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Agents for Change

Applying Critical Pedagogy in Enabling Programs

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Agents for Change: Applying Critical Pedagogy in Enabling Programs

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Abstract: In enabling programs, refugees from war-torn countries work alongside local students from low-SES backgrounds, discussing issues they have in common while learning about each other's differences. Students with learning disabilities work to manage their challenges with the help of classmates who are learning in a second language. It is the enabling educator's role to teach this new and diverse cohort in ways that will assist them to transition to undergraduate study; however the best practice pedagogies are still being ascertained. This paper will provide a case study of critical pedagogy (Freire 1994; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2012; Shor 1999) and practice across three courses in one Australian enabling program, designed to support student development in academic literacy, critical literacy, English language skills and understanding academic culture. Across these complementary courses, students learn necessary practical skills, such as essay-writing and research, while they also develop criticality. The development of criticality allows students to better understand, critique and, perhaps, address societal inequities (Kress 2011); supporting students to become agents for change who can achieve in the broader university and society.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Enabling Programs, Widening Participation, Australia

Introduction

Over the last six years there has been an increased focus on widening participation in higher education in Australia. Many universities have established enabling education programs, which offer study opportunities to those who have not traditionally seen university as an option. Enabling programs are 'bridging or foundational programs that provide opportunities to undertake higher education for those who lack the usual or traditional prerequisites for university entry and which enable them, not just by providing access, but by actively preparing them for success in their future undergraduate studies' (Klinger and Murray 2010, 118).

In these programs, refugees from war-torn countries work alongside students from low-SES backgrounds, discussing issues they have in common while learning about each other's differences. Students with learning disabilities work to manage their challenges with the help of classmates who are learning in a second language. It is the enabling educator's role to teach this new and diverse cohort in ways that will assist them to transition to undergraduate study; however the best practice pedagogies are still being ascertained.

This paper will provide a case study of critical pedagogy (Freire 1994; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2012; Shor 1999) in practice across three courses in one Australian enabling program. These courses are designed to support student development in academic literacy, critical literacy, English language skills and understanding academic culture. Across these complementary courses, students learn necessary practical skills, such as essay-writing and research, while they also develop criticality. The development of criticality allows students to better understand, critique and, perhaps, address societal inequities (Kress 2011); supporting students to become agents for change who can achieve in the broader university and society.

Widening Participation in Higher Education in Australia

In 2007, guided by the then Minister for Education and Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Australian Federal Government endeavored to establish the nation as a knowledge economy, through implementing policy designed to better facilitate equitable access to university

education. Australian political discourse clearly links widening participation with the country's economic future (Cocks and Stokes 2012). Widening university participation presents new opportunities for realising inclusive education practice, which acts to 'engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all' (Hockings 2010, 1). In 2008, as part of the Bradley Review, visions of how Australian universities could work towards a more socially inclusive system, and how that would help the nation develop as a knowledge economy were discussed. Accordingly a goal was set that by 2020, '20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education should be students from low socio-economic backgrounds, with 40% of 25-34 year olds holding a bachelor- level degree'(Bradley et al., 2008, xiv). As a result, there are now a number of different approaches being taken to embed enabling programs in Australian universities with UniSA College being one example.

The Foundation Studies Program at UniSA College

UniSA College opened its doors in 2011 offering a one year, Commonwealth-supported Foundation Studies Program to transition students into undergraduate degrees. The College plays a key role in UniSA's equity strategies and has been designed with Australia's targets for widening higher education participation in mind.

The UniSA College student cohort is diverse, comprising various nationalities, ages and educational levels. Many of the students come from one or more of the government defined equity groups; 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' (ATSI), 'Disability', 'Isolated', 'Low-socioeconomic status' (low-SES), 'Non-English Speaking Background' (NESB) and 'Rural' (NBEET, cited in Klinger and Murray 2011). Ross reports that 2010 data identifies 'the University of South Australia as the only institution with 20-plus per cent low-SES undergraduate recruitment and below-average attrition rates' (2011, 23). This is significantly higher than the 2010 national undergraduate low-SES enrolment average of 16.5 per cent (Lomax-Smith, Watson and Webster 2011, 115), suggesting that the College is an effective pathway for attracting students from low-SES backgrounds in line with the national widening participation targets.

The Foundation Studies program is designed to help students develop academic literacies through core courses which focus on; research strategies, essay writing, critical thinking, socio-political knowledge and information technology. The students then choose to specialise in study areas relevant to their preferred undergraduate degree.

In order to develop academic literacies in a critical sense, the program is designed to be inclusive and learner-centred. A constructivist approach is used to support engagement with university content and encourage students to build on existing knowledge. The scaffolded curricula enables the students to build effective study practice and in turn develop their abilities as autonomous, adult learners. Gale notes 'socially inclusive teaching is about providing room for different ways of thinking about, and different ways of engaging with knowledge, and indeed including different kinds of understandings that perhaps have not been part of Australian higher education before' (2010, 5). Ramburuth and Härtel (2010) emphasise the importance of welcoming learning environments for students from low-SES backgrounds in order to ensure that their identities are not devalued in comparison to peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Here staff play a crucial role in creating a positive learning environment, assisting students foster a commitment to their studies and to understand how new knowledge and skills will enable them to contribute to society and challenge the status quo. In these ways, students are supported to develop positive learner identities.

Granting access to HE is one of UniSA College's main goals and therefore ensuring these students are prepared and equipped with academic literacies is paramount for their retention. However, given the various backgrounds and needs of the individual students, UniSA College teaching staff recognise the importance of implementing critical pedagogy in their instruction.

Primarily teaching academic literacies does not necessarily guarantee a student's success, however showing students how to utilise these skills in order to analyse their place in society and transform their lives may have greater impact.

Critical Pedagogy in Enabling Programs

Critical pedagogy is a useful framework for enabling programs. Enabling programs offer an alternative pathway for marginalised groups to access elite institutions, which supports HE to provide more socially just outcomes through granting agency to diverse students. In an educational context, Nordlander, Strandh and Brännlund (2013, 3) identify that agency is:

possessed by 'someone who acts and bring about change' (Sen 1999, 31). Furthermore, the ability to act and effect change – agency – is a social process in which the individual can contextualise past experience and habits (habitual aspect) and entails a capacity to imagine and act on alternative possibilities of the present and the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Nordlander, Strandh and Brännlund (2013, 19) argue that universities provide “the individual with resources that will increase their agency and voice and, by extension, their social participation and opportunities in life”. This is particularly important for students from equity groups as “the positive effect of university education on agency appears to be much stronger for young people from blue-collar backgrounds” (Nordlander, Strandh & Brännlund 2013, 18). Gidley et al. argue that universities which foster social inclusion support individuals to reach their full potential and act to strengthen societies (2010).

Enabling programs are designed to support agency and inclusion. Students in enabling programs often come from disempowered societal groups, therefore educators in these programs are able to design curriculum in ways which can assist students to understand, critique and be better able to change this positioning. Critical pedagogy, as Freire (1994) advocates, presents a progressive ideal through focusing on educational change through praxis. Critical pedagogy imagines education as a political act, wherein curriculum is designed to empower the oppressed, to make students aware of the ways in which they have been systematically marginalised and give them tools to challenge this positioning (Freire 1994). Education can reinforce hegemony, or it can become a space in which to create dialogue between academics and students, supporting each other to understand and re-create the world (Freire 1994; Degener 2001). By making students aware of their political positioning and hegemonic constructs, valuing the knowledge that students bring rather than subjugating it, and opening up dialogue around ideas and curricula, teachers grant students agency and they are then better able to critique, challenge or change existing structures (Degener 2001). This is essential for true social inclusion; as Nordlander, Strandh and Brännlund observe “the capability of agency – the ability, at least to some extent, to be an agent of one's own life – is closely connected with the opportunity to act as a full member of a social context” (2013, 3). Critical pedagogy can be employed in enabling programs to empower non-traditional students for success beyond university; here, critical educators have the opportunity to offer students a valuable learning experience which imparts much more than basic academic literacies.

The UniSA College program aims to develop students' critical understandings. Teaching academics take a shared approach to embed criticality in program courses. A focus on praxis (Freire 1994; Mayo 2012) is maintained through a continual process of practice, reflection and discussion, wherein teaching staff work together to ensure that content is valuable for students. Teaching staff are aware of the power of their role and the politics of language in acting to include or exclude certain groups, so they focus on using inclusive language and selecting course tasks which work to empower learners. Educational practice is grounded in knowledge of and respect for the learning community. Academics value students' “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez,

Moll and Amanti 2012); embracing students' experiences as starting points for discussion. As Degener (2001, 5) notes "only through being attentive to students' realities will critical educators develop teaching practices that accept and validate the different kinds of cultural capital that influence the ways students make meaning of their learning". Educators' awareness of students' broad range of outside knowledge is used to design relevant and connected program content, utilising life experience and existing knowledge to inform university activities and develop course materials. In this way, students are able to critically analyse their lived experience while developing academic literacies which combine to provide engaging experiences of critical literacy: "learning to read the word through a reading of the world" (Freire 1994, 29).

Practical Application of Critical Pedagogy

The principles of critical pedagogy provide guidance for curriculum structure and content. The following practical examples demonstrate how critical pedagogy can be applied in enabling programs, by outlining how this approach has been embedded in three courses taught at UniSA College: English Language Studies (LANG 46), Critical Literacy (LANG 1002), and University Studies (EDUC 1075).

English Language Studies

The College requires students to enrol in one of two language courses on offer: English Language Studies or Critical Literacy. Before each study period commences, students are offered enrolment advice regarding the differences between these two language courses and are asked to participate in an English writing diagnostic exercise at Orientation. This exercise helps staff identify students who might require additional language support and instruction. Students are then advised to enrol in the language course that best fits their needs.

One-fifth of the UniSA College student cohort identifies as NESB (UniSA 2013a). To fulfil the learning needs of these students, the College offers the course English Language Studies. The course is also open to native English speakers who have had little engagement with academic study and wish to develop the necessary literacy skills in preparation for undergraduate study. The English Language Studies course runs twice a year and is offered via internal study mode only at the CBD campus. The course content has been designed to provide intensive English language support commencing with a focus on syntax and form and gradually incorporating exercises to build academic literacies. Students are shown that language is functional and its use will differ according to social, cultural and academic contexts. The assessments test students' aptitude of all four language skill areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening. A scaffolded approach helps them develop an understanding of how to communicate and use language effectively and appropriately in different spoken and written contexts.

It is important to acknowledge an issue when teaching a mainstream language. Theorists and advocates of critical pedagogy, including Freire and Macedo (1987), note that there is too much emphasis on teaching standard mainstream languages, and thus the role and voices of minority language speakers have effectively been silenced and devalued. These students are therefore limited in their ability to share their thoughts and insights forcing them to be passive learners in the educational process (Degener 2001). As governing bodies and educational authorities give credence to teaching mainstream languages, the speakers and cultures of minority groups are pressured to conform to the practices, ideas and perspectives of dominant language groups. This presents significant challenges for teachers attempting to embrace the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy and equity in an educational program. In order to enable "students to become active participants in their learning, teachers must legitimise their language needs" (Degener 2001, 38). It is also important for language instructors to inform students of the advantages of being bi-lingual in a dominant English speaking society. Solely reflecting upon how students are made to feel inadequate because of their low English communicative proficiency does little for

self-esteem. However, illustrating the benefits of being able to communicate in two or more languages helps students realise how they can make valuable contributions to society and business through promoting diversity rather than monoculture.

With this in mind, the learning tasks incorporated into the English Language Studies course enable the students to think about the function and power language plays in their lives. Students are shown how language can transform their role in society to become ‘agents for change’. From the beginning of the course, students are asked to set language learning goals and to reflect upon the reasons why they enrolled in the course. Personalising their language learning needs and aspirations helps them become more critically aware of how competency in another language enables them to function in society and achieve their career goals. Students are asked to write reflective journals on the development of their English language skills and communication with others. This enables them to understand how acquiring communicative skills in an additional language assists in daily life activities. The course has a strong focus on intercultural communication where the students are shown how to identify the various communication styles and social customs across cultures. Shor (1992 cited in Degener 2001, 40) suggests “educators might consider engaging in critical discussions about language so that students can confront the power structures that make certain languages and forms of language dominant”. With this in mind, teachers can facilitate class discussion regarding English as a global language and the role it plays in creating a homogenous monoculture. Establishing a dialogue helps NESB students reflect upon the language challenges they face in daily life which consequently may make them feel devalued, inadequate and marginalised from the native English speaking community. Classroom discussion, problem posing and reflection not only help students identify the factors that contribute to their marginalisation but also empower them to take steps to overcome these challenges.

Critical Literacy (LANG 1002)

The Critical Literacy course can be undertaken twice a year through internal enrolment at the CBD campus and two regional centres or via external study mode. The aim of the course is to develop students’ ability to remain critical when reading, writing, and researching. The course material and assessment tasks have been strategically designed to encapsulate the UniSA graduate qualities. The course objective is to guide each student into becoming “... an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical, and creative thinking to a range of problems” (UniSA 2014). Students are taught how to analyse the content and perspectives presented to them in various text types including real-world media texts. At the end of the course the students utilise their text analysis skills with an independent critical review of an academic journal article.

Throughout the course, students are presented with a range of media and academic texts in written, digital and visual formats. Students are shown that each text has a different purpose and conveys messages in diverse ways. By deconstructing and analysing texts, students gain insight into the techniques and strategies writers and producers employ to express meaning and have impact on the reader. Critical literacy teaches students to become more critically aware; to contest the notion of there being one truth and to challenge the stereotypes and messages which are circulated in societies and propagated in the media. Students are taught that language use is significant in determining how we define ourselves and the world around us. Language is a reflection of culture and social realities. Students are shown that the material within a text reflects a range of factors such as socio-historical contexts, culture, power, relationships and ideologies. Students come to understand that language is not neutral in its application as it changes according to different contexts, place and time.

A strong emphasis of the course is developing the skill of text analysis. Every text is created with a rhetorical function. Initially, students are presented with media texts, within which they

identify writer purpose, perspective, socio-cultural influences and source credibility. As their text analysis skills strengthen, they apply these tools of text analysis to academic texts, assessing the strength of evidence and research methodology. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) raise the importance of students developing a critical stance in which they apply their own background knowledge to understand the relationships between their ideas and the perspectives presented in texts. Reading and viewing texts from a critical stance enables students to identify whose voices are included or omitted and who may gain or lose through the creation of a text. In this way, critical text analysis helps students understand issues of power and identify which groups are subjugated or oppressed for the benefit of others.

University Studies (EDUC 1075)

University Studies is a compulsory core course for all students at UniSA College. The aim of the course is to provide students with a supported introduction to university systems and academic culture while also building study skills. Most students undertake the course in their first semester of study, so the course is available twice a year, with a large cohort of over 600 students in the first semester and a smaller cohort of over 200 students in the second semester. The course is taught at a CBD campus, two regional centres and in external mode. The course provides a guided introduction to academic literacies, including assisting students to develop skills in idea generation, research and essay writing. Course assessments are heavily scaffolded, commencing with a confidence building quiz at the start of the semester through to the completion of a 1500 word research essay grounded in eight academic articles.

Critical pedagogy is applied throughout the course to encourage students to consider their own learning experiences in light of current systematic limitations and generate their own informed approaches for future academic success. University Studies is designed to assist students to understand their own needs as adult learners and to develop positive study practices. Students are guided towards greater understanding and awareness of the educational system, both its supportive elements and limitations, so that they can effectively manage their own needs. For example, students complete the “Success Types Learning Indicator” (Pelley 2008), a condensed version of the Myers-Briggs personality test designed for medical students, in order to identify study practices which may best align with their own learning preferences. Later in the course, academics and students view a critical discussion of education paradigms presented by Sir Ken Robinson (2010) and use this to commence a critical exploration of educational experiences, which offers insight and gives students a chance to reframe their experience under current systems while also providing direction for the future. The course provides the opportunity to explore further study options and careers in an informed manner, while also receiving guidance and support from the College. This is particularly important for the 52% of College students who are first-in-family at university (UniSA 2013a) and can particularly benefit from an informed academic mentor. In these ways, students build their critical awareness of the university system, while also developing means and supportive strategies for managing their own needs both within and around the existing system.

Course content is structured to assist students in developing and implementing critical thinking, logic and reasoning skills within the university context. Students learn how to construct an argument grounded in academic evidence utilising logic and reasoning. Different perspectives are presented and the student’s argument is tested, giving the students time to demonstrate and develop their knowledge in a supportive environment. Students are assisted to select their own research topic, which relates to an area of interest. Many students are passionate about the opportunity to explore an issue of interest which in turn enables insight into the oppressive systems that have impacted on their lived experience. For example, in recent research essays, an indigenous man explored the medical and cultural issues which inform the life-expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, while a female refugee who arrived in

Australia by boat explored the policy and rhetoric around asylum seekers in Australia and how this position has developed in conflict to Australia being signatories to international human rights conventions (Stokes 2014). Student Evaluations of Teaching demonstrate that a number of students identify this research opportunity as the best element of the core course (Stokes 2014). In these ways, the application of critical pedagogy assists students to gain greater enjoyment and engagement from the course, while also assisting them to better understand societal structures and build the tools to change their position.

Reflections

By implementing critical pedagogy, educators can support students to become more empowered to create change. Critical pedagogy is suitable and beneficial for enabling programs, as the students enrolled in these programs often come from marginalised positions where their lives have been affected by systems of oppression. By recognising and discussing these power structures, and teaching the students how new skills will help them better manage and challenge their societal position, critical pedagogy contributes to their engagement with the educational process. However, a focus on the acquisition of academic literacies alone is inadequate; critical educators need to show students how these skills can be understood in the context of their own lives in order to create meaning and relevance. Therefore enabling programs should combine academic literacies with critical pedagogy. The College academic staff regularly discuss and reflect upon teaching practice with colleagues, which supports the continual modification of material in order to better meet student learning needs. There are considerable benefits of praxis for educators, as collaboration, reflection and idea-sharing encourage the adoption and integration of progressive and inclusive learning methodologies.

By embracing critical approaches, educators grant students opportunities for voice and agency, highlighting the political role of widening participation in effecting genuine social change, as more people are supported to reach their potential. As Nordlander, Strandh and Brännlund (2013, 19) observe “higher education has an equalising effect and is crucial in generating equal participation in society”. While some scholars have observed that universities may perceive tension between attaining the twin goals of equity and excellence (Leathwood and O’Connell 2010, 599), Gidley et al. (2010, 142) argue that “quality in higher education is synonymous with a broad interpretation of social inclusion in higher education in that both are concerned with equitable access, participatory engagement and empowered success”. The inclusion of these approaches assists students to reach their potential through a focus on both academic literacies and engaging with the complex world around them; as exemplified by a student reflection that through the course “I grew as a person” (UniSA 2013b). In order to effect genuine social inclusion, critical pedagogy is a sound approach for enabling programs.

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