Reflections of a 'wannabe' progressive teacher: how
reflection and reflexivity can positively impact practice

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ABSTRACT

An investigation and self-analysis of the process of reflection and teaching will be evaluated from an individual early careers academic perspective. In the higher education sector it is imperative that lessons are revisited to ensure that the methods of teaching applied are flexible and develop positively (Schön 1983), in conjunction with the student's complex needs, helping to achieve academic praxis for both learners: the teacher and the student (Brookfield 2017). Pedagogical practice will be considered as an ontological continuing process of academic progression using 'The Four Lenses of Critical Reflection' framework (ibid.) to identify good reflective and reflexive teaching. Consideration of positive, realistic and effective teaching practices which can be applied to make necessary improvements will be examined. The title progressive teacher implies the implementation of good flexible teaching practice that aligns with student learning and assessment outcomes.

KEYWORDS

PROGRESSIVE TEACHERS

REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

REFLECTION,

LEARNING AND TEACHING.

INTRODUCTION

Stephen Brookfield's (2017) critical lens is used here on a personal and human level. His writing demonstrates similarities with Paulo Freire, whose principles such as humanisation, understanding the learners from their experience, creating a mutuality in learning and empowering students in their personal learning journey through the many different ways they may learn informs my own signature pedagogy (see Freire 1970). As a facilitator of learning, someone who nurtures potential, who helps to raise confidence in students, I wish to respect my learners, impart my academic knowledge and wisdom and also be willing to learn with and from them. As Kincheloe (2003: 136) states, 'researchers (be they teachers or students) are educating and being educated alongside their students'. Progressive teaching encompasses teaching with respect, understanding, acceptance of difference and the knowledge that we never stop learning no matter who we are (Freire 1970, 1974, 1994; Darder 2018). A reflective practitioner should be aware of how their individual pedagogy informs their teaching practice (Schön, 1983),

aligning their role as an educator with that of the students as learners (Light et al. 2001). Studying alongside teaching can allow an early careers educator a deep understanding of what students are currently experiencing in their higher education (HE) journey. Empathy with workloads and submission deadlines, whilst simultaneously attempting to synthesise their own learning, continually and consistently improving their own teaching practice and understanding of individual and collective student needs, can be helpful practice (QAA 2015a).

LENS ONE, THEORY

The reflective thought process requires courage, the ability to humble oneself, adaptability, empathy, thoughtfulness, honesty and I am sure many other intuitive human practices unnamed here (Malthouse & Roffey-Barentsen 2013). My own signature pedagogy (Husbands & Pearce 2012; Haywood 2017) is one rooted in the ideals of the progressive teacher (Freire 1970; Brookfield 2017) – someone who devalues the atypical/standard power structures often found in the traditional schooling of a classroom/learning space and attempts to practise an effective inclusive pedagogy which encourages and considers student voice (Light et al. 2001; Husbands & Pearce 2012; Fry et al. 2013). Marcuse (1969) discusses his idea of 'repressive tolerance' and the reproduction of power structures whereby '[g]enerally, the function and value of tolerance depend on the equality prevalent in the society in which tolerance is practiced'. This is representative of the unequal status quo being reproduced in societies across the globe (Freire 1970; Ball 2008).

In regard to this hegemonic phenomenon, philosophy and critical pedagogy are subject areas which have the capacity to locate the learner within the intersections of the unequal status quo (Freire 1970), allowing the student the opportunity to understand the power structures surrounding their educational experience/s and possibly understanding

of their prior learning, rebuilding confidence upon the realisation that they are victim to many societal stereotypes and their dehumanising qualities (ibid.). At the same time, it must be realised that to attempt to change the dominant structures of prior educational learning is a monumental task (hooks 2003).

Biggs (2003: 16) discusses how critical reflection can expose the hegemonic teaching structures 'that benefit a small minority in power', strengthen the ideological neoliberal discourse (Ball 2008) of standardised rote learning in current parts of the British education system, and make for the destruction of creativity and critical thinking. One idea of a facilitator of knowledge is to assist students, helping them in co-constructing their individual learning (ibid.). Scaffolding is one such method used to support students to acquire and ultimately consolidate knowledge (Biggs 2003). The process involves assisting the learner with building on their prior knowledge, and removing that support once the learning objective has been understood (Brookfield 2017).

Once deeper learning and understanding has taken place then the scaffold provided by the teacher is no longer required (Light et al. 2001). The term scaffolding is often credited to the social constructivist Vygotsky, relating to his theory of assisting learners to reach knowledge which may be temporarily out of their reach, something he described as the 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)' (Johnson et al. 2011: 59, bold in original). It was in fact Wood et al. (1976) who first used the term to describe the relationship between successful parental tutorage and 'language development of young children' (Hammond & Gibbons 2005: 8). This practice aligns perfectly with Biggs's (2003) theory of constructive alignment and how and why students learn what they do.

LENS TWO, LEARNER PERCEPTIONS

It is important to acknowledge the requirements of each individual module taught in HE, how much knowledge the students have to learn and the time frame they have to do it in. However, it is imperative not to assume a 'deficit model' whereby the presumption is that students cannot cope with expected learning requirements (Victoria State Government 2019). Nonetheless, truly important knowledge that is essential for a teacher to possess is that of understanding their learners; this can be difficult in short-term situations but not impossible (Warwick Centre for Lifelong Learning 2019). A truly reflective educator must learn alongside their students, be willing to work with the students whilst simultaneously making the aims and objectives of their learning clear and transparent (Freire 1970). Although it is important to be clear, it is not always easy to support students whilst demonstrating the expected academic outcomes. An effective practitioner should also be able to demonstrate the importance of formative feedback, in the outcomes of summative assessment to students (Biggs 2003).

A reflective practitioner recognises the need for genuine, constructive feedback and listens and learns (Sambell 2016; Schön 1983; Brookfield 2017). Educational opportunities and observations can inform teaching practice and student learning, such as setting out core student learning and additional recommendations in a way which is more clearly signposted for students, so that they may understand the requirements expected of them, and be aware of the additional resources provided for them. A progressive educator should not be the dominant voice in the teaching space, they must not hold all the power, and this authority is not to be abused if your aim and objective is to obtain trust in your relationships with students (Freire 1970; Biggs 2003), allowing them a safe space to discuss their ideas and thoughts and expanding

their comfort/ease with key terminology. It must be admitted that these practices can sometimes be utopian ideals within the constraints of global academic expectations and student outcomes.

In a progressive teaching space there is ongoing dialogue, which is massively important. The encouragement of dialectical interaction with students demonstrates the meeting of the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2015a, 2015b), their subject benchmark policies and fulfilling practitioner requirements. Students should be encouraged and allowed to be heard. As Freire (1970) discusses, it is about empowering people and humanising them, telling them their voice is important and that they can name their world. Learning and understanding academic vocabulary can be difficult to teach and learn, but once done it can be a real accomplishment in boosting a student's confidence and self-value. The response from students to progressive teaching is often positive and instils a level of confidence in my learning and teaching style, my evolving signature pedagogy. As Freire states:

The problem-posing method does not dichotomize the activity of the teacher-student: she is not 'cognitive' at one point and 'narrative' at another. She is always 'cognitive,' whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections of the students. The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. (Freire 1970: 61–2)

LENS THREE, PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As a constantly reflecting progressive pedagogue, it is imperative to consider students' learning, their learning styles (Marcy 2001) and their individual as well as collective needs, linking these needs to the progressive teaching practice. As the inspirational, progressive educator bel hooks discusses:

Progressive, holistic education, 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (hooks 1994: 15)

Again value is placed on knowledge of your learner and their needs, being aware of, and flexible to constant change and student learning requirements. Good educators must constantly reflect on their inclusive teaching practice, considering reflective pedagogical ways to give students the opportunity to study, attempting to discover the way they learn best, be it through reading, videos, Tedtalks, podcasts, etc.; this has never been so important as in this Covid-19 age. This can be linked with the different learning styles of individuals (Marcy 2001). This position requires clarity from the teacher; the job of the educator in this situation must be to clearly signpost to students their expectations: in this case, not to read and watch every learning material provided, but to use their autonomy to discover the learning tools that work best for them (Light et al. 2001). The issue here is clearly communication, which is the responsibility of the educator. Clear, directed learning helps students to understand the academic requirements expected of them and supports their learning (Biggs 2003).

This type of directive rationality in philosophical teaching approaches also allows a mutual dialogic exchange between the teacher and student to take place (Freire 1970), encouraging trust and confidence in the teacher/student relationship through learner empowerment (Ryan & Tilbury 2013; Brookfield 2017). An additional characteristic of this process is that opening up a dialectical dialogue can demonstrate scholarly learning as well as student engagement (Biggs 2003) through raising consciousness and understanding (Freire 1974).

LENS FOUR, STUDENTS' EYES

Students very quickly work out who has the time and/or propensity to listen to and support them. There are many reasons why educators may become despondent and alienated from the students they teach and vice versa; working responsibilities, lifestyle, personal duties, stress, childcare, illness and many other issues can affect an individual's ability to interact with any group of people (Freire 1970; Vittoria 2016). As an educator you must give the students your undivided attention whilst you are facilitating their learning; they will react to the environment they are in and can tell if you are invested in the class; this is the responsibility of the teacher (Sambell 2016; Brookfield 2017). The job of an educator is not an easy one: there are many expectations, practices, responsibilities and duties that an educator must perform to be an effective knowledge producer; the stress is real and time is always short.

Practice and pedagogy are now subjected to more stringent rules and regulations that must be adhered to, balancing academic requirements and student learning. Students should be able to build positive relationships with their educators, through being approachable and transparent, building a relationship based on encouragement, trust and learning alongside curriculum coherence and knowledge construction. This progressive teaching practice is massively influenced by the brilliant Brazilian revolutionary educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1974, 1994, 2001, 2013; Freire & Shor 1987). The fact that there are barriers and limitations to teaching should not limit our ability

to trust in ourselves and the power of teaching. I am positive I am not the only one who remembers the wise words of a former teacher that, at the time they were uttered, offered no meaning. Words now remembered and understood, in effect, what stays in students long-term memories over the course of their degree, should last them a lifetime, as Martin et al. (2000) declare: '[b]efore material can be remembered (and forgotten), it must first be learned. Learning involves three basic processes: the acquisition of material, its consolidation and its retrieval' (p. 281). To engage students, teaching must have meaning, which can be created by involving the students in their own learning, becoming co-creators within the learning environment (Freire 1970; Biggs 2003; Sambell 2016; Brookfield 2017).

SUBJECT REQUIREMENTS

Teaching in HE is quality-controlled by a governing body and looks at '[s]etting and maintaining academic standards' for students (QAA 2015a). It is essential that educators think about how their teaching impacts the outcomes of their students, ergo, the QAA guidelines are an exemplar to follow. HE modules all have their own subject benchmark statements (QAA 2015b). The QAA (2015b) guidelines are a set of documents which educators can use to help design the most effective education programme with good assessment outcomes for student potential. Both statements discuss similar themes which can already be aligned to the philosophy of education programme I teach. Critical thinking skills are embedded within philosophical reasoning and logic; students are taught a history of western and eastern philosophy, leaving many students feeling valued and accepted (Freire 1970). Their voice is heard in a British society which is largely dominated by Western ideals and values (Bignold & Gayton 2009); this is not representative of all HE student populations.

Philosophy is a great subject to teach as a 'wannabe' progressive practitioner. It has many great qualities for critical reflection, although it must also be recognised that it is a difficult subject to decolonise; hence, this semester, in order to include more equality and diversity in the module, more philosophers of colour and more female philosopher voices were added to the taught and self-directed learning content. This practice aligns with the expectations of the QAA (2015a: 3; 2015b: 3) section on 'Equality and Diversity'. Nonetheless, the module is and always will be a work in progress, changing with the distinct needs and requirements of individual students and the learning, reflective and reflexive knowledge which is imperative for the practitioner to implement in their own teaching (Brookfield 2017).

The thought of decolonising the curriculum continues with difficulty when the 'important' historical philosophers who are recognised and discussed in the benchmark statement for philosophy are nearly all white males like 'Socrates and Wittgenstein' (QAA 2015a). Of course these philosophers are important figures in the teaching of this subject, but where is the mention of Olympe de Gouge, Franz Fanon, Cornel West, Mary Wollstonecraft, bel hooks, Ibn Khaldun or other important philosophers whom the students that I teach can relate to on a cultural, gendered or race level? It is important in society for people on a human level to relate to what they see, an aspiration they can emulate, and on a psychological level this mirroring effect can have a massive impact on students and their confidence in their own abilities (Gonzales 2017; Wilson 2017). Practice makes progress for the progressive practitioner, there is no such thing as perfect, just a continuation of growing, learning, developing and managing one's own knowledge, behaviour, emotions, level of respect and conduct; this relates to both social and academic life (Freire 1970; Watkins & Mortimore 1999; Brookfield 2017; Darder 2018).

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

The above title is a term which has in recent years been reframed in higher education to attempt to align more cohesively with teaching and students' assessment outcomes, identifying 'aspects of assessment that can support learning' (Sambell 2016: 4). It has been noted that HE institutions are failing to keep up with HE students' attainments levels and expectations within employability markets; however, excessive summative assessments are having a negative effect on student learning and academics' morale (Sambell 2016). Reflection in any sense encourages thoughtfulness, contemplative thought and reflexivity on the possibilities of teaching, but also considers the limitations placed on teachers, such as administrative and academic responsibilities set out by the QAA (2015a, 2015b) guidelines. On top of these expectations the neoliberal markets that universities are obliged to enter into to survive the current global economic climate are inescapable – there is huge pressure on both students and educators to compete on a global capitalist scale (Maisuria & Helmes 2020). So perhaps the question is: How do students learn best? Sambell (2016) demonstrates the importance of feedback in students' learning and confidence building, and in the mutuality of building trust and confidence in your student as their educator (Brookfield). One such student spoke of the negative effect lack of feedback had on their HE studies:

'Feedback at college was, well ... if it was coursework you'd just get drafts and they'd write 'Change this', or 'Delete this', or 'Just sort it out...' And it would be helpful ... Because sometimes [here] you just don't know what to do. So that's the thing about Uni. You don't get to do drafts, so you are a bit lost with that. Here you just feel, like, 'Oh! I'm on my own!' You've got no drafts or anything like that ... no one telling you how to get those few

extra marks. Or to tell you to take out something that was wrong.' (Sambell 2016: 15).

Upon reflection, more opportunities should be available for students to engage with their learning and feedback in this way, following the advice of Sambell (2016). This type of practice has been shown to lessen the impact of student alienation and their feelings of angst in a HE institution where they may feel unsupported and disengaged (ibid.). This also raises the issues of student retention, which is another important narrative (see Hamlyn 2017) but is not the focus here. The idea of assessment for learning appears to be one which aligns the assessment learning aims and objectives (Biggs 2003; Fry et al. 2013) with students' expected outcomes and includes the students in the process (Brookfield 2017). Involving students includes informing them of the reasons for learning particular module content, the expectations of governing bodies which oversee their degree classifications and the prospective realistic engagement it will take on their part (Sambell 2016).

SUMMARY

Reflecting upon my own educatory practice whilst teaching is essential; my reflexive practice continues to push me to become a more effective teacher, which in turn will benefit the students I teach. My ethos of progressive teaching is strengthened through collaborative efforts and collegiate support, where teaching methods and objectives become much more focused. Student's assessment outcomes are important and teaching comes with huge responsibilities. Students have and always will be at the forefront of teaching; now I can continue with the knowledge that they are in safe hands as I intend to consistently and regularly reflect and take contemplative time with my own thoughts to understand the processes I am teaching and expecting my students to learn. Teaching and learning can be related to a never-ending circle, you cannot always predict where the teaching ends and the learning begins but you are forever in that circle, interconnecting the two practices, just as it should be. I look forward to what the future holds in regards to the knowledge I can impart and also continue to learn alongside my students.

Notes: This text was in part developed during a professional learning term participating in the PG Cert: Pedagogy and Learning in Higher Education programme at the University of East London.

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