

Edited by Angela Jones, Anita Olds
and Joanne G. Lisciandro



Transitioning students into Higher Education

Philosophies, Pedagogies and Practice



Liberation and connection Fostering critical students as active agents of their own learning

Dr Sarah Hattam and Jennifer Stokes

The learning process should be one that enables students to contend with their actual conditions, in order to move toward greater critical consciousness and a critical literacy that prepares them to engage effectively with more complex forms of knowledge and to enact practices in their lives in sync with a more just world. (Darder, Mayo, & Paraskeva, 2016, p. 3)

Introduction

Many enabling programs adopt fundamental principles from pedagogies of social justice and other empowering philosophies. As educators, we have drawn upon critical pedagogy to inform the design and development of key courses that serve to embed criticality in our enabling teaching and support the transition of students into Higher Education (HE). While our university delivered a preparatory program for many years prior to the establishment of our school in 2011, we realised early into our own teaching in enabling education that we had been given a rare and special opportunity. Enabling education is characterised by its separation from mainstream HE as well as freedom from constraints of a standardised, government-regulated year 12 curriculum. As an alternative pathway into university, we realised we had the potential to engage and capture an audience with teaching approaches and curriculum that could be labelled ‘radical’ within higher education (Shor, 2007, 2013). We are not alone in this quest, as there are other ‘radical’ teachers in HE that also advocate for and adopt critical pedagogical approaches (Brookfield, 2004; Mayo, 1999; Finger & Asun 2001; Hattam, Shacklock & Smyth, 1997; Degener, 2001). Traditional educational pedagogy relies on the ‘banking method’ (Freire, 1974) and prior to widening participation initiatives, the ‘traditional’ Australian university student was more likely to be of Anglo-Saxon origin, middle-class and able to compete in a masculine, competitive culture (Bennett et al., 2016; Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray & Southgate, 2016). Widening participation warrants a redesign of educational pedagogy to better support and value students from diverse backgrounds and extend the knowledges valued within the university in line with socially inclusive approaches. This chapter shows how our linking of philosophy, pedagogy, and practice radically shifts away from established pedagogy as we unsettle the notion of the ‘traditional’ university student subject. This chapter considers the role of strong educational philosophy in pedagogy and practice, which provides spaces for students to explore relevant issues, develop class consciousness and critique systems, so that they may engage with societal change.

We have applied these pedagogical and philosophical approaches in the design and delivery of critical, digital, and information literacy courses. We provide examples from practice in the courses Digital Literacy: Screen, Web and New Media, Future Ideas: Information and the Internet

and Critical Thinking: Media and Academia. Constructing meaningful experiences through exploring contemporary texts and interpreting these in an academic context assists the students to “read the word through a reading of the world” (Freire, 2004, p. 29). Supporting the development of respectful dialogue in enabling classrooms assists in the development of learning communities wherein each learner is valued and feels safe to develop their critical understanding of the world. Through carefully designed curricula that respond to students’ needs and develops awareness, this approach encourages passionate engagement leading to deep learning experiences (Ramsden, 2003). This chapter will explore the role of educators as change-makers, the students’ adoption of critical approaches, and the potential this presents for the development of active learning communities.

The need for critical pedagogy

In adapting critical pedagogy for the present, we reflect upon how Freire’s philosophy was born in revolutionary 1960s South America. Additionally, Shor speaks of his earlier experimentation with critical pedagogy in the 1970s in a time of counter culture in American colleges. As sociologists, we identify the need for resistance, activism, and a questioning of the status quo in our contemporary global economic and political times. We are in an era of ‘Fake News’, the rise of social media, Brexit, growing nationalist rhetoric across Europe, and changes to media ownership laws limiting the diversity of voices presented to the Australian public (Evershed, 2018). Alongside similar Western nations, politics of division, fear, and the culture wars (Johnson, 2007) dominate Australian political discussion. This is a time to question dominant messages and ask why we are being distracted from critical global issues, such as climate change, and the widening gap between rich and poor in many wealthy nations. These are times to encourage our students to seriously question the world around them and to imagine a more equal and caring society. It is through education that we can co-create dialogue, extend opportunity, and support our students to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others, in the hope of building a better world together. Our teaching approaches and course design are underpinned by the philosophical work of Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (1987a) who believe in the liberating and transformational role that education can play. This educational philosophy inspires us to employ critical approaches which lead to transformative experiences wherein students can critique power structures and gain agency:

as conscious human beings, we can discover how we are conditioned by the dominant ideology. We can gain distance on our moment of existence ... we can struggle to become free precisely because we can know we are not free! That is why we can think of transformation. (Shor & Freire, 1987a, p. 13)

This chapter will explore the liberatory potential of informed course design, which can support student transformation into critical and active agents of their own learning. Drawing on Freire and Shor’s teachings of critical pedagogy provides opportunities for radical teaching, as their approaches are underutilised in mainstream HE or secondary schooling pedagogy. Arguably, by

their nature enabling programs are a radical space, designed to widen participation and challenge the status quo of who ‘belongs’ at university. Through practice and research, we learnt our students often had negative experiences at high school (Smyth & Hattam, 2004), which led them to question their capability and intelligence and whether they belonged at university (Burke et al., 2016). We could see that often the ‘problem’ of our students’ prior lack of educational attainment was framed in deficit terms (Bacchi, 1999; 2009); that students from low socio-economic backgrounds could be perceived as lacking the cultural capital to succeed at university (Bourdieu, 1977). Yet, we could also see opportunities to value the diverse capitals students bring through a ‘funds of knowledge’ approach (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales, 1992), which would assist them to connect with university. We realised that we needed to implement an alternative method to connect with our students who had previously disengaged or encountered barriers in their education. Challenging traditional methods has its own issues, as Shor and Freire observe: there is a lot of pressure to teach the traditional way, first because it is familiar and already ‘worked out’, even if it doesn’t ‘work’ in class. Second by deviating from the standard syllabus you can get known as a ‘rebel’ or ‘radical’. (1987a, p. 7)

While we work to empower students through an understanding of the political nature of education and social systems, we share Long’s understanding that we must be careful not to distort the spirit of Freire’s radical pedagogical agenda by taking for granted that empowerment and liberation are synonymous with autonomous actors engaging in militant, counterhegemonic activity ... the call of the radical teacher is therefore to challenge and enable students to take responsibility for their own education so that students become both willing and able to make difficult, perhaps even life-changing decisions. (Long, 1998, p. 114) In this way, we can work toward greater social justice; as Shor (2007, p. 39) argues “questioning the status quo is the central goal” of radical teaching.

Freire and Shor’s empowering education

Freire has inspired critical educators and those working toward greater social inclusion through a commitment to utopian ideals wherein we actively “imagine a world not as it is now but as it should and can be” (Mayo, 2012, p. 9). In Freire’s work, societal change is progressed through critical pedagogy, which understands education as a political system that privileges some and disempowers others. Through respectful praxis and critical consciousness raising, educators can work with the oppressed to transform the world (Freire, 2004). Freire’s critical pedagogy was developed through teaching experiences with oppressed peoples in 1960s South America (Mayo, 2012), and his approach conveys the radical ideals of the time. His hopeful approach has been adapted and implemented around the world, while maintaining its commitment to societal betterment: “critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between education and power in society and, thus, uncompromisingly committed to the amelioration of inequalities and social exclusions in the classroom and society at large” (Darder et al., 2016, p. 1).

Rejecting a ‘banking’ approach to education, Freire (2004) focuses on the importance of respectful dialogue to better understand students’ subjective position, progress understanding, and support

active critique of systems. Working with students to develop tools to analyse and overcome the structural limitations of existing systems, critical educators encourage agency and facilitate societal transformation (Darder et al., 2016, p.3). In this way, educators continue to develop understanding and critique to better support marginalised students: “through dialogue, problem posing and reflection (a form of praxis), students can come to a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to their marginalisation and the steps they might take to eliminate them” (Degener, 2001, p. 13). In implementing critical pedagogy for teaching in the developed world, educators have maintained the revolutionary spirit and commitment to hope and societal change embodied in Freire’s work. Like Freire, Shor’s critical teaching framework strongly emphasises the ‘empowering’ role that education can play. The history of Freire and Shor’s intellectual relationship is revealed in their co-authored book *A pedagogy for liberation* (Shor & Freire, 1987a), a transcript and record of their conversations about their shared dream of liberating education.

The book provides an insight to both Freire and Shor’s classroom experiences, as they experimented with liberatory pedagogies. Shor followed this up with a practical ‘guide’ (Shor, 1992) of how to apply critical pedagogy to teaching, which was valuable in the development of our own praxis. In *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change* (1992), Shor offers explicit methods for how to implement key aspects of Freire’s philosophy. In this chapter we demonstrate how we implement four of these elements: participatory, problem-posing, dialogic, and change-agency. The following sections demonstrate how we have adopted Shor’s model to produce positive outcomes for our students, to inspire a sense of liberation and to re-assess their own place in the world.

Liberation through critical literacy

Critical Thinking: Media and Academia is a critical literacy course which focuses on the media for the first seven weeks, followed with six weeks of analysis of the academic genre. The course aims to develop the criticality of the students across the genres so they learn that some are more credible sources of information than others. From a social justice perspective, teaching critical literacy in a university widening participation program, targeted at people who were historically marginalised, is fundamentally important. The diversity of our student cohorts is substantial with approximately over 50 per cent from low socio-economic backgrounds, 40 per cent from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, 10 per cent on humanitarian visas and 5 per cent Aboriginal. This course highlights who benefits from the status quo by “disrupting commonplace notions of socially constructed concepts such as race, class, gender and sexuality” (Wallowitz, 2008, p. 1). The tools developed in the course assists the recognition of how “language use is one social force constructing us” (Shor, 1999, p. 2) and critical literacy can “teach oppositional discourses so as to remake ourselves and our culture” (Shor, 1999, p. 2). This element of critical literacy is liberatory as students engage in dialogue regarding the social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, social class, age, and religion in the texts around them and question the ‘truth’

claims that are being told in these narratives that may be contributing to their own marginalisation in Australian society.

In the development of the curriculum of Critical Thinking, where it is possible, the students are encouraged to select their own topic for assessment to enhance the participatory element in the course. The ‘participatory’ element highlights the political importance of ‘talking’ that occurs in the teaching space, as “the rules for talking are a key mechanism for empowering or disempowering students” (Shor, 1992, p. 21). If participating in a group text analysis, we select a topic that connects with their life-worlds. This demonstrates Shor’s connection also between generative issues, topical themes and academic themes. When taught in isolation from the other two themes, the academic theme can be abstract and ‘alien’ (Krause, 2006) to students new to university.

A topical theme we explore to highlight how the media utilises language techniques (or discourses) that produces harmful consequences for groups of people is the link between young people and ‘hoon drivers’ (a term commonly employed to describe people who drive above the speed-limit and break road-safety laws). We problem-pose collectively what is the ‘truth’ about young people in contemporary times? We show clips from mainstream current affair shows that regularly repeat the same stories about young people (specifically working-class young men) engaging in dangerous practices on the roads. The students observe that the repetitive representation of young people as ‘hoons’ by the media is damaging with the increased cost of insurance for all male drivers under the age of 25 as well as ‘hoon’ driver laws that mean all drivers under 25 cannot drive with other young people after 9 pm at night.

We connect the discussion with an ‘academic theme’ by introducing Cohen’s (2002) theory of moral panics to show how politics and the media historically construct ‘folk devils’. Cohen’s theory outlines the steps involved in constructing ‘folk devils’ with the media shaping the opinion of particular groups of people, creating a panic amongst the viewers (and voters) who then lobby the government for change of laws and policies. This often produces an ‘a-hah’ moment for the students. They see how the media works along a continuum of condemnation and commendation and people and issues are presented to us in simple binary terms, as we are encouraged to ‘choose a side’. They see how particular groups are continually positioned in particular ways (refugees, Aboriginal Australians, women, young people), and the audience is only presented with narrow perspectives on issues (marriage equality, abortion, politicians, welfare support).

Students often reflect on completion of the course of how they have come to identify the media as a key proponent of racism, sexism, Islamophobia and homophobia. Giving the students opportunities to analyse and critique the power structures (media, government, education, church) that they interact with on a daily basis empowers them as they realise they can resist and challenge the dominant messages communicated within and by these structures. Choosing themes that connect strongly with their lifeworlds means the students see that learning about political ideologies is important to them. This inspires students to challenge what is being presented as the

‘truth’ in the media across a whole range of issues. In Freire’s terms, through the course students can become ‘masters of their own thinking’ (1974, p. 124), as their consciousness has been raised and they are empowered to create their own ‘truth’ claims, or narrative, about the world and their place in the world.

Building agency through digital and information literacies

In developing content for enabling programs, dialogic processes are employed to build trust and rapport with students, embed elements of learner choice, and work with students to co-create content, which builds learner agency. Students develop digital literacies and production practices through Digital Literacy: Screen, Web and New Media , while Future Ideas: Information and the Internet focuses on innovation through information literacy and university research practices.

To support participation, it is important to establish trust early on, particularly for students with negative past educational experiences. The first two weeks of teaching are critical for retention of students transitioning to university through enabling pathways (Hodges et al., 2013, p. 53), so it is important to rapidly establish a welcoming environment wherein diverse voices are valued. Embedding inclusive strategies better supports all learners (Hockings, 2010), and techniques can be employed from the first interaction. As Freire states:

at the moment you say Hello! How are you? to the students you necessarily start an aesthetic relationship. This is so because you are an educator who has a strategic and directive role to play in liberating pedagogy. Then, education is simultaneously a certain theory of knowledge going into practice, a political and aesthetic act. (Freire in Shor & Freire, 1987b, p. 31)

Learning names, goals and motivations for study helps educators tailor learning toward student interests. As an introduction to our inclusive learning environment, university codes of conduct are unpacked and connected to classroom practice. From the first tutorial, academic culture is introduced, such as the ‘50-minute-university-hour’ and use of first names, and linked to a supportive learning environment. While especially relevant for first-in-family students, this explication acts to reassure all students that individuality is respected. Establishing an inclusive learning environment opens space for dialogue wherein students actively contribute, and their knowledges are valued.

With trust established, we move to problem exploration of complex and emerging digital and information issues, assisting students to build academic literacies, knowledge and argumentation. For example, in a 2018 Digital Literacy lecture we explored the ‘moral panic’ and reportage on video game Fortnite on current affairs television and by YouTube vloggers. Students drew upon gaming experience and familial relationships to bring valued perspectives to the discussion. Ultimately, we reached a consensus that the issue was around parental supervision, lax enforcement of game ratings, and misunderstanding of game content. Here, the dialogic classroom

provided learning outcomes for both students and academics, working together to determine the best way forward from a combination of lived experience and theory.

Course assessments provide opportunities for students to generate concepts and address student-identified problems. In *Future Ideas*, learning analytics is used to capture responses to questions posed in the lecture and online, and students form teams based on topic interest, using research to better understand and address these ‘wicked problems’. Students are encouraged to use design thinking and diverse perspectives to approach their research question, which underpins their engagement with academic sources. In *Digital Literacy* students develop an individual pitch for a digital project, which supports personal or professional interests, including advocacy for disempowered groups. Recent examples include infographics to further understanding of diverse sexual orientation, anti-bullying, or breaking the cycle of drug dependency, websites for environmental action or mental health, and virtual reality excursions for bedridden patients. The students welcome elements of choice and this underpins heightened commitment to producing high quality assignments which support student agency and facilitates deep learning outcomes (Ramsden, 2003). Through connecting with student lifeworlds and a commitment to change through informed action, the tutorial room becomes a space for innovation and new understandings are built through respectful co-construction of knowledge.

Conclusion

We look with hope to the diverse knowledges and perspectives these new students bring through successful transition to and connection with university. Engaging with students’ lived experience supports transformation of self and society through education: “the students’ lives and language were social texts ... the liberatory process could be a window and a road to the students, to see their own conditions and to envision a different destiny” (Shor, 1992, p. 24). As students from marginalised backgrounds enter the academy through enabling education, they also make a valued and unique contribution through connecting their existing knowledges with those of the university, and the liberatory potential of widening university participation is evident. As Shor and Freire (1987b) argue, “the critical development of these students is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society” (p. 23). At a time when trust in significant institutions has fallen, there is growing evidence of activism for societal betterment around the world. From #MeToo to #NeverAgain, young people are mobilising through technology and developing agency. As educators, we can play a significant role through philosophically informed pedagogy and practice that supports students to develop critical consciousness, and informed action to create change for a better future. Let’s begin!

References

Bacchi, C. (1999). *Women, policy and politics: The construction of policy problems*. London: Sage.

- Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* NSW: Pearson.
- Bennett, A., Motta, S. C., Hamilton, E., Burgess, C., Relf, B., Gray, K., Leroy-Dyer, S., & Albright, J. (2016). *Enabling pedagogies: A participatory conceptual mapping of practices at the University of Newcastle*. Australia: University of Newcastle.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2004). *The power of critical theory: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. Indianapolis: An Imprint of Wiley.
- Burke, P., Bennett, A., Burgess, C., Gray, K., & Southgate, E. (2016). *Capability, belonging and equity in higher education: Developing inclusive approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Degener, S. (2001). Making sense of critical pedagogy in adult literacy education. In J. E. Comings, B. E. Garner, & C. E. Smith (Eds), *Annual review of adult learning and literacy*. Volume 2. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (pp. 26–62). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Evershed, N. (2018, 3 August). How the Fairfax takeover will further concentrate Australia's media. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2018/aug/03/the-fairfax-takeover-and-how-it-will-worsen-australias-media-industry-squeeze>.
- Finger, M. & Asun, J. M. (2001). *Adult education at the crossroads: Teaching our way out*. New York: Palgrave.
- Freire, P. (1974). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company.
- Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Trans. R. B. Barr, London: Continuum.
- Hattam, R., Shacklock, G., & Smyth, J. (1997). Towards a practice of critical teaching about teachers' work. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2(3), 225–241.
- Hodges, B., Bedford, T., Hartley, J., Klinger, C., Murray, N., O'Rourke, J., & Schofield, N. (2013). *Enabling retention: Processes and strategies for improving student retention in university-based enabling programs*. Canberra: Office for Learning and Teaching, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Hockings, C. (2010). *Inclusive learning and teaching: Research synthesis*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Johnson, C. (2007). *Governing change: From Keating to Howard*. Perth: Network. Krause, K. (2006). *Transition to and through the first year: Strategies to enhance the student experience*,

Keynote Paper Inaugural Vice-Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Colloquium 2006. Queensland, Australia: University of the Sunshine Coast.

Long, D. (1998). A radical teacher's dilemma. Response to "Practicing radical pedagogy: Balancing ideals with institutional constraints". *Teaching Sociology* , 26(2), 112–115.

Mayo, P. (1999). Gramsci, Freire and adult education: Possibilities for transformative action . London: Zed Books.

Mayo, P. (2012). *Echoes from Freire for a critically engaged pedagogy* . London, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonazales, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice* , 3(2), 132–141.

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed). London: Routledge Falmer.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy. *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice* , 1(4), 2–32.

Shor, I. (2007). Can critical teaching foster activism in this time of repression. *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching* , 79(Fall), 39.

Shor, I. (2013). Occupy in one classroom. *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching* , 96(Spring), 54–58.

Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987a). *A pedagogy for liberation: Dialogues on transforming education* . Westport, Connecticut: Bergin Garvey.

Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987b). What is the 'dialogical method' of teaching? *The Journal of Education* , 169(3), 11–31.

Smyth, J. & Hattam, R. (2004). *Dropping out, drifting off, being excluded: Becoming something without school* . New York: Peter Lang.

Wallowitz, L. (2008). *Critical literacy as resistance* . New York: Peter Lang.