FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL LIVES: PUBLIC VERSUS MARKET PEDAGOGIES

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Abstract

Vocationalism and other market logics dominate over social logics in contemporary higher education discourses. This personal critical reflection explores how theories of critical pedagogy can inform and inspire educators to centre social justice.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, social justice, neoliberalism, vocationalism

Fighting for Social Lives: Public versus Market Pedagogies

Occasionally when I teach, interactions with my students leave me off-kilter and searching for critical pedagogical theory to address, transform, expand or withstand the tension points coming to a head in the classroom. There is a common question arising in these unnerving exchanges: is the purpose of higher education to enable students to get a job, or is it for enhancing social good? While social justice and finding a career are not mutually exclusive, my experience is that neoliberal business logics in higher education have the capacity to overshadow critical and social sensibilities and actions. The challenge in this situation is how to appropriately address students' concerns about the social realities, and perhaps problems, within career-focussed courses or programmes. What happens if critical and social perspectives are routinely eschewed over rote curricula and educational practices? What impact will this have on students and the industries they are seeking careers in? In an effort to reconcile industrial, critical and social rhetorics in higher education, this writing is an example of my reflective process that links teaching experience in a Canadian public university to critical educational theory.

During a seminar I was teaching about the economic and social landscape of the North American entertainment industry, one of Hollywood's most powerful movie executives, Harvey Weinstein, was charged with several counts of sexual assault and other egregious offences (Simon, 2018). During this semester, the students came to class every week with many fervent observations, questions and reflections about the Weinstein charges and other industry abuses being exposed.[1] Revelations included systemic and persistent abuses of power, workplace harassment, overtly and covertly racist practices, and rampant sexual assault, and this left many students questioning their choice of pursuing an education and a career in the entertainment industries. Our classroom conversations subsequently intensified as public discourse and other allegations became frequent, and particularly focused on abuses based on race and gender. In light of the media revelations over several weeks, one student's comment stands out:

> I'm Iranian, and my family didn't want me to study film because they don't think it's possible for someone like me to succeed here in film. They think the industry is too racist to accept me.

This student was a relatively new citizen, and was clearly feeling the weight of racism in public discourse, and perhaps also in practice in my film production program. In response to this statement, I tried my best to facilitate a discussion about systemic racism, about industry, community and individual strategies for addressing and resisting racism, and about employee rights and protections in the industry and in law, but I kept thinking that the discussions fell short of where there needed to go. This sense of feeling like my students needed better support and educational framing made me consider my pedagogical approaches. Elaine Unterhalter (2010) draws on Melanie Walker's "capability approach" to describe pedagogy as "an ethically informed process in which we are alert to questions of equitability, a humane justice, and what

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[1] Weinstein was convicted on some of the charges in March 2020 and sentenced to twenty-three years in U.S. prison. (Dwyer, 2020).

we want students to be and become" (p. 93). My sense of disquiet echoes Unterhalter's words, and can be understood as a pedagogical drive to enable social justice through teaching and learning. However, in thinking back, I didn't find a way for this student to see themself reflected in media production education and beyond, so Walker's *capability approach* was likely never realized. Did I falter in the face of the neoliberal pressure to quiet the critical mind and fall in line with the rote technical aspects of media education? What other work would I need to do to realize more socially just pedagogical commitments, and what other learning did I need to do in order to better address these important issues?

The same semester, but in a different seminar on business writing and industry preparedness for media artists, my class talked about industry abuses of power and about swiftly changing workplace policies and standards to address harmful workplace practices and cultures. We considered a selection of objectifying images from Hollywood films, and talked about why images can be objectifying, and potential impacts of this objectification. I asked the students, if our industry creates representations that objectify and degrade certain bodies, is it possible that our images are connected to the ongoing workplace violence experienced by many industry workers? What happened next stunned me, partly because the class was engaged in an in-depth discussion. One student stood up and yelled at me:

> How dare you disrespect our industry in this way. If the industry knows that sex sells, or wants to use images that make them money, how dare you question that.

I was taken aback at this student's position, as it had naively not occurred to me that being critical about the entertainment industry presented such a threat to them in the context of our class. In the conversations that followed, the student was not interested in critiquing the entertainment industry because the student was in the media program as a means to get a *good* job. I responded by saying that employees can have opinions, and the more informed and considered their opinions, the better. We looked more closely at changing employment policies to show that issues of workplace abuses were being confronted at a high level. Again, though, I was left with a feeling that I hadn't responded to this fully or satisfactorily, and I certainly did not find a way to address the economic threat that fueled the student's comments. Certainly, in teaching vocational content critically, I am placing students in a bind because students do need to find employment that can pay their bills, and possibly even bring them a sense of joy and accomplishment. Furthermore, push-back is to be expected when students have received messaging about the purely functionalist vocational value of their educational programmes. The educational challenge, then, is how to situate critical and social content so that students can find ways to apply it within workplace contexts. The work must be to build bridges between industrial contexts and critical and social curricula; these bridges most certainly have to be about confronting, speaking to, and strategizing remedies to social inequities that manifest in media workplace culture (Allen, 2013; Ashton & Noonan, 2013; Berger et al., 2013). What comes into question while considering bridging social and critical curricula and pedagogy to vocational content, are the broad economic and social pressures faced by the public post-secondary education landscape, and the resulting discourses taken up by these institutions.

While my university is a public institution, the newer technological and career-centred programs are priced as *cost-recoverable*, and students are paying tuition amounts that are getting closer and closer to pricey private institutions. In fact, one of our university administrators recently delivered a self-proclaimed "state of the union" where they launched a new operational plan, and explained that our former way of institutional planning was "no way to build a business." In this address, clear departmental actions were noted, but they were not linked to our core institutional values of access and student well-being. The disparities between institutional visions and institutional actions are well documented in academic literature, particularly with respect to the ways equity initiatives are often managed in performative ways and have limited impact (Ahmed, 2012; Dua & Bhanji, 2017). Dua and Bhanji (2017) note, in particular, that equity initiatives are easily absorbed by neoliberal commercial rhetorics wherein it is important for institutional competitiveness to speak a language of equity and diversity without operationalizing these sentiments. The tensions in these institutional critiques play out in a variety of ways. Stromquist and Monkman (2014) warn that:

> The privatization of public education…contributes to the depoliticization of the university as students in private universities are readily inculcated by 'careerist' as opposed to 'critical' norms…the privatization of higher education puts it squarely in the productive sphere and weakens the principle of education as a public good… (p. 14)

If students and instructors sense that the purpose of their education is simply for obtaining a job, then the critical and social functions of higher education might be lost. In my experience, there is a rift or tension between colleagues who are concerned with bridging critically-minded and social justice approaches to our vocational programs, and those who are focused on teaching pure technologies and rote job skillsets. In trying to find a way through these tensions, different critical pedagogy theories offer generative notions for prioritizing the *public* in public educational institutions.

Two critical concepts that I have encountered describe the tensions that I experience in academic life: public and market pedagogies. Giroux (2014) defines public pedagogy in neoliberal terms "that privileges the entrepreneurial subject" (p. 1) and "attempts to undermine all forms of solidarity capable of challenging market-driven values and social relations…" (p. 2) Giroux's concept of public pedagogy aligns with Stromquit and Monkman's warning that careerist logics have the potential to erase topics and perspectives of social good from educational contexts. The vocational logic they warn against includes emphasis on productivity, prioritization of rote workplace skills, and the reduction of socially critical course and program offerings in the social sciences and humanities (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Together, these theorists criticize market logics for infiltrating the public sphere. Paulo Freire's (2017) sense of public pedagogy differs immensely by theorizing how teachers can embed notions of deep democracy in education. Freire's work entails a deep faith in the capacity of all people, particularly people who are typically cast aside or considered invaluable. For Freire, education is a non-hierarchical dialogical act "between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects" (p. 182). In other words, formal education offers the chance for teachers and students to learn

together in a community that values different perspectives and rich dialogue. From a Freirean perspective, public pedagogy has the capacity to democratize the production and exchange of knowledge, thus having the potential to challenge or transform systems of power. Freire's work has been built upon by critical scholars such as bell hooks (1994) who advocates for responsive and democratic methods of teaching critical thinking, and who also extends her scholarship to media culture because of the potent public pedagogy of popular entertainment on dominant ideas about gender, race and class (hooks, 1996). Media scholars have taken up hooks' work in critical media public pedagogy and developed critical media educational courses that seek student agency through the exploration of resistant interpretations and production of popular entertainment (Patterson et. al, 2016). What this work evidences with respect to public education is a need to vigilantly pay attention to mechanisms of democracy, ethics and social justice that might become overshadowed by industrial and marketplaces demands and logics. These tensions between notions of public and market invoke the image of fighting for social lives in the face of policies, communications, and pedagogies that undermine critical thinking and inculcate rote commercial mindsets. The following section explores educational theory that supports social pedagogical concerns.

Theories of resistance to neoliberal and capitalistic, market-driven forms of education have the potential to support different approaches to critical pedagogy. Pinar's (2017) concept of the *reconceptualist* educator draws from Michael Apple's work theorizing social justice in education. A reconceptualist approaches pedagogy through critical theory, historical perspectives, and away from technical or corporate function towards "a fundamental reconceptualization of what curriculum is, how it functions, and how it might function in emancipatory ways" (Pinar, 2017, p. 172). Pinar's reconceptualist approach is important as it encourages educators to centre social good and teach critical theory with concern for history and ethics over marketplace concerns. Apple (2004) notes that it is essential for educators to develop a clear purpose and prioritization of social values underlying their teaching practices. Since market-based neoliberal values are embedded in our educational systems, and "Since these values now work *through* us, often unconsciously, the issue is not how to stand above the choice. Rather, it is in what values," we, "must ultimately choose" (Apple, 2004, p. 8). So, the site of resistance for Apple is in the centring of values for social good as a way to offset or destabilize the rationality of neoliberal educational mechanisms. Freire (2017) and hooks (1994) look more closely at the character and core values of educators, and suggest that in order to check our own superiority in the classroom, we must engage the students' knowledge, and remove hierarchies and one-way directionality of learning. For Freire (2017), the educator should be "a person constantly readjusting his knowledge, who calls forth knowledge from his students" (p. 185). Freire and hooks' democratic approach to education is a critical pedagogy that ultimately promotes a teaching practice that values instructor self-reflection and openness to change through the prioritization of students' knowledge critique and production from their social locations and areas of social concern. This democratic approach to curriculum and pedagogy extends to decolonizing or postcolonial approaches. Pedagogical strategies include reviewing

structures of colonial nomination in history and social practice, working with the difficult knowledges inherent to colonial histories, appropriately integrating local histories and knowledges, particularly Indigenous histories and knowledges, and ultimately using these strategies for the goal of enhancing students' sense of relationality and self-determination (Cote-Meek, 2014; hooks, 1994, 2010; Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Unterhalter, 2010). Reading this kind of theoretical work offers me energy, insight and focus on centring social justice and critical social theory in my teaching, and in how to respond to highly individualist and instrumental neoliberal pressures within my institution.

Despite the ways that critical pedagogy critically informs my teaching approaches and philosophy, a question remains in my mind: how is it possible to build the stamina to fight for social lives in higher education? Rogowska-Stangret (2017) urges academics to "win the gag reflex back and to learn from the bodily impulses and instincts in order to form a visceral politics," (p. 14) and to do so while considering "the potentials of collectivity" (p. 12). These visceral politics remind me to centre the feelings associated with the pangs of identifying and addressing injustices in curricular or institutional structures, and to constantly remind myself of the ways that collective action influences change. The various ways that oppressive aspects of dominant culture evaluate, reward or regulate instructors in inequitable ways, is also well documented in academic literature (Henry et al., 2017; Mayok, 2016). For speaking up, and working on initiatives that promote student or instructor equity, I have certainly experienced harassment, even in one instance being accused loudly of having a "gay agenda" after routinely following up with a department head regarding the budget for a queer-themed course with significant student demand. In this instance, my supposed transgression was simply requesting information on an established course, but one that inherently challenged heteronormative dominance in my department. I am not alone in these interactions, so collective action is an important path forward for instructors to build community and support each other in transforming the institution through just measures, and at times, in supporting more just outcomes through instructor hiring and evaluation processes themselves (Henry et al., 2017). While instructors have a relatively high degree of agency and autonomy by contract, there are persistent tensions within the culture and working processes of the university that seek conformity, accountancy, and consistency with the ways things have always been done. Instances of institutional push-back and harassment are also a reminder to retain the visceral and student-centred sensibility of resistance. While I've never used the metaphor of war or fighting to reflect on my teaching career, I have had an instinct lately to use my privilege as a full time instructor to perform a blockade between the students and crushing hegemonic institutional structures violent and oppressive curricula or pedagogical practices. Harmful institutional practices that are well-documented include a dearth of culturally-appropriate counselling and student services, or curriculum and pedagogy that focuses solely on oppressive histories, hierarchies or cultural representations and assumptions (Cote-Meek, 2014; Dei, 1996; Henry et al, 2017; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This oppression might be even greater in vocational or career-based university departments, as the social problems of those industries embed themselves

in the curriculum and pedagogy of these programs. Scholars such as Allen (2013), Ashton (2013), Lee (2013), and Saha (2018), chart the ways that race and gender, in particular, are sites of exclusion in both the media industries and media vocational education; these authors explore strategies for resistant pedagogies, curricula, and institutional practices for the betterment of student experience, agency, and for the future impact on cultural industry work. In my own institution, there are instructors who are following these lines of resistance and transformation, and some that simply want to teach technological processes or old canons in uncritical ways. These differences form sites of tension, and contribute to my visceral sense of a blockade. Through this feeling, I find resolve for embedding histories of injustice and resistance into my curricula, thinking creatively about how students can complete courses using knowledge from their lived experiences, and finding ways to allow students to complete work outside of institutional timelines. All of this work underscores my commitment to contributing to a healthier and more just educational experience and landscape. By doing this, I hope to engage what Freire (2017) referred to as the "utopian state of *denunciation* and *annunciation*" (p. 188), which I see as a form of emancipatory and empowered personal expression. Denunciation and annunciation are a utopian vision of education that sees the learner coming to a place of dismantling socio-political systems that affect them, and communicating or envisioning their way through or beyond these systems. In practice, students have commented that my courses that sit amongst other more instrumental curricula or hegemonic canons have offered them an oasis that has allowed them to explore their own connections to curricula, and see beyond normative cultural paradigms. This is particularly the case in my queer cinema history course, wherein the students explore a plethora or films and theories that emphasize non-dominant cultural expressions of gender, sexuality, race and nation. So, my impulse as an educator to perform a blockade is ultimately a phenomenological mechanism that gives space for students' epistemological reckoning, or just some time so that they can reach their goals. In the classroom stories I shared that left me off-kilter, my blockade failed in these moments as they needed to be responded to with more sustained action and focus, particularly in how these student concerns connect to the students' future workplaces in their desired careers in the entertainment industries. The critical pedagogies that I explored in this writing will assist me in staying focused on centring students' experiences and knowledges in their learning, ongoing reflection and strategizing on critical issues of injustice, and engaging critical theory as a necessary pedagogical intervention to centre social care and social justice in higher education. If I can make space for critical pedagogy in vocational or applied learning environments, I hope that will assist in transforming both the institution and the industries that our programs link to.

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