A REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS OF A TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH AT A RURAL THAI UNIVERSITY

by

Ed Rush

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education (Research)

Murdoch University

2007

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Ed Rush, September 30, 2007
Abstract

Mass culture in Thailand creates idealizations about female beauty which cause many women to engage in destructive behavior such as starvation dieting and forced vomiting. In this dissertation I describe efforts to develop awareness among a group of predominately female students at a rural Thai university about the ideological purposes of these idealizations. Using a CD-based multimedia research template, the students reported the “common sense” beliefs which help create the beauty ideal and the effects of these beliefs on their own lives and the lives of other women. The major finding of their research was that mass culture creates beauty ideologies to maintain social stratification, in that those women who are made to feel “ugly” because they do not resemble the white-skinned underweight ideal tend not to be members of the elite social class which has the resources and time to achieve these ideals. The significance of this dissertation lies in the emancipatory effects that it produced; although a Critical Discourse Analysis showed that the students continued to assimilate some of the values and interests which they had identified as “oppressive”, they also demonstrated to varying degrees that they had ceased to think and behave in ways which had caused them mental and physical damage in the past.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION ..............................................................................................................1
- The Research Context.................................................................................................3
- Positioning Myself.....................................................................................................10
- Significance...............................................................................................................18
- Research Questions...................................................................................................19
- Outline of Chapters...................................................................................................20

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS .........................................................................21
- The Politicization of Knowledge................................................................................21
- "You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train": Reality, Morality and Research.........28
- The Challenge of Positivism......................................................................................29
- A "Critical Science"?..................................................................................................33
- Teaching to Resist.....................................................................................................34
- Hegemony: Exploitation as a Natural Part of the Only Possible World ..............40
- Thai Forms of Power: Introduction..........................................................................43
- Thai Hegemonic Norms of Gender and Sexuality...................................................48
- Opportunities for Resistance....................................................................................52
- Conclusion..................................................................................................................54

## METHODOLOGY ...........................................................................................................56
- The Research Environment......................................................................................57
- The Data Production Tool.......................................................................................61
- Development of the Research Tool Template.......................................................63
- Ethical Concerns.........................................................................................................68
- The Critical Discourse Analysis Methodology.......................................................70

## FINDINGS .........................................................................................................................78
- Introduction...............................................................................................................78
- First Analysis - Body Image.....................................................................................79
  - Some Preliminary Matters....................................................................................79
  - Body Mass Index (BMI).....................................................................................79
  - Cross cultural comparisons of relative costs...................................................81
  - Reporting the participants' English..................................................................82
  - A note on referencing.........................................................................................82
- Body Image - Ideologies.........................................................................................83
- A Closer Analysis......................................................................................................103
- Social and Personal Experiences..........................................................................113
  - Eating disorders................................................................................................115
  - Plastic Surgery....................................................................................................116
  - "Mental Problems" from Diet Pills and Financial Burdens............................124
  - Personal Experiences.........................................................................................129
- Evaluation ................................................................................................................131
- Comparative Analysis - Skin Pigmentation.........................................................140

## CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................157
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Project Editing Screen........................................................................................................64
Figure 2: Media Screen (video image of interviewee intentionally removed)...............................66
Figure 3: Finished Product with editing strap removed (English version).................................67
Figure 4: Finished product with editing strap removed (Thai version).........................................68
Figure 5: “Personal Experiences” section (“public view”).............................................................69
Figure 6: “Personal Experiences” section (“private view”)............................................................70
Figure 7: Fairclough’s CDA Schema.................................................................................................73
Figure 8: BMI Classifications.............................................................................................................80
Figure 9: BMI Distribution in Thailand.........................................................................................81
Figure 10: U-Srim before ... and identically after? ...........................................................................94
Figure 11: Gifarine Body Lotion......................................................................................................97
Figure 12: Marie France BodyLine: The Perfect Body......................................................................101
Figure 13: Marie France BodyLine: the Other Half of the Binary..............................................102
Figure 14: Marie France BodyLine: Obese Women are the Subhuman Prey of Wild Animals........102
Figure 15: Before and after Blepharoplasty (“double eyelid” surgery) (Meronk, 2007)...............123
Figure 16: Olay Total White............................................................................................................143
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to Dr Nado Aveling and Dr James Bell for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, special thanks to Winfred Wordsworth Bisset, without whom nothing has ever been possible, and my wife, Sureeporn, and son, Amata, for their patience and support over the past few years. Thanks also to Gary Waddell for feedback and friendship.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The structure and content of culture make life unnecessarily more nasty, brutish and short for some people.
- Jim Thomas, Doing Critical Ethnography, p. 33

I didn’t pretend to an objectivity that was neither possible nor desirable. “You can’t be neutral on a moving train,” I would tell [my students]. Some were baffled by the metaphor, especially if they took it literally and tried to dissect its meaning. Others immediately saw what I meant: that events are already moving in certain deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that.
- Howard Zinn, You Can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train - a Personal History of Our Times, p. 8

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point is to change it.
- Karl Marx, Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach

The above quotations encapsulate the intent and character of the curriculum that is the subject of this dissertation. It was developed from my beliefs that oppression is not a “natural” part of life but something that is created and maintained to serve the privilege and comfort of a few; that to abstain from politicizing teaching and research out of an obligation to objectivity or neutrality is in itself a political commitment to maintaining and reproducing oppression; and that teachers who are awake to structural oppression have a moral imperative to employ curricula as a weapon against it. The chapters that follow explain how I created and applied this curriculum, and evaluate to what extent it succeeded in engendering “praxis” – political action by the participants arising from their investigations into the oppressive constraints on their own lives.
Of primary importance in this research is the concept of ideological hegemony, a notion which suggests that the mass of the population maintain and reproduce their own exploitation by unconsciously adopting the values and interests of the ruling elite (for example, Apple, 1979: 4-6). In response, my curriculum sought to encourage the research participants to identify these hidden and exploitative values so that they could develop strategies to counter them. Accordingly, the major aim of this research is to evaluate in what ways the curriculum succeeded in facilitating consciousness of and resistance towards oppressive modes of thinking.

An important consideration in this dissertation will be my role within the research process. I have approached this study from a position that the true and the good are to be found in “increasing the power and advantage of the least advantaged” (Apple, 1979: 158). However, as Thomas (1993: 68) notes, this perspective is “largely a matter of personal predilection”, and thus is likely to be perceived by the politically conservative as “left-wing bias” characteristically to be found in “institution[s] not of learning, but of indoctrination” (Miller, 2003). Consequently, it is imperative to the integrity of this research that I show that my work is verifiable rather than a product of unsubstantiated assertions, and that I have not imposed my own views both on the data and on the audience. According to Thomas (1993: 61-68), objectivity in politicized research can best be achieved by a commitment to a critical reflexivity which deliberately avoids the use of conceptual clichés, overgeneralizations and “sledgehammers”. A major goal of this project therefore is to evoke the spirit of activism which marked my teaching and research without debilitating the narrative with axe grinding.

A strong additional imperative within this commitment to reflexivity is to assess the effect that my personal characteristics had on knowledge production. To what extent has my status as a 37-year-old white Australian male acted as a repressive
force or distorting filter in my interactions with and representations of the young (20-21 year old) Thai female students? Patton (2002: 63-66) calls for qualitative researchers to engage in ongoing “reflexive triangulation” in which culture, age, gender, class, social status and other personal characteristics are examined for their impact on “what I know”, “how I know it”, and how I portray “the Other”. I will briefly address these considerations in this introduction and in more detail in Chapter 4.

The Research Context

Critical research projects are founded on the notion that elements of current forms of social organization are repressive and that inquiries into knowledge should be directed towards reforming them. However, as Thomas (1993: 33) emphasizes, claims about oppression must never be taken on faith if a critical research project is to have validity.

The predominately female students who participated in my curriculum live in a society which receives mid-range ratings from the United Nations with respect to gender development (UNDP, 2006b) and gender empowerment (UNDP, 2006a). Thailand is ranked 74th out of 177 countries on both measures (in 2004 it ranked 54th on the first measure; by comparison on the second measure, Australia is ranked 3rd). The relatively low rankings are mainly derived from Thai women’s inferior earnings compared to men’s (Thai women on average earn 39% less than men) and their lack of access to formal political power (only 8.1% of Thai MPs in 2006 were women). The 2003 Thailand Human Development Report (2003: 76) in summary notes that while women in Thailand have “considerable power” in the family, in businesses, and in the local community, they are still “[systematically] disempowered” in the formal political system because “gender bias is still built into many laws and institutions.”
Of more direct relevance to the students’ lives are the attitudes that relate to sexual violence, body image, sexual orientation, skin color, and the relative worth of women’s work – the themes which acted as the starting point for the majority of their projects. With regard to the first point, the 2002 World Health Organization’s World Report on Violence and Health (2002: 152) stated that 29.9% of Bangkok women had at some stage been the victims of actual or attempted rape (the WHO terminology is “forced sex”) by their partners and a further 20% had been physically assaulted within their relationships. A briefing paper on sexual violence in Thailand for the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (Archavanitkul & Jarusomboon, 1997: Section 1.2) suggests that a contributing factor to this phenomenon, along with the legality of marital rape, is the “structural violence” inherent in Thai patriarchy. This manifests as a feeling among men that they have the “[freedom] to have irresponsible sex, extramarital sex, and to practice very little consideration when there [are] sexual needs.” It also notes that Thai men who rape their female children offer on occasion the defence that “since [their] daughters [have lost] their virginity for other men already, it is their right to release their sexual tension with their daughter. It is their right and because they were not the first, so they do not commit a sin.” For Sinnott (2004: 111), the high rate of sexual violence against women and girls combined with popular denial of female sexuality and agency make heterosexuality a “morally dangerous and risky endeavor” for Thai women.

As I will explain in more detail in the next chapter, the high importance attached to female beauty is also a significant source of pressure for Thai women. Jackson (2004b: 211) has proposed in his theory of the “Thai Regime of Images” that surface presentation in Thailand is taken to indicate the essential nature of the individual. In other words, while beauty may be thought of in the West as merely a representation of the inner being, in Thailand it is indicative of the “internal
virtues of a character” (Mattani, cited in Jackson, 2004b: 210). In simpler language, this can be taken to mean that there is a widespread belief in Thailand that beauty is the manifestation of internal goodness while ugliness reflects character defects. This is in keeping with Thai Buddhist beliefs that present status (worldly success and appearance, amongst other things) is a product of the quality of one’s conduct in a previous life. Slimming down or whitening the skin thus may represent more than efforts to attain greater social success; it could also indicate that one is attempting to improve the content of one’s character.

These observations appear to have some strength in the light of research which shows that Thai women are strongly predisposed to using skin whitening creams, to undergoing radical dieting, to using diet pills, and to undergoing cosmetic surgery and other weight loss and beautification procedures\(^1\). For example, Jennings et al. (2006: 143) in a comparative study of self perception of body image by university students in Thailand and Australia report that female Thai university students have a higher susceptibility to developing eating disorders than female students in Australia because the pressure to be thin “is more extreme in Thailand”. This, they say, is due mainly to traditional Thai attitudes that female beauty is essential to “[holding] men’s attention and [maintaining] their status” (2006: 147). Meanwhile, data from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (Consulting Room, 2007) show that Thailand was ranked 27\(^{th}\) in the world in 2003 in terms of the frequency of cosmetic surgery procedures; this despite the fact that Thailand is ranked 92\(^{nd}\) out of 229 countries in the world in terms of GDP per capita (CIA World Factbook, 2007d).

Those with lesbian or bisexual orientations in Thailand also experience considerable stress, although the pressure derives from sources which are

---

\(^1\) I provide extensive support for these claims in Chapter 4 of this dissertation
different to those which are most prevalent in western countries. Direct physical and verbal intimidation does occur but is relatively rare. Instead, oppression occurs mainly through the use of dehumanizing language (Sinnott, 2004: 6); the imposition of and adherence to heterosexual-norm male/female identities within lesbian relationships (2004: 76-111); a community “tolerance” of lesbian relationships that is conditional on their suppression from the public consciousness (2004: 122-30); a popular notion that lesbianism is a “passing phase” for young girls (2004: 117-118); and the use of gossip as a weapon of control against those who break the unwritten rule against “coming out” (personal communication with lesbian students, October 9, 2006). The effectiveness of the first tactic mentioned above is worth special note. Lesbianism is described in both academic and popular circles in a way that suggests pathology or freakishness. Gays, lesbians and the transgendered are designated “phit-peet” (literally, “mis-gendered” or “mis-sexed”) (Sinnott, 2004: 5), or as “pheet-thii-saam” (literally, “third sex”) (2004: 5). Attempts have been made to introduce the term “phuuying ruk phuuying” (literally “women who love women”) (2004: 169) into public discourse for lesbians as a means of eradicating dehumanizing language, but these efforts have met with little success. “Kralok” a male identifying lesbian, describes the impact of the standard terminology as follows (Sinnott, 2004: 6):

Third sex/gender means you are neither man nor woman, maybe some kind of monster. So there isn’t any third sex/gender for me.

Finally, a range of barriers continue to prevent women from gaining jobs that offer them opportunities for power and career development. Both western and Thai owned companies in Thailand regularly specify that applicants for jobs such as managers and engineers must be male, while the female gender is widely stipulated for secretarial work and other support jobs (for example, the display classified advertising section in the English-language Bangkok Post newspaper of
September 29, 2006, carried six gender-specifying advertisements; jobs open to men only were for project managers and engineers, while females only were invited to apply for secretarial positions). Furthermore, in keeping with the observation by radical feminist Andrea Dworkin (1998) that “the only jobs in which women are paid more than men are modeling and prostitution”, among the highest paid and most sought after jobs for most women - including graduates of Thailand’s elite universities - are aircraft cabin crew work (a job associated in Thailand with exceptional female beauty) and product promotional work (models -- known as “pretties” – promote products ranging from garden taps to beer and typically wear miniskirts, halter tops and thigh boots to attract customers). The relative value placed on these jobs is reflected in the salaries that they attract: for example, an aircraft cabin crew attendant can expect to earn about THB 30,000 (AUD 1154²) per month in her first year of employment, which eclipses the entry level monthly salary of THB 15,000 (AUD 577) earned by a state-employed Thai university professor with a Ph.D. Meanwhile, an experienced “pretty” earns about THB 10,000 (AUD 385) per engagement (personal communication with student and part-time “pretty”, October 9, 2006).

The prostitution industry also remains a major employer of Thai women from the working and middle classes. Researchers from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok (cited in Tinnakul, 2004) estimate there are 2 million female sex workers in Thailand (representing about 8% of the nation’s adult female population), and that most women enter the industry because they are unemployed or are seeking supplemental income for their families.

The 83 students – 78 female, 5 male -- who participated in this project were residential undergraduates at a large rural state-run university located approximately 100km north-west of Bangkok. The university is ranked in the first

² at 1 AUD = 25.9843 THB on March 14, 2007
tier nationwide but the highly stratified nature of Thai society\(^3\) means that the students (who mainly come from working or middle class families) feel, to varying degrees, as if they are “poor relations” to those who are enrolled in Thailand’s major city campuses. In fact, it is not unusual for students of both genders to be referred by Bangkok students as “ban nok” (literally “house outside”, but the intent – depending on the tone of voice used – can translate as “rural savage” or “country bumpkin”) (personal communication with student following submission of assignment on this theme, October 1, 2006).

The generalized feeling of inferiority that many of the female students feel because of the country/city distinction gains sharper focus on campus due to the formal and informal policies of the university and the study body. For example, the university requires that female students report back to their dormitories by 11pm, while male students are free to stay out all night. Furthermore, although the student body in 2006 for the first time in its 26 year-history elected a female student president, there is a generalized belief that men are better leaders; and some of the university “cheer songs” (sung by both genders at university sports days) contain lyrics that celebrate gang rape and sexual torture\(^4\) (personal communication with student following submission of assignment featuring mp3 recording of cheer songs, October 1, 2006).

However, in keeping with the dominant Thai belief that women should be kunlasatri (literally a “properly reared woman” who is patient, subservient and docile) (Sinnott, 2004: 114), there is little obvious on-campus resistance by women to these practices. No women’s advisory service exists; aggressively sexist

\(^3\) for example, in an economic sense, Thailand is the 20\(^{th}\) most unequal country in the world according to the Gini index of income disparity (CIA World Factbook, 2007a)

\(^4\) One song describes the thrill of being raped with a steel bar by a pack of men. Another describes a woman being raped at successive kilometer markers on an expressway.
songs are usually described by the female students as “good fun” or of no consequence; sexual harassment in the form of wolf whistling and staring by packs of male students is rarely challenged by female students on the grounds that resistant behavior would make them look “over-confident” and thus subject to censure by their female colleagues; and the dormitory rule is grumbled about but accepted. Meanwhile, the entrenched fear that women are “moral minefields” (Sinnott, 2004: 130) whose lives are marked for disaster if they drink or smoke means that local student bars are often populated almost exclusively by male students. Another major stricture – that women should not have sex before they marry – is mainly policed by the female students, who will use damaging gossip against other women who appear to be “too friendly” with male students (over-friendliness can involve riding pillion on a motorcycle with a male friend). A majority of female students who have boyfriends will conceal the fact from their parents given the community belief that romantic relationships affect women’s ability to study (this observation generally does not apply to males) (personal communication with student, October 1, 2006).

In summary, the freedom of the lives of the female participants in this project is constrained in part by direct external restrictions (i.e. gossip, job barriers, the dormitory rule) and also by values that they have learned to internalize. These values are collated within the term kunlasatri (what it means to be a properly reared woman), which teach women that social, romantic and professional success depends on being shy, patient, subservient and docile, even to the point where it seems unproblematic to participate in rituals which celebrate pack rape. As I have illustrated, these attitudes have tangible effects on women’s lives in Thailand, especially in the areas of political representation, sexual violence, employment opportunities and body image.
This last mentioned point - that individuals are bound to values which actively disadvantage them through the engineering of their consent, rather than direct coercion -- is a major theme in my dissertation. This phenomenon was named “hegemony” by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and was held to be far more powerful than coercive practices. An indication of its power can be gained from a question posed by Terry Eagleton (1991: 114):

How do we combat a power which has become the “common sense” of a whole social order, rather than one which is widely perceived as alien and oppressive?

It is this question which this research project has mainly sought to answer.

Positioning Myself
The business of speaking on behalf of others is inherently problematic, especially in contexts where researchers have almost nothing in common with those whom they are seeking to represent. I am white, male and in my 30s. Those who I am speaking for are young, Asian and female in a nation that is associated with a “powerful fantasy” that prompts many “western men [to] travel halfway around the world in pursuit of a sexual experience they conceive of as extraordinary” (Bishop & Robinson, 1999: 191). It is therefore important that I acknowledge my own power, privilege and biases before making any truth claims about those whose lives and circumstances are so different to mine. Failing to do so, according to Thomas (1993: 47), significantly reduces the “truth quotient” of any critical study.

Thomas (47) suggests that qualitative researchers should begin the reflective process by examining their own principles and ideologies. The approach which has helped me to become more aware of my values has been to think of how I started to become conscious of my own privileges and the concomitant lack of
privileges that my advantaged position implies for others in the unequal societies in which I have lived. For Aveling (2004: 59), questioning one's fortunate status usually occurs as a result of experiences that position oneself as the Other. It is precisely the unfamiliar sense of alienation and social dislocation that I have felt on occasions during my last decade in Thailand that has caused me to become more sensitive to the scale of the advantages that I have enjoyed for most of my life, and the associated deprivations suffered by those who do not share my privileged class, gender and race..

I was born and educated in Perth, Western Australia. My mother, a journalist, died when I was about four and my father, a businessman, married a woman who had a senior public service job. My entire schooling – from 1975 to 1986 -- occurred at one of Perth’s PSA boys-only private schools, a college at which there were only a handful of Aboriginal and Asian students. My social contacts widened when I attended a local university (I shared a house with three male Malaysian and Singaporean students) but my experience remained narrow in that most women and people from other cultures that I knew were already relatively wealthy and well educated and had high opportunities for advancement. Looking back, it seemed to me at this stage of my life that the privileged lifestyle and opportunities I had were “normal” and available to everyone, regardless of their gender, skin color or social class, as long as they worked hard enough. This naïve belief - its insupportability plain when data regarding social indicators such as access to resources are considered -- clearly was a result of my insulated circumstances.

Awareness of my relative privilege first began to impinge when I took a job as a journalist at a predominately working class port city in Victoria. I was assigned as a court reporter for a short time and covered many cases of domestic abuse. The horror and duration of the experiences of the female victims – some of whom, unstereotypically, were middle class or from the local elite - caused me to
understand for the first time that aggression and violence were not just things that happened to those whom I considered to be underprivileged or unlucky but also to those who had my educational and social advantages. However, the really crucial realization was that there was something that seemed to confer even more advantage than schooling or money, and that was gender. In all the cases that I remember witnessing in court, the bashings, burnings, kickings and imprisonments were directed by men against women. The conclusion that I drew from this was that I was likely to be permanently insulated from the possibility of being a victim of the shocking crimes I was hearing about for no other reason that I was born male. This opened another line of questioning: why did my newspaper (and all other Australian media) under-represent the actual incidence of these crimes? That news selection and editing at my paper at that time was dominated by men served to heighten my internal speculation that my profession played a strong role in the normalizing and trivializing of aggression by elites (in this case, men) against subordinate classes (here, women).

This experience in turn caused me to re-examine race-related experiences from my own childhood and adolescence which at the time I had dismissed as inconsequential. I started to question whether the anti-Aboriginal and anti-Asian racism which was a normal part of the speech of many people I had had grown up with was merely as harmless or funny as it was presented to be. I also began to recognize the hypocrisy which prompted the heavily drinking middle class white people who were my friends and colleagues to moralize about the decrepitude of Aborigines. The Perth writer, Robert Drewe, in this extended extract from his novel “The Savage Crows” (2001: 98-99), summarizes all the elements that made such a strong impression on me when I was growing up during the 1980s in the moneyed coastal strip just north of Fremantle (the pillorying of drunkenness among Aborigines by hard drinking, wealthy whites; the casual use of racist language at social gatherings on the assumption that everybody shared the values
that motivated the language; the mitigation of Aboriginal suffering or savage violence directed against Aboriginal people through references to their alleged cruelty to livestock or white people; the aggressive justification of white supremacy; the scorn, embarrassment and accusations of wowserism or trendiness or elitism that any contradictions of these claims to supremacy would provoke):

In Geoff’s opinion it was at this stage that his brother [Crisp] went peculiar, began to come on very heavy. Lounging around the [Dalkeith] pool after a Sunday evening barbecue (the d’Arcys and Oakes were also there, sipping claret and picking steak shreds from the teeth) Crisp bridled -- as did Anna he noticed by her eye-rolling -- at yet another slighting reference to coons and boongs, this time in an anecdote by Peter d’Arcy. D’Arcy the pharmacist was relating how he’d been forced to stop serving an Aboriginal woman with medicine because she wouldn’t pay her bill. Geoff glanced sideways at his brother, seeking his confidence about the pickup episode [in an earlier passage, Geoff relates how he and his boss were scratched and bitten in a Mercedes Benz in East Perth by some Aboriginal women after trying to pick them up for sex], but found him unreceptive, staring distantly away from the group, drinking quickly.

“You can’t run a business on handouts,” d’Arcy was saying. “I had to push her out of the shop in the end. I told her straight. I said, “Listen Mary, lay off the plonk and spend your booze money on medicine for bub.” They won’t listen to reason.”

The story didn’t strike a particularly responsive chord with the women, even Helen d’Arcy. Their identification was with the mother.

“Poor thing,” Claire Oakes said. “Those lubras must have a terrible time. I read in the paper their babies have a mortality rate ten times that of white children.”

“Unfortunately,” said her husband the sage gynecologist, “these people won’t help themselves. All the government handouts and health care don’t mean a thing without self-help.”

Helen d’Arcy said, “You can’t blame them for being prostitutes, can you? I mean if it was a choice of that or your child starving.”

“Oh, I could never sink that low,” Denise [Geoff’s wife] said.

In jumped Crisp, the [Perth-born ex-ABC journalist] neo-lefty from the East. “It’s not generally taught in schools that some pillars of pastoral society used to distribute poisoned flour to the blacks in their locality. And organize shooting parties like fox hunts on Sunday afternoon after a roast dinner.”

“Really?” d’Arcy said, looking over at Oakes.

“I dispute that,” said Oakes. “And anyway they were savage bastards in those days. Spear you as soon as look at you. Kill all the best stock, cut off one leg and leave the rest of the carcass to rot.”

Crisp’s eyes fixed on the silky oak’s swaying wind chimes. “For that matter it was popular among the graziers to distribute typhoid infected blankets to the
Aboriginals in winter – a neat trick which saved valuable bullets and carried off the women and children with much approbation."

“How terrible,” Denise said politely. “Would anyone like some dessert? There’s only fruit and cheese I’m afraid.”

“What bullshit,” Oakes said. “Typical left-wing propaganda based on legend and hearsay but with no facts to back it up.”

Crisp was unremitting, began gesturing with his wine glass. “Not that your ruddy-cheeked farmers minded dealing with women and children as a rule. They’d snatch up babies by the feet and dash their heads against rocks.” Struck by inspiration he tossed the T-bone from his steak to [the Great Dane] Cheyenne. “Or throw them to the dogs.”

Oakes got to his feet, angrily brushed grass from his trousers.

“Or into their parents’ camp fires,” Crisp said.

“Let’s go home, Claire,” Oakes directed. “I’ve had enough communist remarks for one night.”

By the time I had reached my mid 20s, I had acquired the mindset commonly referred to as “liberal guilt”. For Aveling (2004: 62-65), this is characterized by the feelings of remorse, fear and alienation that arise from the recognition that one plays a part in the maintenance and reproduction of a social system which apportions benefits and privileges to certain groups not on the basis of merit but because of their historic authority and privilege. Increasingly, however, “liberal guilt” has become a target for mockery, particularly with regard to statements by liberals that they feel powerless to alter the cruel and disadvantageous circumstances that they say they feel partly responsible for. The linguist and activist Noam Chomsky (2005: 38-9) gives an insight into the motivations for the rough treatment that western liberals sometimes receive:

Interviewer: At the talks you give to American audiences, you often are asked the question, “What should I do?”
Chomsky: Only by American audiences. I’m never asked this in the third world. When you go to Turkey or to Colombia or Brazil, they don’t ask you, “What should I do?” They tell you what they’re doing. When I went to Porto Alegre, Brazil, for the World Social Forum, I met with some landless campesinos, and they didn’t ask me what they should do; they told me what they were doing. These are poor, oppressed people, living under horrendous conditions, and they would never dream of asking you what they should do. It’s only in highly privileged cultures like ours that people ask this question.
However, in recognizing Chomsky’s point, I also can see from my own experience and reading why this confusion about what to do occurs. Aveling (2004: 59) points out that the privileged tend only to define their advantage in contrast to those they regard as underprivileged: in other words, “they [are] that which the Other [is] not”. The problem with this line of thinking, however, is that liberals tend to “move in different circles” to those they identify as underprivileged and thus one’s progressive conscience may be pricked only on the infrequent occasions when the Other is confronted - a stimulus which is usually too weak and irregular to prompt determined political action.

For Aveling (2004: 59), transforming “liberal guilt” into effective action requires a willingness to “re-examine the unmarked normativity of [one’s privilege]”. In other words, in order to move beyond wishful thinking that everything will improve to actually working for change, one must actually start thinking about what it is to be privileged. For most people - and this was my experience as well - this process usually only begins when one experiences being positioned as the Other.

I have lived in Thailand for a decade. For various reasons, my communicative skills in Thai are still at a very low level and thus I frequently experience days or weeks on end where I have almost no meaningful contact with anyone apart from my bilingual Thai wife. Furthermore, the strictness of Thailand’s immigration laws have made it very difficult to gain permanent residency in the country despite the fact that I have been married to a Thai national for nine years and have lived in Thailand continuously for that time. Accordingly, I remain an “alien” (and may do for the rest of my life), which makes it impossible for me to gain a position of seniority in my job. Finally, the Thai Government makes it a practice of heavily inflating admission charges for foreigners to public facilities,
and at least one Thai bank has also recently introduced a policy where foreigners receive no interest on money they deposit in their accounts.

I mention these phenomena because social isolation, the annulment of the possibility of gaining formal power and inferior treatment based on external characteristics still mark the lives of many people (typically women and non-whites) around the world. The well-documented feelings of rage and hopelessness that people feel in these circumstances therefore are no longer complete abstractions for me.

However, I do not want to overstate the depth or import of my experience of Otherness. The crucial difference between my experience of being an outsider and those whose whole lives are clamped within a permanently restricting frame is that I have the option of removing myself from this environment at any time. Furthermore, being white and male still carries large privileges in Thailand, as it does everywhere else in the world. For example, although I possess only a Graduate Diploma, I am paid more than a Thai professor with a Ph.D at the university at which I work because I am a white foreigner (most visiting Indians, Japanese and Filipinos are paid Thai rates). Furthermore, local attitudes that men have uncontrollable sexual appetites provide a license for male sexual freedom that, if practised by Thai women, would result in their public abasement; white skin is praised in mass media advertising as providing evidence of one’s “hi-so” (“high society”; elite) status and thus most white people, regardless of their actual character, are treated at first meeting with a deference that is not experienced by people with darker skin; and my fumbling efforts to communicate in Thai are usually met with admiration and praise rather than the mocking which, when I lived in Australia, was a common response to foreigners who spoke broken English. In essence, although I have had a faint taste of what it is to be estranged from power and status, my maleness and whiteness provides me with a structural
privilege that “cannot be erased” (Allen, 2004: 130). It can be said therefore that my solidarity with the oppressed can never be fundamental as it is impossible for me to truly experience oppression: the best I can hope to be is someone who benefits from racism and sexism but nevertheless is anti-racist and anti-sexist (2004: 130).

I thus have arrived at the point where I believe neutrality actually indicates an allegiance to an unfair status quo. Accordingly, I have adopted a moral position that inequality is not part of the natural order of things but that it is created and maintained. A stance such as this suggests that the only moral way to behave is to work against unfairness and oppression. Chomsky (2005: 183) puts the tendency to activism this way:

As for activism, that’s just elementary. There is an enormous amount of human suffering and misery, which can be alleviated and overcome. There is oppression that shouldn’t exist. There is a struggle for freedom all the time. There are very serious dangers: the species may be heading toward extinction. I can’t see how anybody can fail to have an interest in trying to help people become more engaged in thinking about these problems and doing something about them.

However, in writing this, I am aware that describing the oppressed as an entity separate from myself implicitly positions me as the knowledgeable superior who will beat a path forward to a better reality; an absurdity given that I as a white male will always have a limited consciousness about what whiteness and maleness means to those who are affected by these qualities. The reflexivity that guides this project therefore has the purpose of keeping the focus on the specificities of the relationship between I (a member of a dominant white male class) and those with whom I have worked (my female Asian students, whose oppression is empirically observable). Have I dictated the terms of praxis, and thus annulled its possibility, or have I allowed my subjects to be the major source of knowledge and inspiration for change? As Schwandt (cited in Patton, 2002: 64) says: “All
understanding is self-understanding”; thus it is that all meanings which I present as conclusive or revealing in this project will be backgrounded with the process that I undertook to arrive at those meanings.

Significance
As this is a qualitative inquiry, it will be assessed on its substantive\textsuperscript{5} rather than statistical significance. However, as Patton (2002: 467) notes, judgments about the substantive significance of any qualitative inquiry are not derived entirely from the quality of the contents of the researcher’s findings. Contributing also to the assessment are value judgments made by readers and users of the inquiry. Therefore, claims to significance made by any qualitative researcher must always be tentative.

I will argue in the conclusion that my inquiry is significant in both a confirmatory and an emancipatory sense. It is confirmatory in that I feel that my analysis bears out many of the predictions of hegemony theory; that is, I think I have shown that many of the cultural beliefs which exist in the research context actively work against the students (whom I categorized as “oppressed” due to their gender and social class), and that these beliefs are so deeply internalized that they appear to the students to be a “natural” part of the “only [possible] world” (Apple, 1979: 5). It is also emancipatory in that it has partially succeeded in enabling the participants to elucidate the repressive nature of those “common sense” beliefs that have contributed to their oppression and, as a result of the development of their new awareness, has prompted them to take concrete action to reduce the power of “cultural domination” (Thomas, 1993: 69) over their lives.

\textsuperscript{5} “Substantive” means the “actual” or “real” quality of a thing as opposed to conjectures that are made about it. Thus, a qualitative inquiry can be said to have substantive significance if it provides consistent and coherent evidence about the phenomenon, if it increases and deepens understanding of it, if the findings are consistent with other knowledge about it, and if the findings are useful for some intended purpose (i.e. to contribute to theory or, in the case of this research, to produce emancipatory effects) (Patton, 2002: 467)
Again, however, my claims to significance are made tentatively. This is because these claims are open to contradiction by an audience, and because a critical stance intentionally rejects the open-mindedness and objectivity which are usually thought of as pre-conditions for making claims to credibility and significance.

Research Questions
The questions that guide this research reflect my interpretation of Paulo Freire's pedagogy. The curriculum I designed had the purpose of encouraging my young, mostly female students to recognize the unfair and unnecessary restrictions that are placed on their lives, to recognize that their experiences are not unique but are shared by many others, to identify the social beliefs which help maintain these restrictions, and to use their new knowledge as the foundation for the development of political strategies against the restrictive forces they had identified. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the dominant ideas and values in Thai society with regard to the generative themes they have identified?
2. Do the students perceive themselves as "oppressed"? If so, in what ways?
3. What are the major forms of ideological reproduction that the students identify?
4. What political strategies do the students develop as a result of their involvement in the project?
5. Do they feel more empowered as a result of their involvement in this project? If so, in what ways?
6. What relationship develops between the researcher and the students? What are the characteristics of this relationship and how do they change over the course of the project?
Outline of Chapters

The chapters are organized as follows:

- In Chapter 2 (“Theoretical Underpinnings”) I begin by describing the “oppositional” view that knowledge is not the product of an objective process but has a political dimension in that it reflects the values and interests of the dominant classes. I then review how these ideological forms of knowledge – which benefit some but disadvantage others -- come to be accepted as natural and inevitable by everyone in society, even those who are most oppressed by them. Finally, I discuss how the pedagogy developed by Freire seeks to awaken awareness of and resistance to the hegemony of ruling class ideologies.

- In Chapter 3 (“Methodology”) I open with a description of the multimedia data production tool that I developed. I then describe the Critical Discourse Analysis that I used to make sense of the data that was produced by this tool.

- In Chapter 4 (“Findings”) I review the data and develop an argument that the students developed partial awareness of and resistance to “common sense” assumptions that actively work against their interests. I also speculate about why the development of awareness and resistance was only partial.

- In Chapter 5 (“Conclusion”) I assess the confirmatory and emancipatory significance of the research and make suggestions for future improvement of the curriculum.
Chapter 2

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Oppositional research and pedagogy gains its impetus from the idea that some people’s lives are unnecessarily “nasty, brutish and short” (Thomas, 1993: 33) and that education accordingly has a duty to empower them to awaken to and fight against their disadvantage. It also falls within the critical approach that has been heavily influenced by, among other traditions, feminism. As this is a political position - one which runs counter to the traditional idea that research and teaching should be “objective” and “neutral” - it requires explanation and justification. Accordingly, this chapter will begin with an elucidation of the philosophical rationales for an activist stance and will then move on to describing how these validate the choice of pedagogy that was used to generate the data for this project. Concluding the chapter will be a discussion of established and emerging thought on the themes that were derived from the student participants’ application of the pedagogy: namely, the subjugated position of women in Thai society; the tolerance of but lack of acceptance for Thai lesbians and bisexuals; and the Thai media’s idealization of female passivity, whiteness, thinness and physical beauty.

The Politicization of Knowledge

The rise of the natural sciences over the past four centuries has entrenched within the Western cultural consciousness a particular view of reality and knowledge. Reality is held to be a stable and overarching actuality which, due to its transcendental nature, is independent of the characteristics or beliefs of individuals or their patterns of interactions within social groups. Knowledge that corresponds to this reality can be gained by proposing hypotheses and then conducting experiments which produce data in support of the theories that have
been made (for example, Pojman, 1999: 465). To ensure reliability and validity, it is critical that the experiments can be repeated by others. If repeated testing by a variety of experimenters produces the same outcomes, then human biases and mistakes can be said to have been eliminated and objective outcomes achieved. The physicist Richard P. Feynman (Wikiquote, 2007b) was attributed as describing the approach in the following way: “It doesn't matter how beautiful your theory is, it doesn't matter how smart you are. If it doesn't agree with the experiment, it's wrong.”

Those engaged in epistemology - the branch of philosophy which inquires into the nature of knowledge - have developed a piece of shorthand which reflects this emphasis on objectivity. According to the formulation “S knows that p” (where S is the subject) (Code, 1991: 559-565), the focus of interest is p and the arguments that can be developed to support the particular claims to knowledge of p. S on the other hand can be treated as an irrelevant abstraction given that it is the rational argument for a knowledge claim that matters rather than the person who is perceiving p or is proposing or assessing the argument for p. This shorthand also carries an assumption that knowledge is generated from the private rather than the public sphere. While a social dimension to knowledge is admitted - for example, teachers and parents may encourage children to pay attention to some things and ignore others - mainstream philosophers regard this as mere bias which can be overcome through private reasoning. Ultimately, therefore, the inquiry into knowledge is regarded as one in which the “solitary individual [constructs] a house of truth upon the foundations of clear and distinct ideas” (Pojman, 1999: 557).

Oppositional epistemologists on the other hand doubt that knowledge is the outcome of an objective process conducted by egocentric individuals. With regard to the first point - the assumption of objectivity - they argue that the
theory building of mainstream science and philosophy does not originate from the “fixed, pivotal, Archimedean point” (Code, 1991: 561) of the disinterested observer but from a distinctly masculine standpoint. The feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code (1991: 563) puts the argument this way:

... it has long been tacitly assumed that [the objective knower] $S$ is male. Nor could $S$ be just any man, the apparently infinite substitutability of the “$S$” term notwithstanding. The $S$ who could count as a model, paradigmatic knower has most commonly – if always tacitly – been an adult (but not old), white, reasonably affluent (latterly middle class) educated man of status, property, and publicly acceptable accomplishments. In [the] theory of knowledge he has been allowed to stand for all men.

In other words, $S$ is not an empty placeholder but is imbued with the characteristics of a certain privileged kind of man, which in turn tends to corral the output of “malestream” science and philosophy in certain oversimplifying directions. Code (1991: 569) argues that the non-neutrality of $S$ can be observed in two ways. Firstly, covert evidence of the gendered nature of $S$ is to be found in the dominance of the adversarial method of inquiry. Although it is not the only methodology available for truth seeking – alternatives have always existed which are more closely associated with characteristics of “essential femininity” – it has taken on the hegemonic status of “all that is possible” because it “depends on an association of aggression with such positive qualities as energy, power and ambition: qualities that count as prerequisites in the white, middle-class, male professional world.” For Moulton (cited in Code, 1991: 569), the outputs of the argumentative paradigm are distinctive. Those seeking to prove a truth claim are unable to proceed except by attacking an extreme opposing position as a means of showing that their own stance is defensible. Accordingly, the main purpose for reasoning under this paradigm is to defeat opponents rather than to explore, explain and understand. The result typically is that only one decontextualized solution can be offered to a problem when required instead is a variety of interpretations and possibilities. Thus, not only is the “maleness” of the paradigm
at fault, but also “its constitutive role in the production of truncated philosophical problems, inquiries, and solutions.”

The assumed masculine status of $S$ is also apparent in overt ways. For evidence, Code (1991: 563) points to the historic assertions by several major western philosophers that women are inherently subjective and therefore unable to act as objective $S$. To illustrate, Rousseau stated that women had inferior capacity for reasoning and were inherently sensual; Kierkegaard believed women to be “merely aesthetic”; Nietzsche categorized men as Apollonian (intellectual) and women as Dionysian (sensuous); and von Humboldt claimed that women could not “come as close to the ultimate investigation of truth as man” due to their “lack or a failing of analytic capacity.” While Code (1991: 570) accepts that these “explicit denigraions” of women have in recent times become both less common and more perceptible, and thus easier to counter, the covert “manifestations [...] of contempt” for women that distinguish the assumptions that underlie philosophy remain “intransigent” because they:

... mask a bias in favor of institutionalizing stereotypical masculine values into the fabric of [philosophy] – its methods, norms, and contents [...] Thus, whether by chance or design, it creates a hegemonic philosophical practice in which the sex of the knower is, indeed, epistemologically significant. [emphasis added]

The highlighted observation above is crucial. If $S$ indeed is not an abstraction, but is a gendered entity whose characteristics partly determine the construction of theories about what can be known, then $p$ cannot be the outcome of an objective process. This in turn invalidates the claim that there are unitary standards of truth, falsity and rationality, which makes the inquiry into knowledge a partial – and therefore political – process.

On the strength of this rejection of impartiality and universality, Code (1991: 560) and other oppositional philosophers (for example, Rorty, 2003: 590-595) argue
for epistemological relativism in which “knowledge, truth or even “reality”” can be understood only in relation to the cultural and social circumstances of groups of knowers. This, they say, does not automatically entail a subjectivist position - one in which personal tastes and opinions are indistinguishable from truth claims - but rather allows for the more discerning evaluation of arguments for knowledge. To clarify, if monolithic explanations are disallowed, many different ways of knowing a phenomenon become possible. Following this, if it is further accepted that not all knowledge claims are equally valid - that “some knowledge is better than other knowledge” (Code, 1991: 561) - then the viability and authority of an explanatory scheme is derived from its ability to enable people to make sense of their world and to “cope with the decisions, problems, and puzzles they encounter daily.” Thus, according to Code (561), a relativist position introduces a “moral-political component into the heart of epistemological inquiry”.

Unsurprisingly, philosophers of science take strong issue with the relativist rejection of objectivity and the related proposition that knowledge is the contested product of group effort rather than individually reasoned representations of reality. For example, Levin (2003: 605) argues that the relativist project is unworthy of discussion as it bases itself on the following “self-refuting” arguments:

- It is an objective fact that there are no objective facts
- It is absolutely true that everything is relative to a framework
- No one can divorce himself from his social milieu to examine his society with a critical eye, and that conclusion is the result of my having done so ….

Pojman (1999: 558) meanwhile claims that relativism represents an unworkable attempt to fuse the political - which is partial in that it involves gaining power and changing social arrangements - with the epistemic, which requires impartiality in
its pursuit of truth. “On the surface”, he says, “it seems that [these] two subjects are incompatible.”

For their part, at least some oppositional epistemologists appear to concede that their stance is philosophically incoherent. For example, Anne Seller (cited in Pojman, 1999: 558) states:

My philosophical education taught me to follow reason wherever it went and to distrust political considerations. My experience as a feminist has taught me to stick by my commitments even when I appear to have lost the argument.

On the face of it, this posture seems irrational (a possible characterization could be: "I know the argument for my position is wrong, but I’ll keep making it anyway."). However, Rorty (2003: 591-595) attempts to construct a defence for statements such as Seller’s by claiming that they appear “irrational” only if this word is narrowly defined in the manner used by the natural sciences. If social inquiry is to maintain his relevance, he argues, then “rationality” has to have a broader meaning than that associated with the techniques of experimentation.

The basis of Rorty’s objection (591) is that the goals of culture and society cannot be stated in advance and thus the humanities are unable to conduct experiments to test the validity of predictions, a failing which by the terms of the natural sciences makes all social science fundamentally irrational. However, if it is agreed that the humanities are to have some use, then the term “rationality” must be allowed to have a broader meaning than its popular “strong” conception. When applied to the human sciences, rationality must have a “weaker” association with moral qualities like “sane” or “reasonable” or “eschewing dogmatism”. If this were accepted, then the public and humanists may also be motivated to stop “hankering” after the idea that “… [the natural] science[s] [have] a special method which, if only the humanists would apply it to ultimate
values, would give us the same kind of self-confidence about moral ends as about technological means” (2003: 591).

Following on from this, Rorty proposes an “ethnocentric” version of relativism, the “rationality” of which is derived from its emphasis on the advancement of human happiness. This starts with the assertion that there can be no universal theory about truth that can be stated in positive terms. Truth is not a correspondence to reality; neither is it a contemporary statement of opinion. Instead, all that can be said about truth is that people in given social groups will commend as true those beliefs which “[they] find good to believe” – a purely negative statement. The point of social inquiry therefore is to find the ways to bridge the gap between the things which people believe to be good and those which they think to be better. As such, inquiry which is grounded in a spirit of solidarity with humans rather than an allegiance to abstractions such as objectivity can have “only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one.” Thus Rorty – like Marx and many other activist thinkers – is an “anti-philosopher” (Eagleton, 2001: 261) who places no value on “sustained reflection” (i.e. philosophy) unless it leads to change.

In summary, I have shown that feminist epistemology has acted as a vector for the stance that truth, knowledge and reality are not universal and monolithic properties but are contestable constructions which arise from the interactions and beliefs of social groupings. I have also noted that oppositional epistemologists place ethical and political concerns at the heart of the inquiry into knowledge and in some cases maintain that there is no intrinsic nature to truth; a stance which encourages some (like Rorty) to consider abandoning epistemology altogether. In the following sections, I will discuss the view of reality and ethics that accompanies oppositional epistemology and the justifications they provide for the pedagogy used in this research project.
“You Can’t be Neutral on a Moving Train”: Reality, Morality and Research

The nature of that which people consider to be real (the philosophical field of ontology) is another determinant of how people choose to research and educate. For example, one common view of reality held by the politically conservative is that society is an organic structure which is larger than the sum of its constituent citizens. For this structure to develop for the benefit of all, individuals must be committed to its authority and survival and direct their political and intellectual efforts towards its continuance (Hewison, 1997: 74). Scruton (2005) puts it this way:

... the most important obligations governing our lives as social and political beings – including those to family, country and state – are non-contractual and precede the capacity for rational choice [...] they have an absolute and immovable character that we must acknowledge if we are to understand our social and political condition. The refusal of people on the left to make this acknowledgement stems from their inability to accept external authority in any form, and from their deep down belief that all power is usurpation, unless wielded by themselves [...] [Furthermore], while the left-liberal view of politics is founded in antagonism towards existing things and resentment at power in the hands of others, conservatism is founded in the love of existing things, imperfections included, and a willing acceptance of authority, provided it is not blatantly illegitimate.

However, contrary to Scruton’s assertion, the Marx-inspired left does agree that people are involved in relations that are independent of their consent. The difference is that while Scruton views these relations as being of a fundamentally benign nature at the level of institutions such as the family and the state, Marx (cited in Eagleton, 2001: 271) saw the “indispensable” relations as lying deeper and having a much more negative cast. For Marx, all culture and cultural manifestations, such as families and nations, have “one parent”: people’s labor and their relations to the means of production. As the essence of these capitalistic relations is “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation”, the goal of his activist
philosophy therefore was not to preserve and extend but to overthrow and remake.

Although Marx’s “reductive” emphasis on the economic causes of oppression is widely criticized today, his position that the cultural and economic forms of capitalism are inherently oppressive remains a defining element of the worldview of many oppositional researchers and educators. For example, the “bottom-up” historian Howard Zinn (2002: 8) cites the importance of warfare and the weapons industry to capitalist economies in making the claim that scholarly objectivity is neither possible nor desirable: “Events are already moving in certain deadly directions,” he says, “and to be neutral means to accept that.” Educators therefore should teach to “change the world”, specifically to “increase the amount of love and justice in the world” (Brookfield, 1995: 1). The job of oppositional research and education, as informed by this ontology, accordingly becomes one of grounding one’s preconceived assumptions about injustice in explicit empirical evidence of its existence and, thereafter, of directing one’s efforts to redressing these injustices.

It is at this point that the role of ethics should be raised. What justification is there for believing that the oppositional worldview is any more desirable than the conservative outlook? Is there any scope for making objective judgments about what is true and good, or must these always be purely personal opinions? The following discussion is important as it involves the question of positivism, an approach to philosophy which many oppositional educators blame for the desecration of the spirit and practice of education.

The Challenge of Positivism
Ethicists, or “moral philosophers”, attempt to understand the nature of what is right and wrong. For many philosophers of science, this is a pointless task as no sense data can be produced in support of statements of belief. To illustrate, the
English philosopher Bertrand Russell (2000: 788) - whose ideas helped to provide the foundation for the philosophical school of “logical positivism” - claimed that it was impossible to prove which beliefs “make men virtuous” and that any attempts to do so would inevitably involve the corrupt presentation of conjecture as truth. Accordingly, Russell called for the elimination from philosophy of any inquiry into speculative matters such as beliefs and theology.

The positivist school of philosophy refined this stance by proposing a “verification principle” (Pojman, 1999: 466). This stated that for a sentence to be meaningful, it must be verifiable in principle by experience. To clarify, it would be reasonable to state that atoms exist because, although they are not directly observable by human senses, the statement “could conceivably be true if we had instruments to bring them to human consciousness” (468). However, moral and theological statements are meaningless as they cannot be verified, as Pojman (468) explains:

"Statements such as “Telling the truth is good” or “Killing innocents is bad” can’t be observed. That is, we can observe a lie or killing, but we can’t observe the “goodness” or “badness” which are predicated of these subject terms. [Positivist philosopher A.J Ayer] would reduce the value sentences to emotive expressions, such as “Telling the truth – Hurrah!” and “Killing innocents – Boo!"

Thus, according to Singer (1997: 271), the effect of positivism (and, later, postmodernism) was to reduce ethics in the minds of many to the status of arbitrary subjectivism. However, as a professional ethicist, Singer wonders whether it indeed is possible to make objective judgments about ways that are better for all human beings to live.

The answer he proposes is based on the suggestion by former Oxford philosophy professor R.M. Hare that judgments can only be considered moral if they are “universalizable” (205). By this he means that we must be prepared to make judgments regardless of whether we win or lose by their application - a stance
which Singer (206-7) argues limits the extent to which “we may put our own needs and our own happiness […] ahead of the happiness of […] other beings.” For Singer, an ethic of this nature can truly be characterized as oppositional as it defies the prevailing - conservative - norm of the pursuit of material self-interest.

To arrive at such universalizable judgments, says Singer, individuals and groups should employ the “escalator of reason” as reason “can take us where we did not expect to go” (1997: 269). In other words, while reason initially is employed only to help us to survive and reproduce, Singer argues that its momentum can carry us beyond these purposes and, in doing so, create a tension between our basic desires and that which emerges as the (universally applicable) “right thing to do”. Singer (1997: 269) explains his point by referring to the overthrowing of slavery in the United States:

> We can live with contradictions only up to a point. When the rebelling American colonists declared that all men have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, they may not have intended to bring about the abolition of slavery, but they laid the foundation for a process that, over almost a century, brought about that result. Slavery might have been abolished without the Declaration of Independence, or despite the Declaration, abolition might have been staved off for another decade or two; but the tension between such universal declarations of rights and the institution of slavery was not difficult to see.

As can be seen, Singer argues for moral and political concerns to remain at the heart of what it means to be “rational”. However, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986: 131-3), human considerations have now largely vanished from western social inquiry. This, they argue, is due to the positivist-inspired view that truth and knowledge consists only of those things that can be directly experienced, which necessarily has led to the virtual eradication of concerns about “values”. Reasoning therefore is now synonymous with scientific “technique” in that it is assumed that social inquiry has only one task: to provide the “objective facts” required to distinguish more effective courses of action from less effective ones.
The social sciences thus only are interested in explaining how outcomes occur, not whether or not they should be allowed to occur.

Kincheloe (2002: 3) argues that this instrumental form of reasoning has had several distinctively negative effects on teaching and researching. The primary one is that “dreaming about what could be” is now regarded as anachronistic. In its place, all that matters is the transmission and absorption of the discrete “factoids” that represent official knowledge, the success of which can be measured by top-down standardized testing. The role of education and teaching thus is debased; if competent performance on tests is all that is required, it is not the job of a teacher to produce, research or interpret knowledge, but only to ensure that the official knowledge is assimilated as efficiently as possible. Teachers therefore are required to enter a “Cartesian trance” in which they are to be insensitive to the anti-democratic strategies that they implement and to the degradation and demoralization that they bring to the teaching profession. “In this reductionist jailhouse,” says Kincheloe (2002: 10), “questions involving the educational gaps between the rich and the poor are deemed inappropriate. Questions about indoctrination fall on deaf ears. Such problems do not lend themselves to neat reductionist measurement with handy quantitative results.”

In response to the “bizarre educational world” imposed by positivist standards described above, Carr and Kemmis (1986) argue for a recasting of what it means to reason. While wishing to retain the “rigor and explanatory power” of modern science, they state that a return to Aristotelian conceptions of theory and practice (132) would allow the readmittance of the “judgments and interests of humankind” to social inquiry. Thus “theory” should no longer be thought of as a set of testable “law like” generalizations, as this suggests the only point of access to practice is through the application of the techniques of the natural sciences. Instead, they prefer to see theory (or praxis) as a process of cultivating the
character of the individual through reference to the “uncertain” and “incomplete” knowledge offered by ethics, politics and education. The idea that there is something intangible that can be nurtured to grow in a certain value-laden direction thus gives the praxis orientation to theory a specific practical and moral intent; a “disposition [for the character] to be cultivated”, which Aristotle termed phronesis.

The question that arises here is how Aristotle’s “practical philosophy” of praxis/phronesis, in which the qualities and values of human life are foregrounded, can be synthesized into a meta-theory which accommodates the techniques of the natural sciences. While many solutions have been put forward, the thinking of Jurgen Habermas remains particularly influential.

A “Critical Science”?
In keeping with Code and other oppositional philosophers, Habermas (cited in Carr et al., 1986: 134-144) denies epistemological objectivity and maintains that the construction of knowledge is shaped by the human interests that it serves. He identified three “knowledge constitutive interests”: the technical desire to gain control over natural objects, which gave rise to the natural sciences; the practical interest of humans to grasp the social meanings which constitute social reality, from which hermeneutics was developed; and the emancipatory drive to develop material and intellectual conditions in which non-alienating interaction can occur. Habermas credits the last interest for the development of Critical Science.

The Critical Science Habermas proposes comprises some of the core assumptions that distinguish oppositional research and teaching. It holds that people’s aims and purposes in life are repressed and distorted by the manipulative effects of “outside [...] agencies”, which in turn produces a hegemonic ideology in which subjugation and oppression seem “unproblematic, inevitable, incidental or justifiable”. The objective of Critical Science therefore is to subvert this
ideology through a sustained Marxist-style critique (i.e. “We wish to find the new world through criticism of the old”), and thereafter, to construct new forms of knowledge which empower people to acknowledge their true needs rather than those that have been dictated to them by the oppressive ideology.

However, the means by which this emancipatory outcome may be achieved remain unclear. Critics noted that Habermas did not provide a criteria of rationality by which emancipatory knowledge generated by a critical social science could be validated or rejected. In other words, how could the theories of a critical social science “be shown to be ‘better’ or ‘more correct’ interpretations than the ideologically infected interpretations they seek to replace?” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 140). Habermas’ attempt at justification was to suggest an ethical theory of self-realization in which individuals subject their speech to a rational process of validation. If they can show through argument that their utterances are true, comprehensible, sincere, and that it was right for them to produce the utterance, then they have engaged in an ‘ideal speech act’ through which debate characterized by a lack of coercion and manipulation can flow, and from which the form of “the conduct of the political struggle” can emerge. In this way, Habermas attempted to show that all humans have a conception of an ideal form of human life which is “promised by, and anticipated in, the very activity of language”, but which is concealed from them by naïve acceptance of ideologically derived opinions and norms. Nevertheless, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986: 143), Habermas’ theory is “not a finished product” and should be taken as a tentative rather than conclusive gesture towards producing a unified theory of knowledge, justice, action and rationality.

Teaching to Resist

Some distinct themes of oppositional teaching and research have now emerged. These include claims that knowledge is not in correspondence with an
independent reality but is a political construction which can be marshaled to alter oppressive conditions; that “oppression” is an empirically verifiable phenomenon which educators have a duty to bring to consciousness and to subvert; and that the struggle against oppression must be formulated locally rather than with reference to any grand unifying critical science (which, in any case, does not yet - perhaps cannot - exist in any satisfactory form). A major consideration preceding this research project therefore was to adopt a form of theory/method which accommodated these assumptions.

One model which has been widely applied by oppositional educators since the 1970s has been that developed by the Brazilian activist Paulo Freire. This section will describe how the Freirean method relates to the points described above – particularly with reference to challenging ideological beliefs as a means to emancipation – and will then go on to describe the “generative themes” that have emerged from the research participants’ application of the pedagogy. The mechanics of the pedagogy as it was applied in this project will be described in the methodology chapter that follows.

Freire’s “education for critical consciousness” was developed from his efforts to teach illiterate Brazilian peasants to write. As a result of his own experience, and through his interest in Marx’s action-orientated philosophy, Freire grew to reject the longstanding view that education was primarily a matter of transferring expert knowledge to the ignorant. He argued instead that to teach writing without paying attention to the oppressive cultural conditions which were responsible for the mass illiteracy in the first place was to lend active assistance to the entrenchment and reproduction of structural exploitation (for example, Freire, 1973a: 42-47).

Accordingly, Freire suggested a new objective for Brazilian literacy education; that it should not be concerned with decontextualized learning outcomes, but should teach skills as an aid to developing critical reflection. This, he argued, would
empower the oppressed to find the means to free themselves from their passive and mute acceptance of their exploitation. For this to occur, the Brazilian oppressed had to come to know that they were active “makers” of culture as well as recipients, as awareness that they had agency would allow them to escape from their “submersion” in apathy and to “acquire the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled” (Freire, 1973b: 81)

A first step for sympathetic educators who wished to employ a “pedagogy for the oppressed” was to understand that the transfer method teaching is a form of ideological “banking”. Freire (1973b: 45-6) clarified this concept as follows:

[Banking] education … becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and ‘makes deposits’ which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat […] In their political activity, the dominant elites utilize the banking concept to encourage passivity in the oppressed, corresponding with the latter’s ‘submerged’ state of consciousness, and take advantage of that passivity to ‘fill’ the consciousness with slogans that create even more fear of freedom.

In place of this one-way transference of information, Freire (1973b: 61) advocated a dialogic method of teaching. He imagined a pedagogy in which teachers and students worked together as co-investigators to “name the world” which previously had been hidden from them by the force of ideologically-induced apathy. This process of naming turned on the conception that the foundational word – the essence of dialog – has an essential binary nature of reflection and action, which must be balanced if praxis - action based upon critical reflection - is to occur. For Freire, dialog which lacks a will to action is mere empty verbalism; on the other hand, action for action’s sake makes dialog impossible and thus also is a negation of the possibility for praxis. Only when people speak together of their own free will, in an atmosphere of love and
solidarity for the idea of naming and changing their reality, can the “true word” in all its binary power be spoken.

To achieve this end, Freire developed a curriculum process which he named the “pedagogy of the oppressed”. The first phase involved researching the vocabulary of the participants and selecting as “generative words” those which revealed “longings, frustrations, disbeliefs, hopes and an impetus to participate” (Freire, 1973a: 49). Thereafter, these “generative words” were matched to visual images (“codifications”) of familiar local situations which also offered perspectives for the analysis of regional and national problems. After teachers and students discussed the implication of the generative word in relation to the presented image (a process called “decoding”), the word was presented without its image and separated into its constituent phonemes. Following this, the participants learned to “visualize” the phonemes and combine them into new words. The first lesson concluded with the students writing the phonemic combinations that they had developed and, in later lessons, essaying on the objective conditions of their lives.

In Freire’s experience, this process of helping previously muted individuals to become aware of their status as active and creative “Subjects” quickly led to their politicization. He cites the following anecdotes in support of his claim (Freire, 1973a: 56, 47-8):
When an ex-illiterate of Angicos, speaking before [socialist Brazilian President] João Goulart and the presidential staff, declared that he was no longer part of the mass, but one of the people, he had done more than utter a mere phrase; he had made a conscious option. He had chosen decisional participation, which belongs to the people, and had renounced the emotional resignation of the masses. He had become political." [...] [Referring to another peasant]: “I make shoes,” he said, “and now I see I am worth as much as the Ph.D who writes books.” [...] [And another elderly peasant]: “I know that I am cultured,” [he] said emphatically. And when he was asked how it was that he knew himself to be cultured, he answered with the same emphasis, “Because I work, and working, I transform the world.”

The effectiveness and political impact of Freire’s method was so great that he was jailed and then exiled by the right-wing government that overthrew Goulart’s. However, despite the controversial success that he had had in Brazil and other South American countries, Freire explicitly stated that his pedagogy was not a universal panacea. His colleague of the time, Richard Shaull (writing in Freire, 1973b: 13), agreed, stating that it would be “absurd” to think that a literacy program designed for Brazilian peasants could be directly applied in an industrialized society like the United States. Nevertheless, said Shaull, there were parallels between the societies of Brazil and the U.S. which made the concepts underlying Freire’s work equally relevant to both these societies, as well as all other cultures in the world.

Shaull’s claim rested on his observation that the U.S., like Brazil, always has had an obvious “culture of silence”. In the case of the U.S. in 1973, however, it was not illiteracy but the rapid advancement of the technological society which was “rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system.” In more recent times, the educator Ira Shor has identified the unthinking acceptance of the concept of “self-reliance” as one of the major disempowering forces of contemporary U.S. culture. Writing of his students in one particular class, Shor (1992: 63) explains:
They did not perceive the school system or the economic system as problems, as systematic obstacles, as political factors functioning against certain groups and for others. Their education had denied them a critical appreciation of their society's power relations [...] why some won and many lost, students could explain only by the single great lesson: Win or lose, the individual is to blame [...] if you fail to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, blame only yourself.

Accordingly, Shor argues that American students today are equally inclined as the Brazilian peasants of the 1970s to “perceive their state [...] as fated and unalterable” (Freire, 1973b: 57), and thus are as in need of a Freirean pedagogy which heightens their sense of agency.

A form of the Freirean model that is commonly used in western societies today is outlined by Posner (1998: 89-93). Educators and students begin the process by developing “generative themes” which reflect a shared view of reality. Shor (1992: 55) describes these themes as “problematic conditions in daily life” that “grow out of student culture”; phenomena such as alcoholism or even things seemingly as trivial as bad language. Following this identification, theme-related instructional materials in the form of readings, photographs, interviews and the other representational forms are developed cooperatively by teachers and students. These are designed to stimulate “critical reflection” about the dominant forms of knowledge that frame the presentation of these themes in daily life. For example, Freire, in dialog with Shor (1987: 36), claims that discussion and research which proceeds along critical lines can serve to highlight and open to debate orthodox “obscuring myths” such as the argument that high unemployment is due to “illegal aliens” rather than government policies to suppress wages. The outcome of this process is praxis - action based on critical reflection.

However, the magnitude of the praxis that can be achieved should not be overestimated. For Shor (1992: 34), often “all that can be accomplished” is a “moment of transition from passivity or naïveté to some animation and critical awareness.” Significant success, in his view, is achieved when students on their
own initiative initiate topics that are more structural in nature than the personally relevant generative themes they began with: to “seriously study racism or sexism or the arms race” indicates a “starting point of transformation which may develop in the long run into their choices for social change”. Nevertheless, such is the hold of mass culture over the students’ expectations that the critical method often cannot even “make a dent” in the students’ outlook.

It can be seen from the discussion in this section that Freirean pedagogy accords with the oppositional thinking described earlier in the chapter. Firstly, it assumes that knowledge is not a value-free representation of an overarching reality; instead it is seen to be a political and moral phenomenon that can be marshaled to destabilize exploitative ideologies. Another important dimension is that knowledge is held not to be the product of individual thought; indeed, there can be no emancipatory knowledge apart from that which emerges from dialog. Knowledge is thus an inherently social product as “[the] word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no-one can say a true word alone” (Freire, 1973b: 61). However, as all oppositional educators acknowledge, the task of subverting official forms of knowledge is monumental due to the power of ruling class ideology to “saturate our very consciousness” with the notion that a world deformed by exploitation is tout court, “the only world” that is possible (Apple, 1979: 5).

Hegemony: Exploitation as a Natural Part of the Only Possible World

Eagleton (1991) begins his treatise on ideology by noting that there at least six different ways to define it, none of which bear much relation to each other. However, the quality of this nebulous concept can be gleaned from his description of what the study of ideology entails (xiii-xiv):
[It] is among other things the inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness. It is because being oppressed sometimes brings with it some slim bonuses that we are occasionally prepared to put up with it. The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power; and any practice of political emancipation thus involves that most difficult of all forms of liberation, freeing ourselves from ourselves.

The major questions about ideology as they relate to oppositional research and education thus can be summarized as follows: what is the nature of this force that so effectively causes people to work against their own interests? How does it cause people to become so blinded to their oppressed condition? How can it be exposed and undermined?

The person who has most fully addressed these questions was the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Writing from prison, Gramsci proposed that ideology was of critical importance to the ruling class as a violent instrument of control. However, in his opinion, there was a greater force than ideology; that of “hegemony”.

Hegemony, according to Gramsci (cited in Eagleton, 1991: 112), is a category that is broader than ideology but is not reducible to it. Hegemony refers to the phenomenon of inculcating a conviction in the disempowered mass of the general population that ruling class values are the only possible values. It therefore is about winning consent to its rule from those that it subjugates; ideology, on the other hand, is something that is impressed by coercive means. For Gramsci (113), hegemony is an immeasurably more powerful force than ideology as it is able to represent its interests as “natural” or “the limit of commonsense”, whereas ideologies generally have to be enforced by visible (and thus resistable) apparatus such as the police or the singing of national anthems.

In his analysis of hegemony, Gramsci posited that it is manifested in four ways (cited in Eagleton, 1991: 112-113), with ideology figuring as but one of its constituent aspects. Abutting ideology, he suggested, was its economic dimension,
which may, for example, take the form of altering the tax system to favor elite groups, or to “create a layer of relatively affluent, and thus somewhat politically quiescent, workers”. Then there is the political aspect of hegemony, which for Eagleton resides most clearly in the Western parliamentary system. The insidiousness of this arrangement, he says, is that it is able to convince the disenfranchised that they govern themselves, “a belief which no slave of antiquity or medieval serf was expected to entertain” (112). Finally, hegemony is maintained through the creation of the impression that the bourgeois state is somehow “neutral” instead of an instrument for the advancement of the ruling class which owns and benefits from it. This is a particularly powerful form of control as it contains an element of truth. People living in capitalist societies are not under the direct political, cultural and judicial rule of their masters, yet indirectly they remain subjugated because of the “dull compulsion of the economic [need simply to survive].” Under this arrangement, the political state “can take something of a back seat”; nevertheless, it “sustain[s] the general structures within which this economic activity is conducted” (113).

As can be seen, hegemony is associated with civil society – the “whole range of institutions intermediate between the state and the economy”. Its infusion in mass culture thus makes it particularly difficult to combat, as Eagleton (1991: 114) explains:

> How is the working class to take power in a social formation where the dominant power is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with ‘culture’ itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlor? How do we combat a power which has become the ‘common sense’ of a whole social order, rather than one which is widely perceived as alien and oppressive?

The answer for Gramsci (cited in Eagleton, 1991: 118-121) was that struggle must broaden from traditional forms of occupying factories or confronting the state to contesting the dominant values, customs, speech habits and ritual practices that
comprise culture. For this to occur, organic intellectuals must work with subordinated groups towards elevating the practical experience of their subordinated condition above the “common sense” notions of existence that they derive from their rulers. To be an organic intellectual thus is not to be a “contemplative thinker” who remains outside social and cultural life. Instead, one must be an organizer, constructor and “permanent persuader”, who seeks to develop a new emancipatory ideology which is perceptible “in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life.”

However, according to McLaren and Rizvi (2002), Gramsci never intended for the cultural struggle to be an end in itself. They say that Gramsci in all his writings emphasized that fight against the common sense ideas of the elite must be directed towards the goal of developing a proletarian hegemony administered by workers’ councils. Nevertheless, they say, “progressive” educators appear to have lost sight of this aim in recent times and thus have unwittingly taken critical pedagogy “out of the business of class struggle and focused instead on reform efforts within the boundaries of capitalist society.” For teachers to be really be considered “organic intellectuals”, they must be involved in developing strategic alliances with anti-capitalist and working class movements worldwide. Without this commitment, one is actively working to reproduce the hegemonic conviction that capitalism – and its attendant iniquities – are “part of nature itself”.

In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical work that is emerging with regard to hegemonic thinking and practices in Thailand. The methodology chapter that follows will discuss the process by which the research participants identified and challenged these aspects of dominance.

Thai Forms of Power: Introduction
The work of Australian National University professor Peter A. Jackson has been particularly influential with regard to the location and regulation of hegemonic
power in Thailand. Jackson (2004b: 201-2) argues that western poststructuralists misunderstand the nature of Thai power when they assume that the modern Thai state, like those in the west, attempts to exert a panoptic “all seeing” control over individuals’ private and public lives. In actuality, says Jackson, the Thai state has little interest in disciplining individuals’ private behavior and instead reserves its regulatory attention for the public domain, a practice which (to western eyes) results in a confounding mismatch between public behavior and private beliefs. Why this should be so, and the implications that this has for oppositional pedagogy and research in Thailand, will now be discussed in detail.

Poststructuralism is a philosophical movement which argues that texts do not have stable meanings throughout time (for example, Madison, 2005: 162-3). In other words, the meaning of a text is not entirely derived from the author’s intention but is also affected by the characteristics of the audience and the location and time in which the text is read or observed. By applying various analyses to texts, an audience is able to develop an understanding of the shifting meanings that they undergo, and is also able to appreciate the illogicality of assuming that the self is a single coherent entity (Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 477-501).

The task of poststructuralism therefore is not to look for essential truths, which it argues is a futile task anyway as meaning is endlessly changing and thus is infinitely deferred (Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 481). Instead, its purpose is to investigate how the self is constituted and how dominant modes of speaking, writing and behaving (“discourses”) are produced and regulated. Resistance within the poststructuralist framework therefore lies more in exposing and challenging the discursive constructions that perpetuate power than in organizing mass political action (2000: 492).
For Foucault (cited in Jackson, 2004b: 208-209), the power of western states to regulate their citizens is partly derived from the willingness of individuals to expose their inner lives to public scrutiny and to police their own public behavior. With regard to the first point, Foucault argued that the West is a “confessional culture” in which the mass of the people believe that “speaking one’s truth” or enunciating one’s “true being” leads to personal liberation. This preparedness to reveal all in turn provides the state with considerable insight into whether its subject population is internalizing dominant values and interests.

Another dimension of control identified by Foucault was described through the use of a prison metaphor. In his book “Discipline and Punish” (Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 491), Foucault referred to an innovative form of Georgian prison architecture known as the Panopticon. This was a building in which guards were located at the apex of a central tower, which gave them a complete view of the prison cells that were arranged in circles below them. The prisoners, on the other hand, were unable to see the guards and thus were inclined to discipline themselves on the assumption that they were under constant surveillance. In modern states, according to Foucault (491), the position of the all-seeing guard is fulfilled by “the military, psychiatry, the school, the workshop [...] [the] minute disciplines, the panoptics of daily life.” Faced with this assumed constant fixity of gaze, people ensure that they themselves do not “circulate in unpredictable ways” and thus control over the public and private spheres is absolute.

Jackson argues however that this dynamic does not exist in Thailand. In place of a “confessional culture”, with its transparent relationship between public behavior and private beliefs, there exists instead a “regime of images” where the “surface is taken for real” (Van Esterik, cited in Jackson, 2004b: 190) and thus “the real [can remain] hidden and unchallenged” (Van Esterik, cited in Jackson,
In plainer language, this means that modern Thais enjoy a comparatively high degree of autonomy in terms of their private thinking and behavior as long as they do not “thrust it onto the consciousness of others.”

This Thai concern with the surface is believed by Jackson and others to derive from recently developed local cultural concerns with “face”, “reputation” and “constructing positive images” (Jackson, 2004b: 186). Given that images are made by humans and thus also can be destroyed, and that the surface in a paradoxically deep sense is the real, it can be appreciated how much effort is expended on ensuring that the integrity of the image is retained. Mulder (cited in Jackson, 2004: 189-90) explains:

[The] appreciation of presentation as the essence of reality described the phenomenon in which outside appearance is taken to be the essence of social life ... It is [the] pronounced tendency to take the surface of things for their essence that may be called “deep seated satisfaction with the presentation.” The depth of this satisfaction is demonstrated by the emotion that is involved in presentation. Presentation is therefore more than superficial reality: it is essential reality; this mental recognition is at the basis of the tendency to equate the manipulation of the symbols of social reality with its actual mastery.

An effect of this almost exclusive concern with the surface is that “certain truths” are effectively barred from being publicly stated. Thus, says Jackson (2004b: 184), it is common in Thailand for there to be official denials of the factuality of events that are widely believed to be true. While western cultural logic may construe this as a contradiction or a “perversion of reason” (202), Jackson argues that this negative interpretation cannot be applied within the Thai context. Instead, from the point of view of the “regime of images” that he proposes, the strategy of implausible denial is not intended or perceived as a duplicitous attempt to bury the facts but as a culturally logical response to the recognition that “the facts have already escaped into the public domain and are circulating widely as common knowledge” (203). To officially recognize these facts would be to provide them
with the force that they require to damage the essential surface; however, to disown them is to “relocate representations or discussions of an offending fact from the domain of public discourse to the less problematic private domain” (203). Thus, the truth has not been destroyed; officials have not tried to murder it; and the integrity of the essential public image has been preserved.

Challenges to the truth value of a representation are not the only phenomena that “arouse consternation” in Thailand’s regime of images. According to Jackson (2004b: 205-206), attempts to impugn the prestige value of an institution cause “equally intense reactions.” This, he says, is clearly illustrated by the reaction of the Thai Government to criticism of its “war on drugs” policy in 2003. Commenting on the extrajudicial killing of up to 2700 people during a three month crackdown on the methamphetamine trade, the Thai National Human Rights Council accused Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of working to usher in a “culture of authoritarianism” (Morris, 2004). Thaksin’s response was not to dispute the accuracy of the NHRC’s claims but to attack the organization for having damaged the country’s standing in the eyes of the world. “Don’t they think their criticisms which have been published worldwide will do the country a disservice?” he asked. More pointedly, the state aggressively penalizes any commentary on the monarchy which in any way can be judged as negative. Hewison (1997: 58) cites advice from a “leading Thai scholar” that “any statement which touches upon the conduct of the King is liable to be interpreted as lese majeste. In addition, a statement which is not strictly lese majeste may nonetheless be regarded as disrespectful.”

In summary, the thrust of the analysis by Jackson and other ethnographers is that a kind of “cultural aphasia” exists in Thailand. This they define as a “willed inability within a culture to allow for the articulation of certain ideas, the loss of a
discursive or linguistic center for addressing particular issues.” (Bishop and Robinson, cited in Jackson, 2004b: 192). Put another way (Jackson, 2004b: 192):

Thai forms of power create a divide between an intensely policed public domain and a silenced but relatively autonomous private sphere. [Bishop and Robinson] describe the disarticulation of these two domains and their political and social effects as producing a national “will not to know” by which private truths, labeled “gossip”, are denied and repudiated by state authorities if expressed in the public domain.

I will now discuss the implications that the unique silencing form of hegemonic power in Thailand has for the “generative themes” identified by the research participants. These, as described in the introduction to this chapter, concern issues of female beauty, conduct and sexuality.

Thai Hegemonic Norms of Gender and Sexuality

Van Esterik (1996: 203) begins her discussion of the importance of beauty contests in Thailand with the observation that attractiveness has long been used by the state to “keep [Thai] women in their place.” Beauty contests, she says, have been skillfully managed to ensure women “conform to a passive, morally upright, dutiful stereotype”, in which attributes of gentleness, silence, virtue, and an appealing voice are paramount (203). Indeed, such is the power of the beauty ideology that the contests have always had more influence on young Thai women than feminist writings. Thus: “Beauty contests set the tone for the way Thai women are evaluated and thought about and how they evaluate and think about themselves. As everyone says, ‘Thai women love beauty contests.’” (216)

These observations are important because they reemphasize the importance of the claim that the image is the location of hegemonic power in Thailand. As Jackson (2004b: 209) argues, the modernizing west assumes that the surface is a mere reflection of the “real” inner being; however, in Thailand, it may well be that the surface has the power to mould the inner being. Thus it is that contemporary Thai politicians are at times admired more for their beauty than
their judgment, and that external physical beauty can be thought to “[correspond] with the internal virtues of a character” (Mattani, cited in Jackson, 2004b: 210). In the light of these observations, it is not surprising that a significant proportion of the research participants in this project nominated concerns over their (“unattractive”) dark or yellow skin pigmentation, or their less than ideal (i.e. non-anorexic) bodies, or negative reactions to their “unladylike” behavior as the most significant problems they have in their lives.

However, as mentioned before, the so-called “fetishization of the surface effects” (Jackson, 2004b: 189) means that it is very difficult for women to admit to tensions or disagreement with hegemonic norms. The individual may disagree with a particular dominant ideological belief, such as that “good” women should effectively be asexual (for example, Sinnott, 2004: 115), but such is the anxiety not to cause public disharmony that personal contradictory opinions may never be expressed. Accordingly, many ethnographies conducted by Thai and western researchers appear to show that modern Thai women of all social classes wholeheartedly subscribe to beliefs and attitudes that in the west would widely be regarded as blatantly sexist. For example, research by Knodel et al. (1999: 96) found that women in metropolitan and rural focus groups invariably countenance their husbands or boyfriends using the services of prostitutes as they believe that “it is natural for men to pursue sex at every opportunity”. (More specifically, these women did not dispute men’s stated attitudes that “to have sexual intercourse is like having meals - we [men] have to have it every day” (96) and that married men have an inherent need for a frequent “change of taste” in sex partners.) Furthermore, Thai women habitually state that their own sexual gratification is unimportant, that is their duty to please their husbands sexually, and that adultery on the part of women (but not of men) is to be regarded with “abhorrence and disgust”. In essence, women publicly imply that separate standards for male and female sexuality are “natural”, as an article from the Thai
“Daily News” (headlined Where Has Proper Femininity Gone?) (Sinnott, 2004: 114) makes clear:

Equality of the sexes and rights and freedoms are good things, but one should not forget that there are limits to them. No matter what, there will never be a day when men and women can do all the same things ... Women letting themselves go and following men's behavior and not preserving their proper femininity - society will look down on them, and they will be ashamed wherever they go. Wait until you are born a man before you do what men do, and while you are a woman, take care of your proper femininity, and then you will be praised by whoever sees you.” (Emphasis added)

The important question in terms of social justice is whether the surface conformity with sexist beliefs really reflects privately held attitudes. Jackson's theory of the regime of images posits that this is not necessarily the case, but that the silencing effect makes it extremely difficult to make accurate judgments. Thaweesit (2004: 206) affirms this stance, claiming that dissent often can be gauged only through the "ambivalence and tension [that] predominate in women's verbal expressions and silences whenever their actual sexual behavior is incongruent with certain authoritative or ideological discourses". That these silences frequently occurred in her interviews with female factory workers affirms to her that modern Thai women are torn between attaching to traditional normative discourses that oppress them and newer discourses which emphasize "personal autonomy, sex equality, modernity and so on" (216). Indeed, such is the strength of the conflict between preserving public proprieties and behaving in ways that are non-traditional that most women develop extremely "fluid and incoherent" self-presentations. In other words, Thai women are liable to feel that they must be "different [people] in different social situations", which strongly contributes to the general opacity of the female Thai inner being (205).

Before moving on to discuss opportunities that exist for resistance within the Thai regime of images, it is worthwhile to briefly look at how Thai lesbian relationships - also a notable generative theme in this project - fit in with the
general picture. In keeping with Jackson’s theory, the freedom of Thai women to have a female lover, even if they are in stable heterosexual relationships, is relatively unpoliced when compared with the west. This comparative liberty, combined with heterosexuality’s status as a “morally dangerous and risky endeavor” for women (Sinnott, 2004: 111), is perhaps largely responsible for the “ubiquity” of lesbian relationships in Thailand. Thaweesit (2004: 211), for example, states that she was “struck” by the fact that the factory workers she interviewed for her fieldwork considered lesbian relationships to be “ordinary” because they were “so widespread”.

However, as Thaweesit (2004: 212) and Sinnott (2004: 122-31) point out, private tolerance of lesbian relationships does not translate into public acceptance. So-called “toms” (from “tomboy”; those who appear more masculine in a lesbian relationship) tend to be discriminated against in workplaces and in social situations because they are thought to be “uncompliant” and liable to make trouble (although the feminine-looking “dees” – from “ladies” – remain unscathed due to their affirmation of the Thai norm of female presentation). Meanwhile, the Thai state and its various agencies (teachers, medical professionals and administrators) routinely produce “vivid images of sexualized [homosexual] threats to the national moral order” (Sinnott, 2004: 185). These often take the form of ‘scientific’ warnings about the ‘contagious’ status of homosexuality, as can be seen from this Thai radio report (cited in Sinnott, 2004: 200):

Many academics don’t dare tell the truth that teachers who are homosexual influence children in primary school. Ratchabhat. [a university which attempted, unsuccessfully, to ban gays and lesbians from applying to its teacher training college] has the duty to produce teachers to teach children in the primary grades. So this is the point that Ratchabhat is making: it is afraid that homosexuality of teachers will make Thai children be homosexual. And there is research from foreign countries on provinces in the northeast of Thailand that found this to be true.
Opportunities for Resistance

In developing his theory of the “regime of images”, Jackson notes (2004b: 184) that it is not static or “traditional” but has emerged from a contested and dynamic system of power/knowledge. Thus, while it may be true that a state of domination exists today, the instability and artificiality of the existing power structure implies that a new configuration – possibly one that is much less oppressive than that which exists now – may eventually emerge.

The language that Jackson uses acknowledges Foucault’s claim that power is not something that can be owned exclusively by one class in perpetuity but exists in constantly evolving relations from which we cannot escape (for example, Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 489-90). This assertion to the dynamism of power relations caused Foucault to largely dismiss the idea that there ever could be a totalizing Marxist-style revolution which “(overthrew) power once and for all” (492). Freedom for Foucault thus was not envisaged as “liberty” – “a process with an end” (493) - but as something that could be found only in permanent rebellion against the ways in which people are defined, categorized and classified.

Jackson (2004a) illustrates the temporary nature of current hegemonic power relations in Thailand by describing their surprisingly recent arrival. He argues that Thailand’s success in escaping direct invasion and colonization from the British during their period of Empire building was not due to the actions of “great kings saving the country” – a dominant narrative in Thailand – but to the realization by the elite that western powers would conquer any country that in its view remained “unChristian, uncivilized, non-progressive and stagnant” (2004a: 234). Accordingly, in 1861, King Mongkut issued an edict that the performing arts were to be revived “in order to impress Western visitors with images of Siam’s civilized high culture”. For Jackson, the “implicit message” that Siam’s elite sought to convey through this “mobilization of the population in the collective
performance of civilization” was that westerners did not need to colonize Siam in order to make it civilized as “we Thais are disciplined enough to subject ourselves to your standards of civilization” (237).

This process of “auto-colonial[ism]” (Jackson, 2004a: 233) in later years took the form of requiring Thai men and women to adopt western dress, to abandon their “brush cut” hairstyles, to stop chewing betel nut and to write monogamy into law (although, even today, polygamy is widely practiced and accepted as long as knowledge of it remains located in the private domain.) In more recent years, the Thai beauty contest became a major state tool for nation building (Van Esterik, 1996: 211-215). For example, in their earliest incarnations in the 1930s, women’s “radiant beauty” was said to “increase the power and legitimacy of democracy”, while since the 1980s beauty contests have been claimed by the Thai Government to encourage “tourism and foreign investment” (conversely, the women’s movement argues that this strategy has appealed only to sex tourists and actively buttressed Thailand’s image as the “biggest brothel in the world.”)

Jackson’s point is that the primacy of the image within Thai culture is not “ahistorical” or a “cultural given” but is the result of the state’s policy of orchestrating national performances of “civilized” behavior, first for foreign consumption, and then as a means of consolidating its power over the local population (2004a: 219). Mindfulness of the recently engineered status of this regime in turn should create awareness of the transitory nature of power and domination and the possibility that this offers for its reform.

One of the major theories for change within the western poststructuralist tradition that has been proposed in recent years is derived from Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity” (for example, Madison, 2005: 163-5). Briefly, this states that identity - particularly gender identity - is a function of stylized acts that are repeated through generations. “Gestures, posture, clothes, habits … the way
one crosses one's legs to way one wears a hat” are all performed differently depending on the gender, race, class status, and sexual orientation of the performer. Statements such as “he acts like he's gay” are common because “identity is performed, and to perform outside […] inherited constructions is to break through these taken-for-granted and commonsense notions of what a specific identity is or should be.” Thus, if one understands the socially constructed nature of gender, then one also will acknowledge that identity categories are not “naturally inherent or biologically determined” but are open to revision. In the words of Madison (2005: 164-5), recognition of performativity is a commitment to action as it:

... places the responsibility to break through unfair practices upon our shoulders and forces us to reckon with the fact that these categories -- and therefore the responses and practices based on these categories -- are not a fact of life, but are based upon human behavior that we can change.

Nevertheless, as “disruptive” as this concept is held to be in western scholarship, it appears rather conservative when applied to the Thai context. According to Jackson (2004b: 210-13), Butler’s idea that essential identity is determined by ritualized and repeated actions seems “natural” in a society like Thailand’s where the surface image is assumed to have the power to mould the inner being. Therefore, for Jackson, Butler’s theory is notable for having a wider explanatory scope than western scholars credit it for, but is scarcely as revolutionary in a cross-cultural context as the claims that have been made for it. The unlikelihood of finding any grand theories or visions of liberation that can be applied across cultures thus seems affirmed.

Conclusion
I have shown in this chapter that oppositional pedagogy and research are guided by an epistemological outlook which asserts that knowledge can never be “objective” but instead reflects the values and interests of those who construct
truth claims. A major task therefore is to debunk the notion that dominant forms of knowledge are “neutral” by showing that they in fact serve to entrench and reproduce empirically verifiable forms of oppression. However, as Gramsci has noted, this task is particularly difficult due to the power of capitalist institutions to diffuse their interests through the cultural sphere in such a way that oppression and disenfranchisement seem “natural” and “commonsensical”.

I followed this analysis with a discussion of the Freirean pedagogy, which is claimed by many to directly address and subvert dominant forms of power/knowledge. Its efficacy is claimed to lie in its explicit mission to replace the apathy of the oppressed with the understanding that they have the capacity to “create culture”, and thus have agency. This methodology accords well with Gramsci’s proposition that the duty of the “organic intellectual” is to help bring to consciousness the “lived experience” of the oppressed in order that they may be empowered to work for a better reality.

A discussion of Thai forms of hegemonic power concluded the chapter. A detailed explanation was presented of Jackson’s claim that the face that Thais present to the world determines their inner being, along with an explanation of how this obviates the need for the Thai state to police the inner lives of its citizens. Also raised was the concept of hegemony as it specifically applies to Thai gender norms, and the need for Western academics to recognize that the “disruptive” critical theories of the West may be inapplicable or conservative when applied to the Thai context.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This research originally was intended to produce a critical ethnography of those who participated in the curriculum. That is, I intended to “[immerse] [myself] in the culture under study” (Patton, 2002: 81) for the purpose of documenting efforts by the participants to resist unfairness and injustice within their lived domain (Madison, 2005: 5). Methods that are typically employed to produce data for critical ethnography include in-depth interviewing and naturalistic observation, with the strength of the conclusions depending to a considerable extent on the depth and variety of the methods used to generate the data (for example, Patton, 2002: 555-566).

However, because as interviewing was not allowed in this project due to ethical concerns, I was unable to conduct interviews for this project and thus felt that it would not be possible to use the critical ethnography method. Restrictions on making observations also existed due to my decision to be bound by the conventions arising from the “second wave” feminist method of consciousness-raising. This encourages women to discuss their lives in the company of other women only (for example, Sarachild, 1978) and thus my observation of participant behavior was largely restricted to the artificial setting of the classroom.

I therefore have been presented with the problem of retaining a “critical” focus to my work in a context where my access to the participants’ lives and culture has been significantly reduced. The compromise I reached was to employ the methodology of “Critical Discourse Analysis” (CDA). According to one of the methodology’s key developers, Norman Fairclough (1995: 2), CDA is a form of textual analysis which can be used by researchers to reveal how popular discourse
is manipulated in order to maintain social practices favorable to elite interests. It draws heavily on Gramsci’s propositions about ideological hegemony and has an explicitly emancipatory aim, which accords well with the motivations and interests I outlined in my Introduction and Literature Review.

Before discussing how I applied CDA to my students’ textual output, I will provide a brief description of the research context and the electronic tool that I designed and used for the purpose of data production.

The Research Environment

The data for this project was generated from a curriculum that I developed for English major students at a rural Thai university. The students conducted a three semester investigation during June 2005 - October 2006 into a social problem that they felt directly affected their lives. A total of 78 of the 83 students were female and most chose to investigate gender-related issues. The content of the curriculum will be briefly discussed later in this section.

The aims of the curriculum that I constructed were in sympathy with those of the radical “second wave” feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. The Women’s Liberation Movement of the time referred to the Latin etymology of the word “radical” (in Latin: “root”) to argue that their radicalism should not be perceived as “extremism” but as a means of “(getting) to the roots of problems in society” (Sarachild, 1978). A notable figure in the movement, Kathie Sarachild, described how WLM “radicalism” took the form of “consciousness raising”; that is, women were encouraged to describe their feelings and experiences as a means of identifying “who or what [had] an interest in maintaining the oppression in [their] lives”, the collective recognition of which was used to build a mass movement against these interests. Similarly, I sought through my pedagogy to encourage my predominately female students to describe how their lives are circumscribed in
the hope that this would lead to awareness of why oppressive constraints exist and how to take action against them.

There were two immediate problems that I faced in creating an environment which would fulfill the definition of “radicalism” described above. The first related to the difficulty of providing space for the students to talk about their personal and shared experiences. Sarachild notes in her 1978 paper that there was “tremendous resistance” by already politicized American women to describing their lives even when men were not present at their meetings. How then was I to successfully encourage apparently apolitical women from a culture which has a comparatively much higher acceptance of traditional passive female roles (for example, Hofstede, 2007) to speak intimately and revealingly about their experiences, especially when the person who normally would act as the facilitator was restricted on the basis of gender from being present? Furthermore, how could data in the form of records of discussions that took place out of my presence be generated?

Language presented another barrier. The participants all were rated by me -- a teacher and assessor of English as a Foreign Language of ten years’ experience -- as “extremely limited”, “limited” or “modest” users of English, which prevented them from precisely communicating abstract concepts in the language which provided our point of contact. As my Thai language competency is at an even lower level, and because of the restrictions on interviewing, the problem of accurately rendering the students’ thinking was acute.

My response to these problems was to develop a computerized bilingual multimedia template which would allow the students to independently develop and present their research in the form of text, images, audio and video. I felt it was essential that I gave students the capacity to work in my absence given the importance that women’s movements historically have placed upon creating
research environments which are populated exclusively by women. Furthermore, as much of the students’ research involved the analysis of mass culture messages that they felt were biased or oppressive, it was desirable that the students had the capacity to provide examples of the messages they were critiquing. Finally, I wished to provide them with the means of developing a permanent record of their research efforts. Bilingual functionality was included so that the students could first set down their thoughts in Thai before attempting to convey their meaning in English. A full description of this template is included later in this chapter.

The product of the students’ research was the culmination of three semesters of work. The constituent courses were structured in the following way:

1. Semester One. Course Advanced English Writing. In this class students worked in pairs to develop written themes on a social problem which they felt directly affected them, the concrete effects that they felt this problem had on the wider community, their personal experience of the problem, and the cultural beliefs which they felt contributed to this problem. The “generative themes” they identified included the following:

   - Being a dark-skinned woman in a culture which glorifies white skinned women

   - Having a normal body shape (one that is within the 18-25 Body Mass Index range) in a culture which glamorizes “beauty” in the form of extremely slender or anorexic figures

   - Being lesbian in a culture which dehumanizes lesbians
• Being a woman who wants to have the same social freedoms as men in a culture which accepts smoking, drinking and promiscuity as “relaxing” when done by men, but as evidence of evil or moral failure when engaged in by women.

The teaching methodology followed my interpretation of the “problem posing” pedagogy set out by Paulo Freire and Ira Shor. This is described in greater detail in Chapter 2.

2. Semester Two. Course: Critical Reading in English. The students formed into larger groups of 4-7 people based on the theme they had identified in the previous semester. They researched their topic in greater depth and produced a 5-10,000 word academic essay in English.

3. Semester Three. Course: Advanced Integrated English Language Skills I. Students developed a multimedia representation of the research they had done over the previous two semesters. It included supporting evidence in the form documentation, images and audio and video recordings.

The prosaic wording of the course titles suggest that the university’s syllabus planners intended for students to be taught purely technical language skills (“Critical Reading” warrants inclusion in this observation as this term in ESL teaching generally is taken to mean reading for the purpose of discerning the strengths and weaknesses of arguments, not as a means of building emancipatory knowledge.) My justification for politicizing the course content was derived from the cultural context in which my students live and work, which I have described the introduction to this dissertation.
The Data Production Tool

As I have stated, a major problem that I faced in this project was to gain insight into the participants’ experience in an environment where it was not possible to conduct interviews for ethical reasons and where the opportunity to conduct naturalistic observations was significantly limited due to second wave feminism’s preference that consciousness-raising and gender research work occur in female-only environments. I therefore felt that I had to construct a data production tool which the participants could independently operate, which would enable them to provide data in the form of images, video, audio and text, and which would provide them with complete control over what would be accessible by people both within and outside their research groups.

My solution was to refine a multimedia resource tool which I had developed and deployed over the two years leading up to this project. This tool was designed with reference to Paulo Freire’s curriculum model and has the following design features:

- An “Introduction” section, in which students outline their “generative theme”;

- A “How it Affects Others” section, in which the students describe the concrete social effects of the problem they have identified. Students have the opportunity to include supporting evidence for their points in the form of Windows Media video, MP3 audio, text, PDF documents, and images;

- A “How it Affects Us” section, in which students describe the effects of the problem on their own lives. Students relate their experiences in their native language in MP3 recordings which are subtitled in English;
• A “Why it Happens” section, in which students identify discourses which they believe contribute to their subjugation. This section allow them to provide pictorial, textual and electronic representations of the messages that they identify as oppressive. The students are asked to write critical commentaries on these selections. This generally takes the form of explaining why the media was selected, what the ‘real message’ underlying the text is perceived to be, and descriptions of what a fairer and more just message should be;

• A “Resistance” section, in which students describe:
  
  o new facts they had discovered through their research;

  o their vision of a better economic, political and legal system;

  o their vision of a better educational system;

  o their vision of a better media system;

  o any concrete action they had taken to redress what they consider to be oppressive behaviors and thinking.

The finished product is a multimedia CD which could be played on all computers with Microsoft Windows operating systems. However, due to my then lack of programming ability and also a lingering commitment to high teacher control, the students in previous semesters were not able to construct this resource for themselves. Instead, they provided me with the raw materials and I would generate the CD for them. This was an extremely time-consuming process and occasionally resulted in serious misunderstandings between the students and myself.
As my programming skills developed, and as I became more aware of the need for student control over the creative process, I felt it was a priority to augment the resource. The tool used to generate data for this project has retained the features described above but is now much more student directed in that all editing and publishing features are able to occur independently of me. I will now briefly describe the constituent features of the revised tool.

Development of the Research Tool Template
I programmed the template using the popular multimedia development program “Authorware”, which is produced by the software company Adobe Systems Incorporated. The template enables students to add text, images, audio, videos, PDF documents and subtitles, and to publish their work to compact disk. No programming knowledge is required by the students. Figure 1 and the notes below describe the main design screen.
Key:

1. The assets menu. This contains the supporting evidence for the students’ assertions. As detailed, students can add multiple PDF, audio and video files. The files are added by clicking the buttons grouped underneath label 13. The media screen is displayed in Figure 2;

2. The subsection menu. This details the various subsections within the various sections of the students’ research project (as detailed in labels 4-7 and 9). In the example I have given here, an imaginary group of students
have identified “bulimia” and “anorexia” as effects of the public pressure to have a very thin body shape;

3. The title for the students’ project. This is displayed in English or in Thai, depending on which language interface is selected by the user;

4. The Introduction section of the project;

5. The “Social Effects” section of the project;

6. The “Our Lives” (or “Personal Experience”) section of the project;

7. The “Reasons” (or “Social Beliefs”/ “Public Discourses”) section of the project;

8. Language interface buttons. Students prepare their work in English and in Thai. These buttons allow users to switch between the versions;

9. The “Resistance” section of the project;

10. The main image for each page published by the students. The image seen here is a stock template image which the students are directed to replace;

11. The main text area. By clicking the “Main Text” button under label 13, students are able to edit the template text in Microsoft Word.;

12. The picture text area. Students are able to edit the text by clicking the “Picture Text” button under label 13;

13. The editing buttons. By clicking these buttons, students are able to add text, images, audio, video, PDF documentation and subtitles. This editing bar is not shown in the published version (see figure 2);
14. The publishing button. When students click this button, the students' files and folders are copied to a special publishing folder. They are then able to use CD burning programs such as Nero to write the completed project to CD;

15. The main editing button. By clicking this, students are able to name their project and add subsections to the main sections of their project (as detailed in labels 4-7 and 9).

Figure 2: Media Screen (video image of interviewee intentionally removed)
The completed project has the same appearance as the editing version except that the bottom editing strap has been removed. The published version is shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3: Finished Product with editing strap removed (English version)
Ethical Concerns

A directive from Murdoch University’s ethics committee was that students must not be publicly identified. I took the following steps to comply with this requirement:

I requested that students identify themselves only by monikers and that they provided only non-identifying images of themselves. In cases where the students wish to identify themselves on the CD, I undertook not to pass on these identities in my published report.
I provided two levels of privacy in the “Personal Experiences” section of the template. In the “public view” area, students included information which they wished to share with an audience (see Figure 5). In the “private view” section, students could store text, images, video, pictures or audio in a password protected format which only they could access (see Figure 6). Students stored personal information in external Microsoft Word documents which were protected by passwords that they set and which no-one else was privy to.

Figure 5: “Personal Experiences” section (“public view”)
The Critical Discourse Analysis Methodology

As I noted earlier, I chose to employ the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because it provided the opportunity to retain a critical focus in an environment where I was prevented from using some of the tools traditionally associated with politicized research. In this section I will provide a brief overview of CDA methodology and explain how I applied it to this project.

CDA is an analytical tool which was developed with reference to assertions that manipulation of public discourse helps to maintain elite privilege (for example, Fairclough, 1995: 73-5). A “discourse” in this context is taken to mean language
that is put into social use in order to produce and reproduce a particular ideological aim (for example, Bucholtz, 2003: 57). For example, newspapers typically choose to state that “millions are out of work” instead of reporting that “firms have sacked millions”, thereby representing slumps and unemployment as “akin to [irresistible] natural disasters” rather than events that are the predictable consequence of [resistible] policies by social planners (Fairclough, 1995: 74-5). CDA thus pays special attention to propositions by Gramsci that the ability of the privileged elite to present their values and interests as “common sense” and “natural” (Apple, 1979: 5) arises not from overt totalitarian-style propaganda but from their understanding that ideologies become most deeply entrenched when they imbue the language that people use to understand and represent the world.

The proposition that language and representation are the main vehicles for the hegemony of elite ideology has led poststructuralists to suggest that a primary scope for resistance accordingly must lie in the analysis and reconfiguration of language. They point to examples such as the one described in the previous paragraph in stating their position that discourses are not merely symbolic but also have material consequences (for example, Bucholtz, 2003: 57). Therefore, to alter the concrete circumstances of the oppressed, it is necessary to “endlessly [question] [... ] constituted experience” (Rajchman, cited in Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 493) in order that fairer discourses with more equitable material outcomes can be produced.

The justification for this position includes special emphasis on Foucault’s interpretation of the nature of power. For Foucault, power is not a property that can be “seized” by the strong and used perpetually as a weapon against the weak. Instead, power is an intangible which is constantly circulating and exists only in ever-changing relations between people (for example, Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 489-90). Thus, the nature of power is that it is constantly in flux and cannot be
harnessed, which suggests that the hegemony of the ideology of the elite also is inherently unstable and must be constantly defended, maintained and reproduced (Fairclough, 1995: 76). I will now describe how CDA attempts to contribute to the destabilization of the elite’s profound -- but at the same time fragile -- dominance through the “denaturalization” of ideological background knowledge and the language that helps to produce it.

Like the ‘Critical Theory’ that informs it, Critical Discourse Analysis and its methodology are not clear cut concepts. This is because the form of CDA is determined by the research context. As all research contexts are unique, every application and formulation of CDA must necessarily be different in order for the most efficient analysis to occur. However, having said this, it is possible to enumerate some basic features of CDA. According to van Dijk (1998: 2), all critical research on discourse must have the following attributes if it is to be considered “critical”: it must focus on social problems and political issues rather than fashions; it must explain rather than merely describe the properties of social interaction and social structure that give rise to discourse structures; and it must emphasize how discourse structures “enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge” relations of power and dominance in society.

The model that is most widely referred to by researchers when developing a CDA application is that suggested by Norman Fairclough (1995: 28). The starting point for Fairclough’s construct is that discourses which are produced at the “micro” level (for example, sexist language) are not independent of “macro” societal structures such as laws which institute exclusion based on gender. Instead, he says, higher level social structures such as legalized discrimination set the conditions for and also are the product of micro events. Thus, the task of Critical Discourse Analysis is to reveal how these micro and macro factors combine to produce
“taken for granted background knowledge” in which the ideological goals of this knowledge are seen as non-ideological common sense.

The schema in Figure 7 illustrates Fairclough’s approach to the problem of analyzing how elite ideology is embedded in its mutually consolidating micro and macro aspects.

![Figure 7: Fairclough’s CDA Schema](image)

This diagram highlights the interlocking and reinforcing natures of macro and micro factors by placing the analysis of text inside the scrutiny of sociocultural practice. Thus, it serves to emphasize his and van Dijk’s point that the analysis of text is merely descriptive unless it also seeks to explain how ideological discourses at a local level contribute to the formation of ideological background knowledge and the exploitative social relations that this knowledge produces. In an illustrative example, Fairclough analyzed the transcription of an interview between a rape victim and police officers for evidence of speech devices and
practices which indicated acceptance of sexist assumptions as “natural” and “normal”. He cited specific elements of speech to support his claims that four elements of what he terms “ideologically based coherence” were revealed, the most visible of which were that “women have bad tempers” and the idea that if women put themselves in situations where sexual intercourse may take place, then they have no justification for alleging rape if sex occurs against their will. Among the statements that Fairclough (1995: 28-9) highlights as indicative are “you’re female and you’ve probably got a hell of a temper” and:

... you went to that house willingly ... there’s no struggle ... you could have run away quite easily ... you’re well known ... in Reading ... to the uniformed ... lads for being a nuisance in the streets shouting and bawling ... couple of times you’ve been arrested ... for under the Mental Health Act ... for shouting and screaming in the street ... so ... what’s to stop you ... shouting and screaming in the street ... when you think you’re going to get raped ... you walk in there ... quite blasé you’re not frightened at all ...

Fairclough suggests that these examples of discourse now appear obviously ideological due to the success of the women’s movement in denaturalizing them. However, other implications read from the interaction – that fear or its absence can be read from certain behaviors or their absence (i.e. the woman did not run away, so therefore it was obvious that she was not frightened) and that people will always behave to type (i.e. the woman when mentally ill shouted in public before; therefore her normal and expected behavior is to shout in the streets) – are much more highly naturalized as “common sense” and thus more difficult to recognize as ideological representations.

Thus far, CDA has been described from the point of view of analyzing texts for the purpose of identifying how they contribute to ideological manipulation. However, as Mary Bucholtz (2003: 58) suggests, CDA remains limited in its effectiveness as long as it treats people as subjects and consumers of discourse rather than producers of texts that contribute to their continuing subjugation (for
example, Fairclough in the above illustration does not discuss how the speech of the rape victim contributes to the consolidation of ideological background knowledge.) Furthermore, Bucholtz believes it is equally important to establish whether people experience the effects of discourse in the way that analysts predict that they will.

These are especially important points as a major objective of my project was to establish whether the participants unwittingly continued to reproduce oppressive discourses even while immersed in a project that overtly sought to be ‘emancipatory’. To paraphrase Talbot (cited in Bucholtz, 2003: 57), identifying the difference between what the participants’ texts actually do and what they purport to do was at the heart of my critical discourse analysis. From this a judgment can be made about how effective the curriculum was in helping to raise the participants’ consciousness.

In light of Bucholtz’ observations, I have used the following procedure for my analysis:

- Taking the lead of van Dijk (1998), I have begun my analysis by reviewing the ideological background knowledge that exists for each topic that has been researched by the participants. Why do discourses such as white skin is more desirable than yellow/black skin and normal body shapes are unattractive exist? Who do they benefit? How are they distributed and maintained?

- Next, I have analyzed the institutional messages that the participants have identified as contributing to these beliefs. The method of my analysis accords with that used by van Dijk (1998: 24-36). In his survey of a popular US sociological text, The End of Racial, van Dijk provided extensive examples of the writer’s use of hyperbole and exaggerated representations to support his claims that the book’s central argument
was that middle class African Americans maintain the myth of racism against them in order to benefit from affirmative action policies. He went on to assert that the 'micro level' ideological meaning of this text contributes to what he claims is the macro level institutional racism of (for example) loaded immigration laws, biased media coverage and stereotyping textbooks. I have used similar techniques when examining the evidence that the participants have provided in the form of advertisements, statements by “experts”, movies, songs, and so on.

- Following this, I have analyzed the commentaries that the participants have made with regard to the institutional messages that they have provided, and have also examined the language that the participants used during their recorded interviews. To what extent does their language in interactions and their commentaries on what they have identified as oppressive represent acceptance of or recognition and rejection of ideological background knowledge? The conclusions that I draw from this analysis will contribute to my evaluation of the effectiveness or otherwise of my curriculum.

In closing, it should be emphasized again how difficult linguistic “resistance” is to identify and engender. The CDA literature is replete with examples of how to analyze texts but is relatively silent on how the act of becoming aware of oppressive ideologies can be translated into resistant behavior. Fairclough (1995: 50-52) tentatively suggests that those who are relatively powerless in interactions may demonstrate resistance by interrupting, challenging questions rather than answering them, questioning their interlocutors’ sincerity and using the lexis of their peer groups rather than the vocabulary preferred by the interrogator. However, even if these can be accepted as disruptive strategies, the effectiveness of such strategies remains in question. Accordingly, the findings that I present in
this research will not be made in a declarative tone, but in language which recognizes the uncertainty of the outcomes that usually result from “emancipatory” research projects. The prominent feminist CDA practitioner Mary Talbot (2003: 480-1) acknowledges the difficulties facing politicized research in the following way:

The trouble is that traditional sexist stereotypes are so resilient and so well entrenched that they may be contested repeatedly without undermining their commonsensical status. Even a chorus of dissenting voices is unlikely to dislodge them.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Introduction
The major premise that underlies this research is that much of what appears to be neutral ‘common sense’ in a given society is in fact manipulative and oppressive. Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to review my attempts to establish whether the curriculum that I developed has helped the participants to become more aware of the ideological purposes of supposedly disinterested values, and whether their new awareness (if any) was translated into thinking and behavior that could be termed “resistant”. The success or otherwise of the curriculum in helping to elevate the participants’ consciousness in turn provides the basis for an evaluation of the program’s effectiveness.

The approach I take to address these questions corresponds to the critical discourse analysis methodology I outlined in the previous chapter. Thus, I begin by describing the dominant ideological narratives that exist for the research topics that the students proposed. These descriptions are derived from published research and from the material that the students produced for their research projects. I then go on to analyze the students’ own assessments of their research for the purpose of determining the level of their adherence to or rejection of values that they themselves have identified as “oppressive”. This emphasis on not taking at face value the participants’ claims about critical consciousness derives from the observation by Bucholtz (2003: 57) that critical discourse analysis must primarily be concerned with what texts actually do rather than what they purport to do. A discussion of the curriculum’s strengths and weaknesses and ideas for future directions will be included in the conclusion to this project.
Four major themes evolved from my invitation to the mainly female research participants to consider which elements of their lives they were felt were the most stressful or oppressive. These included the concepts of body image, skin color, sexual orientation, and lack of female agency relative to that available to men. I have chosen to confine my critical discourse analysis to two projects that were undertaken with respect to these themes. The longer analysis will deal with student research into body image; the other analysis will concern an inquiry into the pressures caused by unfashionable skin color. I have chosen to include only two analyses instead of reviews of all the several dozen projects that were submitted for grading because the foundation for qualitative analysis is “thick, rich description” (Patton, 2002: 437) rather than the superficial reporting that a review of all projects within the limited space of a Master’s research dissertation would have afforded.

First Analysis - Body Image

Some Preliminary Matters

Body Mass Index (BMI)

In this section I will often refer to the “Body Mass Index” (BMI), a measure used by the World Health Organization and other agencies to classify underweight, overweight and obesity. The WHO (2007) defines BMI as weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters (kg/m²). For example, a person would be considered overweight (BMI=25) if their weight/height configuration was 155cm/60kg (60/1.5²). BMI classifications are as follows:
Some researchers have suggested that different BMI cut off points should apply to different ethnic groups; however, pending further investigations, the WHO has suggested that the values described in the above chart should apply to all ethnic groups for now.

Data on BMI levels in Thailand are not comprehensive. I have collated various surveys produced for the WHO (2007) to produce the table below. This table shows that Thai women are marginally more likely to be overweight or obese than Thai men. It should be noted that these data apply only to Thais aged over 35; no figures are available for younger age groups.
Cross cultural comparisons of relative costs
I occasionally refer in this section to the high cost of beauty treatments in Thailand. However, it is quite difficult to translate the burden of these costs into terms that will be understood in the Australian context. Both the Purchasing Power Parity and “Big Mac Index” indicators suffer from various well documented flaws (for example, The Economist, 2002) which suggest against their use here. Nevertheless, I have used the Purchasing Power Parity index of per capita Gross National Income as the basis for trying to show the true equivalent cost in Australia of a treatment in Thailand because it remains the widest used measure for parity conversions, and because I feel that is important that I evoke the burden to Thai women of their investment in “beauty”.

The World Bank (2007) states that the PPP GNI for Australia in 2005 was 30,610 “international dollars”. In comparison, in Thailand, it was 8440 “international dollars”. Accordingly, the per capita Gross National Income of Australians was 3.63 times higher than that produced by Thais. From this, although I accept that it is a very crude measure, I have calculated a value called “Adjusted Australian Dollars” (AAUD) by multiplying the AUD equivalent of the cost in Thai baht of a product by 3.63. For example, a Marie France BodyLine weight loss treatment in Thailand costs THB 60,000 (AUD 2,269.75, calculated from 1 AUD = 26.4347

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>% BMI &gt;= 25</th>
<th>% BMI &gt;= 30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thais</td>
<td>M  19.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F  26</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: BMI Distribution in Thailand
THB $60,000$). If this AUD value is multiplied by 3.63, it can be seen under this measure that the actual equivalent cost in Australia would be AUD $8239.19$.

Accordingly, for clarity’s sake, I have used the following notation when I present costs.

- (THB [value]; AUD [value]; AAUD [value])

Thus, the treatment I referred to above would be written as (THB $60,000$; AUD $2269.75$; AAUD $8239.19$)

Reporting the participants’ English
I have reported the participants’ English verbatim. If I have edited their words, I have clearly indicated this. It will be seen that their expression is rather awkward throughout; this reflects the fact that they all achieved scores of 4 (“limited user”) or 5 (“modest user”) on the International English Language Testing System examination they took at the end of their final semester. These low scores are indicative of the generally poor levels of English spoken in Thailand; for example, a study by one of Thailand’s leading state universities, Chulalongkorn University, rated Thais second from bottom in South East Asia in terms of English language competency (Prapphal, 2001).

A note on referencing
I often refer in this chapter to academic papers and research reports cited by the participants. I have attempted to independently verify each of the sources that the students have quoted; however, sometimes it has not been possible to confirm the material because of the students’ inaccurate or absent referencing or because the material was written in Thai. Nevertheless, I have retained those few sources that I could not verify for several reasons: firstly, because I feel that the

---

6 the official exchange rate on March 8, 2007
information they have provided accords well with facts that I have been able to check, and thus I feel that their information is reliable; and secondly, in light of the probable accuracy of their information, I feel that it would have been disruptive to the narrative to omit these unchecked sources. References which have not been verified are clearly marked.

Body Image - Ideologies

As I noted in the literature review, Jackson’s theory of the “Thai Regime of Images” (2004b) suggests that external presentation and appearance in Thailand may indicate something more substantial than the representation of inner truths. He suggests instead that the general Thai conception may well be that the surface is the real. Jackson (2004b: 211) writes:

In the modernizing West, it was the inner being that was conceived as real with the image being a “mere” surface that expressed or followed the contours of the inner self. In the Thai case, the relationship is reversed. It is the surface image that has the power to mould the inner being.

This suggests that while western women who do not have fashionably thin bodies may speculate about whether there is a causal connection between their figures and their supposed character flaws, Thai women in a similar position may be much more likely to regard as incontrovertible that their imagined moral failings are embodied and thus visible to all.

If it is accepted that Thai identity is yoked to surface representations -- that it is “solidly body based” (Van Esterik, 1999: 277), and that one’s moral worth therefore is literally written on the skin -- then it is reasonable to expect that great emphasis will be placed in Thailand on enhancing physical beauty as a means of building self-worth and public acceptance. There is much evidence to suggest that this is the case: salient observations include the enduring enormous popularity of beauty contests and beauty contest preparation schools (for example, Van
Esterik, 1996: 215), the ubiquity of dieting and weight loss products in the media, the boom in expensive cosmetic surgery procedures, the national predilection for dieting and diet pills, and the results of comparative studies which indicate that Thai women are far more concerned about their body shape than people in western countries such as Australia (for example, Jennings et al., 2006: 143). In other words, to a considerably greater degree than in the West, it seems that how “beautiful” (incorporating the qualities of thinness and whiteness) you are is a large determinant of your social worth and, accordingly, how you will be treated. Furthermore, the power of beauty to influence one’s social and professional fate appears to be growing thanks to the advent of sophisticated advertising techniques and modern beauty technology, as van Esterik (1999: 216) suggests:

Beauty [in Thailand nowadays] has become effectively detached from its moral base. Thus, beauty is seen less as a natural attribute existing within the body and radiating outward, and more as something that can be purchased, placed on the surface, and enhanced. It becomes the responsibility of women to develop their own beauty potential rather than assume responsibility for meritorious acts that will result in inner beauty ... this reinforces the idea that beauty is a function of wealth, a belief that resonates well with the Buddhist notions of kharma.

The outcome of this line of thinking -- that “not being beautiful is a moral failure” (Van Esterik, 1999: 216) and that this central assumption leads directly to concrete experiences of exclusion -- appears to be endorsed by many of the research participants. For example, one group in the introduction to their project on body image states baldly that “Thai society believes that beauty is the most important thing for human life.” They go on to say:

7 L’Oreal Thailand estimates that the Thai “beauty market” is worth USD 26.6 billion (Turpin, 2004: 189)
8 I discuss the claims in this clause and the one that precedes it in pages 130-131
We realize that if we are thin, the others will appreciate us because media such as advertising, music and magazines are the most influential promoters of the thin standard. As a result, it leads to a popular belief among us that being thin is perfect [...] we have tried to change ourselves until we suffer from many diseases for having a perfect appearance. In fact, there is no women can never be like that.

Thus, the participants appear to have articulated a major theme underlying (Marxist philosopher) Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and of critical discourse analysis; that agencies of mass culture inculcate marginalizing beliefs in the minds of all, but most pertinently those outside the elite (in this case, non-waif-thin people of all social classes, but particularly those from the middle and working classes), who in turn contribute to the reproduction of their own powerlessness by internalizing and echoing back the beliefs which serve to undermine them (for example, Eagleton, 1991: 93-124). However, in making this observation, it is also interesting to note the obstinate stance that the participants flag; they state that they have suffered in futile pursuit of an ideal which can never be achieved. Are these authentic indications of “critical” awareness and resistance? This question will be addressed as an outcome of the following discussion.

My intention now is to describe in detail the participants’ exposition of those which they consider to be dominant discourses about female body image in Thailand. This has several purposes. Firstly, it will allow me to make an assessment of the degree to which their understanding of their own context corresponds to that taken by established “critical” research. The scale of convergence will it turn help me to move in the direction of making a judgment about whether my curriculum achieved one of its major goals; namely, to build the students’ capacity to recognize the ideological content of “common sense” assumptions. The other reason for providing a detailed rendering of the participants’ accounts of discourse is that it will help me to determine whether they developed genuine resistance to the ideologies that they became aware of, or
whether their apparently subversive rhetoric masked a continuing acceptance of their own marginalization.

As I was unable to conduct interviews for this dissertation, my assessment of the participants' analysis of discourse that follows is constrained to material that they presented in the “Social Beliefs” section of their project CDs. I will also describe the concrete effects that the participants claim are the outcomes of internalizing such beliefs (as was made available to me in the “Social Effects” and “Our Lives” sections of their projects). An exposition of this connection is important because of the claims by critical discourse analysis and hegemony theory that control over influential discourse enables power over the minds and action of others who, if they were not manipulated, would be expected to pursue their own interests instead of those that lead to their marginalization (for example, van Dijk, 1993: 250).

As the earlier quotes from Van Esterik indicate, Thai Buddhist ideas about kharma (referred to in the Thai Theravadan Buddhist tradition as khamma) appear central to the extraordinary importance placed on female physical beauty. I have used the term Thai Buddhist instead of Buddhist as the unorthodox nature of local understandings of the teachings of Gautama Buddha appear to provide strong clues as to why Thais assume a causal link between khamma and physical appearance, when this point is left moot in the original teachings.

According to the prominent Theravadan Buddhist monk Ajahn Sumedho\(^9\) (1995), khamma as taught by Gautama Buddha refers only to present consciousness of the consequences of one’s actions. In other words, whatever one is conscious of right now - negative emotions associated with negative

---
\(^9\) Sumedho is arguably the most well known former student of the internationally famous Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah (now deceased). He was a resident monk at a forest monastery in northern Thailand for 12 years and has written extensively on Thai Buddhism. He now heads a large monastery in Britain.
actions, feelings of neutrality, positive emotions associated with positive actions – that is khamma. What khamma is not, he says, is a catch-all term for unprovable assertions about the consequences of actions in a “past life” or the likely future results of present actions (1995: 53, 56):

It’s no good to speculate about who you’ll be in your next life. I think that’s a waste of time, and the Buddha said it was futile to try to figure out what you were in a previous life [...] Now the teaching of reincarnation is not really a Buddhist teaching at all – it’s Hindu. In the Hindu treatment of reincarnation, you go from one body to another. If you’re born into a low caste, you must wait for the next reincarnation, your next lifetime, when you might be reborn into a higher caste. In Buddhism that would be considered superstition because it cannot be proved, and it tends to make one think there is a purity in being born in a certain class or caste. [However], we can see that people born into the Brahmin caste can be just as nasty, rotten and impure as the meanest untouchable person. And we know that untouchable people can be pure of heart, if they live good lives and use wisdom.

This contrasts strongly with mainstream Thai Buddhist notions of khamma. According to the research participants, statements about the causal qualities of past lives are not regarded as irrelevant speculation – instead, they are assumed to be self-evident. For example, the participants state in their introduction to their review of Thai beliefs about khamma that it is taken as given that the Buddha taught that “you are beautiful because you did a good action in the past.” They go on to say that this belief can be subdivided into two “approaches”; namely, that if one does “something good in the present, (one) will be beautiful and healthy in the next life”; furthermore, that if you “do bad”, you will “be ugly” and “easily get disease.” In support of their appraisal of the dominant Thai view, the participants translated and quoted Annyamanee Mallikamas of the Thai Dhamma Study and Support Foundation as saying: “Buddhism believes in cause and effect so everything does not happen accidentally ... For example, some people are more beautiful than others or someone has a better manner or habit. You are beautiful because you are not angry or mad while you are ugly because you are
angry and mad". Tellingly, an image that they provided on the CD screen which presented this belief was of a line of monks going on their daily begging round, known in Thai as bindebaht. In the Thai Buddhist tradition, providing food to monks is a way of “making merit”, or put another way, of accumulating capital for the accrual of future earthly and spiritual benefits. The caption they have provided for this picture is: “Please!!! I wanna be beautiful.”

Thus, in summary, the participants state that the dominant discourse in Thailand about khamma as it relates to the concept of body image is that “khamma is the Thai way of life”. However, as we have seen, khamma is not taken to be an awareness of current mental states that are designed to lead to reflection on the impermanent nature of self and a commitment to the Buddhist path of liberation. Instead, khamma is held to be something akin to fateful punishment or reward for actions that can only be conjectured about, but never directly recalled or proved. Thus, the “Thai way of life” for those women unlucky enough not to have a fashionable body shape or too poor or busy to achieve one appears to be to resign oneself to inferior prospects and treatment on the unprovable assumption that this is the fate one has created for oneself. Furthermore, to resent the body image standards that are created by those with luck, money or leisure enough to achieve and dictate those standards is to induce khamma-destroying “angriness” or “madness”, which in turn will reduce one’s chances of achieving those standards for oneself in a future life.

The interpretations which I have drawn from the participants’ statements about the connection between heterodox Thai ideas about khamma and mainstream ideas about female beauty correspond well with published research. For example, van Esterik (cited in Jackson, 2004a: 222) contends that the Thai Buddhist

---

10 The English version of the text (Mallikamas, 2000) also definitely states this: “One can see that people are born with different physiques, degree of beauty and nice complexion. Some are born ugly or physically challenged, all the result of past kusala or akusala khamma.”
rationale for the appreciation of beauty includes the idea that “physical beauty reflects merit store” and that “ugliness, unfortunately, (conveys) the opposite.” Mulder (cited in Jackson, 2004a: 222) meanwhile agrees that Thai ideas about khamma in particular and about Buddhism in general differ from Gautama Buddha’s teachings: while the institutional and ritual expression of Thai religion appear to be “very Buddhistic indeed”, he says, “its characteristic mentality is not so much interested in the Theravada message of moral self-reliance as in auspiciousness, worldly continuity, and the manipulation of saksit (supernatural “sacred”) power.”

Before identifying the other ideological beliefs that contribute to the marginalization of the non-thin in Thailand, it is worth looking briefly at what “beauty” and “ugliness” are considered to be in Thailand, and who exactly is “beautiful” or “ugly”. One of the weaknesses of the participants’ research is that they have not explicitly addressed these questions (a point I will refer to in my analysis) and therefore I will draw definitions from those they have identified within their projects as being “beautiful”, and also from research which refers to Thai women’s self-perceptions of their body shapes.

In this context, a “beautiful” female body shape is generally understood to be one that is extremely thin, if not anorexic. For example, the popular Thai celebrity website M-Thai (2007) recently asked respondents to rate local stars according to their “beauty”, “sexiness” and “cuteness”. The three top rated celebrities (Pacharapa Chaichuer, Woranuch Wongsawan and Paula Taylor (a Thai national with one Caucasian parent)), had an average Body Mass Index of 16.6\(^{11}\). According to Gowers et al. (2004: 64), a BMI of less than 17.5 in adults can be an indication of anorexia. Unsurprisingly, the best available data indicate that the

\(^{11}\) The exact dimensions of these stars are as follows: Pacharapa Chaichuer, 168cm/46kg (BMI 16.3); Woranuch Wongsawan, 165cm/44kg (BMI 16.2); Paula Taylor, 169cm/49kg (BMI 17.2)
average Thai undergraduate-aged woman is significantly heavier and shorter - but healthier -- than this ideal. For example, a 1995 survey of 37,089 female students at Thailand’s Sukhothai Thammarat Open University (Somboonsook, 2006) found that the average height and weight of the respondents was 52.2 kg and 157.3 cm – a “normal” BMI of 21.1. Nevertheless, research published in the Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand (Sritipsukho & Pacharapaisan, 2004: 1477) stated that more than 80% of a cohort of “normally” shaped Thai women in one study consider themselves to be “obese”, while Sharps et al. (2001: 523-524) conclude that Thai women have a stronger preference for thin body shapes than those desired by Thai men or US women because the “invasion” of the psychological landscape of Southeast Asia by the “Western preference for extremely slender female forms” has intensified the pre-existing great pressure to be “beautiful”.

One inference that can be drawn from the above observations is that a large proportion of Thai women believe that “beauty” corresponds with an unhealthy height/weight ratio that for most is unachievable without radical dieting or surgery (note, for example, that “tallness” is a component of the beauty ideal and that the average height of the Thai celebrities described above is 167 cm – 10cm taller than the average height of the Thai student respondents, and 14cm taller than the height of the average Thai woman aged 13-59\(^1\)) (Somboonsook, 2006).

It can be argued therefore that that a harsh dichotomy exists for Thai women. If to be “beautiful” is to be underweight or even anorexic, then to be of normal healthy weight is to be “fat”, therefore “ugly”, and thus (in terms of the Thai interpretation of khamma) morally odious. Not surprisingly, those who are truly overweight or obese are the subjects of mockery, as will be noted later.

Who then is “beautiful” in Thailand, and who is “ugly”? In the absence of authoritative research into correlations between socio-economic status (SES) and

\(^{12}\) Somboonsook states that the average weight and height of Thai women is 54.3kg and 153.6cm (BMI 23)
adult BMI in Thailand, informed conjecture will have to suffice. In the case of young children in Thailand, local research (Langendijk, 2003; Sakamoto, 2001) suggests that the progeny of the wealthy continue to show a traditionally stronger tendency towards overweight and obesity than poorer Thais. However, this trend may well be in decline. According to a review by World Health Organization researchers Monterio et al. (2004) of SES-obesity correlations among people in developing countries (Thailand is not specifically cited in their research, but matches their “developing nation” per-capita income level definition), the incidence of obesity is shifting from the upper to the lower strata of society. This, they say, is due to the poor’s increasing access to cheap, high energy-density food at the expense of more costly and less energy-dense food, a comparatively low level of knowledge about healthy eating, and shrinking opportunities for leisure and recreation. In other words, the wealthy are more able to “resist increasing obesogenic environments” because “they are more likely to have flexibility in their choice of diet and activity pattern than the poor who are more constrained in their choices” (Monteiro, 2004: 94).

Accordingly, it seems reasonable at this stage to propose as a summary that the ideal body shape for Thai women is one that is suggested by the social elite, and that this body shape, generally speaking, is one that is extremely difficult to attain or else is out of reach of most of the female population of the middle class and poorer sectors of this strongly inequitable country. Furthermore, it can be argued that great pressure is placed upon women to achieve these often impossible standards by an ideologically convenient distortion of the Buddhist

---

13 Monteiro et al. (2004: 943) state that the “burden of obesity” starts to shift towards people of lower SES once GNP per capita reaches a level of USD 2500; in 2005, GNP in Thailand was USD 3255.12 (1 THB = USD 0.0308) (Bank of Thailand, 2007)

14 Thailand in 2002 had a Gini index of 51.1 (CIA World Factbook, 2007a), which by this measure made it the 20th most inequitable of 123 countries for which there were data. The Gini index measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of family income, with a score of 100 indicating complete inequality. To give an idea of Thailand’s standing, in 2002 it was a more unequal society than corruption-plagued Nigeria.
notion of khamma, which suggests that failure to achieve a state of unhealthy slimness is the consequence of one's visibly indicated moral failings, and that expressions of discontent about this “reality” will reduce the chances of achieving beauty (and thus power) in future incarnations. It is time now to consider the participants' appraisal of how this core ideological belief helps give rise to other marginalizing beliefs which, if the predictions of critical theory are accurate, lead to tangible disadvantages for those who already have the “least power and advantage” (Apple, 1979: 158).

The participants in their study divide the other major ideological beliefs which they believe help to sustain their position of inferiority into three major areas: those relating to relationships, professional success and physical health. For each of these groups of beliefs, the participants have given a brief appraisal of each constituent belief and supported these descriptions with samples taken from the Thai mainstream media. These samples include advertising, drama shows, newspaper articles and other mass media forms of communication.

As stated before, the first purpose of my exposition is to establish whether the participants have demonstrated “critical consciousness” in analyzing these beliefs. “Critical consciousness” in this context means that they show awareness that an unreal dichotomy has been created in which all those who are not underweight are falsely and unjustly classified as “fat” and “ugly”, and furthermore that they show understanding of the ideological imperatives that have driven the creation of this dichotomy.

The first category of beliefs -- those pertaining to relationships -- include the following statements: “fat is ugly”, “men always prefer thin women”, “thin women look sexy” and “non skinny can never look fashionable”. In describing these beliefs, the participants make several strong main points: that the women who are proclaimed to be “fat” by the media samples they have included are in
fact not fat at all or else are caricatures of obesity and thus unrepresentative of all but the smallest proportion of Thai women\textsuperscript{15}; furthermore, that the products which offer “cures” for this undesirable condition either are ineffective or are destructive to health, and dishonestly play on women’s fears in order to generate profits for businesses owned by the Thai elite.

One media message which was the target for both these observations concerns a range of diet products (drinks and pills) called “U-Srim”. The advertisement shows a woman who could not conceivably be called overweight (see Figure 10 below) standing on a set of scales in a public area that looks like a department store. Her apparent grossness causes her to throw up her hands in horror and emit a stagey ‘girlish scream’ before wrapping the readout in an obscuring embrace. As the bystanders wander in questioningly (most of the observers are young, slender, fashionable, middle to upper middle class-looking men) a man’s bantering voice asks: “What is the thing most women are scared of? We understand what it is…” before cutting to an image of what appears to be the same woman pirouetting before the camera.

\textsuperscript{15} Recall from the introduction to this chapter that only 3% of women in Thailand aged over 35 are obese (although it must be stated again there are no definitive figures for obesity levels among women in younger age groups)
The likely answer to the question posed by the advertisement is that a Thai woman’s greatest fear is to be considered “fat” and therefore unattractive to men. However, as can be seen from the images above, there is no relation between what the advertisers say is “overweight” and the WHO definition of the word. In effect, the advertisers are stating that “fat” means any body shape that exceeds by even the slightest measure the dimensions of the model-underweight ideal. But even this interpretation may be too generous: given that the “before” and “after” images appear to be identical, the advertisers seem to be suggesting that those who already are underweight can still be considered “fat” and unattractive to men unless they are actively trying to shed even more weight. Women of a normal healthy weight thus by comparison stand condemned as being repellant, and if they are not trying to lose weight, heedless as well. Another interpretation of the effect that the advertisers seem to be trying to create in women’s minds could be put this way: “If that skinny woman in the first image is fat, then how grotesque am I?” The participants express the fear and the cause of this fear this way:
Truly, most men love thin women because their bodies are the first thing that attracts them. Therefore, if any women want to attract any men, she will be thin [...] many media causes most women addict in the image of thin bodies [so] most women try to turn themselves in same as the actress in the media [...] The main reason is not only beautiful but also good looking in eyesight of many people around them, especially men.

However, despite the apparent power of the advertising, the participants remain aware of the artificiality of the images being presented, and also of the dubious efficacy of the product. They questioned why the “customers have to think she is fat while she isn’t fat” and commented also that the product simply does not work. “[...] we read the some website about effecting of this product,” they say, “[and] most women told that it doesn’t have effect so much [and] this product can’t lose weight.” Nevertheless, while they are doubtful about the advertisement’s claims, most women in Thailand apparently either do not share these misgivings, or at least appear to stifle their reservations in the hope that the promises made by advertising such as this may be true. The participants claim that this particular advertisement helped generate THB 200 million (about AUD 7.6 million) in profit on the sales of U-Srim for the financial year of 2004, and ensured also that the product was distributed in 1000 stores nationwide16.

I have mentioned these figures as I feel it is important that it is understood that commodities such as U-Srim are not niche goods sold on daytime television, but mainstream products that command large sales and prime time advertising budgets. This is the case for all products and media referred to by the participants in their projects as I explicitly asked them to support their contentions about Thai social beliefs with media imagery that could fairly be described as overwhelmingly mainstream.

16 These figures could not be verified
I also want to emphasize here that I have drawn attention to this particular advertisement as it helps to clarify the gulf in attitudes that existed between me and the participants. The advertisement for U-Srim to my eyes was a particularly crude example of stereotyping. However, while the participants seemed aware of the advertising’s dubious claims, the trivialization of female concerns and behavior that I believe distinguished the advertising’s imagery appeared not to have the same emotional impact. It was from this mismatch in attitudes that I feel my bias started to exert some influence on the truthfulness of the participants’ analyses.

One particularly clear example of what I believe is the undue influence that I sometimes had on the participants’ work concerned a piece of advertising that they provided in support of their statement that most Thais believe that “fat is ugly”. The participants showed me an advertisement in class for Giffarine Body Lotion and I reacted with visible shock. Figure 11 reprises the storyboard:
Figure 11: Giffarine Body Lotion

1. New!!! Giffarine Dramtic Body Creator
2. It can help you to lose your fat
3. mosquito
4. It can help you to lose your fat
5. The more you slap, the more will reduce
When the participants first showed me this advertisement they had concentrated on the unbelievable nature of the claim that slapping cream on one’s skin could reduce fat content. However, to my eyes, what was most noticeable was the casting of the woman as a mute object for the man to gain pleasure from and to discipline. After 10 minutes of mutual non-comprehension (the participants – all female – thought the advertisement was funny, while I struggled in vain to explain my position that the assumptions underlying the images were not), I wrote down what I was trying to express.

Giffarine is a lotion that the company says will reduce your fat levels. In this advertisement, a woman who is not at all fat is slapping the lotion on herself when a mosquito lands on her breast. She wants to kill it, but her husband (Tarzan, a dirty, smelly, ignorant fool who lives in the jungle) stops her because he likes her big tits. We chose this advertisement because Giffarine is a major brand in Thailand and many women use it. Furthermore, the lotion simply does not work – another example of the insincerity of the weight loss industry17. Finally, the advertisement is extremely sexist – it reinforces the message that you have no value unless you please ignorant men.

I used emotive words such as “tits” and “dirty, smelly, ignorant fool” as I was caught up in the heat of the moment and wanted through the coarseness of my own language to parody what appeared to me to be the gross sexism of this advertisement. However, while I had only intended this treatment as a talking point, the participants took my statements as the right analysis and included it verbatim in their finished presentation. This was a reminder to me that the large power differences18 in Thai society help to confer an authority on teachers that often impedes efforts to create democratic learning environments (Shor, 1992: 138-139), in that there will always be a strong tendency on the part of students to:

17 The language used in the previous two sentences is my edit of their original phrasing
18 See page 124 for an explanation of Geert Hofstede’s research into power differences
[... ] pay attention to the teacher’s words, not because the content is inspiring but because they want to see what the limits and rules are and to pick up on the teacher’s values. If they can mimic the teacher’s words and values in discussion, on a paper, or on an exam, then it is easier to get a good grade. Speaking and writing like teacher-talk is the easiest way to get by.

That I may have compromised the truthfulness of the participants’ analysis appears evident also in terms of the frequency of the doublethink that they displayed. In using the word “doublethink”, I am referring to George Orwell’s definition of the term as the capacity to hold simultaneous belief in two contradictory ideas. A good example concerns their analysis of chart-topping pop song in which a man nags his girlfriend to stop eating because he is worried that she will look like a barrel of fat. After describing the song and the lyrics as “interesting” and “fun”, they change tack in the next sentence and describe it as “ridiculous” because it is “not fair with the fat people”. The ideas are not presented in an ironic sense – i.e. that the lyrics are “fun but ridiculous” – but as two jarringly contradictory thoughts, as if they had responded naturally in the first clause but had suddenly remembered what the correct attitude was in the second. This tendency to contradiction is evident throughout the rest of their project and thus there is a general sense that the challenge they are presenting to “common sense” beliefs is done without much conviction.

(However, having said this, the sincerity of the participants might be more under question if their analysis had been more certain. After all, hegemony theory asserts that the most powerful but damaging beliefs are those which intrude into the spiritual domain of our lives: into the “realm of values and customs, speech habits and ritual practices.” (Eagleton, 1991: 114) Accordingly, to challenge beliefs such as these is to rock the foundations of one’s worldview and it would be strange if hesitancy or outright irrationality in the face of this destabilizing task was not shown. Shor (Freire et al., 1987: 25) expresses this point well when he states that efforts to create critical cultures within classrooms or research always
create disorientating tension precisely because mass culture “socialize[s] people to police themselves against their own freedom”.

The remaining classes of beliefs discussed by the participants - that only the model-thin will achieve professional success, and that all who are not underweight are unhealthy - followed the same pattern as the beliefs described above. The students presented evidence from the mass media to support their contention that these attitudes were held by the bulk of people in Thailand, and then presented their challenge to these discourses. As with the analyses discussed above, their criticism centered on the unreality of the images that were presented and the dubious nature of the products that were being offered as “cures”. Moreover, with regard to these sets of beliefs, they also attacked the mass media representation that there are only two possible body shapes for women: model thin or grossly obese. The messages which they found particularly representative of this stereotyping suggested that those women who are not thin can best be thought of as prey to be hunted and eaten by ferocious animals. Here, for example, is advertising for Marie France BodyLine, a Hong Kong-registered slimming company with branches in Switzerland and Thailand and other Asian countries:
The advertisement begins with a pair of hungry tigers (father and son) staring ravenously from the jungle at a slim woman in high heels (Suwatchanee Chaimuksik, a locally famous bikini model) who is washing her SUV in a seductive way (a close up shot at one point shows white frothy soap coursing down her hip, which to my eyes appeared to be an obvious reference to semen). The dialog up to this point is as follows:

Father: Since we have escaped from the zoo we haven’t eaten anything. Are you hungry, son?
Son: Oh!! Father, look!! Perfect body: narrow waist, slim legs
Father: Father will eat her. But it’s not enough to eat ...

At this point the camera pans to an obese woman next door who is gyrating in a parody of a go-go dancer as she sprays down her much more modest car.
Son: “Look over there! An elephant!” (cue loud sound of trumpeting elephant)
Father: Look son, it's using its trunk to play with water
Son: Daddy, I want to eat its tummy!
Father: Sure son, I'll go for the head

The final shot is of the tigers salivating manically as they gaze at their prey.
The closing tagline is “If you have a beautiful body, you will be successful”, the implication being that if you are slim that you not only will you be rich enough to afford an expensive car but also that you will ascend from a state of elephantine animality to humanity. The participants reacted by saying that this advertisement was “not fair for fat woman” because “she is human; not a food” and:

Therefore, it is not fair that they [tigers] decided between thin or fat woman are more delicious. Moreover, it is also negative because this advertisement shows fat woman look valueless. It shows this advertisement insult fat woman.

In closing, it can be seen that the participants have identified a number of classes of social beliefs about body shape which they feel disadvantage the bulk of the female population; moreover, they have identified some falsehoods which they feel render these “common sense” beliefs unfair, and occasionally have protested at the sexist stereotyping of advertising images which are widely accepted as amusing\footnote{The Marie France advertisement described above as of March 8 had been viewed 11,274 times on YouTube (2007) and was tagged as “funny”. One poster wrote: “some said the best marie france is from thailand. watch it to find out”. The latest person to have watched the clip wrote the following review: “dude, this is funny shit”. Another wrote: “”Look over there! An Elephant!” LMAO  !! (Laugh my arse off)”}. Nevertheless, in stating their opposition to and dissatisfaction with these loaded messages, the participants have also shown through their occasional reproduction of teacher bias and their own instances of incoherence that their analysis may not be as “critical” as it seems. As I indicated in the introduction, I will now take a closer look at the language that the participants have used in order to establish what really is being said by the participants.

A Closer Analysis

A closer reading of the participants’ text reveals a number of themes which indicate a continuing strong acceptance of the unspoken assumptions which Thai mass culture distributes about female body shape. In other words, while the participants often overtly express opposition to or disagreement with some of the
cruder text and images carried by the mass media, their language also indicates that they accept many of the foundational premises from which these messages are derived.

As noted before, the most obvious area of compliance is their acceptance of the “thin/fat” binary for women. While it is true that the participants on occasions attack the representations of “fat” (recall their complaints that models described as “fat” in advertising often actually appear underweight), they never challenge the basic idea that a woman who is not underweight can ever be anything other than “fat”. Put another way, while they remark on advertisers’ habit of identifying fatness with underweight women or caricatures of the small fraction of Thai society that is truly obese, they at no time comment on the complete absence of images representing the continuum of “normal” female body shapes. This calls to mind the observation by Foucault (cited in Adams St. Pierre, 2000: 481) that humans have a tendency to think and speak in binary terms, and that “women are usually on the wrong side of binaries and at the bottom of hierarchies.” In this context, the women who are on the wrong side of the binary are the overwhelming majority of females in Thailand who do not possess bodies that the WHO classifies as “underweight”. Another illustration in the Australian context is provided by Anne Summers (2007), who has noted that the habit of the first white colonizers of Australia was to categorize women either as being exclusively saintly or evil (as “damned whores” or “God’s Police”), with no space left for women to be defined as anything other than one of these stereotypes. Binaries such as these, says Summers, provide an “existential straitjacket” in which economic and social independence is denied to all apart from “rebels”, who are relatively free in some ways but nevertheless must live in a state of “constant reprobation”.

104
The acceptance of the “fat/thin” binary in this context is further expanded to assimilation of a “thin-beautiful/fat-ugly” binary. Time after time, the participants state unequivocally that one can only be “beautiful” if one is as slim as a model, and that all men without exception will regard a woman whose body shape does not conform to the fashionably underweight image distributed by the mass media as “fat”, and therefore “ugly”. For example, when discussing a Japanese “comedy” comic book which retails the story of a “very ugly and fat” woman who cannot get the man of her dreams, they note that “after she undergoes surgery, she is a new woman. She is very beautiful woman” (my emphasis). The mainstream popularity of this story, they say, derives from the absolute authenticity of its premise: “It bases on the reality in our society that most men are interested in thin and beautiful women,” they say. Nevertheless, in another example of what appears to be their recognition that it would serve well to be ‘on message’, they state in the very next sentence: “It is unfair to say that men are (most) interested in thin and beautiful women. We cannot proof that men like thin women more than fat because in this cartoon books is just one example so we cannot decide that all men [repetition deleted] only love thin women.”

What makes this particular juxtaposition noteworthy, I feel, is that they have not included a conjunctive adverb such as “however” or “nevertheless” between the sentences. It may well be that the participants’ low level of English language competency prevented them from recognizing that the contrasting clauses they wrote should have been joined with a sentence connector for the sake of coherence; nevertheless, even if they had used such a device, the conjoining of a flat statement of fact that men are only interested in thin women with a claim that the proposition they have just made is in fact effectively untrue indicates an unsustainable compartmentalization in their thinking. This is not to accuse the participants of being irrational; it is only to note again that the pressure to simultaneously hold two opposing thoughts can be counted on to induce
disorientation (in this case, I am arguing that the participants are trying to reconcile the obviously false ideological notion that “men are only attracted to thin women” with the everyday observation that most women who are in relationships with men - and therefore presumably are attractive to those men - do not have body shapes which conform to the “thin” shape idealized by the mass media).

The power of assumptions to confuse perception appears to be illustrated further with reference to the participants’ description of western movies such as “Shallow Hal” and “Legally Blonde”. Their misconception of the message of these movies, especially in relation to the first film cited above, becomes even more apparent (but perhaps more understandable) when it is set against their citing of the Thai movie “Cholesterol Love” as evidence that Thais believe that “fat is ugly”. In “Cholesterol Love”, a privileged male Thai student - “Jetsadaporn” -- returns from his course of study abroad to find that his fiancé (“Lukgate”, played by Thai supermodel/actress Metanee Kingpayome, who has bulked up to gross proportions in a latex suit) has become exaggeratedly obese. Accordingly, he dumps Lukgate because “this matter upsets him a lot” and “because he's going out with a pretty girl” (MovieSeer, 2007). In despair Lukgate attempts suicide, only to be convinced by her father that she may have a chance to win her man if she goes to a diet clinic. She loses a huge amount of weight, which causes her suitor to show renewed interest. “He returns to her to prove his love, but she refuses,” the text on the MovieSeer promotional site continues. “Will Jetsadaporn win Lukgate's heart?” The participants do not report the outcome21, but nevertheless it is clear that the man is in with a fighting chance despite his

20 Orwell’s novel 1984 conveys this sense of disorientation very well. The following quote (Wikiquote, 2007a) describes the Party’s efforts to ensure that Smith’s thinking cleaves to the fantasy of ideology rather than the evidence of his senses: “In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy.”

21 Other students however confirm that Jetsadaporn in the end succeeds in his mission.
shallowness, his cruelty (at one point he loudly mocks her appetite in a crowded restaurant before he storms out to the amused sympathy of the onlookers) and his lack of loyalty. Furthermore, it has been emphasized that the woman was only able to reawaken her (wealthy, privileged) man's interest by reconfiguring her body to a shape that was more acceptable to his taste.

The movie “Shallow Hal” provides a clear contrast to this message. In this film, the stocky male protagonist - a notoriously superficial and usury character - has his perception altered so he is only aware of people's inner characters rather than their outward appearances. He begins a relationship with an obese woman whose character is manifested to his altered (but still bigoted) consciousness as a shape which he finds fantastically slim and sexy\(^2\). As the movie progresses, he starts to develop characteristics of generosity and humility. By the end of the movie, when his original perception is restored, his new maturity has enabled him to overcome his earlier blinkeredness and demonstrate public commitment to a woman whom previously he would have rejected contemptuously. Thus, in contrast to the previous movie, in “Shallow Hal” it is the bigoted man instead of the reviled woman who has undergone change in order to achieve a desired goal. The clips that the students provided as evidence were subtitled in Thai and the meaning of the final scene could not be considered ambiguous - the “Shallow Hal” character regains his original consciousness, learns to love the obese woman for her character despite her unfashionable body shape, and decides to accompany her overseas. Nevertheless, the participants were moved to write that:

\(^2\) One of the major criticisms of “Shallow Hal” is that the male character is not attracted to the “inner beauty” of a woman, but to the idealized, model-thin beauty that he projects onto her. “When he looks at an overweight woman and instead sees her as a thin woman, that’s not inner beauty. What he’s seeing is a typical tall, thin professional model type—which in some ways is more insulting than if he saw her as she really is and instantly rejected her,” says one correspondent to the website of the movie critic Roger Ebert (Ebert, 2001)
He is not hypnotized by his friend anymore so he can see that his girlfriend becomes fat and very ugly. At the end of the story, he does not love her anymore (my emphasis).

This interpretation of course could be due to false memories, or poor subtitling or dubbing by the film company; the lack of opportunity to conduct follow up interviews means this can not be known. However, it seems quite possible that assimilation of the earlier mentioned binary caused the participants in this instance to filter out messages which did not accord with their ideas about what is “common sense” or obvious. If this were the case, it would be inconceivable to the participants that any man, regardless of his own girth, could regard any woman who is not thin – but especially those who are obese -- with anything but aversion.

This subconscious filtering effect also appears to be the case with their interpretation of the movie "Legally Blonde". The participants cite this movie in support of their contention that Thais believe that you have to be “thin to get a good job”. They make special mention of their understanding that the protagonist – a zany blonde woman who passes her admission board to Harvard University after submitting a video application in which she is dressed in a bikini – is “chosen to be a lawyer trainee because she has a positive figure”. In fact, the movie character wins a job at a top law firm after immersing herself in her studies and graduating at the top of her class, efforts which occurred as the explicit result of her dissatisfaction with the stereotyping that resulted from her idealized body and “blonde” ditziness.

The remaining assumptions that the participants demonstrate also derive from traditional ideas about gender roles. For example, when it comes to relationships, the participants accept that the duty of all women is to attract a man and that they must be prepared to change their appearance – radically, if necessary -- in pursuit of this irrevocable goal. Thus, although the participants complain that it is “unfair” for dieting companies to tell women that they have to go on crash diets
to “look more beautiful (and) make men love us”, it is taken as given that women still should find “other ways” to make men love them. One possible way (although it is not an alternative at all), they feel, is to increase one’s “sexiness” by developing a thin figure and big breasts, because then “wherever [a woman] goes, she will be happy and have confidence because men always look at her and are interested in her.” Conversely, women who are not slim have only themselves to blame for their “ugliness” because they evidently are lazy and greedy: “The behavior of fat woman is eating a lot and then sleeping,” they say. “[Advertising] shows that they eat all the time and do nothing. This advertising is true because the habit of fat women when eating a lot of food isn’t good.” Moreover, female sloth and heedlessness should be taken as due warning of future loneliness and betrayal because it is unlikely that any man can bear physical decline in their mates, especially those men who marry women on the basis that they look nice and “want to have sex with them”. Thus, while it is assumed that a woman would never be justified in leaving a man or finding a new one because their partner puts on weight or is a sexual predator23, it is stated that the husband of a woman who loses her youthful slimness reasonably could be expected to go out and “have the new woman because he can’t accept changing her appearance.”

I am aware that the impression I have given of the participants’ analyses in the foregoing paragraphs is quite negative. The implication that has been made is that their investigation has been rather superficial and that in fact they have remained committed to the notion that a woman’s duty is to dedicate her life to gaining male approval by configuring their bodies to men’s assumed preferences. However, as I stated at the beginning of this project, the purpose of critical research is not just to describe but to explain (for example, Thomas, 1993: 3-6).

23 Knodel et al. (1999: 102-103) state that girlfriends and married women in Thailand are expected to show “absolute fidelity” to their partners, regardless of how their partners change or how they behave. For example, one female respondent to a survey on marital attitudes said: “Men are men and women are women ... if women take lovers to get back at their [philandering] husbands, they will never have them back.”
While it may be true that the participants have not undergone a thorough revolution in their thinking as a result of their research, is it fair therefore to dismiss their work and the curriculum which formed the basis of this study as inconsequential? Could the context in which the participants live in fact be so unrelentingly chauvinistic that their first expressions of dissent, however apparently shallow, are instead to be thought of as brave and substantial?

These are fundamental questions for any critical educator. As Freire (1987: 37-8) points out, a major trap for those engaged in alternative education is that they become filled with frustration “when they see that their teaching practice was not able to make the revolution they expected.” Teachers who feel this way, he said, have not understood that the classroom transformation does not automatically lead to the transformation of society. They instead should appreciate that changes that students experience in “critical” classrooms may serve to modify the power of the dominant ideologies which exist outside the classroom, but that these same dominant forces also serve to condition the environment in critical classrooms, thereby interfering with teachers’ ability to “build a critical culture separate from the dominant mass culture”. Accordingly, because student consciousness is both so much the product of dominant ideologies and the determinant of the outcome of any curriculum, classes which do not “seem to go anywhere” may simply reflect the fact that the dominant ideologies are so powerful that transformation can not begin “at this time, in this place, through this means” (Freire et al., 1987: 26).

How strong, then, are the dominant counter-revolutionary sexist ideologies in Thailand? One indication was given in the introduction to this project; it will be recalled that Thailand ranks 74th out of 177 countries on the United Nations’ gender empowerment index, and that women’s political and social disadvantage is held to be due to the “gender bias (that) is still built into many laws and
institutions” (UNDP, 2003: 76). Another clue lies in the unabashed frankness of the sexist imagery that dominates the advertising messages cited by the students. When feminists analyze modern advertising in countries such as Britain or Australia they often note that marketers now understand that the “bad old days” in which “common sense” sexist assumptions reigned have largely disappeared and thus “sexist stereotypes ... are ineffective”24 as a means of promoting sales (Talbot, 2000: 117). In comparison, in Thailand, advertising of the type which introduces images of obese women satirizing their taken-for-granted sexual unattractiveness by parodying go-go dancing to the sound of trumpeting elephants still largely passes without comment, or wins awards25, or is regarded as funny. For Van Esterik (cited in Jackson, 2004b: 191), examples such as this are indicative of the “extreme objectification of women” that continues to exists in contemporary Thailand. Finally, it is interesting to review the parallels between the social attitudes that exist in modern day Thailand and those that were common in western countries before the advent of the modern Women’s Liberation Movement. Here, for example, is Chomsky (2005: 155) providing a retrospective view:

---

24 However, this of course does not mean that westerners live in post-sexist times. For Talbot, feminism continues to be undermined by advertisers and manufacturers through their strategy of presenting feminism as a “pattern of consumption”.

25 Award winning advertisements in Thailand in 2006 included print campaigns for Mag-Lite torches which made joking references to Thailand’s huge prostitution industry (the advertisements were entitled “XXX Cinema”, “Streetwalker” and “A go go bar”). The top TV advertising spot was won by a product which retails the story of a combative woman who tones down her aggressiveness and wins her man after using a skin whitening cream. (AsiaPacific AdFest 2006)
Take something recent in our history, the women's movement. If you had asked my grandmother if she was oppressed, she wouldn't have understood what you were talking about. If you had asked my mother, she knew she was oppressed and she was resentful, but couldn't openly question it. She wouldn't allow my father and me to go into the kitchen because that wasn't our job; we were supposed to be doing important things like studying, while she did all the work\(^{26}\). Now ask my daughters if they're oppressed; there's no discussion. They'll just kick you out of the house. That's a significant change that's taken place recently, a dramatic change in consciousness and in social practice.

In summary, I have argued through my exposition of the participants' analysis that the context in which they live is suffused with a sexism of a pervasiveness that arguably has not existed in western English-speaking countries for decades - perhaps even since the time that the 78-year-old Chomsky's mother was approaching middle age. If Freire and Shor's description of the enormous pressure that environments such as these bring to bear against "emancipatory" projects is accepted, it would seem to follow that any sign of critical consciousness - however slight - would be admirable indeed. However, for the same reason that an elderly man like Chomsky cannot be relied on to accurately describe the experience of young women, my judgments about the effects of ideology on my younger, female, Asian students cannot be regarded as anything more substantial than informed speculation. Accordingly, I now turn to my participants' research into the effects on themselves and other Thai women of the ideological imperatives to be thin and "beautiful" for a more complete understanding of the impediments to change and freedom that they face.

\(^{26}\) A common theme in all gender-based student research projects was the topic of domestic work. All groups complained that women are socialized to do all the housework, regardless of the status of their outside employment. This, they said, is because of the social attitude that men are the heads of families and that domestic work therefore is women's work. These assertions appear to be borne out in comments by the National Statistical Office of Thailand (2007): "Women are not usually enumerated as heads of households unless they are either living alone or there are no adult men in the households," it says, before noting that women have consistently been classified as "not being in the labor force" often because they are "housewives".
Social and Personal Experiences

As I explained in Chapter 3, a major objective of this project was for the participants to engage in the “consciousness raising” of the type developed by the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1960s and 1970s. Former New York Radical Women’s organizer Carol Hanisch recently wrote in an introduction to the reprint of her 1969 essay “The Personal is Political” that one objective of consciousness raising was for women to understand that their dissatisfaction about their treatment in the areas of sex, appearance, abortion, housework and childcare were not simply gripes to be worked out in private between they and their men. Instead, by discussing with other women how these situations affected them, they could learn that their “oppressive situations were not [their] own fault” (2006: 2) and that they actually stemmed from a “male supremacy … movement” (2006: 1) that granted them privilege through their oppression of women. Hanisch also wrote that the WLM tried to get women to understand that resistance that took place individually was usually weak and ineffective; that what was needed instead was to take part in a group or class struggle. “Individual struggle is always limited; it’s going to takes (sic) an ongoing Movement stronger than any we’ve seen so far to put an end to male supremacy,” Hanisch wrote (2006: 3).

I therefore placed considerable emphasis in my classroom interactions on the need for the participants to research other women’s lives in order to find out how the ideological imperatives to be extremely thin reduce women’s health, happiness and independence. Furthermore, I encouraged them to look back at their own lives to see whether they could find any resonance there between what they had found out about other people and how they had personally been affected. Again, because this project had an explicitly political nature, the idea was not for the participants to engage in a version of personal therapy. Instead, there was a hope that the collective recognition of unfairness and injustice would lead
to awareness of the need for action, in whatever form that may take. Hanisch (2006: 4) explains this connection in her 1969 paper:

... the reason I participate in these [consciousness-raising] meetings is not to solve any personal problems. One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution [...] [as a result of these meetings], I’ve been forced to take off the rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman. I am getting a gut understanding of everything as opposed to the esoteric, intellectual understandings and noblesse oblige feelings I had in “other people's” struggles.

How grim then are the lives of women in Thailand in terms of the effects they suffer from the “false beauty standards” imposed on them by “men and the bosses”? (Hanisch, 2006: 2). In researching this question, the participants reviewed master’s and doctoral dissertations written by Thai students, as well as published work by academics written in Thai in Thailand. They also interviewed specialists such as surgeons and academics and, very importantly, included “case studies” in which they interviewed people who they felt had been directly affected by the “social effects” they had identified. Finally, they related their own experiences, and then explained how their thinking and actions had changed as a result of their work. All this was represented in the form of bilingual text, PDF documentation, and subtitled audio and video.

Before I report their analysis, I wish to note for the sake of clarity that my attitude before they began their research was rather blasé. The social effects that this particular group indicated in a project outline they produced before they began their research have been reported so extensively in the western and Thai press that I felt their power to enlighten me would be considerably blunted. On reflection, I think I felt this at least partly because of the numbing effect that occurs when one is confronted with suffering or injustice which does not directly impact on one’s life. In other words, to rework a famous quote by Josef Stalin
(Wikiquote, 2007c): “When one person [suffers] it is a tragedy, when thousands [suffer in the abstract], it’s statistics”. I will discuss in more detail the effect of my positioning at the end of the following exposition.

The participants concluded that there were four main social effects of the pressure to be underweight. They described these as eating disorders, plastic surgery, mental problems from taking “dangerous diet pills” and financial burdens. I will briefly present their findings here so as to provide context to their description of their own experience.

Eating disorders
The participants interviewed a doctor at the Faculty of Medicine at Mahidol University (one of Thailand’s leading medical research universities) as well as a psychiatrist at another hospital who has published extensively on anorexia and bulimia. They also reviewed a Ph.D thesis on female university students’ conception of their own bodies and talked to a young woman their age who employs vomiting as a technique to stay slim. The common themes that emerged from their research were that young women are pressured into developing the “mental diseases” of anorexia and bulimia by the retailing of imagery that shows that only the thin will be attractive and “get the other gender”. Accordingly, the participants reported that of 588 18-year-old students surveyed by the Ph.D candidate at one of Thailand’s leading state universities, 65% were dieting; 54% routinely induced vomiting after meals; 17% used laxatives to control weight; and 39% “claimed that food controlled their lives”. The magnitude of this aberrant behavior was reflected in data they gathered from US Census Bureau statistics (2004); according to this agency’s extrapolated figures, 1.2 million of 50 million Thais aged over 15 risk developing bulimia or anorexia.

27 I am unable to verify these statistics
The young student they included as a case study had a BMI of 19.2, which is borderline “underweight” as defined by the World Health Organization; nevertheless, she felt after reading magazines which contain “many models [who] have good figure” that she was overweight and that she therefore wants to slim down. Accordingly, to become thinner, she vomits after meals as it “feel[s] good because it is like I don’t eat anything.” However, she is starting to worry about this behavior as her teeth have turned yellow, there is blood in her vomit, she suffers anxiety attacks and she had to miss two months of classes when she was at high school. “Could you tell me why you want to improve yourself despite the fact that you look very thin?” the participants asked her (my emphasis). “I want to look good when I get dress,” she responded. “Now there are only small sizes. Moreover, I would like to be like the models. Most of presenters are thin and beautiful so I want to be thin like that.”

Plastic Surgery
The participants interviewed a surgeon at a university teaching hospital, another surgeon at one of Thailand’s leading cosmetic surgery clinics and a young woman their age who had recently undergone surgery to add a skin crease to her upper eyelid. They also surveyed data produced by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (ISAPS) and Unilever Corporation. The participants reported that Thailand jumped from 27th to 5th position in the world between 2003 to 2004 in terms of volume of plastic surgery procedures28, that 47% of Thai women are dissatisfied with their figures, and that 80.9% of Thai women (19.2% of men) would like to undergo cosmetic surgery because “it is a way that can make them look better”. The most common forms of surgery for Asians are procedures to add a crease to the upper eyelid, to provide the nose with a western-style bridge, and to make the breasts bigger (for example, Cullen, 2002). Side-effects include

---

28 The 2003 figures can be verified; see Consulting Room (2007). However, ISAPS at the time of writing had removed all statistical information from its website (http://www.isaps.org/stats_comingsoon.php) so I cannot verify the 2004 figures.
bleeding, infection, and adverse reaction to the drugs that are used, although the participants did not note the frequency of these effects.

I believe that the interview that the participants conducted with the cosmetic surgeon was one of the most revealing components of their project. I say this because the participants’ questions shepherded their interviewee into making statements of a type that, to my eyes, significantly damaged his credibility. I also felt that had the participants pressed the surgeon further on his responses, then the irrationality and ignorance of evidence that informed his assumptions would have been so clearly revealed as to permanently weaken the assimilation by the participants of the sexist beliefs which I believe underlay most of his responses and which occasionally were directly expressed. However, the generalized Thai cultural assumption that high social status equates with a monopoly on truth and knowledge appeared to act as a restraint on the participants’ questioning, and thus it would be unwise to conclude that their capacity to take a searching approach in this interview indicates anything more than the first glimmerings of critical consciousness.

Before describing the interview in more detail, it is advisable to comment again on the power that social status has in Thailand. According to widely cited research by Geert Hofstede (2007), Thailand’s “Power Distance Index” is in the upper range in comparative terms (at 64 out of a possible 100, it is appreciably above the world average of 55 and far exceeds the Australian index of 36), which indicates there is “a high level of inequality of power and wealth within the society.” More importantly, a high power distance index indicates that this inequality is not resented; in fact, large power and wealth differences are “accepted by the society as a part of their cultural heritage.” Given the above, it can be appreciated that the gowned and masked figure who was constantly checking his mobile phone for messages while facing the participants over a laptop computer
in his hi-tech office is likely to have commanded a considerable feeling of deference and respect in the participants.

The participants began their interview by citing their evidence that the rate of plastic surgery procedures in Thailand had jumped dramatically, and offered their hypothesis that this had happened because “the media is more and more pushing us to look like Western woman”. The surgeon responded by rejecting their first point, not on the basis of evidence, but because of his unsupported opinion that plastic surgery frequency “depends on economic in each country” and that rates will always increase more quickly in developed countries than in “undeveloped” countries\(^{29}\). However, in the next clause, he stated that “undeveloped” Thailand had in fact become “more developed”, which is why plastic surgery procedures in Thailand had increased, although not to the extent that the students had suggested. By becoming “more developed”, he meant that Thais had started to become more aware that they had a responsibility to be “good looking”. Thus:

\[
\ldots \text{ plastic surgery is normal thing. It is not special. If you can make}
\]
\[
\ldots \text{yourself good-looking, you should do. Therefore, undergoing plastic}
\]
\[
\ldots \text{surgery is not related to media and is not related to look like Western}
\]
\[
\ldots \text{women.}
\]

It can be seen that the surgeon’s argument at this stage is built on his claim that to be “more developed” is to want to be more “good looking”. He does not directly state what “good looking” is, but, judging by the most popular procedures performed at the hospital at which he works\(^{30}\), important attributes include possessing creased upper eyelids (only 50% of Asians are born with such

\(\text{29 This despite the fact that Thailand’s GDP output grew at a much faster rate in 2004 (6.1%) compared to}\)
\(\text{the other countries he cited in support of his argument (Japan; growth rate of 2.9% and the United States;}\)
\(\text{4.4%) (CIA World Factbook, 2005)}\)

\(\text{30 Yanhee Hospital, where the surgeon works, boasts a sophisticated website}\)
\(\text{(http://www.yanhee.net/index_en.asp) featuring many images of thin, white-skinned Thai women who}\)
\(\text{appear in a slideshow after the opening legend of “Beauty Can Be Yours”. All images are of women; there}\)
\(\text{are no male figures displayed.}\)
eyelids; the overwhelming majority of Caucasian people have them) (Kobrin, 2005), big breasts and a nose with a bridge. Conversely, by implication, having an eye shape that is traditionally thought of in the West as “Asian” (see figure 15), relatively small breasts and a “broad flat nasal dorsum” (Honrado, 2005) is to be homely and “undeveloped”. Nevertheless, the participants did not question the surgeon’s contention that the desire by Thai women to reconfigure their features to those strongly associated with Western women was self-evidently due to the spontaneous recognition of common instinct rather than because of the idealization of Western features by the media; nor did they wonder at his suggestion that it was “normal” for women in a developing country to choose to pay the equivalent of several months’ salary to have non-essential surgery which often has the express purpose of diluting their ethnic identity; nor did they ask the surgeon to reconsider his rebuttal about the increase in surgery rates by asking him to check the evidence they had provided. Needless to say, also not raised were even more fundamental questions such as why so many of Thailand’s limited medical resources are devoted to reconfiguring the faces and bodies of the rich rather than to improving the lives of the multitudinous poor.

The interview continued in a similar vein. The participants next proposed that many Thai women undergo plastic surgery because they want to have “perfect bodies” like local celebrities Metinee Kingpayome (BMI: 18.5 – borderline underweight) and Sonia Cooling (BMI: 16.5 – half a decimal point over “severe thinness”). This was again rejected, this time not with a non-sequitur (i.e. wanting to look “beautiful” is “normal”, therefore advertising has nothing to do with an increase in surgery rates), but with circular logic. According to the surgeon, the saturation of the media by idealized celebrity images is not connected with the

31 the average monthly income in Bangkok in 2002 was THB 27,514 (AUD 1040); in the provinces, the average monthly income was approximately half (Asian Market Research News, 2002). Double eyelid surgery costs THB 17,600 (AUD 690; AAUD 2504) while a “sag band” – a balloon which is surgically inserted to reduce the capacity of the stomach – costs THB 284,744 (AUD 10,772; AAUD 39,102), which is equivalent to 10 months of the average Bangkok wage.
growth in cosmetic surgery; instead, women choose to have surgery simply because “they want to undergo [surgery]”. Another reason he offered was that women are not influenced by the media but only by their friends. The obvious follow up question for the second response is: But who or what influences their friends? (The only question that could be asked as a follow-up to the first response is: “but why do they want to have surgery?” which initiates a recurring loop of frustration). Again, however, these inadequate responses passed without comment.

In the final stages of the interview the surgeon effectively laid his cards on the table. He began by stating that Thai women who do not have “prominent noses” can change the fact that they are “not beautiful” by “improv[ing]” their appearance with a big bridged Caucasian-style nose, which is “good” and “suitable” for the face. “They must do something for making them look good,” he reminded the students, “or they are not beautiful [and] they can’t meet anyone”. This was stated in response to a question by the participants about whether women who choose to have their faces and bodies cut and stitched on the premise that it will make them more attractive to men can be considered “psychologically healthy”. As can be seen above, this appears to the surgeon to be a mystifying question: clearly, a primary duty for every woman is to attract a man, which she cannot do if she has an indigenous nose. If a woman can not fulfill this fundamental role then she will naturally “lack of confident”, which is equivalent to being “psychologically unhealthy”. In this view of the world, those Thai women who do not use any means possible to “make [themselves] good-looking” in the manner of comparatively wealthy Western women are not “developed” and therefore psychologically deficient; on the other hand, only those women who are prepared to risk debt, pain and bodily damage to have their faces and bodies altered in response to the taken-for-granted assumption that all women are incomplete without men can be considered mentally healthy.
I began this recounting of the participants' interview with the surgeon with the intention of suggesting that their unwillingness to interrupt him or challenge his answers showed that they were still inclined to agree with the assumptions that informed his speech. However, alternative interpretations also suggest themselves. One different explanation could be that the participants felt that it was not worth arguing with the surgeon on the grounds that he would never admit to the implications that they were suggesting. To agree that the advertising industry was using racist and sexist imagery to create a fear in relatively poor women from developing countries that they are “not beautiful” unless they alter their bodies and faces to look like wealthier westerners, and that he was making an excellent living from this deliberately created paranoia, would be to admit that he was engaged in the colonization and exploitation of his own people. However, experience also suggests that most people will go to great lengths to avoid casting themselves in such a culpable light, with possible avoidance techniques including the assertion of unsupportable logic of the type described above, or the shutting down of any aggressive line of questioning.

Freire illustrates the futility of expecting power to recognize its own manipulative nature by referring to the “contradictions” that are presented to alternative educators. The fact that claims of structural oppression can be proved through teaching and research should be enough to ensure that radical education is a lever for the revolutionary transformation of society. However, says Freire (1987: 37):

32 A major force behind the development of the Critical Discourse Analysis methodology, Norman Fairclough (1995: 51), suggests that “resistance” is shown during interviews when those who have less power do not display behavior that accords with “institutional norms”; in other words, they choose to interrupt, or challenge questions, or question the more powerful person's sincerity instead of participating in the interview on the more powerful person's terms.
In order for education to be the tool for transformation it would be necessary for the ruling class in power to commit suicide! It would have to give up its dominant power in society, including its creation and supervision of the schools and colleges [...] therefore, the transforming teacher uses the education space without being naïve. He or she knows that education is not the lever for the revolutionary transformation precisely because it should be!

Thus, as Freire suggests, there never has been in history a case of radical transformation that has occurred because the oppressed have confronted the ruling class with their exploitative nature. Chomsky (2003: 107) takes up this point when he talks of the uselessness of speak(ing) truth to power:

First of all, power already knows the truth. They don't need to hear it from us. Secondly, it's a waste of time. Furthermore, it's the wrong audience. You have to speak truth to the people who will dismantle and overthrow and constrain power.

Unfortunately, because it was not possible to conduct interviews with the participants, I can not say definitively why they did not press the surgeon with follow-up questions. It may well be that they felt that it was pointless to pursue the surgeon for the types of reasons expressed by Freire and Chomsky. Alternatively, they may have felt that the extreme inadequacy of the surgeon’s answers sufficiently revealed the ideologies that have given birth to and sustain the booming cosmetic surgery industry, and that therefore, there was no need to attempt to expose his complicity further through adopting a combative attitude which may have landed them in trouble with the university authorities or the hospital. Finally (and most unattractively), it could be - as I first suggested - that their culturally learned deference and deep assimilation of oppressive ideologies helped to persuade them that the surgeon was correct and that he had helped to steer them away from unnecessary dissatisfaction.

One final interesting point that arose in the interview was a claim by the cosmetic surgeon that expensive procedures of the type that he offered were essentially risk-free. He agreed that side-effects could occur from work done at cheaper
clinics, but the “safety equipment” at his clinic ensured that the probability of trouble was only about 3%. The young woman whom the participants interviewed agreed enthusiastically that the operation to add a fold of fat to her upper eyelids had gone flawlessly. “This surgery just uses the laser and doesn’t have any effects,” she said. By “no effects” she apparently meant that her eyesight had not been damaged; the fact that her eyes were swollen for five to six months after the operation apparently was of little account when weighed against the benefits she had received. “I’m pleasure about them,” she said in reference to her new eye shape. “Moreover, someone told me my eyes are beautiful much more than before and she would like to do is the same as me and wanted me to suggest her to.”

Interestingly, the Thai model Kawinna Suwanpradeep sued Yanhee Hospital (Cullen, 2002) after their liposuction treatment for her “hefty thighs” went wrong. “I can’t wear swimsuits. I can’t do fashion shoots. And I can’t play any sexy characters on television, because at some point they might have to show their legs,” she said. “Now I’m the poster girl for plastic surgery disaster.”

33

Figure 15: Before and after Blepharoplasty ("double eyelid" surgery) (Meronk, 2007)
"Mental Problems" from Diet Pills and Financial Burdens

In the final section of the participants’ review of the social effects of the pressure to be thin, they cited evidence from the Thai Food and Drug Administration\textsuperscript{34} that a major cause of permanent depression and suicide among Thai women derives from the use of amphetamine-based diet pills. They recounted the story of a woman nicknamed “Pig” whose took so many pills that her weight dropped from 100kg to 58kg in two years, a pattern of weight loss that was abruptly terminated when she collapsed and died at home. Common effects from ingesting the pills – which are sold in small stores throughout Thailand – include nervous tremors, diarrhea, bulging eyes, a racing heartbeat, high blood pressure and “even heart failure”. They also cited a study included in the Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand (Sritipsukho et al., 2004) which showed that 59.6% of Thai women who use diet pills are not overweight, and that 8.8% are in fact underweight. Furthermore, 87.6% of diet pill users consume more than the recommended amount and 82.8% of all women of a “normal” weight who use diet pills falsely consider themselves to be obese.

The reason that the pills are so popular, says “Mai”, a diet pill user who was interviewed by the participants, is that “society or people around [us] prefer thin women.” Accordingly, although she thinks she is “not so fat”, she has taken the pills on three protracted occasions and has seen her weight drop by as much as 4kg in a month, only to “yo-yo” back upwards by 9kg when she finishes taking them. The pills are expensive – she pays THB 3000 (AUD 113; AAUD 412) per month for them and a further THB 10,000 (AUD 378; AAUD 1373) for a monthly nutritional supplement – but she considers the purchases to be worthwhile despite the expense and the yo-yo effect because “I can wear the beautiful dresses.” However, she now admits to having second thoughts about

\textsuperscript{34} I cannot verify this data
reducing her weight this way; despite being able to fit into pretty clothes, “people
around me often tell me that I look bad and unhealthy.”

Other forms of weight control marketed in Thailand are even more expensive
and appear as likely to cause dissatisfaction and ill-health. Thai women currently
pay about THB 52,740 (AUD 2055; AAUD 7460) for liposuction treatments
(Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2007) and about THB 60,000 (AUD 2340; AAUD
8494) for “Cryocelle Phased Therapy” at the Marie France BodyLine Clinic.
Diligent searching of academic literature turned up no references to the term
“cryocelle”; nevertheless, Kang Xiuhui (reported by Lee, 2005), who won a free
treatment in the company’s “Dream Wedding, Dream Body” competition
explains that it:

... works by the principle of thermolysis, meaning temperature
variance. This treatment converts stored fats into energy, and enhances
lymphatic drainage and microcirculation of the dermis, therefore
allowing the body to feel detoxified. One result is the decrease in water
retention as well as fat and cellulite deposits.
I also met the nutritionist. From her, I learnt an important lesson: the
key to slimming is to eat wisely. I can always select the healthier options.
For instance, instead of having eggs, I can eat more vegetables.

In a widely cited book chapter entitled “The Fine Art of Baloney Dtection”, the
physicist Carl Sagan (1995: 196) remarked that companies which set out to
deceive usually aim to exploit the “powerful emotion” -- “wonder, fear, greed,
grief” – that the victim is caught up in. While the “credulous acceptance of
baloney” that characterizes the response of the duped may only end up costing
them money, the effects can be “much more dangerous than that” – even
“catastrophic”, Sagan said. It may well be that the thermolysis treatment
described above is valid (customers wear a heated belt around their waists during
sessions), although another search uncovered no academic literature on the
efficacy of thermolysis as a treatment for body fat reduction (it appears that it is
usually used as a laboratory or engineering technique to transform complex
organic compounds used for industrial applications, or as a means of stimulating hair growth\textsuperscript{35}. Whatever the truth of the matter, an interview that the participants conducted with one Marie France BodyLine customer (“Pe”) evokes quite well Sagan’s ideas about the anatomy of a scam.

The first point to note is the psychological pressure that Pe was under when she made her THB 25,000 (AUD 946; AAUD 3433) down payment to Marie France for a weight reduction course. Her mother had constantly told her that she was unhealthily overweight and a five star hotel in Bangkok refused to employ her as a receptionist on the basis that she was “fat”. To her credit, Pe posed them a question: which is better - a “stupid beautiful girl”, or a “fat clever girl?” The hotel was sufficiently impressed by this demonstration of spirit to employ her in a hotel information position; nevertheless Pe remained committed to the Marie France course because “most actors choose it” and the advertisements made strong claims that they could reduce her waist size from 32 to 28 inches in a month. In fact, Pe did manage to lose 3 inches but had to withdraw after the first month because she was afflicted by debilitating diarrhea (the “dangerous effects” that Sagan talks of), an experience she attributes to the treatment she had undergone. However, the fact that “Pe” had lost weight after she had taken the course also caused her to decide that, on balance, the program had been successful\textsuperscript{36} and that it was worth repeating: “After I finish this course, I still want to get this course again because I can reduce my waist 3 inch,” she said. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that she would have enrolled again as her mother had complained to Pe that she “[is] always diarrhea”. Furthermore, Pe also was

\textsuperscript{35} See, for example, the listings that were generated by a search of “Google Scholar” for the keyword thermolysis (http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=thermolysis&hl=en&lr=&btnG=Search)

\textsuperscript{36} Given the pressure she was under, it was understandable that Pe did not consider that she may be committing the logical fallacy known as post hoc, ergo propter hoc ("it happened after, so it was caused by") (Sagan, 1995) “Pe” assumes that she lost weight because of the thermolysis treatment, but the weight reduction may in fact have been caused by her restricted diet or, more probably, the debilitating diarrhea that she experienced. However, in fairness, she may also have committed the same error with regard to her reasoning about the diarrhea she suffered.
showing signs during her interview that she was questioning the mainstream ideological values that she had been taught: “I want to say to all of fat women that you shouldn’t care the people in social that thinking about you. You have to confident in yourself. Although you are not beautiful, you are clever. People should think about brain more than beautiful,” she said. Thus, like the participants who interviewed her, Pe seems to be torn between acting on mass media messages that tell her she is ugly and her instinctive feelings that these messages are manipulative and destructive.

On re-reading my review of the participants’ research into the social effects of the pressure to be thin, my first reaction is that I have described their work in too much detail. Stories of the suffering caused by radical dieting, anorexia and cosmetic surgery have been widely circulated throughout the world for at least the past several decades and it seems, on first bite, almost pointless to add to the volume of this reportage. However, on further reflection, I can see that my reaction is the predictable result of patterns of thinking which have helped to maintain and reproduce the stories of unnecessary human suffering which the participants have described.

The major reason for my initial feeling that I had engaged in overkill is that the pressures that the women have described in their project are outside my personal experience. I am a man whose BMI has reached the “pre-obese” level of 26 (178cm/83kg) at various stages of my adult life, yet never have I considered dieting or taking medication to lose weight. Being overweight has been uncomfortable and a little embarrassing, but I have never felt shamed by my body. Thus, on reflection, it is clear to me that I have always subconsciously assumed that the media was exaggerating when it related shocking stories of death and starvation induced by body image pressures (even though consciously I knew these stories to be true), and that the women who have been affected in this way
must have been particularly oversensitive or weak. Couldn’t they have done something to lose weight if they were worried about it? If they were skinny already, why couldn’t they see that? And why do so many Thai women worry about this anyway – I never did when I was overweight, and most of them aren’t even fat! This line of thinking usually terminates in the premise that any destructive or neurotic behavior that an individual displays is their fault alone and that they should do something about it instead of looking to lay their problems at someone else’s door. Shor (1992: 63) calls this the “single great lesson” that the ideology of individualism teaches:

Win or lose, the individual is to blame. Each human being is a lone entrepreneur who succeeds or fails on the basis of her or his character, ingenuity and talents. If you fail to pull yourself by your own bootstraps, blame only yourself.

However, in taking a critical view, I am consciously rejecting this ideological position. My stance is that hundreds of thousands -- possibly even millions -- of women engage in self-destructive actions with regard to their appearance not because they are individually weak but because the norms of cultural and social life strongly encourage this behavior (Schroyer, cited in Thomas, 1993: 5). This emphasizes again the vital role that reflexivity plays in critical research. “Common sense” assumptions naturally help determine the reaction of any researcher to a particular context; nevertheless, it is also incumbent on the critical researcher to recall that he or she is an “active [creator] rather than passive [recorder] of narratives or events” (Thomas, 1993: 46). Accordingly, to go with one’s instinctive reactions rather than attempting to “[bring] the original act of knowledge back into consciousness” (Gadamer, cited in Thomas, 1993: 46) is to reduce the truth quotient of a study because one is creating descriptions and explanations that accord to one’s personal view of the world rather than to what actually exists.
The upshot of this explanation is that I chose to extensively describe the participants’ analysis of the social effects of the pressure to be thin because the process of reflection caused me to become aware that the participants judged these effects to be real and dramatic constraints on the lives of women in Thailand. To have truncated the description would have been to surrender to my initial “gut feeling” that these problems have already been described to the point of abstraction and are no longer of real interest to anyone. This would have played well to my instinctive bias, but also would have suppressed the voice of the participants and served to reinforce the idea that the experiences they described are “normal”; therefore invisible; therefore beyond the scope of consciousness or concern.

Thus far my rendering of the participants’ research has shown that most women in Thailand are a healthy weight, but are incessantly confronted with mass media messages that their “normal” bodies are in fact fat and ugly. Meanwhile, those who genuinely are overweight are often parodied as subhuman. As a result, large numbers of women take dangerous pills, or starve or purge themselves, or undergo weird and gruesome procedures such as wearing heated belts or having the fat sucked out of their bodies so they may reduce their weight to unhealthy levels. The main reason they do this is because they have been told that the interest of a man will forever be withheld if their bodies do not conform to the binary opposite of hugely obese parodies whom the media occasionally go so far as to liken to prey for savage animals. The participants have provided strong concrete support for their contention that this is the lot of most Thai women; what then are their own lives like?

Personal Experiences
Four of the five women who compiled this project provided BMI readings. One was borderline underweight (18.8); one was normal weight (BMI 23.3); and two
were pre-obese (BMI 25.6 and 28.2). The woman whose BMI was 28.2 initially wrote down her BMI as “about” 25.5 which piqued my curiosity - was she sure, or only guessing, or ashamed? A subsequent calculation revealed that she had understated or underestimated her true height/weight ratio by 10%.

The women stated that they had undergone weight control measures - some radical - for three main reasons. All explained that they felt fat compared to their friends, were told by their boyfriends and parents (and in one case, by employers) that they were too fat, and were worried that they would not be able to get jobs in the future because they felt their bodies were ugly. The participants also implied that media images contributed to their desire to be skinny, with one directly stating that she wanted to be “beautiful as same as the stars”. For example, “Faith” (BMI 18.8 - borderline underweight) described how comparisons with her friends' bodies and fears about work and relationships had caused her to “always” think she was fat. As a result, she lost a dramatic amount of weight to reach her current BMI, which made her “happier” because “many people especially my friends both male and female admire me”. Furthermore, she felt driven to become skinny because “many interesting jobs ask for attractive women; therefore, if I want to get an interesting job, I should have an attractive figure”. Finally, the bitter memory of receiving nothing while her friends were presented with flowers, chocolate and special presents by their boyfriends on Valentine's Day spurred her on towards her goal of achieving thinness. However, according to Faith, one can always be thinner, and therefore she will continue to try to “improve my look”.

Faith did not say how she lost weight, but it seems likely that her methods accord with those described by the other participants. The main weight control measures used were starvation dieting and forced vomiting, while one person lost 20kg by using diet pills. The case of “May” (who did not quote a BMI figure, but shrank
noticeably during the 18 months that I knew her) is particularly revealing precisely because it is typical of the experience of the rest of the group and of the women that they researched. Here is an excerpt from May’s story:

I have tried to improve it [my weight] several ways. Firstly, I ate nothing except water and milk during a day. I drank a lot of water per day and 3 kilograms are lost within a week so I think this was the good way to lose weight. However, after I gave up and ate food, my weight increases again. My body was deteriorated and I was exhausted easily. Thus, I tried another way. I ate only breakfast and avoided eating carbohydrate. After that I ate it again after I ate nothing but water and milk for a big while. It caused me bulimia nervosa - an illness in which a person has a very great fear of becoming fat, and so they make themselves vomit after eating (actually, I automatically vomit after eating). My weight decreases 10 kilograms within 2 months but there is also a bad thing about it. My entire body is deteriorated obviously.

Although she is much slimmer now, May doesn’t feel that reaching her objective has been an unqualified success. She is constantly worried that she will get “fat” again if she eats a normal diet and is disturbed by the food phobia she has developed. However, she feels she has no option but to continue with methods that have caused her body to weaken because “I always think that thin is better the fat”. Despite having suffered gastritis as a result of constant diet-induced vomiting, “April” (normal BMI of 23.3) also thinks that she must lose weight: her boyfriend says she would be “prettier” if she lost about 13kg and reduced to a borderline underweight BMI of 18.8, and she retains a belief that “thin woman is clever than fat people because most of skinny women are rich and succeed in their work.” Finally, fashion also plays a part: she dreams of being able to wear “tight, small shirt[s]” like her friends.

Evaluation
To what degree have the participants shown consciousness of and resistance to the elite ideologies which shape their lives? It will be recalled that I began this chapter with a description of the participants’ analysis of the social beliefs which they feel cause women to inflict damage on themselves in the quest to be
underweight and therefore “beautiful”. I recounted their suggestion that a distortion of the Buddhist concept of khamma provided much of the power for the impetus by women to radically alter their bodies; not to be thin in this lifetime, they said, was evidence that one had been immoral in a previous incarnation. Accordingly, in the words of van Esterik (1999: 216), one has a responsibility to enhance “beauty” in order to disguise one’s moral failings. All other ideologies spring from this, said the participants: in order to get a good job, or to attract men (and men must be attracted because of the cultural imperative that to be single is to deny a woman’s purpose in life), or to be part of the in crowd, one first has to be thin because to be thin is to be beautiful, and to be beautiful is to be good.

In presenting the participants’ descriptions, I also evaluated the stance they took with regard to the ideologies they were describing. I noted that they were openly critical of the claims of diet related products and of the media’s false characterizations of “fatness”, and also that they took moral issue with the lacerating misogyny of some of the language and images used in the media messages. However, I argued from an analysis of the participants’ language that they continued to demonstrate assimilation of the basic sexist premises which drive the creation and distribution of these messages. In other words, I suggested that they had developed enough consciousness to be offended by the form of oppressive ideologies, but that they were still bound to the essence of these messages. This essence, as I have said, is that women can only ever be “thin and beautiful” or “fat and ugly”, and to end up on the wrong side of the binary is essentially to be subhuman.

This thesis gains some strength, I believe, from the review which I provided of the participants’ study of the concrete effects that these beliefs had on their lives and the lives of other women in Thailand. The participants showed in extensive
detail that large numbers of women are prepared to risk their lives or go deep into debt to achieve the underweight ideal, and they also clearly described what these efforts actually entail (drinking nothing but milk and water for weeks on end; vomiting after every meal or to the point where there is blood in the effluvium; risking heart attacks and depression by taking amphetamine-based “diet pills”; paying the equivalent of half a year’s salary to be told to eat more vegetables and to wear a heated belt on the dubious claim that this will transform adipose tissue into water). Nevertheless, despite their research, all the participants except for one claimed that they felt they had no choice but to continue with these kinds of tactics as social rewards (boyfriends\textsuperscript{37}; the admiration of friends; “good” jobs\textsuperscript{38}) were available only to those who achieve the underweight ideal.

The line of thinking I have developed here seems to be leading to a conclusion that the power of the ideologies that have acted on the participants was so strong as to prevent any real transformation from happening. However, in developing this curriculum, I kept at the front of my mind Freire’s repeatedly emphasized idea that the relationship between ideologies and the people that they act upon is dynamic and changes throughout time (for example, Freire et al., 1987: 36-38). Thus, while elite ideologies are always working to create the idea in the minds of the subjugated that their relative disadvantage is inevitable and permanent, “critical” teaching over extended periods can help learners to develop research techniques which can help them to discover that their oppression depends on their continuing ignorance and passivity (for example, Chomsky, 1992).

\textsuperscript{37} Those who play the heterosexual-norm role of “ladies” in Thai lesbian relationships are also subject to these pressures. Megan Sinnott in her book “Toms and Dees” (2004) gives extensive treatment of the pressure on women to assume the role of either the heterosexual-norm ‘feminine’ “dee” (from “lady”) or masculine “tom” (from “tomboy”)

\textsuperscript{38} The jobs which my female students most commonly cite as desirable are service sector positions which frequently carry a requirement that their height and weight are “in proportion”. These positions include flight attendant work and secretarial and receptionist jobs.
Accordingly, I developed this curriculum with the specific intention of giving the participants enough space to reflect on any changes that may have occurred as a result of their research. The material that I have described thus far (the “social beliefs”, “social effects” and “our lives” components) all was compiled during the first and second semesters of the 2005/6 academic year. As I have argued, their thinking at this stage appeared still to be in considerable compliance with the subtexts of the ideologies they had identified. However, I wanted to know whether the three month summer term break would enable the participants to view their research and experience with the greater objectivity that is afforded by hindsight.

After the participants returned from their summer holiday, I asked them to prepare a section for their project entitled “Resistance”. This was to contain the following material: an exposition of what they had learned from their research, suggestions on how they would change the media, education, law and politics to ensure that women no longer felt that their worth was relative to the fat levels in their bodies; and information on whether their thinking and behavior had changed as a result of their research (and if so, how).

The first point that became clear in the participants’ exposition of what they had learned was their surprise in discovering that millions of women just like them had put themselves through the same sorts of physical and mental tribulations in order to achieve the underweight ideal. In other words, each person implied that she had always felt that she was essentially the only inadequate or unattractive human being in Thailand and that most other women were coping, or were unaffected, despite the conversations they may have had or the stories in the media they may have read.

This reaction accords well with the idea that hegemonic ideologies gain much of their force from their capacity to divide and isolate. For example, Betty Friedan
(Wikipedia, 2007) wrote that millions of post World War 2 American women remained unaware for many years that their “yearning” for something more than consumption, marriage and child raising was shared by millions of other women (she termed this the “problem without a name”); Michael Apple (1979: 9-10) cites New Left figure Raymond Williams in arguing that people have become so used to thinking in “abstracted individual terms” that they find it difficult to understand that they are part of a social system which relies on their disadvantage and exploitation to produce wealth and comfort for a few; and Chomsky (1993) explains the vital role that modern technology has in ensuring that any rebellious thoughts that the disadvantaged may have will not find expression in the form of popular movements although they may live in huge cities: “People are really alone to an unusual extent. That's a technique of control. I mean if you're sitting alone in front of the tube, it doesn't matter a whole lot what you think,” he says.

Thus, the participants begin the introduction to their “what we have learned” section by stating that when they embarked on their research that they had “no idea” what the causes of pressures to be thin were. All they understood, they said, was that “Thai society has taught the skinny people will success much more than the fat people”, and implied that the truth and fairness of this proposition is never discussed because of its seemingly commonsensical nature. However, after researching this idea further, all stated that they had understood for the first time that this belief was not neutral; that instead it had caused significant numbers of Thai women to put their health at risk by doing such things as taking diet pills or engaging in forced vomiting, and that most women would choose even more radical techniques (for example, cosmetic surgery) if they could afford them.

Two of the participants continued their review by noting that they had developed awareness that the mass media had a part to play in the development of these beliefs. For example, “Hope” (the woman who understated her BMI) said that
she “had learned that the media have influent on people because the media can make people have a wrong believe”. Furthermore, she said that she head “learned” that Thai women “try to do everything for making them look better” because they were “obsess(ed) with beauty”. “June” – who was rejected for employment at a five star hotel because she was “too fat” – agreed, stating that she had learned that “nowadays the media does not present the real image. They just want to promote and sell their products.”

Again, I would have liked to explore these responses in more detail by interviewing the participants. Were they really so unaware before their research that the media uses false and unfair images to create an artificial desire to be thin? After all, given the widespread reporting in the West of the vital role that media plays in developing wants, it seems incredible to me that anyone – particularly university students -- should now profess ignorance of this. However, as in the case of the earlier example that I provided, reflexivity reminds me that my judgments about what people of a different gender, age and racial background should or should not know is hardly a relevant criterion for judging whether their opinions are stated honestly. Nevertheless, in light of the participants’ apparently new understanding about the role that the media plays in creating the pressure to be thin, I also would have liked to know why their suggestions for the reform of social structures were so scant and/ or off topic (they suggested the government should clamp down on media promotions of alcohol and “impolite dressing of pretty girls” – ideas which were completely unrelated to their topic -- and that changes in education and laws need only to extend to providing better information about nutrition and fining advertisers who make false product claims). My speculations about these superficial responses are contained in the conclusion that follows this chapter, where I review the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum that I developed.
I now return to my original question: did the research that the participants undertook have an emancipatory effect? I will continue to argue that it did (although in a limited way), and that the length of time that they were able to devote to it was important to the development of their consciousness.

The standards by which I measure ‘emancipation’ are derived from Paulo Freire, Ira Shor and Noam Chomsky. As I have mentioned at various times in this dissertation, Freire and Shor (1987: 34) feel that “transformation comes in all sizes”; that sometimes it is not possible to “make a dent in the hold of mass culture on the students’ expectations”, or that often all that can be accomplished is a “moment of transition from passivity or naiveté to some animation and critical awareness”. However, says Shor:

If they [the students] seriously study racism or sexism or the arms race, I read this as a starting point of transformation which may develop in the long-run into their choices for social change.

Chomsky (2003: 186-187) reiterates Shor’s point that some form of transformation can be said to have occurred when awareness of and serious research into structural oppression has occurred, but notes that awareness is in fact no kind of awareness at all unless it prompts action:

Education is just the beginning … there's a whole series of things which have to happen and they begin with awareness; you don't do anything without awareness, obviously – you don’t do anything unless you’re aware that there’s something that ought to be done, so that’s the beginning almost by definition. But real awareness in fact comes through practice and experience with the world. It's not, first you become aware and then you start doing things; you become aware through doing things.

“June” – the marginally pre-obese (BMI 25.6) woman who was rejected for hotel employment because she was “too fat” – is an example of one participant who was able to translate her thinking and study into a form of action that both reduced her personal fears and also changed the attitudes of her family. The
generative theme that she developed in the semesters before the long summer break spoke of the pressure that her parents had put her under to lose weight. She wrote then that she had no option but to accept her mother’s warning that her current weight may cause her to develop diabetes; and she felt also that it was her duty to accept her mother’s mockery when she said she wanted to buy a bikini.

However, after completing the first stage of her project, June decided it was time to speak in an informed way to her mother. She told her mother that she understood her desire for her daughter to be as slim as she, and said also that she accepted her mother’s fears about her one day developing diabetes. However, as she explained to her:

> Each person has the different shape and size. It is the heredity. It is like diabetes. I give her the example that my older sister has the same size and shape like her. She is a small girl but I like my father. He is a big guy. Therefore although I can lose weight or be thinner, I remain a big girl because my bones are big.

Furthermore, she corrected her mother of the commonly held belief in Thailand that every woman’s ideal weight can be calculated by the formula “height minus 110”. She pointed out to her mother that achieving the weight specified by this (unscientific) prescription would mean that she would have to lose 13kg, or 20% of her body weight, and that this potentially dangerous experience would put her at the low range of normal body weight. Accordingly, she introduced her parents to the BMI concept and explained to them that a normal, healthy weight was in fact much closer to her current dimensions than that demanded by tradition. In conclusion, June said:
My thought and behavior are changed after I have done this research. I have known much knowledge that I have never know before [...] when I see the advertisements of cosmetics or beauty in the television or magazines, I just watch them but I am not excited and want to buy their products because I know that they do not work. They just want to sell their products. Before I do not do this project yet, I will be interested in the products and buy them because I think they are good. Now, I feel more confident and happy with my life. They, especially my mother, understand me more. She rarely criticizes me about my figure.

This theme of heightened awareness was repeated by all participants. “May” (who used to automatically vomit after meals) said she no longer instinctively felt that “fat woman is ugly and stupid”; that in fact stupidity or intelligence are not dependent on the fat content of the body but to the functioning of character and mind. This was also the experience of “Hope” (the woman who understated her BMI by 10%); from feeling that it was impossible for her to achieve anything unless she had a “perfect figure”, she now says she understands that this mode of thinking had caused her to put her mental health at risk.

After I have done the Body Image project, it make me change my thinking and behavior. For example, I had ever taken the diet pills. They can not make my weight decrease. Then, I know that the diet pills cause of the mental problem, so I stop taking them ... I [now] don’t expect that my weight has to decrease, but I feel my body is stronger. Moreover, I think the mind is important thing. If I have a good mind, my appearance or personality is also good. Therefore, I just take care and make myself has a value.

The material I have covered in this chapter thus far has been described for the purpose of answering the research questions I posed in the introduction to this project.

I have tentatively reached the following conclusions: that the students have developed a surface awareness of the ideological nature of social assumptions which previously they regarded as “common sense”, if in fact they consciously thought of them at all (questions 1 and 3), but that their continued assimilation of the “thin/fat” binary calls into doubt the depth of their critical awareness
I have also argued that the students became aware through their investigation into other women’s lives that their own drastic experiences (automatic vomiting; use of diet pills etc.) were not “normal” but were the predictable results of ideologies which seek to induce fear and paranoia for the purposes of reproducing social and financial stratification (question 2 again, and question 5). Furthermore, I have sought to show that the main strategies that the students have developed as a result of their growing awareness have been, most importantly, to immediately cease habits which have directly damaged them in the past (vomiting; using diet pills); and furthermore, to use logic and evidence to counter the fantastic or baseless claims of family, advertising and “experts” (question 4). Finally, I have highlighted the effect that my biases have had on the students, and have suggested that these have served to muddy to some degree a research context which was already quite opaque due to the ban on interviewing (question 6).

Before making a final evaluation of my curriculum, I will now very briefly provide a description of the investigation that another group undertook in the area of skin pigmentation. This addendum is intended to provide a measure of triangulation for claims I have made in the previous paragraph. In effect, I have argued that my curriculum succeeded in helping participants to develop critical consciousness in a context of overwhelmingly pervasive sexism that I believe has been absent from Australia for at least a generation, but that the depth of assimilation of the values and interests of the patriarchal system have made this new awareness rather tentative. How well does this accord with the experience of another group that undertook research on a different topic but using the same curriculum?

**Comparative Analysis – Skin Pigmentation**

Thailand is populated by three main ethnic groups: those from the Tai-speaking family of races (75%), immigrants from China (who make up about 14% of the
population) and various other sub-groupings (about 11%) drawn mainly from surrounding regions (CIA World Factbook, 2007c). These ethnic groups over the millennia have evolved dark pigmented skin in order to prevent ultra violet radiation from the sun from damaging the content of their blood (Jablonski, 2004: 586). However, although dark skin color is most appropriate for the majority of Thais who do not spend most of their lives indoors\textsuperscript{39}, a large industry devoted to maintaining and satisfying a long-established desire\textsuperscript{40} to whiten the skin has developed. Market research by L’Oreal Thailand (Turpin, 2004: 189) suggests that the total Thai “beauty market” in 2000 was worth USD 26.6 billion, which means that the average Bangkok resident spends about 10% of their salary on “personal care and health” products. Of this expenditure, about USD 60 million is spent on facial whitening products (Wong, cited in Persaud, 2005: 214).

Research into the phenomenon of “whitefacing” in Asia has drawn some tentative conclusions about its causes. Goon et al. (2003: paragraph 1) argue that white colonial cultures have marketed whiteness as the image of modernity and power in order to extract tangible “repayment” from their Asian former subjects for their loss of direct political control over them. However, the flow of profits back to western corporations and their Asian proxies that results from the saturation of Asian popular culture with images depicting young women turning from “ugly [dark] duckling into beautiful [white] swan” (Goon et al., 2003: paragraph 61) is not so obviously the result of “foreign” manipulation as to cause local resentment; instead, says Persaud (2005: 211), the Thai elite has internalized “global modernity’s racist and sexist core” and thus “embraces” their own exploitation by the white races because it in turn gives them a license to take advantage of poorer, darker Thais. Objections that Thailand was in fact never

\textsuperscript{39} 49% of Thais are employed in agriculture and a further 14% in industry (CIA World Factbook, 2007b)

\textsuperscript{40} for example, Malaysian writer Amir Muhammad argues that white skin has “always” been a marker of “privilege” in Asia (cited in Goon & Craven, 2003)
formally colonized are rejected as immaterial by scholars including Persaud (2005: 211) and Jackson (for example, 2004a: 241-245), who argue that the Thai elite have historically shown a tendency to auto-colonization by mandating western forms of behavior and clothing on the grounds that the west represented “civilization”.

The students who developed this project show broad agreement that whiteness has been promoted within Asian societies such as Thailand as a strategy to “stand out -- in a class and colonially positive way -- from the rest of the dark ethnic mass” (Goon et al., 2003: paragraph 63). They argue in their “social beliefs” section that this objective is expressed through the following ideological messages: that to be white is to be attractive, healthy, high class and intelligent. As with all the other projects produced for this curriculum, they provided concrete evidence from mass culture to support their contentions. This evidence generally bears out the earlier expressed suggestion by Foucault that elites benefit from the tendency of the human mind to assimilate false dichotomies: many of the advertising images that the participants cite directly suggest that women are attractive if they have white skin but are unattractive if they are dark; are white and healthy or dark and unhealthy; are white and high class or dark and low class; and are white and intelligent or dark and less intelligent. In turn, the (expensive) products that provide the vehicle for these claims are offered as a means of escaping from the undesirable path of the possibilities suggested by their advertisements. Below is a typical example:
1. Yu! I have got something to show you!
2. Oh you got the good grade
3. Yui always teaches me good things

4. New! Total White!
5. Look! Whiter!
6. Blemishes get better!

7. Acne scars fade
8. Best results occur over time
9. You will have the good chance after you have white skin

Figure 16: Olay Total White
Here we see an older (white) woman showing her younger (apparently identically white) friend that she has achieved a term grade point average of 4.0 in all her university subjects. The older woman then implies on the basis of her demonstrated intellectual superiority that at least some of her scholastic success is due to the fact that she has “totally white” skin. The younger friend dutifully applies the product – a clock hand sweeps around her face, showing that her skin miraculously whitens within seconds\(^\text{41}\) – and achieves the payoff: she is now whiter, and therefore will have a better chance in life than if she had been (relatively) darker (although the audience is reminded that they must buy this product for an extensive period of time to achieve the desired effect). Other media images provided by the participants repeat this theme that whiteness guarantees social success: examples include a previously shunned woman who fills a hospital ward with male neck whiplash injuries after she turns white; a young white woman who tells her slightly less white but envious friends that she earned the nickname “White High Society” by using a particular brand of whitening cream; and a young woman who confides that skin is never really healthy unless it is “rosy white”.

It is important to note at this stage that the students who compiled this project approached their analysis with a significantly more informed and contrary attitude than the previously described group. Although all in the past had behaved in ways that indicated their submission to the mass culture degradation of their skin color – some had withdrawn into themselves because of “inferiority complexes” while others had scoured at their darkness with Scotch-Brite pads or “coconut husk and tamarind meat” until they experienced “burning pain” – the language that

\(^{41}\) Note that the white skin of the younger woman is significantly darkened in frame 5 of the advertisement, presumably for the purpose of heightening the contrast that is being suggested. In frame 1 she is almost as white as the older woman; in frame 5 her skin looks 50% darker; and by frame 9 she has returned to her original color. Thus, if the intended message of the advertisement is set aside, this piece of propaganda shows that applying the product has absolutely no effect at all, which accords well with statements that the students attribute to a dermatologist in an interview described later.
they used throughout their project showed a conscious awareness and rejection of the ideological binaries described above. At no stage in their project do they repeat the tendency of the students described in the previous analysis to unselfconsciously equate “beauty” with the idealized value promoted by mass culture (in this case “whiteness”); instead, they take direct aim at this binary and the “severity of the problem[s]” that derive from the suggestion that those who are not white are at the level of “black pig[s]” or “stump[s] of ebony”.

The tone of their approach is apparent from the first words in their project. In their introduction, the students say that the whiteness value has been “set up without dark skinned people’s agreement” and charge that this represents the clear fact of racism:

> From our research, we know that being dark in Thailand is not the little problem and everyone should not neglect it. Many people think that I [sic] Thailand has not racism, but it is not true [...] The way that other people act different toward dark skin and white skin makes people who have dark skin feel different from other and always think they are lower than white people are, like the air that surrounding everyone, but no one see it.

From this thesis they go on to describe the various social effects that derive from the unrelenting media campaign to convince Thais of the superiority of white skin: the deepening of class stratification (they cited research from a university Ph.D dissertation which concluded that “dark skin teenagers don’t like their skin and always look down upon themselves” because “white skin is the upper class while dark skin is the lower class as laborers”); they also note the huge wealth gap between relatively “white” cities and the countryside; wasteful spending (they reviewed Galbraith’s theory of “artificial wants” and then interviewed a university student who has consistently spent THB5000 (AUD 189; AAUD 686) per month on whitening products, although they have always been completely ineffective: a

---

42 I have already referred to the extraordinary wealth gap in Thailand as described by the Gini Index
“folly” and an “extravagance”, according to the students who compiled this project; skin diseases (they cite the argument by University of Toronto researcher Amina Mire (2005) that dark people use ineffective and toxic whitening products because they are victims of an “impossible desire” to be white); damaged self-esteem caused by the belief of Thai women that all Asian men prefer “white women” (they interviewed a young woman who is using whitening products because she “feels strange” and “ugly” even though she is inwardly “content” with her skin color; therefore, “If I have a chance or a method to make my skin lighter, I will do”, she said); and unrealistic goals (they interviewed a dermatologist who scoffed at the claims made by whitening product advertisements; a revealing exchange which I will refer to in detail later).

The major themes that emerged from their investigation were similar to those described in the previous project. The participants noted the obviously fraudulent nature of the claims made by the advertisements: that it was “impossible” for any cream to eradicate melanin and induce an almost albino shade of whiteness. Therefore, according to the students, these “nonsense” products were simply setting out to “deceive” customers (“Thai people are the tools of these companies,” they wrote.) Furthermore, they reacted cynically to the advertisers’ efforts to create the impression that “dark” means any color -- even shades of white -- that does not equate to the impossibly pale model of success and desirability. They say of one advertisement that features an already white-looking woman fretting over her supposedly dark skin:
... it set up the unreal images and unrealistic word. In the scene that a
girl does not use Ponds whitening cream, they make up her face and
setting looks dull. On the other hand, after she uses Ponds whitening
Lotion, they make up her face look brighter. Moreover, the setting is
more colorful. That is the important things to make people see the
difference between before and after use Ponds whitening Lotion.
Furthermore, they use the unrealistic word also, for example “If you
pay only twenty baht, your life will be change”. In the common sense,
you know that it is impossible. It just is the way that to deceived people
to buy their products.

As a result of their investigation, the participants suggested a far more relevant
program for change than that offered by the previous group. To begin with, the
government – which is the “executive of the country” – should take note of the
fact that many Thais “get bad effect” from the aggressive marketing of skin
whitening creams, and therefore should ban or publicly “insult” products which
make false claims. Furthermore, producers of movies, songs and advertisements
who mock or degrade dark people should change their approach. One example
of what they could do is as follows:

Thai dramas always use the actors or actresses who have dark skin act
as the servants or uneducated people. This is indirect instruction which
make people believe that dark skinned people are lower than white
skinned people. Therefore, the producers should make the new image
of dark people by not give dark skinned people act only as the servants,
but they should be equal with white skinned people.

However, as they say, all of these changes are likely to be ineffective without a
modification in the way that people are educated. They base this statement on the
fact that Thailand has a capitalist economy, and therefore claim that many
companies are able to enrich themselves by inducing ignorance-fuelled paranoia
in the mass of the people. “The companies get the benefit from the gap in
Thailand for advertising their products and this include the whitening products
... Thai people are the tools of these companies,” they write. Accordingly, the
Thai education system must switch from a teacher-centered to a “child-centered”
system as currently “Thai students remain the old value and always believe
everything that hear from other people without proving that it is true or not.” The students should be taught how to find information and truth by themselves, and should also not be threatened with corporal punishment if they show an independent spirit inside the classroom or at home. Only through this form of empowerment can the next generation truly understand that “skin color is just the things that cover your body and it cannot measure the value of humanity”, a realization which would prevent them from “spend[ing] a lot of money on unnecessary products”.

The students themselves felt that they had changed significantly as a result of their projects. One of the more revealing experiences is described by “Sue”, who recalled that she spent much of her time in high school “violent[ly] curs[ing]” friends who directed racist abuse against her while at the same time “try[ing] to do every way for my skin to be whiter”. However, she no longer feels the need to fight back against people who mock her; instead, as a result of her research, she says she feels both “frightened […] that there are many women being the victim and slave of whitening products” and “proud” of her dark skin color. As a result, she swears that companies that sell whitening products will “never get my money though one baht” and that she seeks whenever she can to tell “other dark friends including member in my family […] that they should to think and understand themselves in positive way.” “Tania” continues with this theme of newly discovered pride: her habit of reviling her skin color in the past had caused her to “destroy [her] dignity”, but now she says she is no longer convinced that only white skinned people can be “good people”. As a result, she now feels confident enough to wear colorful clothes (dark people in Thailand who wear bright clothes are often mocked as “crows with chilies in their mouths”) and has given up using whitening cream. This determination to shun products which they feel are fraudulent and manipulative is shared by the other three people in the group: all profess that they have learned through their research that the creams
sell in their billions of baht not because of health reasons or any other remotely positive factor, but purely due to the exploitation of the psychological vulnerability of women who lack the leisure, wealth or opportunity to stay out of the hot tropical sun and thus rid themselves of their unfashionable skin color. Says “Ronette”:

When I buy whitening products, I think I didn’t buy the product that can change my skin whiter but I buy the hope. It is the unrealistic hope; therefore, I don’t have reason to waste time and money with whitening products anymore. I think I am like the frog that exit from a coconut shell and see the real world. I see the real world that the skin can’t judge the human right. At this time, I realize everything and I will stand on this world with my dignity and proud to be what I am.

The conclusion I have drawn from my review of the students’ work above is that it shows a greater degree of consciousness than the first project I described. They at no stage repeated the language of elite ideology that “whiteness” (or “thinness” in the case of the previous group) is a synonym for beauty (although a residual attraction to the idea of whiteness remained); instead, they attacked this notion as “racist” and described concrete ways in which they had been seeking to destabilize this linkage, and how this work could be continued in other areas in the future. The superior “critical” quality of their presentation I believe stems from the larger amount of effort they put in to understanding why and how those non-elite women are further disadvantaged by the unachievable fantasies that their mass culture seeks to inculcate in them. However, I do not think that these greater efforts arose because this group was more intelligent or more motivated than others; rather, the higher level of consciousness that they displayed derived at least partly from my own evolving ideas on how to improve the curriculum. For example, I began to think in the latter stages of their project that I needed to risk inducing bias by actively introducing theories that I thought were relevant instead of concentrating entirely on developing the students’ capacity to discover
ideas for themselves, accordingly, I introduced to this group the ideas of the economist J.K. Galbraith, who suggested among other things that demand for essentially useless products which suck up productive capacity does not originate with the consumer but is “contrived for [them] by the firm through advertising” (for example, Dunn & Pressman, 2005: 180). However, I was not able to employ this strategy with all groups (such as the one whose work I have described earlier in this chapter) because of the sheer size of the class and the lateness of the change in my approach: it will be recalled that 83 people were simultaneously working on a diverse range of projects. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I will discuss how I have reorganized my curriculum to accommodate more teacher guidance, and explain how I feel that this has led to an improvement in the work produced by subsequent classes of students.

For now, however, I wish to briefly return again to the major concern of this chapter: does what the students say about their supposed empowerment really reflect what actually has happened? I argued that the first group had shown awareness of manipulation but still assimilated to a large degree the sexist assumptions that drove the relentless propaganda about the “ugliness” and “badness” of the non-thin; in contrast, I have suggested that the other group were more successful in exposing and countering ideological attempts to

43 My experience in Thailand has been that the majority of my students have very underdeveloped research skills because of the emphasis in Thai schools on rote learning and multiple-choice testing as an assessment tool. Prpic (2004: 7) also mentions the attitude among local teachers that Thai students are “very passive” as a contributing factor to their development of “surface learning” techniques. Accordingly, I have tended to concentrate on developing research skills instead of directly introducing new theories and materials for discussion on the assumption that any material that I gave to the students would be regarded as subject matter that they were expected to “study” and reproduce. However, in recent terms I have started to think again about ideas suggested by Biggs (1996): have I in fact let my opinions about the Thai education system blind me to what actually happens in the classroom? Biggs suggests that Western teachers in general have a strong misconception about the supposedly surface learning approach of Asian students: his research shows that in fact they often show greater aptitude for deep learning skills than Westerners. On reflection, I have found this to be related to my actual experience: once they are introduced to the concepts of structuring essays and finding concrete supporting material for their opinions, I have found that my Thai students produce very solid work. As I discuss in the conclusion, I now spend less time on teaching the minutiae of finding information and more on introducing them to ideas which I feel may assist them in their search for material which helps to explain their experience and study context.
convince them that their non-white skin made them inferior. However, how deep does the second group’s apparently new awareness extend?

Before answering this in detail, I think it is important to note again how strong elite ideologies concerning female beauty are in Thailand. I wish to raise this point because a project such as this can best be thought of as a temporary snapshot of change instead of an indelible record of permanent progress. As Freire and Shor (1987: 25) remind us, elite ideologies are always acting on students even as they attempt to develop a view of the world in which they place their interests ahead of those who would rule them. Every critical educator hopes that the changes in thinking which appear during a particular course will be permanent; however, it is more realistic to assume that the sheer pervasiveness of mainstream ideology in time will constrain and possibly even neuter critical consciousness unless individuals engage in research and action throughout their lives.

A strong clue about the strength of the white skin ideology can be gained from an interview that the group conducted with a dermatologist. The dermatologist was forthright about explaining that the claims made by advertising for products on television are “impossible”; “in really, skin color can not change,” he said, and claimed therefore that the miracle whitening effect that was being shown was due to spot lights and computer graphics. He further advised that many skin allergies he sees in women are due to the effects of strong scouring combined with the use of whitening creams. As a result, he would never accede to a customer’s request to whiten their skin, and bemoaned the fact that he sees so many women who have permanently damaged their skin by using creams laced with toxic bleaching agents. However, the students over the course of their 10-minute interview could not quite seem to accept what he was saying: repeatedly they reminded him of the prestigious French companies which assert on television that one’s skin can turn totally white in seven days if they use their products, and also of the existence of
the many clinics that offer skin whitening procedures. “Can we say that the
doctor deceive the patient?” they asked. The doctor skirted this questions but
repeated again that no cream could reduce the amount of melanin in the skin, and
that any apparent whitening caused by lotions are the superficial and temporary
results of the infusion of vitamin C into the skin. “If you want to be white,” he
said, “you should avoid the sunlight”. A further few minutes passed as the
students asked with increasingly incredulous voices about other techniques which
are offered as “cures” for their darkness; what did he think, for example, about
cucumber cream? “I think it is not real. How do you know there is a cucumber in
that product?” he asked them. “The seller said that,” they responded. “Can we
believe in their word?” he asked them back rhetorically. After another diversion -
they wondered why the Food and Drug Administration approves skin whitening
products (some companies fake the trademark, the doctor said, but did not
comment on the FDA’s authorization of “genuine” products) - they finally
accepted the inescapable realization; that the products do not work despite the
fantastic claims that are made for them by industry and the endorsement they
receive from government agencies. “In conclusions, we should avoid to use the
whitening cream?” they asked. “Yes, just you avoid the sunlight, you can be
whiter”, he said. “O K. Avoid the sunlight,” they repeated, as if making a mental
note that needed to be remembered but which would be all too easy to forget;
even harder to remember, it appeared, would be the dermatologist’s admonition
that “we should accept the way that we are”.

I have recounted this interview because I wish to show again that even a powerful
repudiation of ideological claims may not be enough to convince vulnerable
people that what they have accepted as “common sense” all their lives is in fact
false and exploitative. I suggested that this phenomenon may have been at work
with regard to the interview that the first group conducted with the surgeon. Did
they fail to chase up his logic because they felt it was not worth “speaking truth to
power”, or did they think he had already compromised himself enough and therefore it was not worth pursuing him further, or was the weight of his authority and the pervasiveness of mainstream ideology enough to persuade them that the evidence that they had researched was either flatly wrong or the manifestation of useless carping? A review of an interview that the second group of students conducted with an equally powerful establishment figure suggests that the third interpretation may well be the one that has the most strength.

The participants engaged in a lengthy conversation with “Mod”, the creative director of an industry leading “entertainment company” that had blood ties to Thaksin Shinawatra, a charismatic Prime Minister of Thailand who was deposed in 2006 by a military coup (the company seems to have been dissolved since Thaksin’s fall from power; their website has ceased to exist). “Mod” (a young, white-skinned, Chinese Thai) at that time could be considered to be one of the most influential people that the students could have spoken to: young, very rich, well connected, a friend to superstars and celebrities, and at the apex of an industry which has always had a special attraction for young adults. The thrust of their questioning was to establish why companies of the kind that he promoted invariably sold the message that a woman in a country where people’s skin color is naturally dark cannot be considered beautiful, intelligent, healthy or refined unless they are white.

Mod’s thesis was that his company’s policy of casting dark-skinned actors as servants, or creating the impression that any skin color other than purest white is dark and therefore inferior, had no political agenda. Instead, he said, his company did these things primarily because Thai people lack the sophistication required to understand anything other than gross exaggeration and stereotyping. He cited the example of an advertisement for Pond’s whitening cream in which a woman’s face is transformed for the price of a bowl of cheap noodles (THB 10; AUD
Thai people like to see the exaggerated advertisement that is easy to understand. The owner of the product wants the consumer easily to understand their advertisement,” he said, before accepting that many of the exaggerations that are used – for example, the creation of artificial contrasts between “white” and “black” twins – are based on “impossible” premises. Still, the untruthfulness that informs these exaggerations is of no account; lying advertising exists in Mod’s view because it is driven by the spontaneously created fantasies of women that they can be white. In other words, the burden of responsibility for media untruthfulness rests with women and their apparently self-created demand; no moral deviousness can be imputed to the companies because “the advertisement have to follow the demand of those woman. The advertisement have to know their goal clearly,” he says.

Well, what of research that shows that the products do not work? Despite admitting that advertising is frequently untruthful about its claims, Mod suddenly changed tack and claimed that the products were effective. Why? “Because if it can’t, nobody will buy it’s.” However, in the very next sentence, Mod admitted that “in the past nobody believe in advertisement but now many people do”. Whether this was because advertising has become more sophisticated or because (in defiance of the expert opinion of a dermatologist) that the products have suddenly started to work was left unexplored by the participants.

Mod then returned to the theme of the comparative stupidity of Thai consumers. It is necessary to darken the skin of actresses who are cast as servants in Thai dramas because “it is the easy way to make the people know that this actors or actresses are servants”; furthermore, it is “very difficult to change” this constant reinforcement of class stratification because “Thai people are not similar the foreigners that like to find the new things”. Nevertheless, this attitude on the part of a representative of one of the country’s most powerful media companies could

154
not be imputed as evidence of systemic racism or class oppression in Thailand; in Mod’s view, Thailand showed no discrimination towards its dark citizens because it does not “divide the white and dark skin as in America”.

The self-serving nature of Mod’s responses is similar to that offered by the surgeon in the previous example. Nevertheless, it is clearer this time from the participants’ reactions to the interview about what kind of impression was made. The students were not taken aback by the contradictions in his statements or his repudiation of the intelligence of broader Thai society, or his assumption that there must always be a class of people in society who are “servants”; nor were they inclined to challenge unsupported statements which directly contradicted the research that they had done (for example, Galbraith’s statements about advertising-created demand, and the extensive inquiry they had done into the toxicity and lack of efficacy of skin whitening products). Instead, for at least some of the students, Mod’s performance during this interview renewed their opinion that people such as he were “high classed”.

The major part of this deference no doubt was derived from cultural deference to the traditional class badges that Mod wore: his whiteness, money, job status and male gender. However, also impressive to them were his assurances that he does not “look down upon dark skin is low class of society”, an attitude that he said

---

44 In my view, this was a particularly extraordinary statement as it assumed a complete absence of historical knowledge and logical capacity on the part of his interlocutors. To begin with, Mod seems to be saying that segregation is still in force in the USA. Nevertheless, even if he meant this in an approximate sense - i.e. the US may as well be segregated because of the generally miserable condition of African-Americans – this does not provide any basis for his claim that there is no racism in Thailand. The idea that one society is not racist because it does not copy the racist practices of another society is not proof of the first society’s lack of racism; all it proves is that the first society organizes itself differently to the second.

45 “self serving” in the sense that the uncritical acceptance of advertising by the mass of the people is in the best interests of advertisers such as Mod; if consumers watch uncritically, then they are more likely to continue buying goods in the short term which are ineffective and socially divisive. That this tendency to divert productive resources from essential services to unnecessary luxury goods may come at the cost of increasing “public squalor” and poverty (Galbraith, cited in Dunn et al., 2005: 180) is generally not thought to be in the ambit of the interest of marketers.
was plain given that his teasing of his “so dark” movie star friend “Hana” had never made her angry. “She told we are friend [and] it is O K,” he said. “… I have many dark friends and never looked down on them.” In response, “Tara” – who had been called “black pig” when she was a child and had scrubbed at her skin with Scotch-Brite to eradicate her darkness – said that she was now convinced as a result of Mod’s say-so that the white elite did not discriminate against the darker mass of society. “I ever thought that white people who we call Hi-So [High Society] usually look down upon dark people,” she said. “After I interviewed [Mod], I know that my thought is wrong”.

In the conclusion that follows I will review all the themes covered in this dissertation. I will begin by noting that a politicized view of epistemology provided the impetus for the development of a curriculum that reflected the ideas of “critical” thinkers such as Gramsci and Freire. This curriculum sought to help the students to discover the ideological reasons for beliefs which they felt had a negative impact on their lives on the assumption that action based on this knowledge (“praxis”) would help them to increase their own “power and advantage”. I will then argue that a review of two of several dozen “critical” projects undertaken by my students showed that they developed understanding of the causes of the social evils which they felt directly affected them, but will also suggest that they were still vulnerable to ruling class ideologies because of the extraordinary local power of these “common sense” assumptions and the relatively high deference that status commands in Thailand. In stating my findings, I will also note the effect that my own bias had on interpretation and on the students’ reporting. Finally, I will review my curriculum in light of my findings; in what way could it be improved?
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to review my efforts over three semesters to foster the development of critical consciousness and social action among a group of predominately female students at a university in rural Thailand. This work of encouraging awareness and action was directed at cultural phenomena that the students identified as having oppressive effects on their lives. These included pressures to attain an underweight body shape, to disavow a lesbian orientation, to defer to men, and to whiten the skin. In the chapter on “Theoretical Underpinnings”, I explained that the pressure to be physically “beautiful” (i.e. underweight and white) was particularly strong because of the Thai conception that beauty is the representation of inner virtue, while “ugliness” is evidence of character defects.

In describing these efforts, I have argued that my “emancipatory” research was partially successful in that the students became more aware of the ideological purposes of the “common sense” social beliefs that help to create the pressures, and also that they had begun challenging the hold that these beliefs have over their lives. Concrete action that they have taken with regard to the student research projects on body image and skin pigmentation that I reviewed includes the following:

• ceasing to uncritically accept mass culture’s attempts to attach positive value judgments such as “beautiful” and “successful” to physical characteristics that are distinctive of the social elite (i.e. white skin and thinness); and conversely, learning to embrace or at least accept those physical characteristics which are shared by the majority of Thais (i.e. dark
skin and a normal body weight) but which are denigrated by elite culture as “ugly” or indicative of stupidity, or other negative characteristics;

- using rational argument to challenge family members and friends who act as agents for the values promoted by mass culture;

- ceasing to use expensive (but generally ineffective and sometimes harmful) products which are marketed as “cures” for physical appearances which mass culture deem unfashionable. These products include skin whitening creams and amphetamine-based diet pills;

- ceasing to engage in harmful behavior such as inducing vomiting after meals or abstaining from food for days or weeks on end.

I began this dissertation by explaining that my curriculum was developed from the viewpoint that social stratification is not “natural” or inevitable but is the predictable outcome of the ruling class’s use of mass culture to promote beliefs and values which maintain and reproduce their privilege. I also argued that this manipulation is difficult to identify and resist because it is not overt. Referring to the work of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, I suggested that the tendency of people to hold beliefs which actively disadvantage them occurs because these values have taken the form of “common sense” and therefore are deemed to be “natural” and irrevocable components of the only possible world.

Because I feel that teachers have a moral duty to help students challenge the power of these oppressive “hegemonic” beliefs, I sought out a pedagogy which has the specific aim of “denaturalizing” ideologies so that they can be identified and resisted. My decision was to adapt the model of “education for critical consciousness” that the Latin American scholar Paul Freire developed originally
for illiterate Brazilian peasants, but which since has been widely adopted around the world.

In choosing this curriculum model, I was also mindful of western “second-wave” feminism’s warning that recognition of shared oppression by women is unlikely to occur unless women are free to participate in structured “consciousness raising” sessions outside of the presence of men. Accordingly, I developed a multimedia resource which would allow the mainly female students to independently investigate and report on their individual and shared experiences.

The resource that I developed was in the form of a CD-based template. Students identified social beliefs which they felt were oppressive, and then reported on the concrete effects that they felt these beliefs had on them personally and on the lives of other women. They also described what they had learned from their investigation, and how their behavior and thinking had changed as a result of their new knowledge. Finally, they suggested ways in which the media, education, politics and law could be changed so that a less stratified society can evolve. The template enabled students to support their claims with PDF documentation, text, images and subtitled audio and video recordings. The finished product was able to be distributed to the public.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that I consider my research objectives to have been only partly fulfilled. By this I mean that that I feel that the students were able to identify oppressive beliefs, and also to take concrete steps to challenge these beliefs. However, I also feel that the critical awareness developed by the students is quite fragile due to the relatively undiluted power of patriarchy in Thailand. I argued that the partial quality of their newly developed awareness was evident in their continuing deference to the insubstantial arguments proffered by male “experts”, and (to varying degrees) their continued assimilation of unfair binaries such as “thin-beautiful/ fat-ugly”.
I paid special attention in my dissertation to the effect that my influence had on the students’ research. I noted in particular that I had a tendency to react emotionally to mass media instances of what I regarded as outrageous sexism, and that these outbursts in turn affected the truthfulness of the students’ analyses. I am conscious that these strong reactions on my part were prompted by a deeply-held belief that Australian women have more liberty than Thai women, and that this belief prompts a value judgment that Australian society in that sense is “better” than Thailand’s. I am also aware that making comparisons about cultures based on generalizations is a dangerous predisposition for western critical educators working outside their home cultures as it provides a subconscious justification for encouraging students to adopt liberatory methods employed by people in “developed” countries instead of helping them to find a path which is suitable for their context. I have tried to be as forthright as possible about my biases as the purpose of critical research is to “speak to an audience on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subjects’ voice” (Thomas, 1993: 4). Needless to say, concealing biases or speaking falsely saps this authority.

Finally, I mentioned that some groups showed more awareness than others about theoretical matters such as the relationship between advertising and consumption. I also noted that those groups which had more abstract knowledge tended to be sharper in their analysis and more combative in their attitude, and mentioned that I had provided these particular groups with reading matter that introduced these elements of theory. I stated that I had not provided all groups with theoretical reading matter because of my assumption that the students had developed “surface learning” habits due to the Thai education system’s emphasis on rote learning and multiple choice testing. This, I felt, would tend to cause them to regard the provision of theoretical reading material as a directive to memorize and reproduce instead of to analyze. Accordingly, I spent the majority of class time
introducing students to research and essay writing skills out of the belief that these would help develop the self-direction and independence of thinking that in future would allow successful analysis.

It is my reconsideration of these assumptions that has provided ideas about the direction forward for this curriculum. My reassessment was prompted by a re-reading of a paper by Biggs about research into “surface” and “deep” learning skills by “Confucian Heritage Culture” learners. His research found that Western teachers mistakenly labeled as “rote learning” the careful and repetitive strategies taken by CHC learners, and that CHC students showed a greater commitment to “meaningful” learning than western students. Thus, despite their western teachers’ assumptions, CHC learners (Thai students share many of these characteristics) characteristically perform at high cognitive levels in academic tasks, the evidence for which “is clear, both from large-scale international comparisons of attainment, and from detailed qualitative studies of strategy use” (Biggs, 1996: 63). It has been a chastening experience for me to recognize that my attitude towards my students’ capacity for analysis has been somewhat condescending. In effect, I feel I have paid more attention to the negative attitudes about Thai learners that are expressed by Thai and Western colleagues than to my 10 years of experience in Thai classrooms, which has taught me that Thai students have always demonstrated good aptitude for analysis despite their background of crowded classrooms, heavy emphasis on testing (for example, my 6-year old son this year sat mid term and final examinations in eight subjects in his Thai Grade One classroom) and other characteristics which in Australia are indicative of “bad” teaching and learning environments.

Accordingly, in the curriculum that has succeeded the one that I have discussed, I have provided much more input into the students’ research. After asking them to draw up a project outline, I have researched their points and provided material
which I feel is relevant to their particular concerns. We have agreed in class that this material is not to be taken as “authoritative” but as a reference point for their own investigation. At the same time, I have spent far less time teaching the mechanics of finding out information as it has been my impression that the influx of new ideas has sparked a curiosity to investigate which they independently will find a means to satisfy.

In closing, this dissertation has told the story of sustained efforts by a group of people to expose and combat ways of thinking and behaving which sap the energies and opportunities of the majority of people who are not born into privilege and authority. Howard Zinn (2002: 7) aptly describes the mood that prompts a critical approach to teaching and learning:

This mixing of activism and teaching, this insistence that education cannot be neutral on the crucial issues of our time, this movement back and forth from the classroom to the struggles outside by teachers who hope that their students will do the same, has always frightened the guardians of traditional education. They prefer that education simply prepare the new generation to take its proper place in the old order, not to question that order. [This desire for students not to question exists because …] the world or struggle is full of surprises, as the common moral sense of people germinates invisibly, bubbles up, and at certain points in history brings about victories that may be small, but carry large promise.
REFERENCES


http://www.time.com/time/asia/cover/1101020805/story.html


contemporary readings (pp. 588-595). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.


