrench capitalism and strengthen the political and economic
status quo. Culture jamming, for example, diverts valuable attention and energy
away from structural, reformist solutions toward a consumption-oriented, individu-
alistic, and misguided pseudo-rebellion against the "system." While they fully sup-
port and place themselves on "the left", Heath and Potter contend that hijacking
media messages, joining protests, choosing anti-establishment clothing and per-
sonal embellishment, and practicing small-scale acts of environmentalism, only
serves to fuel a system keen to "sell" the status of rebellion. Their work provokes
heated discussions in the classroom, obliging students to take a closer look at the
efficacy of the counter-hegemonic activities in which they and many of their peers
engage as part of their scholastic and extra-curricular lives. Concomitantly, students
are often frustrated by the lack of tangible solutions offered in *The Rebel Sell* for
how citizens can *actually* effectuate change, and critique the authors' sweeping,
monolithic description of left-wing activists, their goals and actions.

In a similar vein, for the *Representing Homelessness* course, students examine a
cultural history of homeless images and stereotypes, vagrancy laws, and the raciali-
zation of poverty, anti-poverty activism, and homeless autobiography and ethnogra-
phy. They also read James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's "Broken Windows",
a highly influential article published in *The Atlantic* in 1982. Wilson and Kelling
posit the notion that "disruptive" or "disorderly" people – especially homeless peo-
ple or panhandlers – are like "broken windows" that make citizens *feel* less safe in
their neighborhoods and eventually escalate into major crimes in a sort of behav-
ioral domino effect. Their ideas directly influenced a number of controversial urban
initiatives including New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani's "quality of life" pro-
gram in the 1990s. This program gave police discretionary power to punish minor
crimes and, critics claim, led to racial profiling, problematic gentrification, and the
violation of citizens' rights. Nevertheless, many students find "Broken Windows"
to offer convincingly pragmatic solutions to improving society and a compelling
read.

The examples of *The Rebel Sell* and "Broken Windows" demonstrate that fac-
ulty cannot assign readings or introduce perspectives and arguments that represent
"straw men" for students to easily blow apart; instead, students need to engage with
thoughtful, well-informed, diverse points of view. Of equal importance, it also de-
pends how the ideas contained in these materials are introduced to students and
addressed in class. In writing this article we realize that we have in fact not as-
signed enough of these types of texts for our courses and perhaps not been as self-
reflective as we could be concerning our biases in selecting certain materials over
others. Yet, how diverse *should* our readings / course content be? To be honest, we
struggle with how much we should overtly and covertly encourage students to em-

brace what we consider to be the "right" way of viewing the political and economic world while still promoting and facilitating a "political education."

Impact of students on and in the community

When students participate in service-learning projects and placements, there may be a sizeable gap between their own life experiences and the life experiences of those with whom they work. This potential gap raises a few important issues that can influence the parameters of university / community collaborations. First, service-learning is not simply "service" by members of the university community. It also requires a tremendous amount of work on behalf of community partners (as noted in the Malaysian example discussed above). With the fourth year MPI practicum placements, for instance, each year local organizations must train, supervise, and integrate a new set of students.

Second, once students go out into the community or develop hands-on media projects, they move further outside the instructor's purview. At a recent keynote address about service-learning at The University of Western Ontario, a colleague in the Faculty of Law asked the speaker whether she had ever experienced a case of "service-learning gone bad." What would happen, she wondered, if a group of students traveled to South America during an Alternative Spring Break program to witness farming crises, environmental degradation, and labor abuses, but rather than working to change the system, one of the students hatched a plan to come home and exploit these resources even further? In acknowledging the law professor's (fairly extreme) example, the speaker emphasized that experiential learning requires instructors to relinquish some, although not all, of their pedagogical control. Truly democratizing student learning and asking students to think critically about the role of media and communication in the "real world" also means taking the sort of risk that this law professor describes.

Third, for their hands-on assignments many students find it easier to mount philanthropic projects (e.g. organizing a fund-raising event for a local charity) than to work directly in the realm of activist communication; a spectrum that spans from what Alice Reich has called the "charity basket approach to the revolutionary" (cited in Donahue 2000, 430). Can we, however, consider "awareness campaigns activism? Is the potential for individual transformation (or consciousness-raising) through such awareness campaigns as much a form of 'activism' as the objective of taking direct action to transform the world?" (Dean 2008, 355). There is a very real concern that, especially in the absence of critical reflection and action, some students opt to consciously or unconsciously participate in the "safe" and "sanctioned... institutionalization of activism on college campuses" that Courtney Martin (2007) claims is "a key culprit in the absence of visible youth movements in this country" (C. Martin, online). To address this concern, MPI students are required to critically discuss in their final papers for both the *Alternative Media* course and the practicum placement (which, as noted above, often includes philanthropic organizations) the role of "awareness" in activist-oriented work. They must also consider the potential pitfalls associated with "passive activism" and with the

type of "soft activism" that gives the "illusion of political action through typing on a computer" (Kahn and Kellner 2005, 93).

Methods of evaluation

Although the MPI faculty employ familiar methods of evaluation (e.g. exams and theoretically driven papers) for their respective courses, it often is more difficult to adjudicate the experiential learning components of the curriculum. Students tend to focus on achieving quantifiable measurements of "success" (e.g. how many people attend an event or the number of hits on their blog) and, understandably, expect to be graded on such outcomes at the exclusion of analyzing associated processes. If, however, critical pedagogy embraces diverse sites of knowledge, as Breunig (2005) suggests, then "multiple methods of assessment and evaluation must also be considered" (115-16).

In this case, hands-on media projects and community placements are graded primarily on the basis of student reflection papers that meditate on the processes, methodologies, and intersections between a course's experiential learning component and its readings, lectures, and discussions. For both the practicum placements and international internships, faculty members also look to host organizations for their input on how well students have performed "in the field." The extent of an organization's influence on a student's grade must, however, be determined on a case-by-case basis as every placement and internship is unique, and participating organizations differ from each other in terms of their size, structure, mandate, and expectations of students.

For both their practicum placements and international internships students receive a grade of Pass, Fail, or, in exceptional cases, Pass with Distinction. We have found that this type of non-numerical evaluation mechanism has tended to work well in upper years of the MPI program. At this point in their lives and academic careers, students usually choose their service-learning obligations for specific personal and / or professional reasons and thus are dedicated to the assignment. They also are of course keen to pass the course, to graduate, and to attain one of the few available Pass with Distinction honors. As well, many students are hoping for letters of reference for graduate school / law school / future employment from their host organization and / or the supervising MPI faculty member.

Regardless of their motivation(s), the papers students produce at the conclusion of their practicum placements are genuinely some of the best we have read at an undergraduate level. Numerous students have commented that writing this final paper was a cathartic process, allowing them to critically analyze their hands-on, "real life" experience through the lens of years of course content. Conversely, we have encountered a few students who do not dedicate as much time as they should to this writing and reflection process, perhaps knowing that it would be difficult for one of their faculty members to actually fail them. If the situation were to arise, our possible reluctance to assign a failing grade may, in part, be a reflection of our own desires to support and guide students and / or it may suggest that a more detailed grading scale would be more appropriate for this service-learning requirement of the program.

How Public the Intellectual?

To be effective public intellectuals, academics must engage with the "'real world' political implications of theory" and "place greater emphasis in their *habitus* and field of practice on renewing dialogue and interaction with activists..." (Martin 2005). We are fortunate to work in a faculty and at a university that supports MPI's politically oriented, theory / practice program. Many of our colleagues, especially in the United States, do not enjoy the same intellectual or pedagogical freedom even after they are tenured.[7] As well, relatively little of the public interest work faculty members perform outside (and often even inside) the university counts officially toward the "service" requirement of their jobs. Indeed, the "publish or perish" expectations of academe mean that "outreach, engagement, and community service" usually do not figure strongly in the adjudication of a faculty member's productivity (Ward 2005, 219; see also Few, Piercy and Stremmel 2007, 47; hooks 1994). As bell hooks (2003) laments, without such "reward for service in the interest of building community", it becomes even harder "for individual teachers to make a commitment to serve" (83-84). In addition, the increasing corporatization of the university means that administrators are more likely to focus on what contributes to the bottom line than to how the university is contributing to the wider public interest, especially in the current economic crisis (Côté and Allahar 2007; Giroux and Myrsiades 2001; McLaren 2005; McLaren and Farahmandpur 2001; Martin 2005; Simon 2001).

While not all community/activist work can, or should, be considered directly relevant to our jobs as faculty members, it is difficult to "talk the talk" if we fail to "walk the walk." As we see it, part of our role is to create a bridge between the university and the broader public, and to empower students to explore the implications of critical media studies and civic engagement both inside and outside the "ivory tower." If we do not possess first-hand understanding of both the challenges and rewards associated with engaging in public interest activities, how can we expect the same of our students? Yet, work and family obligations necessarily limit the amount of time and energy that faculty members can dedicate to community work, public activities, and activist endeavors. This balancing act requires a constant evaluation of how much and what kind of activist or community work is enough, too much, and potentially even too "radical" for the university.

In a very personal account of this scholar / critic-activist dialectic, April L. Few (2007) describes her experience as a Black female professor at an American university trying to negotiate her "commitment to diversity and social justice with the demands of tenure" (Few, Piercy and Stremmel 2007, 48). Few is regularly asked to take on speaking, organizing, and leadership roles both inside and outside the university that give her the "chance to provide voice to the values" she holds dear. She admits that "[j]ust saying 'no' is not as easy as it appears" (Few, Piercy and Stremmel 2007, 50). Like Few, we struggle to find equilibrium between our "real" professional work commitments and requests for our involvement in public education and social justice activities. Ironically, we also often feel that we do not con-

tribute nearly as much as we should to our communities, especially when we compare ourselves to many other academics at the forefront of the struggle for more democratic media systems.[8]

The Path Ahead: Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have raised issues about the role of faculty – specifically in critical media studies – as instructors, scholars, and public intellectuals striving to work in the interest of local, national, and international communities. The MPI program offers a useful case study of how such issues can play out on the ground and some of the challenges inherent in building and maintaining a politically oriented curriculum dedicated to marrying theory and practice. As faculty members, we are, however, in an extremely privileged place – we have relatively secure, well-paying jobs with benefits and live and work in a prosperous city in Canada. These are precisely some of the primary reasons why we *should* be at the forefront of struggles for a more socially just world. Colleagues working for NGOs and community-based associations both at home and abroad dedicate their lives to advancing democracy and fighting oppression, and they usually do it with far less support and financial security – and in many cases, physical security – than most university faculty members enjoy.

As a reflection on the philosophy and practice of the MPI curriculum and the issues arising from realizing its objectives, this article has also helped us question in a more rigorous way our own assumptions about how we teach, how we engage with our communities, and how we view a critical pedagogy approach to media studies that is grounded in rigorous theoretical study and community-based experiential learning. It is our hope that similar types of programs can be mounted in other critical media/communication programs and, to that end, this article offers insight into the challenges and rewards of MPI for others interested in embarking down a similar path.

Notes

1. The university is located in London, a city of approximately 360,000 people in southwestern Ontario, Canada.
2. For a constructive discussion of revolutionary working class pedagogy that highlights the centrality of Marxism, see Mike Cole et al., *Red Chalk: On Schooling, Capitalism and Politics* (Brighton: Institute for Education Policy Studies, 2001); Gregory Martin, "You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Bus: Critical Pedagogy as Community Praxis," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 3, no. 2 (October, 2005), http://www.jceps.com/index.php?pageID=article&articleID=47; and Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur, "Teaching Against Globalization and the New Imperialism: Toward a Revolutionary Pedagogy," *Journal of Teacher Education* 52, no. 2 (2001): 136-50.

3. See Erin Anderssen, "Professor makes his mark, but it costs him his job," *The Globe and Mail*, February 6, 2009, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article970280.ece. Rancourt also has his own website: http://rancourt.academicfreedom.ca/.

4. For a productive discussion about teaching issues of marginalization (e.g. of race and ethnicity), especially in a relatively homogeneous classroom, see Susan Cipolle, "Service-Learning as a Counter-Hegemonic Practice: Pro and Con," *Multicultural Education* 11, no. 3 (2004): 12-24; and Adrianna Kezar and Robert A. Rhoads, "The dynamic tensions of service learning in higher education: A philosophical perspective," *The Journal of Higher Education* 72, no. 2 (2001): 148-72.

5. The implications of this theory versus practice relationship also rest at the heart of debates about the role of journalism studies in post-secondary institutions. As David Skinner, Mike J. Gasher, and James Compton (2001) explain, "[i]n both the literature on journalism education and in the classroom, doing journalism and talking about journalism are typically considered two different things" (344). One of the problems is that, more often than not, faculty members possess either professional skills obtained in the field or the advanced academic credentials required to teach at a university level. The courses they subsequently teach reflect this difference in experience/expertise.

6. Partial funding for these internships has been provided by The University of Western Ontario's international curriculum funding and by the MIT Heine Foundation award.

7. Following 9/11, the "war on terror", and the escalating corporatization of universities, there has been a proliferation of writings from American critical pedagogues expressing concern that activist-oriented scholarship is increasingly being vilified and marginalized within the United States (Kellner and Share 2007; McLaren et al. 2004).

8. See also the "Bridging Scholar/*Activist Divides* in the Field of Communications" *panel at the International Communication Association Annual Conference*, Montreal, Canada, May 22-26, 2008. http://www.icahdq.org/conferences/2008/scholaractive.asp; and Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee, eds. *Communication Activism*, 2007.

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