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## 6 Becoming a Critical Educator

*[C]ritical pedagogy offers a way to engage differently with students in teaching, learning, researching and acting than neoliberalisation suggests. Its vision is of education as a relational, outward looking, hopeful, critical, political and transformational process.*

– Joyce Canaan (2013: 4)

The last two years have been extremely challenging, as a global pandemic has shaken societies to their core. Alongside the isolation, loss and death, we have seen the ways governments around the world have put the needs of capital and privileged members of society above the needs of the general population (Luce, 2021). We have seen on one hand, the uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement alongside the populist oratory of many western governments, promoting a patriarchal rhetoric of nationalism and the growth of right-wing fascism, racism and misogyny (Galamba & Matthews, 2020; Mercier, 2018; Trelstad, 2021).

The world is currently a truly frightening place, and had she still been with us, Professor Joyce Canaan would be fighting for the rights of everyday working-class students who are simply seeking to understand and negotiate the complex world they are living in and find a space for themselves where they can be treated with dignity and respect. Another thing the Covid-19 pandemic has shown is that *it is* ‘the proletariat’ who keep economies afloat; nurses, teachers, cleaners, bus drivers, shop staff, healthcare workers and others considered now ‘essential’ working people (ONS, 2020; Smith, 2021). There is a similar story in HE, where we have seen the dependency of universities on staff on precarious contracts; a process driven by the marketisation of universities, of which Joyce was such a vehement and consistent critic (Canaan & Shumar, 2008, 2013; Spooner, 2020).

It is worth noting that Joyce was not just academically critical of the way marketisation impacted so detrimentally on pedagogy; she was also

not afraid to talk about the real physical impact the ‘academy’ can take on the human body, and how stress can manifest as illness. It was for this reason that she never stopped questioning herself and asking her students to question what was going on, and as she said, ‘raising questions that put their immediate concerns in a wider context’ (Canaan, 2013: 152). There is no question that Joyce considered the decision to be a critical pedagogue as accepting a responsibility to students foremost; however, she also recognised that, in the context of the neoliberal university, this takes a toll; given that tending to students’ needs entails added pastoral care, prolonged academic support over seemingly never-ending academic terms, the squeezing of marking time, all of which leaves little time and energy for research or anything else outside immediate pedagogical demands (Amsler & Canaan, 2015; Darder, 2017; Reay, 2017). As such, Joyce acknowledged that the expectations of individual institutions and the collective academy weigh heavy on academics’ shoulders in the neoliberal university (Canaan, 2013; Edwards & Canaan, 2015; Helmes & Maisuria, 2020).

In this chapter, I use the lens of critical pedagogy as a transformative process to develop a methodological and philosophical process of action research (Darder, 2017). As an aspiring critical pedagogue, it was important for me to understand the social dimensions as well as theory behind my own teaching practices, in an attempt to create a genuine, authentic space to shape my own teaching ‘praxis’ (Freire, 1970). As a working-class early career academic, I am often plagued by ‘imposter syndrome’; and while this has been the case throughout my own academic journey, I try to use this experience to provide an understanding of the experiences faced by many of my students (Gadsby, 2021). Hence, what struck me as most valuable about critical pedagogy is the way it places students at the forefront of their own learning. About this, Henry Giroux (2010) writes:

For Freire, pedagogy is not a method or an a priori technique to be imposed on all students but a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy. Critical thinking for Freire was not an object lesson in test-taking, but a tool for self-determination and civic engagement. (716)

Paulo Freire's message is one of empowerment, humanisation, self-actualisation and a commitment to emancipatory education, a true pedagogy of love (Freire, 1970). What I am trying to express here is the development of a reflective process of transformative learning, observing the interpersonal dynamics between a lecturer and students, and the pedagogical learning processes in HE. I have used the Action Research Model developed by Lewin (1946) as a three-step framework to evaluate the stages taken in this informal research. The enquiry question asks: *How do I better understand my students, so that I may support their academic and social needs?* My concern lay in observing how perceived negative learning experiences in the neoliberal institution, with its culture of criticism and blame could be turned into positive teaching and learning practices/methods which can 'humanize' teacher/student relationships (Edwards & Canaan, 2015; McLaren & Rikowski, 2016).

Since much learning is not intuitive, reflection is required to help teachers to meet the student's needs. This is then a significant aspect of the contemplative framework of this chapter. I will also be looking at the use of an informal 'flipped classroom' (Strelan et al., 2020: 158) and its implementation. The idea of nurturing and encouraging individual strengths through a positive reflective practitioner action research approach are examined; and while there is no empirical data provided here, what I offer in this chapter is an individual early careers lecturer's narrative through an action research process. It was indeed through my experience with Joyce that I came to appreciate more fully the significance of this experience.

## Personal Pedagogy

The style of teaching I embrace in my practice (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Hawkey, 1998) is that of a progressive educator (Brookfield, 2017; Darder, 2015; Freire, 1970, 1974, 1994, 2001; Freire & Shor, 1987; Haywood, 2017; Vittoria, 2016), a reflective practitioner who attempts to create praxis with reflexive action in their teaching and learning (Husbands & Pearce, 2012), a process encouraged by Joyce and the 'Critical Pedagogy

Collective' (Canaan, 2013: 4). It is a state of 'being' whereby the educator seeks to proactively work to support students through the development of learning and knowledge, leading to self-discovery and confidence in their own academic abilities (Amsler & Canaan, 2013; Canaan, 2008; Watkins & Mortimore, 1999). Freire (1970) argues: 'We must realize that the aspirations, the motives, and the objectives implicit in the meaningful thematics are *human* aspirations, motives, and objectives. They do not exist "out there" somewhere, as static entities; *they are occurring*' (p. 88, italics in original).

Freire speaks to the way that 'the humanisation of the curriculum' involves us understanding students as real individuals; their dreams, ambitions and what has meaning to them (Reynolds, 2021). To work respectfully within this process means that we must foster a greater depth of understanding, encouraging individuals and the group as a whole as they engage with the material under discussion, in the context of their lived realities (Brookfield, 2017; Harland, 2019; Schön, 1983). The following looks at the way I have tried to do this within my own work as a teacher. Linking the need for reflection and reflexivity in action research increases the opportunity for self-discovery within teaching and learning. It is imperative as a reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 2017; Freire, 1970) to understand the way students develop their beliefs in the context of their lived histories, and to learn and build relationships that create trust and positive, effective learning spaces.

## Becoming Critical

In becoming critical, a reflective practitioners' teaching practice is very personal. Developing critical self-awareness can, at times, involve a painful personal process, where one's confidence can be knocked and somewhat diminished (in the short-term). I learned one such lesson in the process of this short action research. This discovery enabled me to not take criticism of my teaching as a direct personal attack (McElhaney, 2017). With this in mind, the ensuing description is a journey of learning how to turn

the 'personal' into an introspective analysis of improving teaching practice and interpersonal relationships (Amsler & Canaan, 2013).

After receiving some negative feedback in regard to my teaching style and practice, I decided to take a step back and consider the critical pedagogical steps I had to take if I wanted to create meaningful change. Introspection and a realistic judgement of the mistakes I had personally made was the best place to begin. Honesty had to begin with myself and had to be willing to believe that the students had a point and, equally, a right to voice their frustration. At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that within the contemporary academy the issue of 'student satisfaction' is viewed through an entirely 'consumerist' focus. So, from the point of view of University managers, successful outcomes for students are not those who can think critically and creatively, but rather are successful in terms of graduate level employment prospects (Herbert et al., 2020).

In contrast to a critical pedagogical approach, this implies an instrumental approach to teaching. But at the same time a critical educator, in current times, has to engage both with the requirements of the changing academy and the academic, social and emotional needs of students (Darder, 2017). There is no doubt in my mind that insecurity and tenuous positions of academics in HE institutions discourages lecturers from autonomous action in their teaching space (Taberner, 2018). Employment insecurity in current times and my probationary position affected my capacity to engage effectively all these different aspects of this process. I also felt considerable pressure, particularly in context to whether my employer would still value my work and whether my position was secure.

Ultimately, I was more fortunate than others to have enough security and autonomy to develop the pedagogy I wanted. So, while I did want to be more than a service-provider of the academy in the current 'students-as-consumers' marketised climate (Wong & Chiu, 2019), I was, as all newly starting academics are, under pressure to balance a range of different needs, including my own continued employment! While I was clear that I could not challenge this system alone, I could attempt to change my teaching environment and create the conditions for a critical space of mutual relational learning and trust (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2010). Additionally, I felt it was important to maintain a sound working relationship between the

academy and my own self, health and well-being (Canaan, 2013), which, while not the focus here, is an important ongoing consideration in the process of becoming critical.

So, I decided to look at what I could do to change the student experience and, thus, made an informed choice not to take their criticism as a personal attack, but to use it to improve my teaching practice and pedagogy, with the aim of creating more positive relationships with the students, central to an effective critical pedagogical approach (Canaan, 2015). I came to see that this was going to involve a continuous process of learning, discovery and development for both myself and the students in my classroom. I was determined to be available and accessible to them, who so obviously required support and reassurance (Brookfield, 2017). My re-reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* motivated me to take the time to get to know the students as individuals and find the courage to be my authentic self with them. I am still a work in progress. I will often ask my students ‘what does practice make ...?’, those that have experienced my teaching will reply ‘progress’, as I reject the idea of perfection. Who decides what is and isn’t perfect? My approach is about encouraging students to continue trying to improve their work, through patience and perseverance.

## My Study’s Action Research Model

This following section discusses how the Action Research Model created was used to assess the outcomes of this small-scale action research. Evaluating the critically relational pedagogical processes performed/carried out by myself and the success/failure of this aspiring progressive educators’ reflective and reflexive practice. The Action Research Model (see Figure 6.1) implemented for this study demonstrates the congruent reflective nature of the critical pedagogue, in that, the teacher is also, always learning and must consider their students as knowledge-givers. In addition, this dialogical model is articulated in five steps (see Figure 6.2) that includes: (1) initial reflections; (2) learning & Inquiring about students; (3) relationship learning; (4) assessing success and failures; (5) reflecting and beginning again (Taylor, 2020).

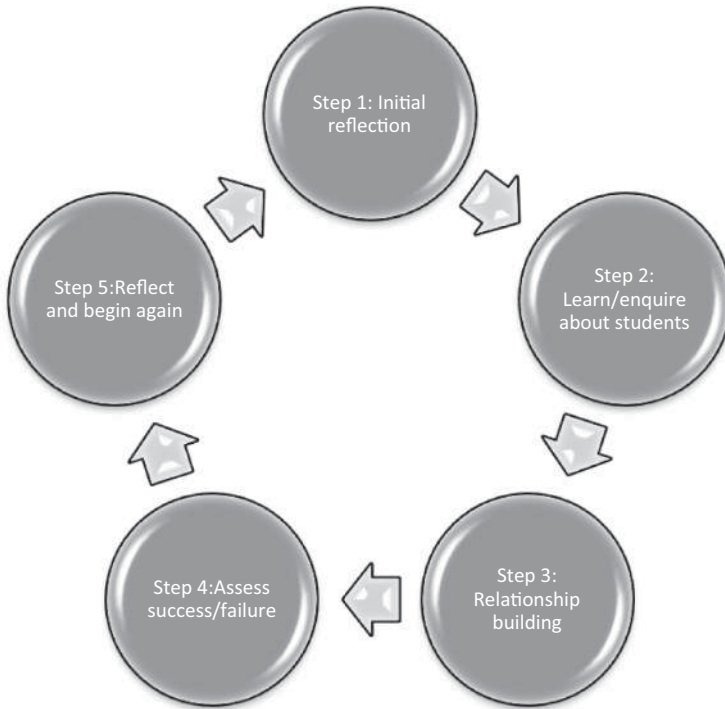


Figure 6.1. The Action Research Model.

<b>Step 1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial reflection – review where to change teaching approach and practice?</li> </ul>
<b>Step 2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn and enquire about and from students. Take time to get to know them – with future cohorts always create a time for introduction and relationship building</li> </ul>
<b>Step 3:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempt relational academic trust building – implement an informal flipped classroom</li> </ul>
<b>Step 4:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess success or failure of flipped learning process (‘just in time’ learning), assess relational trust built</li> </ul>
<b>Step 5:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflect, see where improvements can be made, start again, act and become reflexive ...</li> </ul>

Source: (Taylor, 2020)

Figure 6.2. Five steps of Action Research Model.



## Critical Pedagogy in Action

Brookfield (2017: 3) states that '[c]ritical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions'. Cowden and Singh (2015) also identify the importance of Freire's concept of dialogue within this:

Critical [p]edagogy ... is a dialectic process where the teacher and the student are both engaged in teaching each other and learning from each other. This is not to deny the teacher's knowledge, but this is understood not as a private accumulation, but as work whose inherent social collectivity is realized through the engagement with students. Freire's concept of 'dialogue' thus represents much more than the inherent value of people talking with each other, but rather as a dialectical interchange between theory and experience. (15)

This points to important ways in which we as educators can understand the students we are working with and how learning is going to be meaningful for them. Students often lead very complex lives; and as educators, we often have little idea of the personal circumstances they face or the oppressive conditions that manifest in their own lives (Darder, 2017). As such, students must be viewed as individuals who are experiencing and being pulled by many differing influences and issues at university. Along with their academic learning, they also must traverse the peer relationship journey, where some students have relayed that it feels 'like being back at school' (Read et al., 2018). Students also struggle to negotiate a relationship with their lecturers, with all of the barriers that this process can entail (Sparks, 2019).

Moreover, the kind of educational consumerism taking place and currently being encouraged in HE can also have an effect on the relationship between a lecturer and their students, creating a customer/provider relationship and all the market expectations which go with this (Wong & Chiu, 2019). In extreme cases, students have been seen to sue their universities when not receiving the grades they believe they deserve (Mortimer, 2018). Consequently, neoliberal consumerist tendencies can alienate both students and teaching staff alike from the educational process, effectively,



creating a barrier to learning for some and an ‘I pay for a service and expect to see results’ approach for others.

Kornelakis and Petrakaki (2020: 292) argue that ‘the unprecedented increases in university tuition fees about ten years ago fundamentally changed the relationship between the university and the student body’. This disconnect between ‘education as knowledge’ and ‘education as employability’ can thwart the process of a genuine pedagogical exchange and dialogue between the facilitator of knowledge and the student; education and learning has become distorted by the way Universities have come to be seen as ‘no different to any other business’ (Amsler & Canaan, 2013; Hill, 2017; Maisuria & Helmes, 2020). The oxymoron for the critical pedagogue presented in these circumstances involves how ‘[t]he marketisation and commoditisation of higher education ... have made it simultaneously more difficult and more important to pursue principles of Critical Pedagogy’ within the academy (Serrano et al., 2018:19). In this climate, educators must then work to critically understand these barriers and reflect on their own pedagogy and practice, openly and honestly.

A key question I asked myself as an aspiring critical pedagogue throughout this process was ‘what type of teacher do I want to be’? As Larrivee (2000) points out:

Teacher beliefs are self-generating, and often unchallenged. Unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations ... [C]ritical reflection ... merge[s] critical inquiry, the conscious consideration of the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about human potential and learning. (293)

Thus, what I wanted to ensure was that teaching took place in a productive and effective learning environment, whilst also encouraging engagement and student voice, giving validity to their concerns and way of life, their culture (Freire, 1970, 1974, 1994).

Critical reflection is an effective pedagogical tool, and I found critical reflexivity – the process of ‘thinking about thinking’ – as the best way for me as an educator to achieve a liberatory praxis in my teaching (Brookfield, 2017; Freire, 1970). As such, it is imperative to use reflective and reflexive

strategies as a tool to make changes and improvements to teaching processes and practice. I saw it as crucial in this that I encouraged self-confidence and positive self-image, so that one way students may see their own potential is through your belief in them; '[s]elf-esteem is developed at an early age through the influences of the parents or guardians and lecturers in particular at higher education' (Garglo et al., 2015: 26). The role of the educator is significant in that it can have a real impact on student's learning, as well as on their assessment outcomes.

In researching '[c]auses of differences in student outcomes', the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2015: 1) found four key factors: (1) 'Curricula and learning ...', (2) 'Relationships between staff and students and among students: A sense of "belonging" emerged as a key determinant of student outcomes', (3) 'Social, cultural and economic capital' and (4) 'Psychosocial and identity factors' (ibid.: iv). These four points interlink with one another, although, the focus of my study concentrated on point 2, my relationship with my students. Do my students feel as if they belong in my classes? Equally important, do I give the impression and support their belief that they belong in my classes? Learners require help to understand their own strengths and the expertise and skills they 'bring to the table'. They should be encouraged to see the skills they have *already* acquired and shown how these can be transferred into their academic work and learning, being aware that they are not walking into the classroom as a 'Blank Slate' (Pinker, 1999: 141).

This critically pedagogical process is at odds with what Freire called the 'banking concept of education', where much of western education has become 'an act of depositing' information into the student for them to memorise and repeat for as test. In essence, this deposit is considered 'a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, 1970: 53). Arguably, this is relatable in contemporary times to the employability models presented in HE, where national and global industry expect academics to equip the gaps in knowledge students possess, in terms of specific vocational employment. As some commentators have noted, this worryingly reflects the way many students from poor working-class backgrounds who attend post-92 institutions see their own experience of education (Ingleby, 2015).

In contrast, Freire's (1970) problem-posing approach better describes the type of critical educator I am working to become:

The humanist, revolutionary educator ... '[from] the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.' (56)

This points to the importance of mutual respect as a means of engaging with greater criticality the power differentials at play in teacher/student relationships. Trust, as Freire advocates, is an underrated, yet powerful tool in the teacher's toolbox for building positive relationships with students. Creating the conditions for student voice, encouraging their engagement and participation in their own learning, providing the space for a sense of belonging, all create mutual learning opportunities for both student and teacher (Wilson, 2017).

## The Possibility of Transformative Change in Relational Teaching

In Lewin's (1946) work on action research, this second stage considers the learning processes used and is paired in the planning and action steps taken in this research with the possible transformative qualities of progressive teaching/education. When working with students I consistently try to remember my own student undergraduate days and the levels of anxiety I felt, needing reassurance and kindness from my lecturers when my confidence was low and deadlines were looming. This helps me to consider how I can be the kind of educator who understands these pressures, and can look at them from the students' point of view. The extended effect of respectful mutual learning (Canaan, 2013; Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2016) should build over time, and I recognise through reflection that building trust with students who are experiencing the pressures of their particular lives in the context of a marketised university, with

expectations that they are successful irrespective of their own needs or the needs of their families, is not easy or straightforward.

Lala and Priluck (2011) demonstrate in their work the importance of action research and reflective qualitative research in the field of education (Berliner, 2002). Their study, however, misses some factors, including the anxiety felt by students when change occurs and their stress management levels at times of importance (i.e. deadlines, personal life or final year). So, the issue for me is always how do I better understand my students? What mechanisms can I put in place to build trust, *relinquish power, to humanise the classroom* (Harven, 2021) and monitor the relationships built in an educator/student forum, where the environment provided can be both a nurturing space as well as a productive and creative arena of knowledge production. As such, to effectively teach students, I must know my learners, or at the very least, attempt to get to know them outside of solely their academic performance.

A key thing I learnt on reflection was that a mutual exchange of respect, which includes 'listening', offering students a chance to introduce themselves and discuss their concerns can be extremely productive on the road to building a trusting relationship with them. It is through expressing openness in the initial stages of the relationship that trust can build and create a space where everyone's experiences are perceived as valued and valid. Through this study, I discovered that one must be sincere and honest, yet cannot think to please everyone all the time. Nevertheless, one must attempt an honest, contemplative relationship with our students, one that requires cultivating and nurturing (Brookfield, 2017). By viewing difficult experiences as a learning opportunity, they open the possibility for transformative change (Boronski & Hassan, 2015; Freire, 1970, 1974, 1994, 2001) in our learning and teaching practices.

Given the above, the main intervention I put in place was one of genuine, reflection and reflexivity, based on the evidence given in the complaints made in my student evaluations. Was that enough? Was further action required? If so, what action? If an educator wishes students to trust them, must this not be a mutual learning experience? Hence, another key question for me was: How do I demonstrate trust to and in them? The idea of 'the flipped classroom' was an approach that appealed to be in

that it could provide a level of autonomy to the students whilst getting to know their new lecturer, trusting them to follow through with their own learning (Warwick Centre for Lifelong Learning, 2020). The reason for this, according to Strelan, Osborn, and Palmer (2020), is that the flipped classroom introduces lesson materials before the class, in order to permit educators to utilise most of the class time for building active social relationships with students. Through this approach, I sought to develop more opportunities for teaching through trust.

## Teaching through Trust

My discussion here about teaching through trust provides an evaluation of step 4 of the Action Research Model. This entailed looking at how putting trust in students themselves is a positive practice and the outcome of this action. The result was demonstrated through direct dialogue and email messages with managers, colleagues and students. This was similar to Lewin's (1946) third stage, which comprises data gathering and evaluating/ measuring the changes in behaviour of the students in this small informal action research. The flipped classroom (Strelan et al., 2020), as noted above, was chosen and piloted, as a means of building trust and confidence in the students.

As a process of critical pedagogy, the flipped classroom had roughly a 50% engagement rate with the students. Whilst I was encouraged by this, there was a feeling of discouragement involved in dealing with their negative criticisms. Nevertheless, as a critical reflective practitioner, I firmly believe it is useful to examine student responses and to address these as positive aspects of philosophical change (Freire, 1970), critically reflecting on good and bad practice and encouraging transformative change. Yet, questions persist. Can an educator ever realistically reach/engage all their students? Perseverance and determination are continually required to reflect on the changes one must make (Brookfield, 2017) to support every student, even those who may not want/or believe they require our help or support. Other students in the class did start to engage with the module, with

me at its helm, and were enjoying the classes I taught; this was a positive consequence. Any action can result in two outcomes, both positive and negative; although, feelings can change (in both directions) and as pointed out previously, it takes time to build a strong foundation, to create lasting relationships of trust.

During this process, I found using the flipped classroom to be a positive critical practice, it was a catalyst, a turning point for a more positive dynamic in the classroom (hooks, 2003). Putting my trust in the students, in turn, allowed them to begin to trust me and my teaching ability; it was an action which created reciprocal confidence, hope and an emerging trust in one another's skills and capabilities. Although, this action was positive in the main, critical pedagogy requires more than an overreliance on one teaching method. The flipped classroom technique, for example, can be kept in the 'teacher's toolbox', but a critical educator must be aware of the needs of all their students, mindful to treat them as individuals and employing a wide variety of methods. About this, Joyce Canaan (2013) noted:

[C]ritical pedagogy offers a way to engage differently with students in teaching, learning, researching and acting than neoliberalisation suggests. Its vision is of education as a relational, outward looking, hopeful, critical, political and transformational process' using a wide variety of 'tools' and authentic processes. (4)

The critical reflective model used in this chapter created a change for me the teacher/learner, allowing a deeper more meaningful relationship with the teaching process of a critical pedagogue and an understanding of the commitment and hard work this choice entails. Something which is not to be underestimated is the time, emotional labour, personal sacrifice, resistance and lonely periods of self-reflection and, at times, isolation that this entails.

Lastly, the fifth step of this reflective action research was to review the lessons learned, to make the necessary changes and to begin the process once again, constantly considering and evaluating the pedagogical tools we have or will come to learn through growth, transformation, honest reflection and critical evaluation. Darder (2017) speaks to this aspect of our work as a fundamental task of educators: 'Thus, critical pedagogy insists that one of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which

critique and possibility – in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom and equality – function to alter the grounds upon which life is lived’ (xiii).

## Conclusion

As an aspiring critical educator, I have learned that taking the time to nurture student relationships and trust is incredibly important, as is building genuine connections that display an authentic interest in a students’ lived experiences and their world (Canaan, 2008). I have also learned to have more trust and patience in my own capabilities and intentions, steadfast in the knowledge that I will consistently and continuously attempt to practice the ideals I have discussed in this chapter, continuing to learn along the way. Most importantly, I have come to understand that a genuinely critical learning space is one, as Paulo Freire proposed, that is full of hope, trust and mutual learning for both teacher and student.

As I close here, I cannot help but to reflect, as I often do, upon something Joyce Canaan expressed to me, simply and direct: ‘Indignation is good Lisa, because it makes you fight.’ In the spirit of these words and my ongoing effects as an aspiring critical educator, I will continue to ‘fight’ for my students right to experience an education that allows them to develop as critical citizens and engaged human beings, rather than striving towards the limited terms of the neoliberal academy – that of being ‘satisfied consumers’. Thank you, Professor Joyce Canaan, for your passion and inspiring words, which continue to guide my journey.

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