TAU 3 PROJECT

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PROJECT TITLE:

The (im)possibilities for critical dialogic pedagogies for asynchronous online teaching

CONTEXT & AIMS:

This study was undertaken at the Wits School of Education with undergraduate students enrolled for a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. It investigates whether a third-year English literature course can feasibly remain underpinned by a dialogic (Freire 1970; Bakhtin 1981) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1970) when it shifts to asynchronous online modalities. The move online was necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given high data costs, low reliability of connectivity in some areas and the constraints associated with scheduled online classes, in 2020-21 the university determined that digital access to courses would be more equitable through the use of asynchronous modalities only. While this did not guarantee access, it was an attempt to provide flexibility, for students to go online in their own time and work through activities at their own pace, using the university's zero-rated digital learning platform. The course in question had always been taught face to face before which allowed for robust engagement and debate amongst students. A key concern about moving online was that such engagement would cease to be possible and thus radically alter the learning experience for the students as they confronted the two controversial prescribed texts. The focal questions this study sought to answer then was, can a critical dialogic pedagogy be enacted in an asynchronous online course? And if so, what new shapes might such a pedagogy take in online spaces and modalities?

Conceptually speaking, three intertwined ideas underpin this study. The first is the recognition of the importance of dialogue in producing learning. This can be traced back to the centrality of social interaction in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning (1962,

1978). But more significantly to the idea of the dialogic that is key in both Bakhtin's work (1981), where he argues for the importance of multiple voices in dialogue providing multiple perspectives, and in Freire's work (1970), where he sees dialogue as relational and key to the development of critical consciousness. This raises the notion of criticality, the second key idea, which foregrounds power relations, particularly those of dominance and oppression, and aligns with social justice education. And this ultimately takes us to the need for a decolonial praxis (Walsh 2020) that speaks to our southern context. What also becomes significant as we deepen our understanding of online modalities is that we need to think beyond the commonsense notion of dialogue as necessitating face to face interaction but consider what Boyd and Markarian refer to as a 'dialogic stance' (2011, 2015), or, in the words of Shor and Freire, to begin to see 'dialogue as an epistemological position' (1987). Thus what is under scrutiny here is the course's orientation to knowledge and how that is pedagogically articulated in whatever modalities it may be taught. The aim is for students to use literature as a playground for investigating/experimenting with issues of representation and power, drawing connections to their own everyday worlds, reflecting on their own positionalities and gaining a sense of their own voice and agency.

COURSES & PROCESSES:

The literature course in question is titled Representation & Power and deals with two novels on (pre)colonial Africa – *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad and *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe. We undertake a contrapuntal, postcolonial reading of these two novels, foregrounding their respective loci of enunciation, politics of representation and positioning of the reader. The pedagogy, however, centres an emergent decolonial praxis (Walsh 2020) where students are invited to negotiate an open-ended orientation to knowledge based on exploratory dialogue and asked to reflect critically and agentically on their own positionalities (Ravitch 2020). This is a reading intensive and writing intensive course. In addition to reading two novels and a range of related readings, students were assigned to writing tutors who engaged with them in online forums and gave feedback on weekly individual writing tasks.

Ethics clearance was obtained from the university's ethics committee. The class consisted of 170 students, 31 of whom agreed to participate in this study. There were also 10 writing fellows, 8 of whom agreed to participate from their perspective as fellows. The table below outlines the data gathered, shows the analysis that has been done in Phase 1 (already complete) and indicates the discourse analysis that is being done in Phase 2, currently underway.

	Data gathered	Data Analysis: Phase 1	Data Analysis: Phase 2
1.	Online discussion forums	• Frequency of participation • Patterns of interaction • Attitudes (from focus group, FG)	Discourse analysis of discussion content
2.	Weekly writing tasks	• Submission rates • Attitudes (from FG)	Discourse analysis of written content
3.	Online comments on narrated video lectures	• Rates of online responses to videos • Attitudes and practices (from FG)	Discourse analysis of content of comments
4.	Final writing reflection	None	Discourse analysis of content
5.	Exam: Literary analysis/argument essay	None	Discourse analysis of content
6.	Student questionnaires	• Quantitative analysis of close-ended questions • Thematic content analysis (TCA) of open questions	
7.	Student focus groups	• TCA of discussion	
8.	Writing fellow focus group	• TCA of discussion	

Phase 1 of the data analysis has provided us with the following insights on students' engagement:

1. **Students are not passive viewers of narrated PowerPoint videos:** they not only listened but took notes, paused to consult novels/readings, paused to rewind and listen again. Student comment 1: *I also read a lot of my classmates' responses throughout the video*. Student comment 2: *Took time to answer questions raised by the lecturer and then proceeded*. Student comment 3: *interacted with comments when interesting points were raised.*

2. **The online space is suited to writing intensive work, and the weekly writing tasks produced in-depth critical engagement with the novels**. The task on Achebe's colonial schooling was the most popular with students making the following comments: *This writing task was more relevant to me as an African person who is a major in English. I was able to put myself in Achebe's shoes before jotting down my ideas. This was more interesting as I was able to voice myself during the writing task.*

3. **In weekly discussion forums, participation was influenced by tutor interaction style and facilitated through the use of controversial topics.** Preliminary analysis suggests writing fellows that elicited strong participation responded at length to each student's comment and exhibited a strong personal voice.

What became evident during the course of this analysis is that what was emerging showed student's *levels of engagement* and *forms of engagement*, and that another layer of analysis is needed to get at the presence – or absence – of the critical and/or the dialogic. Thus Phase 2 of the analysis deepens the focus to orientations to knowledge, drawing on 'dialogic stance' (Boyd & Markarian 2011, 2015) and 'dialogue as epistemological position' (Shor & Freire 1987).

ACHIEVEMENTS:

The following institutional events have been held:

1. 5 August 2021: An online presentation and discussion with key Teaching & Learning people within the School and at Faculty level, with the UCDP Convenor, and with colleagues involved in T&L projects. The purpose of the meeting was to disseminate information about TAU and to begin building a community of practice.

2. 19 August 2021: A cross-faculty Wits webinar was held by the three Wits TAU fellows (Sue Benvenuti, Lanelle Wilmot and myself) to inform the university community about our respective TAU Projects.

3. 23 February 2022: A Roundtable on Critical Dialogic Pedagogies was held where five projects (including my own) were presented and discussions were held on questions emerging.

CHALLENGES:

The following challenges have been identified:

1. **Time:** There has been insufficient time to analyse all the data as yet which limits what can be said about this project for now.
2. **Colleagues' workloads:** Because colleagues are overstretched with teaching and administrative responsibilities as well as with ongoing training for teaching via the learning platform, even those who might have been interested in researching critical dialogic pedagogy do not have capacity to take on the extra work.
3. **Ethics:** While I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that one is following all ethics protocols when conducting research, it must also be said that it is considerably more difficult to obtain permission from students when you only see them online. Furthermore, it would appear that the ethics committee has little or no knowledge of SoTL which causes delays with the application.
4. **Too much of a disciplinary focuts:** As I continue to work on this study, I fear that it is too narrow – and has too much of a discipilinary focus to be useful beyond the discipline of Applied (English) Language Studies. I am hoping to identify colleagues in different faculties to work with so as to scale up and generalise the study.

MOVING FORWARD:

Fortunately we were able to obtain a second cycle of funding from the UCDP Grants and we are therefore moving forward with the project. In moving forward we plan to focus on the following: (1) undertake a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data gathered already gathered; (2) hold a cross-faculty symposium/event on critical dialogic pedagogies with a view to broadening the reach of this work to other disciplines where orientations to knowledge may be different; (3) gather an additional set of data from this year's iteration of these courses to track the shift to a blended pedagogy; (4) scholarly publications with disciplinary and/or SoTL foci.

10 August 2022

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