Freedom for the (Distance Education) People! Ten Practical Ways to Bring Liberatory Pedagogy to Your Online Class

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Author Biography

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With the rapid growth and adoption of online programs in higher education comes a concern that education is becoming even more industrialized, reducing student liberty. This paper first critiques online learning with the concept of industrialized education. Then, it outlines and applies the revolutionary approaches of liberatory pedagogy. Finally, this paper explores and describes ten practical ways for teachers and instructional designers to apply liberatory pedagogy in online courses to empower students as partners in their own learning.

Introduction

Two agreements seem to be clear across modern literature regarding distance education: it is growing at a rapid pace in higher education, and this growth is bringing significant change. In the fall of 2018, around 3.25 million students enrolled exclusively in "distance education" courses at Title IV institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), an increase from 3.1 million in the previous fall of 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This paper takes a critical look at online education through the lens of liberatory pedagogy. First, this paper critiques online learning with the concept of industrialized education. Then, it outlines and applies the revolutionary approaches of liberatory pedagogy. Finally, this paper explores and describes ten practical ways for teachers and instructional designers to apply liberatory pedagogy in online courses to empower students as partners in their own learning.

Background

Desmond Keegan, one of the original distance education historians, called distance education "the most industrial form of education" (1980, p. 21). Years later, Otto Peters (1994), one of the first distance education theorists, agreed that online programs were the greatest example of industrial education. Distance education incorporates factory approaches of marketing, mechanization, division

of labor, line management, quality control, and standardized mass production in course delivery (Powar, 2003). Developing an online program may be more like operating a business than running an academic institution (Beaudoin, 2002). This certainly rings true considering the students who are manufactured into conformity on a conveyor belt of pre-made video content, text discussion posts, and multiple-choice quizzes. The web-based software which houses our virtual classrooms like Canvas, Moodle, and Blackboard are even called "learning management systems" (LMS).

In contrast, liberatory pedagogy empowers students by giving them agency to renegotiate the power relations in learner interactions (Dobrin, 1999; Ringer, 2005). Liberatory pedagogy is in the family of critical pedagogy, articulated by those like Paulo Freire, which focuses on the liberation or freedom of students. Paulo Freire was best known for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), first published in 1970, which has sold over 1 million copies. The basic theme of that book is that our system of education is inherently oppressive, but critical consciousness brings liberation. Freire used an analogy called the "banking model of education." Of it, he writes that "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1996, p. 53). This analogy still rings true. However, now, we have online banking, where deposits can be made by the click of a mouse or the touch of a finger, and online classes, where mostly one-way content goes from teacher to computer to student.

Have our online classes created an online banking system of learning? Complete with cookie-cutter course templates and one size fits all Canvas shells? Administrators even call the process "cloning" when multiple sections of the same class are duplicated. Online enrollment in universities is growing by the millions in the last decade (Ginder et al., 2019; Lederman, 2018). As programs and courses are quickly scaled and cloned to keep up with student demand, it seems there is little consideration for pedagogical concerns, especially those of a liberating nature.

Three main directives of Freire (1996) can bring us hope and tools to counter this type of banking education. These concepts are to name, to reflect, and to act. First, to name the world around us is a basic human activity. In the classroom, teachers use their words to explain, to teach, and correct around a particular subject matter. When students are denied this basic human act in the classroom, dialogue cannot occur; instead, it is only one-way communication. By allowing students the human right to also name the world, the teacher and the student step onto level

ground and become co-creators of knowledge. In this author's college, to remind us of this constant challenge in online learning, we use this quote from Freire in our course template welcome page: "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (Freire, 1996, p. 73-74).

Second, is to reflect. Freire (1996) used the Portuguese term "conscientização" which means "critical consciousness." This is the act of reflecting on a context and recognizing the oppressive social, political, and economic contradictions. In the classroom, this means for both students and instructors to call out power differentials and the traditional hierarchy of authority. It does not necessarily mean the entire class structure will be changed, but that at least they will be recognized in a critical way.

Third, it is not enough to name and reflect. True liberation comes through action. Freire (1996) called this "praxis," which is reflection with a purpose toward transformative acts. It can be far too tempting to have given the students a voice, have a "critical conscious" moment in the classroom, and then just proceed in the same manner that the class has always been taught. Only by continuing the process into action will true change occur.

Ten Liberatory Praxes for the Online Class

With the concept of liberatory pedagogy as our foundation, this paper will now step through a top ten list of practical ideas. The irony is that any learning that occurs through this paper will be one-way communication, without any dialogue. These ideas are birthed from a higher education context and may need to be adjusted for younger age groups.

The first idea is to "Embrace Network Knowledge." Recognize and call-out the true source of knowledge in the internet age: it is not the professor. It is everywhere. Information is ubiquitous in the worldwide network to which every student is connected. Students do not need to be told everything but should be guided by the teacher to seek out and use their digital networks as needed. This type of learning has been called "Network-Based" (Peters, 2002), "Networked Learning" (Inglis, as cited in Panda, 2003), and "Virtual Network Education" (Johnston, 2020).

The second idea is to employ "Student-led Curriculum Mapping." If a university program has never invited students to help plan or map the curriculum, then it is revealing an underlying assumption: it is the professors and administrators who know best—instead, welcome students into the planning phases. Much could

be gained by including representatives from a diverse student population into curriculum mapping rather than doing it in the secret college boardroom behind closed doors.

Third is to “Implement a Liquid Syllabus” (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). A liquid syllabus means that the syllabus, or at least parts of it, is not fixed at class start, but rather after class start. An instructor could negotiate objectives, grade weights, and even assignments with the students to give them more agency in their own learning. Perhaps it could even be offered as an editable Google document or wiki page in the LMS. In addition to shifting more power to the students, a syllabus also gives students a first impression of the class and could help students take a more active position from the first connection.

Fourth is to allow “Student-Set Due Dates.” Related to the liquid syllabus, students could vote on due dates within the parameters of the semester. Adult learners will love this idea as they attempt to fit learning around job and family responsibilities. In her book “Teaching to Transgress” (2014), bell hooks suggests that standards can be high without being absolute.

Also related, the fifth idea is to give a “Student Goal Setting Survey.” Create an early survey for students to set their own learning goals related to the topic. The students are in the class for a reason, and teachers should find out what this reason is. Picture a motorcycle with a sidecar as an analogy for teaching. Both the instructor and the student are on it. Which person did you picture driving? Let students drive their learning while the teachers sit in the sidecar, guiding, directing, map-reading, and encouraging when needed.

Sixth is to “Hack Down the Discussion Board Hierarchy.” Teachers should respond with more process involvement than “the final word,” more unlocking the conversation than locking it down. In this age of uncivil conversations and classroom litigation, it can be difficult to let go a little and frightening to hear some of the stories of discussion boards gone wild. There should always be a role for the teacher to help keep the dialogue kind, respectful, and safe for every student. However, students should be led to deeper thinking and allowed to express their thoughts on a topic, right or wrong. If you want to create formal roles, have students lead the online discussions with starter and wrapper roles, This is where the student, rather than the teacher, poses a discussion question online, and another student wraps up the conversation with a summary and closing remarks at an appointed time.

Seventh is to "Encourage a Back-Channel." A back-channel is a communication technology used by students to talk about the class without the teacher's presence, usually outside of the LMS for privacy. Some current examples would be Google Hangouts, Voxer, WhatsApp, and Snapchat. Do teachers really want students talking behind their backs? Yes, they do! Because of the power differential, students will not be fully honest face to face. If there is a problem, the only way students are going to be able to fix it is to combine their power and, if needed, speak out together. So, teachers should encourage students to meet and connect outside of class.

Eighth is to "Get and Use Mid-semester Student Survey Data." Teachers know and have probably used all the arguments against student satisfaction surveys: They are all biased, you'll only hear from the angry ones, it's never anything constructive, students today are too harsh, students have just become consumers, etc. However, honest feedback is part of the dialogue and reflection that leads to liberating changes in the classroom. Instructors often do not recognize the power differential in the classroom, and because of this, students will typically only give an instructor positive feedback. Perhaps a reason why feedback is so harsh is that students are bottling up all the feelings from years of classroom oppression and finally have a sliver of power to say something about it without direct repercussions. It is important to get this data mid-semester so that teachers can accept issues and adjust their course for the second half.

Ninth is to "Provide a Space for Student-Added Materials." An argument against this might be, "but we don't know what they might post." However, this is exactly the point. Instructors do not know how students might apply or interpret the content from their own contexts. This idea may help bring in a different, diverse voice or perspective that the teacher does not have. As our online classes start to bring students from a variety of geographic areas and backgrounds, students can help expand beyond the limitations of their teacher's single location. Examples could be a GIF sharing discussion post, a crowdsourced video, or a class music playlist.

The tenth idea is to "Allow Students to Express Content in Relation to Themselves." Higher education is a time not just to learn new content and gain credentials, but to understand oneself more fully and one's relation to the world. Monk and philosopher Thomas Merton once wrote, "The function of a university is, then, first of all to help the student to discover themself: to recognize themself, and to identify who it is that chooses" (pronouns adjusted) (Merton, 1979, p. 4). This may be particularly true with undergraduate students, but also with adult students of

all ages who return to school because they are still figuring it all out. The more students are given the opportunity to relate and express content in relation to themselves, the more they will discover themselves and the more liberation they will experience. One example would be the teacher replacing lecture slides with ones created by a student. How would the student tell the story of this content? Allow them to present, create a recording, an info-graphic, a work of some sort that represents the content different from the perspective of their own lives.

Conclusion

There is no turning back from online education. There is also no setting in the LMS to prevent online classes from perpetuating and accentuating the industrialized, oppressive nature of higher education. However, as teachers, administrators, and instructional designers, we can slow down and thoughtfully consider liberatory pedagogical choices as online programs are developed, and perhaps then we can create results that free our students to learn. This author taught these concepts during an online teaching boot camp one summer, and a part-time teacher approached a few months later elated at the freedom he now felt in class. He said it was more inspiring to go, more fun to teach, and the students were more positive in their anonymous feedback as well. Freire (1996) believed that true liberation brings freedom for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Perhaps liberatory pedagogy can help guide further distance education and help make this so.

In closing, this is a declaration of freedom for the distance education people. As with all such declarations, it is not one of finality or success, but one of hope. This declaration is a call for dialogue, reflection, and action by all online administrators, teachers, and developers, welcoming students as partners in their own learning, self-discovery, and ultimate liberation.

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