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Critical Pedagogy in the Time of COVID-19: Lessons Learned

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When educational institutions shut down in March 2020, university lecturers found themselves tasked with moving from physical classrooms to remote teaching almost overnight. Although many had prior experience with teaching online, for millions this was a totally new experience for which they were unprepared. Early research reports suggest it was a period marked by fear, anxiety, and uncertainty for tertiary level faculty (Hordatt Gentles & Leask, 2020) as they struggled to cope both personally and professionally to ensure continuity of learning for their students. In addition to worrying about the spread of the COVID-19 virus and managing life in the new normal of economic and social shutdowns, faculty now had to navigate a steep learning curve for figuring out how to teach online.

At first, the change was viewed as a temporary emergency strategy—a way of making sure students did not fall too far behind—just until the virus was under control. However, as the weeks and then months progressed, it became apparent that even when the pandemic ends, the way university faculty educate may change forever. As suggested by a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization IESALC report on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO IESALC, 2020), as higher education institutions plan for the immediate and long-term future, they should, among other strategies, “document the pedagogical changes introduced and their impacts . . . [and] promote internal reflection on the renewal of the teaching and learning model” (p. 8). As a university educator, I see these

recommendations as a clarion call to think deeply and critically about what has been learned during this time of COVID-19 and how it has changed pedagogy. It is imperative that university educators figure out how lessons learned during the pandemic can be instructive for how to be better prepared to teach in what promises to be a vastly different future.

This is easier said than done. For me, the move to online teaching was, in some ways, a seismic shift. As a teacher educator who had devoted 17 years to using critical pedagogy in pursuit of teaching critical consciousness, I had constructed a repertoire of methods for encouraging my graduate students (who were mainly in-service teachers) to reflect critically on their practice. My aim was to help them find their voice—to recognize the power of teacher advocacy and agency in improving the quality of teaching. To do this, I relied heavily on strategies that created safe, caring spaces within the classroom for learning about, valuing, and respecting their socio-cultural realities. This was the foundation for building dialogue and a sense of community that could make the teaching–learning experience more democratic. The mandatory transition to online teaching threatened to disrupt my accustomed ways of doing things. It raised troubling questions about navigating the challenges emerging from the transition to recreate teaching–learning spaces conducive to critical pedagogy.

I was aware that within its theoretical discourse, the tenets of critical pedagogy are often seen as antithetical to the use of technology (Beyer & Apple, 1998; Hardt & Negri, 2004). How could I then, in the new reality, ensure my teaching retained its commitment to creating humanistic and democratic learning experiences for my students?

In this paper I explore these questions by describing and then critically analysing my experiences during the first few months of the lockdown. My intentions are twofold. First, I deconstruct the tensions that arose between my students and me as we ventured into a new, virtual world of teaching and learning. I then consider how what I learned has led me to rethink and reframe my critical pedagogy in ways that will better serve the needs of my students during and after COVID-19.

Literature Review

Critical Pedagogy

Through theoretical discourse, critical pedagogy seeks to make meaning of and challenge the oppression, inequality, and social injustice that characterize social relations in schools and the wider society. As a discourse, it provides a language of critique and of possibility that challenges the social reality of the asymmetrical power relations in which we live. Although not prescriptive, by espousing Freirean tenets of humanism and pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970), critical pedagogy empowers educators to develop practices that can disrupt the influence of traditional, banking-style schooling on students' capacity for taking ownership of their learning.

Critical pedagogy posits that helping students become the subject rather than the object of their reality is one of its main objectives. For educators, critical pedagogy offers core concepts that are helpful with accomplishing this. For example, the critical pedagogue understands the value of decentering power relations in classrooms, so power is shared equitably among students and teachers who become co-learners. Teachers who commit to critical pedagogy strive to be conscious of how they use power and authority in the classroom and work to

help students be critically conscious of this. They work at enabling students to find their Voice, so they can understand, value, and analyze their experiences. Teachers also work continuously to find ways to stop privileging their Voice over that of their students. This is crucial if students will be taught how to engage in egalitarian dialogue with each other and their peers. The act of engaging in dialogue facilitates critical literacy—the ability to read the world (Macedo & Freire, 1987), and the emergence of critical consciousness.

Critical Pedagogy and Online Teaching

Although the philosophy and practice of critical pedagogy are compelling, they are not without challenges. As Shudak (2014) points out, it is a contested terrain in many ways, precisely because it is not prescriptive (p. 5). The Freirean notions of praxis and situated pedagogy suggest teachers must strive to make their pedagogy culturally sensitive and relevant. This means recognizing conditions in classroom spaces as dynamic and student-led. Therefore, it is not possible to predetermine exactly how teaching and engagement will happen—these should flow and emerge dynamically. For this reason, many critical theorists (Beyer & Apple, 1998) eschew the use of technology for critical pedagogy. They argue it is intrinsically prescriptive and shaped by external forces like learning management systems that frame and dictate how content should be bundled, packaged, and delivered. As Carroll-Miranda (2011) suggests, “technology adoption in the educational setting fortifies and perpetuates new forms of social inequalities as technology embodies new forms of social reproduction” (p. 521).

Yet proponents of critical pedagogy suggest educators should and can figure out how to integrate technology use in ways that

can disrupt oppression and promote critically conscious teaching and learning (Suoranta, 2011). Indeed, when continuity of quality teaching is critical at this time of the pandemic, it seems incumbent on teachers to actively seek possibilities and strategies for doing this.

Methodology

To answer the key questions that guided this research, I drew on data from the reflexive journal which I habitually keep. Drawing from the tradition of qualitative methodology, a reflexive journal is a written account of one's experiences as a researcher where methodological decisions and one's reflections about the impact of one's values and beliefs are recorded. For educators, keeping a reflexive journal helps them become introspective spectators who look inward (Beasley, 1981), "who reflect on their actions and transform their ideas and their future action in the light of reflection" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 173). As a critical pedagogue, I am continuously engaged in reflexive consideration of my teaching and its effect and impact on my students. Cunliffe and Jun (2005) explain this self-reflexivity as "a dialogue with self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting. In this dialogue, we question our core beliefs and our understanding of particular events" (p. 229). Keeping a reflexive journal helps me to refocus and adjust my critical lens constantly, so I remain committed to thinking about and questioning what happened in my classes to honor my students' voices and show how power relations were managed. Did the content, organization, and delivery of it promote problem-posing, recognition of ideological forces, and hegemony, leading to conscientization (critical consciousness) for my students and myself?

To draw data from my reflexive journal, I read and reread my entries made between April and November 2020. These were an assortment of clearly written ruminations in a physical journal, a collection of notes to self which I had jotted down during and after teaching. I also used my voice recordings on my phone, which I transcribed using a software called TEMI. I then systematically analysed all my physical notes and transcriptions, searching for emerging patterns in the types of concerns and questions I had raised. This helped me identify the challenges that arose and that are described, interrogated, and discussed below.

Tensions With Transitioning to Online Teaching due to Covid-19

Before my university closed, I enjoyed feeling prepared to integrate critical pedagogy into my teaching. Over the last 16 years, I had built a toolkit of strong strategies for encouraging student voices and for nurturing their developing critical consciousness. Then, along came COVID-19 and the closure of classes. Suddenly, from one day to the next, things changed. My students and I were now launched into the world of Zoom and a virtual reality that changed how we interacted with each other and how I taught and engaged with critical pedagogy. Several challenges arose.

Trouble With Reading the Room

Moving online meant the space in which I now worked with my students was completely reconfigured. Teachers left physical classrooms with furniture and air conditioning, lighting, audiovisual equipment, sounds, sights, textures, and smells to a virtual space shaped and defined by computer screens. Instead of teaching in

a room with 20 or 30 students sitting in chairs at desks, I was now teaching to a grid of 29 or 30 small black boxes. Instead of drawing from the energy of diverse, living, breathing people in a physical space, I was now in a room by myself, in my own house, talking to an inanimate computer monitor. Instead of moving around the classroom and pitching my teacher's voice to reach around the room, I was now speaking into a microphone. I used headphones to listen to my students, who were now reduced to two-dimensional entities, no bigger than my screen, with their names typed in as Zoom labels to identify them.

This new classroom space made it difficult to *read* the room. In the physical classroom, I could read students' body language to determine if I was capturing their attention and if I needed to switch gears to increase student engagement. While students responded to questions posed, I could read the interest or disinterest in their faces and their physical postures to figure out whether to encourage a discussion. I relied on reading visual and somatic cues to monitor students' moods, to figure out how energetic or tired they were and whether they were willing to speak or preferred not to. I understood and empathized that my students were part-time teachers who came to evening classes after a long day of teaching and who were usually drained and exhausted, yet committed to upgrading their qualifications with a graduate degree. So, I always planned and organized interactive activities that encouraged movement and raised the energy level in the class. I told personal stories and made jokes to liven things up.

Moving to a virtual space stymied my capacity to read physical cues. My ability to monitor student engagement became seriously diminished. I could see they were logged in, but I could not see them because Zoom allows participants to switch off their

video and audio. The host can manipulate the meeting settings and control the use of everyone's audio and video buttons, but it seemed rude to do this. I struggled with whether to insist that students turn on their videos so I could see them either all the time or when they chose to speak. For the most part, students would turn on their videos if I asked them to, but it seemed intrusive—like entering someone's house uninvited. Sometimes when they turned on their video, they appeared lying on their beds, in sleepwear, or with relatives moving around behind them. I questioned myself if I should establish some rules for participation. I had done so at the start by asking students to respect classmates' voices—not to interrupt when they were speaking and always start a critique with a compliment. But how much farther should my rules go?

Tensions also emerged around timing the use of the audio button in our zoom meetings. This was even more frustrating. For example, I would ask a question and then wait for students to volunteer a response. Sometimes this worked well if a student spoke out clearly, but sometimes no one answered. In the virtual space, I faced a visual grid of participants with muted audio icons. There were no cues to read to figure out if someone was willing to try. One strategy was to keep a watchful eye on the meeting controls to check for the blue icon shaped like a hand. This indicated someone had raised their hand. Acknowledging the raised hand allowed them to speak. But this was sometimes unwieldy. It was also difficult to manage a discussion in the online space. If more than one person spoke at a time, it became impossible to hear. I was accustomed in the physical classroom to encouraging students to speak without raising their hands, and I welcomed heated yet respectful discussions, to make room for expression of different opinions. This was not possible in the virtual classroom.

Another challenge that developed around the use of the audio button was having to wait patiently for students to activate it. I would call on a particular student and then wait for what sometimes seemed an eternity for them to respond. This was because it took a while for them to activate the button. Very often, I would feel I needed to prompt action by using the now-common phrase—“Are you there?” “Please unmute your mic.” While this worked, there were times when a student did not unmute their microphone—either because they had left the computer, remaining logged in, but had gone to attend to something else, or they simply chose to resist my request for their participation. I found it difficult to manage the use of audio in an equitable way. At times, listening to a student speak online seemed to take forever. While they were speaking, I worried that the other students would get bored and leave the virtual classroom. This created great anxiety for me. Yet another challenge was that when students opened their mics, the background noise was sometimes loud and inaudible. This happened when a student was listening in from their car or in a public place. A frequent disruption was the sound of children playing or doing homework. The apology from students, “Sorry for the noise, I have a child,” became a standard phrase. I must admit, although I understood the cultural realities that led to these interruptions, I resented them because they interfered with the flow of my classes.

For me, modeling a well-organized class in which explanations, illustrations, discussions, and activities were managed seamlessly was a hallmark of effective practice. In the days before COVID-19, I was normally able to manage disruptions that threatened a smooth delivery proactively. To do this, I practised presentations before class. I downloaded and saved videos to start right away and

integrated them seamlessly as I was teaching. I planned and organized group assignments and made sure audiovisual equipment was up and running before class started.

I had far less control with online teaching, even if I prepared diligently before a class session. A primary reason for this was unreliable internet connectivity. Unstable connections frequently caused students and me to be dropped from our Zoom meetings. What was distressing was that my voice as a teacher and my students’ voices could be silenced or distorted in an instant by a technical glitch. We were constantly under the threat of losing Wi-Fi connection or losing electric power. This also compromised my students’ power and agency in my online classes. Poor connectivity—privatisation of provision of Wi-Fi, poor quality of these services, no public broadband, and the inability of many people to purchase appropriate devices for learning online—contributed to learner marginalization. In this sense, my virtual classrooms became potential sites of oppression and social injustice.

Poor connectivity affected students’ capacity to receive or view visual aids like PowerPoint slides, files, and videos. For me, it meant the impact of my carefully crafted presentations was diminished. Videos played with compromised sound. Students using phone screens could not see the information on display. Students frequently blamed poor access to Wi-Fi for logging on late, not participating, or not submitting assignments on time. I found these new realities annoying but recognized I had to work around them. I could not dictate from where they accessed the Zoom link or how they accessed my classes. I felt this would suggest a lack of empathy regarding their context and might also silence and marginalize students struggling to find optimal spaces to learn. At the same time, I

was concerned that disruptions to the flow of a session were unjust for students who did not have audio or video issues.

Yet another source of tension was how to manage group work. In physical classes, I used group discussions frequently to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among students. I would assign students a topic to discuss and then move around the room, joining in to pose critical questions and hear the direction conversations were taking. Zoom offered a feature called breakout rooms, designed for meeting participants to leave the main virtual space and work in groups. This was easy to organize. However, once I had assigned them to breakout rooms and opened them, the procedure sent the students into cyberspace, leaving me alone in the main Zoom room. This produced an ethical dilemma for me. As the facilitator, I was technically able to move around the breakout rooms, but I felt it somehow unethical and domineering to suddenly appear in a room without warning. I felt it would suggest I did not trust them.

Managing Tensions

It was the process of trying to address these tensions that led me to engage in praxis. Using the theoretical constructs of critical pedagogy, I reflected critically on my practice and tried to think of ways to make critical pedagogy work online. Reflecting on the pedagogy I was enacting or failing to enact led me to reflect critically on the theoretical discourse of critical pedagogy. As I did this, I recognised it was all about the challenges of infusing the pursuit of humanism into a virtual space shaped by nonhuman digital hardware and software.

So, I started to experiment with strategies designed to build *student voice* and to humanize class sessions. My aim was to figure out how to organize the online

space to encourage and support full and active student participation. This meant developing techniques that allowed me to validate and celebrate students' contributions. One helpful strategy was to incorporate digital tools that could support collaboration. So, I learned how to use Padlet, which provided a digital board where students could work in groups, type out their ideas, and share them with their classmates. The Padlet was an electronic page on which the written contributions of all groups could be saved and sent to students after class. I started doing this as a way of showing respect for everyone's contributions.

I also devised ways to enhance and validate student autonomy. Thus, when students worked in groups, I set a time limit for the activity, but these were always open for negotiation. Students were free to suggest they needed more time to complete an activity or discussion. Once they indicated this, I would reset the time. During the breakout sessions, I stayed in the main room and wrote down students' names in the groups. When they returned to the plenary space, I invited groups to share what they had discussed. In doing this, I was careful to call out the name of each group member. This helped to value and validate each student's contribution, even if they chose not to speak in the plenary session.

Another aim was to become more careful and conscious of how I used my *voice* and how it affected my students. I realised that when internet connectivity was poor and we had to turn off our videos to maintain bandwidth, students no longer had the opportunity to read my facial expressions and body language. They had no idea what I was thinking. To offset this, I had to develop and offer my online voice as a conduit for my feelings, responses, and feedback. To do this as sensitively as possible, I ramped up my audio feedback with words demonstrating appreciation,

excitement, and interest in what was being shared. I made it a habit to praise the entire group during and at the end of class about their contributions and participation. I also set aside time before and after class to chat informally with my students about their lives. I inquired about their struggles with online teaching. I asked how they were coping with balancing their private and professional lives. In this way, I used my voice to demonstrate that I cared about them not just as one-dimensional squares on a computer screen, but also as real people. I was thrilled when a student told me how much she appreciated this practice!

Another strategy to humanize our virtual teaching and learning experiences was to extend our voices and caring beyond the online space. I did this by asking students to use social media platforms like WhatsApp to set up class groups where information about classes, assignments, meeting times, and Zoom links could be posted. I invited them to use this medium to converse about ideas emerging from our class sessions or post information that was interesting to them. I also encouraged students to reach out to me on their own by phone or email. I tried hard to always be timely, responsive, and helpful as I responded to their queries and calls. Some of these *offline* interactions provided me with powerful insights into the lives of my students—how they were coping and deeper understandings of how they were engaging with concepts we had focused on in class.

I worked as well at being less anxious about managing the delivery of my content. I recognized and acknowledged that in the new terrain of virtual classrooms, students are often very tech savvy and bring a wealth of knowledge and skills that can be shared with teachers and classmates. In my case, this was an experience I learned to value often; if my ignorance of navigating Zoom and managing digital tools became apparent,

students jumped in to help. Sometimes when connectivity was an issue, students offered to manage the shared screen option to upload my PowerPoint slides which I had sent to them before the class. This led me to set up a system where control and responsibility for engaging with content were shared with students. I sent them my materials before class, set up the Zoom controls so that anyone could share the screen and I assigned a designated student co-host privileges before teaching began.

Using these various strategies to manage tensions with transitioning to online teaching allowed me to regain what I thought was impossible in the virtual classroom—an authentic learning community. This lies at the core of practising critical pedagogy because it empowers students and teachers to feel a shared sense of purpose as they construct knowledge together during classroom sessions. Before the pandemic, I had frequently used Freire's (1970) technique of problem posing by giving students thought-provoking and controversial questions, scenarios, or images to respond to. This invited them to dialogue through open discussion and debate. This is enabled by encouraging everyone to speak freely, argue, and banter in the physical space. Students and teacher also develop and refine their skills for reading each other and the room, to see and hear each other clearly. As Boyd (2016) explains, this is a powerful experience and tool:

Dialogue is not simply a teaching technique but also a process essential to the nature of human beings. We come to know the world and ourselves in and through our interaction with others; knowledge is created in the dialogical encounter. (p. 178)

Getting students to engage in dialogue online was more difficult. The online space made the spontaneity of speech difficult. Constant issues with internet connectivity interrupted the flow of conversations. Not being able to see each other interfered with *reading* the space. Students who only had small devices were unable to see images I posted or slides with my questions. Finding ways of sharing materials differently, creating pathways for students to enjoy more autonomy over their online experiences, developing techniques for helping all students to use their voice with confidence, and devising ways of validating and honoring student participation and contributions helped me become more comfortable as a teacher in an online space.

Discussion

The process of reflecting on my experiences in the first months of the pandemic and critically deconstructing the tensions these produced for me as an educator has proven helpful for answering the questions that guided this paper. I wanted to know how I, in the new reality, could ensure my teaching retained its commitment to creating humanistic and democratic learning experiences for my students? How could I navigate the challenges emerging from the transition to recreate teaching–learning spaces conducive to critical pedagogy? What lessons did I learn?

I learned that counter to the view that technology use perpetuates hegemony and social inequities, it can be enacted in ways that support critical pedagogy. In fact, it is incumbent on educators to figure out how to do this best. As Freire (2015) suggested,

It's not possible for an educator to deny the uses of a computer, videos, and the countless technological elements that

can help him in his teaching . . . education cannot be reduced to technology . . . we need to create new channels of knowledge, new methodologies, new relationships between the subjects who seek knowledge and the most advanced technological innovations that we have at our disposal. (pp. 74–75)

What I learned is that it is possible to humanize and *re-embod*y online environments. What is key is *re-engaging* with the core concepts of critical pedagogy that we enacted in physical classrooms, but with keen critical consciousness of how these need to be reconfigured to enact and sustain inclusivity and democratic student–teacher relationships. For me, this meant using Joan Wink's (2005) notion of a pedagogy of a caring heart and critical eyes, and perhaps my added notion of a critical ear, to guide my thoughts, emotions, and actions as I engaged with my students online. For example, when I was agonizing over whether to develop rules for activating the mute and video buttons, I turned to my core belief that my primary role was to care for and respect my students. I realized that my primary objective was to ensure that student voice and autonomy were valued and that no student was silenced or marginalized. It was therefore not my right to dictate to students how they should appear on the screen. They were, after all, in the safe spaces of their own homes—their domains. I was entering their domestic spaces with a camera that could make public the intimate details of their private lives. I could demand they show respect and empathy for each other, and this should guide their choice.

Another powerful lesson was that I could use technology to build a sense of community in which my students and I began to see each other as co-learners. This

became apparent as I found digital tools that could foster collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, and became evident as my students and I became comfortable communicating with each other over social media. This was my key to making my online classes authentic spaces for dialogue. Researchers contend, “all online teaching must begin with building community and stress that a carefully constructed online learning community provides a space for students to test ideas, get feedback, and create a collaborative learning experience” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, as cited in Boyd, 2016, p. 179).

Yet, another valuable lesson was learning that virtual classrooms can facilitate the democratization of learning spaces *if* educators can embrace the possibilities offered for sharing power. This became evident to me when I saw the benefit of giving my students access to my PowerPoint slides and the authority to show and manipulate them for themselves and each other if I lost my Zoom connection. This was a symbolic demonstration of my willingness to share my power with my students. It disrupted the traditional asymmetry of classrooms where the teacher is the dominant power, and contributed to making my classes more learner-centered. What was key was my acknowledgment that the online space was already diminishing my power and that to be effective, I had to become comfortable with this reality. This called for me to re-engage with the Freirean notion of teachers aspiring to characterize humility. As McLaren (2005) reminds us, this is the “characteristic of admitting you don’t know everything; for critical citizens it represents a ‘human duty’ to listen to those considered less competent without condescension, a practice intimately identified with the struggle for democracy” (p. xxxi).

This meant I had to become comfortable with the discomfort I felt as I struggled to decide how to manage the shifts in power that online spaces were creating. It was an internal struggle to feel relaxed, with students having more control over pedagogical events than they had in physical classrooms. Thus, as I wrestled with tensions about whether I should insist on making students turn on their videos and audio, I realised that this small, simple thing, controlling the use of the audio and video buttons, was shifting the balance of power in the space from lecturer to students. Although this was a good thing through the lens of critical pedagogy, I felt conflicted. I had to confront how I felt. What did this say about me as a teacher? Did it mean I was trying to wield too much power? Was I a critical pedagogue if I was uncomfortable sharing power equitably in my classroom?

Conclusion

In trying to navigate these tensions, I have come to understand the enormity of the task of infusing critical pedagogy into virtual classrooms. It requires courage, tolerance, decisiveness, and love for one’s students, along with a willingness to do the work to devise, learn, and practise new teaching methods for enacting critical pedagogy in online spaces. It requires the humility that Freire identified as core to the work of critically conscious teachers. This is not easy, but it must and can be done. As the world appears to be moving closer to stepping out of the shadows of COVID-19, educators must ensure that critical pedagogy retains its relevance for what lies ahead.

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