

Conformity in a ‘Canned Course’: The Suppression of Authentic Dialogue in Graded Online Discussion Forums

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Abstract

The recent shift to online learning environments in higher education has elicited complex issues pertaining to student demographics, course structure and content, and the instructor’s role. In this paper, I explore tensions that I have experienced as an online teaching assistant of an upper-level undergraduate arts course in a mid-size North American university. I am required to adhere to a predetermined course rubric in marking students’ assignments, and all instances of students’ engagement in the course are assessed according to this rubric. I therefore uncomfortably embody a primarily evaluative role. I argue that the assessment of students’ online discussion forum, especially, impacts their ability to engage in authentic dialogue, forcing them to adhere to hegemonic academic standards of structure and content in their responses.

I first describe the online course environment and my role as an instructor, discussing the detrimental effects of a graded discussion forum upon my students’ self-expression. The assessment of the online discussion forum is antithetical to a Freirean (1970/2005) conception of dialogue, as well as to critical education. Assessment functions as a process of normalization as posited by Foucault (1979). Diverse students’ identity expression might be especially adversely affected by the requirements pertaining to forms and content of online communication.

I then argue that a reconstitution of the ‘discussion forum’ is necessary in order to enable inclusive online education. The provision of a “safe house” (Canagarajah, 2013) in the form of an unevaluated discussion forum could help to enable authentic dialogue while disrupting the evaluative relationship between students and instructor. I offer techniques for assessment, too, that online course facilitators could employ to facilitate students’ authentic communication and the bidirectional generation of ideas.

Introduction

The shift to online learning environments in higher education has given rise to a multitude of complexities related to student demographics and engagement, course structure and content, and the role of the course facilitator. Fletcher and Bullock (2015) posit that “the shift to a digital environment requires that...[educators] adapt practices they have become accustomed to or found to be effective in face-to-face interactions to ones more suited to the digital environment” (p. 690). As an online course facilitator, I have found it necessary to critically examine the roles I embody in the digital learning environment. I have experienced considerable tension between fulfilling my role as teaching assistant in an upper-level elective online arts course, while honoring my students’ positionalities, most of whom are international students from different faculties. My students have struggled to engage in critical written analysis, presumably in part due to their lack of experience in the discipline. Likely due to its subject matter, the course has a reputation of being ‘easy’. However, students are unaware of the complexity of evaluating the course content, which requires the ability to critically analyze, from multiple theoretical perspectives, literary elements including representations of race, class, gender and sexuality. In addition to writing papers and journal responses, the course requires students to participate biweekly in an online discussion forum. Although I believe that this should be a space for the free exchange of ideas, every instance of my students’ online discussion is graded. This has forced them to adhere to the same assessment structure as they do in formal essay assignments, which detrimentally impacts their ability to engage in authentic dialogue. I am required to adhere to the faculty’s standards of academic rigor in evaluating their discussion forum, using a predetermined rubric. However, I fear that I am engaging in the suppression of my students’ authentic voices in doing so. I argue that the assessment of discussion forums in online courses is disadvantageous to students’ ability to engage in authentic dialogue, as an oppressive evaluator-student relationship propagates conformity to a hegemonic academic standard of writing, thinking, and self-expression.

Part 1: The Impacts of Assessment of the Online Discussion Forum

Fletcher and Bullock (2015) refer to the online course as “a ‘canned course’” comprised of premade curricula, rubrics, and an extensively predetermined student-teacher relationship (p. 697), where the “enactment of relationship building [is] reduced simply to written communication” (p. 700). As such, the “pre-existing course shell... is still a record of, and perhaps even a prescription for interaction” (p. 703) of exchanges that occur sporadically and asynchronously between students and instructor (p. 697).

The class discussion forum is the only platform through which students are able to engage in some approximation of dialogue with each other and with myself, as we do not meet face-to-face. Biweekly, my students are required to participate in the course’s discussion forum and to respond to two classmates. The marking rubric for the discussion forum, a checklist that I am required to adhere to, numerically evaluates students on the following: their addressing of the assigned prompts; their utilization of required sources; their adherence to APA writing style, organization, and grammatical

and linguistic conventions; and their required response to at least one peer post, which is also assessed for its adherence to APA writing style. Responses are intended to demonstrate students' understandings of the course readings and their ability to engage in critical literary analysis. Students are required to structure their posts in an argumentative manner.

Just as Rorty (1997) argues that “what we read affects what we become,” so I believe that my students' writing in the online discussion forum “reveals the self, its preoccupations,” and affects how my students are perceived by myself and by their peers (p. 85). Their forms of engagement are heavily restricted, as the course contains no other outlet for them to express their perspectives, beliefs, and personalities, given that they do not meet face-to-face. My students' writing in their discussion forum is thus the sole medium for their expression of their identities. This is problematic, due to the rubric's constraints. Canagarajah (2013) notes that the act of writing “engage[s] ways of thinking, knowledge, and language valued by one community or the other” (p. 162). However, he warns that “students may tailor their work to the interests of the institution in order to qualify for a good grade, rather than risking all this with the uncertainties of an individualistic approach” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 179). This can affect the authenticity of students' communication, restricting them in adherence to predetermined structure and content. The language used in the rubric does not encourage them to respond creatively. The rubric designates that technical aspects, including adherence to APA writing style and grammatical and linguistic conventions, constitute 40% of the student's overall grade. This may encourage students to shift their focus from the content of the response to the structure of their writing. In their attempts to clearly address the topics, their posts are often descriptive rather than argumentative, adhere to required sources only, and refrain from responding to more than the assigned number of peer posts. Overall, the discussion forum is not a free-flowing exchange of ideas, but a forum in which students post short essays and provide brief feedback for two other peers.

In the online course, my “identity [is] more closely aligned with that of an evaluator rather than a teacher”, which I believe (re)enforces an oppressive power dynamic that further restricts students' engagement in authentic dialogue (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015, p. 699). This carries “implications for the nature and types of relationships [I am] able to develop,” severely limiting the nature of my self-identification and how students identify me (p. 700). I embody this role in uncomfortable tension with my own teaching philosophy, which leads me to strive to nurture my students through dialogical processes of co-constructing meaning. Paulo Freire (1970/2005) maintains that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 92-93). For Freire (1970/2005), education is a series of “dialogical relations” in which a topic “intermediates” the student and teacher, and learning arises from the process of resolution of discrepant perspectives (p. 79-80). However, my students are conditioned to cater their responses in accordance with the requirements, which stifles the presentation of, or engagement with, differing perspectives. The prescribed structure of communication between students impedes any potential spontaneous interaction, and because students presumably do not know each other personally, responses are both formally structured and almost always in

agreement with each other, rather than being productively critical. My own role is restricted to that of a “banking” educator, imposing a unitary set of ideas upon students (via pre-written course modules) without creating or holding space for alternative perspectives (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 75). With forty-five students and limited time, my ability to ask prompting questions to facilitate deep exchanges is very restricted. Students refer to the course modules and the rubric, rather than the instructor, to learn, and because each act of written communication by my students is graded, an “implicit power dynamic” is created and reinforced (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015, p. 702). This evaluative relationship restricts students from communicating freely, as content and structure that departs from the norm—for example, ideas that do not thoroughly address all aspects of the prompts, or structure that does not adhere to Western academic stylistic standards—is valued negatively according to the rubric. For all these reasons, my online course is dissonant with Freire’s ideals of authentic dialogue.

Because the course does not foster dialogue or a critical stance, I argue that this online course is antithetical to critical education, which advocates for “critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change- a revitalized public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300). It instead reinforces the “reductionistic impulse to take knowledge at face value” by requiring students to adhere to predetermined course content modules, a single structure of academic writing, and a specific, rational line of critical interpretive thought (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 108-109). The prompts restrict student responses to answering prewritten questions about course content, which does not facilitate opportunities for them to share unique perspectives. Adhering to the rubric and required sources even discourages them from answering prompts in novel ways; I have noted extensive repetition in both the structure and content of students’ work. My students are not provided a platform in which they can “speak in self-affirming ways about their experiences” using their “authentic voices” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309). The structure of the online discussion forum does not facilitate authentic dialogue, and therefore students do not engage in the self-expression, debate, and generation of new ideas that are necessary in critical education.

The assessment of the online discussion forum functions as a process of normalization. Foucault (1979) states, “it is the examination which, by combining hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgement, assures the great disciplinary functions of distribution and classification” (p. 192). These qualities are definitive of the discussion forum environment, with the online teaching assistant embodying the role of surveillance, the rubric providing a normative standard of writing, and the evaluation process serving to classify students. This process of normalization not only “imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels” and to exacerbate hierarchized differences between students (Foucault, 1979, p. 184). My students are stratified on a marking scale, based on their degree of adherence to the rubric. This assigns positive or negative value to certain types of discourse and consequently marginalizes students who struggle with structure, grammar, or course content. Because my students’ identities and subject positions can be communicated only through this graded dialogue, this normalization process might imply that my struggling students are inferior as they strive to adhere to the rubric. Assessment

reinforces a singular format of discourse, stifling individuals' honest, open portrayal of their selfhoods through writing, and thus perpetuating a normalizing process.

Gee (1996) distinguishes between discourse and Discourse. Whereas “discourse” refers generally to “verbal interactions and sequences of utterances between speakers and listeners” (MacKay, 2003, p. 2), Gee (1996) defines capital-D Discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a... group or ‘social network’” (Gee, 1996, p. 131). By assessing each opportunity my students have to engage in dialogue, I am encouraging their conformity to a presupposed normative academic Discourse. Gee indicates that there is a “price’... to be paid by ‘newcomers’ to join a new Discourse... membership requires growing a socially-situated identity that is tied to the Discourse and its values” (MacKay, 2003, p. 6-7). By conforming to the course’s communication structure, I do believe it has deleterious effects on students’ ability to articulate themselves authentically to their peers within the context of this online course. My students are engaging in dialogue using structures and systems of writing that may not be their primary discursive form, as I will discuss below, and that some, in fact, struggle to adhere to. Gee’s perspective indicates that in adhering to Discourse students compromise some aspects of their identity expression. My students’ diversity should be reflected in diverse modes of content and structure in an authentic discussion forum. But in reality, my students are forced to compromise self-expression in favour of conforming to a single format of communication.

Diverse student populations may be especially adversely affected by normative expectations pertaining to forms and content of communication imposed by the evaluation of the discussion forum. Kohl (1994) argues that “given the complexity of life and language in our society,” it is very difficult to justify the imposition of a single set of knowledge upon students (p. 114). Because knowledge cannot be understood or expressed “in the same way by all learners,” it is unjust to “categorize and divide people, to judge them by externals”—especially in the case of their discussion forum, which is the closest approximation to dialogue as can be gleaned in the online course setting (Kohl, 1994, p. 119). This categorization elevates students who are already well-versed in the prescribed academic Discourse and knowledge set, and devalues those who are not. I worry that students who receive poor grades, despite their best efforts, due to their unfamiliarity with the prescribed content or format of writing, may become discouraged and disengaged from the course, and might feel as though their writing, their ideas, or even themselves are unworthy of belonging in the course environment. McDermott and Varenne (1995) warn that “the problem in assuming that there is one way to be in a culture encourages the misunderstanding that those who are different from perceived norms are missing something, that it is their doing, that they are locked out for a reason, that they are in fact, in reality, disabled” (p. 326). This statement alludes to the severity of the disempowerment that might occur in the course. To imply that there is a right way to think or to communicate is harmful to whoever does not inherently associate with the way that is assumed to be ‘right’—the hegemonic form and content of the academic Discourse that is determined, positively valued, and reinforced by the rubric.

The majority of my students are international students who study in faculties that are not language-arts based. This further complicates their written engagement in this online course, as they are being socialized not only into a specific form of academic Discourse (i.e., an Arts course), but also into North American higher education, and more broadly, Western ways of thinking. Lucas, de Oliveria and Villegas (2014) note that students' "language use and language attitudes are influenced by and closely linked with sociocultural and sociopolitical factors, including race, ethnicity, social class, and identity" (p. 221). This indicates a relationship between their ability to express themselves authentically in the discussion forum and the forms of language that they are prescribed to use. Because "writing is not a detached mastery of the form and content of academic discourses but a socialization into the communicative values, norms, and processes of the academy, the challenge is complex for ESOL students" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 168). International students' methods of engagement with course content and their peers may differ intuitively from those of students who are already familiar with the style and content of academic writing required in this setting. International students' "preferred identities" or methods of identity expression, as found in the discussion forum, "may be different from those valued by the academy" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 169). When I evaluate my students based on the degree to which their discourse conforms to the predetermined rubric based in North American forms and structures of academic writing, I wonder about which aspects of their identities they are suppressing in their communication. According to Norton (1997, 2000), "many of the identities that learners might invest in are prescribed by the target language community... these identities are often shaped by the conceptions of ethnicity, gender, and class that prevail in the target language community" (MacKay, 2003, p. 12). Gunderson (2000) argues that "in many ways, the degree of a student's success in school in Canada is a direct measure of the degree of first cultural loss" (p. 703). Therefore, students' improvement—as defined by the rubric—somewhat unsettles me, as their adherence to the prescribed discourse may perhaps be achieved at the detriment of authentic self-expression.

Part 2: Working Toward Inclusive Online Education

Working toward inclusive education in the online course setting requires, I argue, a reconstitution of the 'discussion forum'. Greene (1993) writes that "there cannot be a single standard of humanness... when it comes to taking a perspective on the world. There can only be an ongoing, collaborative decoding of many texts" (p. 212). This sentiment echoes Freire's philosophy, suggesting that it is "indefensible to structure knowledge monologically" while ignoring what Bakhtin deemed "'heteroglossia'... the existence of many voices, some contesting, some cohering, all demanding and deserving attention" (Greene, 1993, p. 212). The online discussion forum must repeal its oppressive structure to enable liberatory dialogue. Fletcher and Bullock (2015) state that "interactions" are "the vehicle through which relationships develop between teachers and learners" (p. 698). With forty-five students, I am limited in my ability to provide adequate support and genuine feedback. This is exemplary of institutional efficiency compromising the quality of interactions. However, offering different opportunities for

interaction could help disrupt the evaluative role of the instructor. Fletcher and Bullock (2015) suggest “offering students synchronous opportunities to engage with each other” (p. 697). Online video chats between students and instructors might be helpful in facilitating dialogue, by enabling synchronous, equal participation in negotiating meaning. This might help to “demythologize academic discourses,” a goal that Canagarajah (2013) argues is crucial for “minority students” especially, who may feel inhibited in using the prescribed academic Discourse (p. 170). However, she warns that “academic discourses are unequal and antithetical to the interests of their communities,” implying that I must think beyond facilitating teacher-student interactions and strive to embody a “multivocal approach” to discourse (p. 171).

Canagarajah (2013) argues that the provision of a “safe house” enables students to “[engage] with competing discourses” and to make “comparisons between vernacular and academic discourses,” ultimately encouraging the development of students’ “metadiscursive awareness” (p. 187). The provision of a “safe house” in my online course could enable the authentic expression of students’ identities as they are constituted through writing (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 187). I propose that this “safe house” should take the form of an *unevaluated* discussion forum in which students are free to engage with the course material, with the instructor, and with each other. The space would be deliberately constructed as one that is intended for ungraded, informal communication. Canagarajah (2013) writes that “safe-house communication helps students resolve some of the conflicts they face in their identity and group consciousness as they engage in academic literacy” (p. 187). A safe house could therefore enable more inclusive forms of discussion for all students.

Instructors must alter their approach to assessment in a way that better supports students’ unique identities. Although I do not have the authority to change this online course as it is currently constructed, there are techniques I can employ even within the parameters of the rubric that I believe could better benefit my students. Canagarajah (2013) suggests a focus on “personalized... content-related... text-specific... comments” rather than “mechanics” when assessing students’ writing (p. 195-196). I must keep in mind that, despite the weighting of the rubric, my students’ formatting and grammar is secondary to the ideas that they communicate. I must redirect my efforts away from correcting their spelling, grammar, citation, or the structure of their responses, as doing so may lead them “to focus only on an error-free product,” portraying the “impression” that I am “not interested in what they are saying” and leading them away from “taking original and independent perspectives on their subject” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 195). A “combination of text-specific marginal comments and more elaborate end comments” could engage a sense of interaction between myself and my students, especially if I ask prompting questions throughout and encourage my students to respond to these comments so that we may engage in dialogue about their ideas (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 196). Doing so might help destabilize the hierarchy between us, reconstituting our interactions to emphasize the discussion of ideas rather than summative evaluation of their writing. Recognizing that “students experience the temptation to accommodate the teacher’s views unthinkingly,” I must remain careful not to impose my own views upon my students’ essays (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 197). Reflecting upon my own positionality as a Canadian-born White woman who has always been successful in the North

American education system and who holds a position of power as the course instructor, I must remain reflective and aware of the ways in which my own background and point of reference affects my consideration of my students' work, and keep this in mind as we interact. Through these means I hope I can positively influence my relationships with my students, even within the parameters of the rubric.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is clear that more inclusive curricula and forms of assessment are warranted. I am but one instructor in one course; this issue persists across courses, faculties, and institutional contexts. Ellsworth (1989) argues that “a recognition, contrary to all Western ways of knowing and speaking, that all knowings are partial... demands a fundamental retheorizing of ‘education’ and ‘pedagogy’” (p. 310). The current means of defining, engaging with, and evaluating student communication/dialogue/exchanges in online discussion forums must change in order to enable authentic discourse, in which students can articulate their unique positionalities. This is a shift to enable what DeLuca (2013) calls a “transgressive conception” of inclusivity, that privileges “individual, unique positions of knowing,” in which “educators... draw on the individuality of students to shape knowledge making (Greene, 1993)” and “student diversity is used as a vehicle for the generation of new knowledge” (p. 335). The overall structure and format of online learning environments needs to change to enable “the sharing and exchange of different ways of knowing” (p. 316). This arguably requires the abolishment of formal assessment of discussion forums, to allow students to freely communicate their knowledge and positionalities. It also requires a reconstitution of the online educator’s role, from an evaluative to a facilitative role in which the educator works to destabilize traditional student-instructor power relations. This resonates with a Freirean understanding of the educator as one who should not prescribe or impose certain forms of knowledge or ways of being, but who strives to construct and hold spaces in which students are equal players in a mutual quest for knowledge. To achieve this, of course, will require a deliberate restructuring of the online discussion forum and the online course overall. As it stands, “it might be worth asking whether or not an asynchronous learning environment can function as a mindtool for... education” or simply “an expedient content delivery system” (Fletcher & Bullock, 2015, p. 702). Discussion in any type of classroom space, including online, must ultimately “[empower] difference and [leverage] it for learning about the self, others, and the world” (DeLuca, 2013, p. 336). Re-envisioning the online discussion forum as a place to engage freely in authentic dialogue enables liberatory opportunities for students’ self-expression.

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