# Building a higher education pipeline: sociocultural and critical approaches to 'internationalisation' in teaching and research

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## Abstract

This article discusses the use of critical and sociocultural approaches to more dynamically 'internationalise' higher education in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China. The article explores the integration of critical pedagogy and sociocultural learning theory in developing more engaging and rigorous education practices for tertiary institutions that are looking to steer their campuses towards international standards in education for the shorter and longer term. This article's specific context is a program that helps develop diverse undergraduates to be more effective teachers and researchers and be concerned with addressing social justice issues in their work and everyday lives. Through what can be called an educational pipeline that begins with undergraduates and branches off into teaching, postgraduate studies, and research, this article discusses sustainable contributions that can be made to 'internationalisation' when the pipeline is grounded in pedagogies and methodologies which help to develop educational equity and a more humanising education.

## Keywords
tertiary education, curriculum, teacher education, reflexivity, Hong Kong

# Introduction

For some 20 years, Asian universities such as those in Greater China (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, mainland China) have been urged towards internationalisation, especially due to the paradigm shifts of globalisation and neoliberalism. These shifts to internationalisation have been identified across micro and macro levels (M. H. Lee, 2014; Mok, 2007; Postiglione, 2011). For teachers at the tertiary level, these shifts have not only been about incorporating course content from international contexts, as this was already being done to a significant degree in previous years. Internationalisation also meant changes like incorporating international teaching methods, technologies, and languages. For teachers at research institutions, the changes urged them to make their scholarship of greater international relevance, employ international methodologies, collaborate with overseas colleagues, and publish in journals outside of Asia. Whether at a research or teaching institution, faculty from both types of universities became subject to international standards of management, from how their pedagogy and research were evaluated, to how decisions were made at the department, faculty, and campus level. Understandably, these shifts towards 'internationalisation,' particularly those influenced by the US, the UK, and Australia, have received a range of critiques. This internationalisation has been viewed as disruptive and insensitive to local contexts, or even as fostering inequities and forms of cultural and socioeconomic imperialism (C. K. Y. Chan & Luk, 2013; W.-W. Law, 1997).

In Hong Kong, educational research has significantly discussed internationalisation in areas such as policy, administration, curriculum, assessment, and teaching. At times this research has looked at supposed disparities between 'East' and 'West' contexts (E. H.-f. Law, 2003; Leung, 2014; Wan, 2005), and at other times it has looked at how the push to become international has also been a push towards neoliberalism, with significant implications for Hong Kong education and social inequities (Petersen & Currie, 2008; Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Woo, 2013). This article builds on the notion that there are some helpful lessons to be learned from international approaches to higher education, such as those related to 'learning-to-learn' reforms in Hong Kong. The article outlines some strategies on how we might move from theories and policies to practice with diverse learners over the shorter and longer term. A pilot project that the author developed is discussed, including its approaches to addressing international standards and educating Hong Kong university students to become teachers and researchers. The article begins by explaining some of the pedagogical issues that emerged from the internationalisation process, and the employment of critical pedagogy and sociocultural learning theory approaches to address those issues. Following these foundational ideas, the article describes the author's integrated strategy of an educational pipeline to more dynamically prepare students to effectively engage 'international' standards, and well as those concerned with educational equity and social justice.

# Key concepts

This section begins with discussing Hong Kong's efforts to 'internationalise' its education system. The discussion focuses on teaching coursework and some challenges that have arisen. In the second and third parts of this conceptual section, the article summarizes some key notions of critical pedagogy and sociocultural learning that were used to pilot an approach to improving internationalisation in undergraduate education.

# Internationalisation in teaching

There has been considerable scholarship conducted on internationalisation of universities in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), including those that discuss changing tasks required of faculty. There have been several suggested reforms for teaching, including e-learning, flipped learning, and teaching courses using Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) or English (Adamson & Morris, 2010; Wong, 2007). A particularly significant reform has been the move towards learner-centred learning and 'Learning-To-Learn' (LTL). While there are variations of LTL and learner-centred learning (sometimes called student-centred learning), they can be generalised as approaches to pedagogy based on theories of constructivism and cognitivism which emphasize the learner's experiences, environment, cognitive processes, and skills (Tong, 2010; Yeung, 2012). Here, learners can include the student or the teacher, and other members of the given educational setting. Learner-centred learning and LTL also emphasise tailoring pedagogy to students' differing needs and customising learning experiences, as opposed to 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogy like those that focus on textbooks and worksheets. Another characteristic of internationalisation reforms concerns the emergence of the 'information society' and unprecedented access to data and technology, which speaks to rapid advancements that have made 'obsolete' some of the previous ways that people learned and worked. It is here that LTL and student-centred learning is promoted to teach students how to continually learn and adjust over the life course, critically consume media and other information sources, and work with others in a highly-connected world that can be ironically isolating and indifferent. This development of LTL and learner-centred learning is supposed to augment pupils' skill sets as future teachers, scholars, and leaders to levels comparable to those found internationally.

Despite over a decade of implementing LTL in Hong Kong schools, and an even longer period of incorporating student-centred reforms, the SAR has been critiqued for perpetuating top-down, teacher-centred pedagogies, which typically revolve around public exams and rankings (Chang, 2017; Chiu & Walker, 2007). Effects of these pedagogies have included students feeling patronised and alienated as they go through schooling, and being uninformed and unprepared for the levels of inquiry, internationalism, and independence that are usually expected at university. While universities may have more

academic freedom in implementing pedagogical reforms, teacher-centred approaches are still quite common and can further steer students' away from thinking for themselves, working creatively and collaboratively, learning how the world works outside of Hong Kong and figuring out what their place may be in it. In other words, higher education students may not be able to fully partake in the benefits of 'internationalisation.' In an effort to address these issues of preparing students to be internationally informed and competitive, this paper discusses the author's integrated use of critical pedagogy and sociocultural learning strategies at a Hong Kong university.

# Critical pedagogy

One of the two key components of our approach to more effectively preparing students towards internationalisation is critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a body of scholarship which focuses on issues of social justice, educational equity, power, control, resistance, and agency. Historically it has some shared foundations in the work of the Frankfurt School and Paulo Freire (Leonardo, 2004), and typically draws from sociology, philosophy, and psychology. A common concept within critical pedagogy includes seeing much of public education as using a banking model, where students are passive containers of information (like a child's 'piggy bank') that unquestioningly receive information 'currency' from teachers and schools who remain in dominant positions of knowledge and experience. This banking model has been connected to seeing education as using a 'one-size-fits-all' factory model that spews out the same kinds of students again and again, disregarding and flattening their diverse experiences, skills, or needs (Luke, 2010). Aside from the factory model, critical pedagogy's banking model concept has been tied to social reproduction, where a society's socioeconomic hierarchy is reinforced and reproduced through schooling (Apple, 2004). This usually means the wealthy elite maintain their power and privilege through the education system, while the middle-class shrinks and less privileged students are not taught skills that may help change their socioeconomic standing. Altogether, social reproduction and the banking and factory models illustrate that education systems can be oppressive and dehumanising for all involved. Critical pedagogy tends to look at these issues as faced by marginalised populations (e.g. women, working-class families), but it also explores issues of privileged groups (e.g. middle-class white men in North America, highly-educated Han Chinese in Asia).

Aside from problems, critical pedagogy examines how educational stakeholders can resist systems and practices of inequity, and how they can foster their own agency, whether social, educational, economic, or political (Bartólome, 1994). Towards these ends, a broad approach suggested within critical pedagogy is problem-posing, where students are not spoon-fed one correct answer to questions, but are encouraged to develop inquiries into given topics, and eventually answers. Although related to the Socratic Method and inquiry-based learning, problem-posing goes beyond students developing 'higher-order'

thinking skills (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Critical pedagogy also involves disrupting the status quo of schooling and the hierarchy of teachers over students and the communities they come from. Here students are encouraged to critique established ideas and norms, including those of schools and society (e.g. news media, transnational corporations), to more dynamically understand how the world works and how we can change it for the better. In Hong Kong, one can see the connections of critical pedagogy's problem-posing approach to internationally-inspired reforms like student-centred learning and LTL.

In recent decades critical pedagogy has become more interdisciplinary and applied across diverse contexts that are concerned with education and care, from teaching to social work to medicine (Gupta et al., 2006; McLaren & Houston, 2004). Over time, critical pedagogy has also received critiques for operating within certain paradigms of theory and practice (e.g. white, male, Christian), which can undermine efforts to make education more just and humanising. Thus critical pedagogy has also been refined by scholars from 'racial minority,' indigenous, diasporic, and LGBT backgrounds (Asher, 2007; Grande, 2003). Responding to critiques of critical pedagogy as being too theoretical, over the past two decades a large body of research has emerged from scholar-practitioners that detail how critical pedagogies have been effectively applied around the globe. Often these works have combined critical pedagogy with other disciplines (e.g. sociolinguistics, geography, legal studies), to provide more intersectional approaches to equity (Chang, 2013; Kubota & Miller, 2017). In Hong Kong, critical pedagogy has been theorised and applied for over fifteen years (Hui & Chan, 2006; Lin, 2004; Mason, 2000). Focal areas have included policy, curriculum, English education, liberal studies, and history of education, and these have provided insights in challenging educational inequities (C. Chan & Lo, 2016; Flowerdew, 2005; Pérez-Milans & Soto, 2014). In developing strategies for the educational pipeline that is the focus of this paper, critical pedagogy was a foundational area. The theories, along with my experience in applying them across age levels, helped me develop short and long-term approaches to more dynamically incorporating internationalisation at the university. In the next section, I outline the second conceptual foundation of our approach to an educational pipeline.

## Sociocultural learning

Critical pedagogy facilitates a broader understanding of how educational systems can be dehumanising and inequitable, and general ideas of how to make classrooms more inclusive and democratic. Sociocultural learning theory is an area of scholarship that helps fill in some of the gaps of critical pedagogy's more sociological and philosophical strategies, by more dynamically conceptualising learning and its cultural roots. Within different sociocultural learning strands, a consistent theme is improving teaching through considering classrooms and other educational spaces as learning ecologies, going beyond formal teacher-student classroom interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). These ecologies

can include students' families, neighbourhoods and formal/informal learning spaces. Sociocultural learning is grounded in the idea that human activity takes place in cultural contexts, is mediated by language, and is highly interconnected to the historical context of the activity's development and its participants' perspectives (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). Key ideas include the detail that should be paid to student/teacher discourse, experiences, and cultural practices that shape the interactions and connections within the learning ecology. Sociocultural learning's emphasis on this dynamic interplay of factors is related to Hong Kong's learner-centred learning reforms (Gan & Lee, 2015), as it seeks to modify and tailor pedagogy beyond just considering a classroom's subject, level, and language of instruction.

Sociocultural learning conceptualises culture as something that is situated, can change over time, and should be considered as practices rather than a list of traits that are permanently branded to a group of people as a 'learning style,' such as early models of the 'Chinese Learner,' or cultural deficit models of ethnic minorities (Clark & Gieve, 2006; González & Moll, 2002). Understanding culture as situated and socially-mediated practices is aligned with critical pedagogy in that it challenges the use of culture as a synonym for race or class, where 'Culture' is used to simplistically explain the low-achievement of a group, such as working-class or ethnic minority students who struggle at a university (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Such notions of 'Culture' signify a static approach that looks at culture as a pronoun, something that is fixed, unchanging, and in and of itself; like 'the Pakistani people' or 'Sham Shui Po students.' When these over-generalisations are used to explain achievement, they devalue 'the Cultures' and languages of these groups, and frame them as deficient of so-called academic or standard 'Culture' and language (C. D. Lee, 2002). This is problematic in that it belittles the struggles and strengths of marginalised communities, which the education system might learn something from if it adjusted its essentialising and elitist standpoint. A second problem here is that all supposed members of a cultural community are stereotyped as being the same. This hides the diversity and agency between individuals and suppresses their ability to change or do things in different ways.

Sociocultural learning's concept of culture as situated practices over time opens up understandings to how people can persist, develop, and change, and these understandings provide potentially transformative foundations for teaching. In other words sociocultural learning facilitates a pedagogy of possibility, where cultural and linguistic practices are not something that people are stuck with (Cole, 1996). These practices can continually change at the borders and intersections where the individual, structure, experience, and history meet (Pacheco, 2012). This approach can inform teachers of where students are coming from, but it also provides possibilities of where the student can go and what they can do in the company of others. In my experience, sociocultural learning theory has helped to more effectively implement formative assessments and curriculum modifications. It has pushed me to be more thoughtful in how I think of myself and my students (e.g.

behaviour, achievement), and how I can re-organise the bigger and smaller elements of our learning ecology to be more equitable, inclusive, and effective (Chang & Lee, 2012). In the following section I discuss applying sociocultural learning and critical pedagogy at a university in Hong Kong, and the strategy of an educational pipeline to support students in becoming stronger teachers and scholars.

## Meeting internationalisation standards

At a recent dinner with two colleagues who are also Hong Kong professors, we traded stories about being junior faculty. My colleagues discussed the increasing 'international standards' for us to be evaluated with for job re-appointment and promotion. These standards included teaching courses that address international issues and methods outside of Hong Kong, conducting research of international relevance beyond Greater China, collaborating on projects with international scholars, and publishing in internationally-ranked journals outside of Asia. Of particular concern was how the last three standards were used to judge our worthiness in winning an external grant from the government: a gold standard for determining rewards like salary increases and promotion. My colleagues and I talked about challenges in achieving this 'internationalisation' while still meeting previously-established standards like teaching numerous courses effectively, working with local schools to conduct research, and engaging in service and 'knowledge transfer' with on-the-ground organisations applying our scholarly expertise. While we were enthused about the different forms of support our institutions provided, the conversation still had its share of concern.

Although Hong Kong's eight publicly-funded universities each has unique policies and practices, all face challenges of meeting international teaching and research standards. The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) has shot up in international QS rankings of Education, but it is still the newest of the universities and has a long history of focusing on teaching practice as a former conglomeration of normal colleges. Thus there have been some challenges in attracting and supporting students with the highest levels of traditional academic skills. One example would be undergraduates whose English fluency levels help them to engage in coursework at high international standards. Another example would be Ph.D. and M.Phil. students. While these postgraduate students are typically understood as receiving the benefits of mentorship from an established professor, there are also numerous benefits for the universities and faculty who support them. These students can help augment the research of scholars who supervise them by asking new questions, investigating cutting-edge theories and contexts, collaborating on projects (whether as a professor's advisee, hired research assistant, or postdoctoral fellow), and developing their own robust bodies of scholarship as alumni. All of these actions help develop the material and scholarly capacity of the professors and universities. Professors who have not won the most elite government grant usually have reduced access to such students. One reason

is because they are not allowed to supervise these students. This restriction is rather ironic for academics who earned their Ph.D. abroad or come from international universities, as they may have significant training, publications, grants, and Ph.D. students they developed outside of Hong Kong. For junior professors in the SAR, this scenario can generate considerable challenges as they individually prepare to meet 'international' standards of research and teaching. In my own efforts, I have tried to be a bit creative in achieving these benchmarks.

At the dinner with my colleagues, it came up that I had won some EdUHK awards for teaching, as determined by students and faculty. We talked a bit about my approach and they suggested that I write something about it which ended up being this article. In our conversation, I discussed my educational pipeline strategy in developing students, and my own work, to meet internationalisation standards. As a new assistant professor, and new to Hong Kong, I did not have immediate access to schools as research sites, or students who could help me conduct my research projects. Quite often my students were not confident in their English or traditional academic skills related to teaching or research. Frequently they had limited experiences and understandings with international contexts, and did not think highly of their academic skills. But what some students did have was an explicit desire to improve, goals of becoming a good teacher, and experiences with the struggles of growing up working-class and attending schools that were not of high rank or banding. With these realisations I decided on a strategy that focused on developing the skill sets of students in my classes, organically weaving them into research projects while at the university, and connecting them to future opportunities as Hong Kong educators. In addition, I discussed how some of these students may wish to become researchers in the future, whom I might have the chance to supervise or just collaborate with during their postgraduate studies. Altogether I viewed this strategy as an educational pipeline, which seeks to build points of access, development, and flow in preparing students for the future (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). In order to best prepare the students along this pipeline, my pedagogy with them had to address some of their struggles, and uncover the relevant skills and experiences they already had. This pedagogy of possibility was informed by sociocultural learning and critical pedagogy, as well as my personal experience working in classrooms, programs, and organisations (Chang, 2015). In the next section I discuss how we organised this pedagogy and the educational pipeline.

## Educational pipeline stages: Pedagogy and methodology

In this section, I outline major features of the educational pipeline strategy I have developed and used in Hong Kong. Applying principles of sociocultural learning and critical pedagogy, the overarching goals of the pipeline are to more effectively teach students in university courses, build their skill sets to be strong educators and researchers, and open up possible pathways for collaboration on future research. There are two

aspects of this pipeline to keep in mind. One is that this pipeline was designed to help students and myself meet standards of internationalisation, especially in terms of learner-centred learning, LTL reforms, and being versed in international methods and contexts of education. The second aspect is that the pipeline does not have prescribed outcomes for students. Not all will go on to be educators, and not all have interests in research. Instead the outcomes focus more on how having some critical fluency in teaching and educational research that can help inform their daily lives and their sense of agency in addressing their needs and aspirations.

*Stage 1: Teaching courses towards engagement and reflexivity*

At the university, I teach various education courses for mostly undergraduates who come from different majors, but are generally thinking of going into education-related fields. The courses have English as the mode of instruction (EMI), and usually have second and third-year students. Course topics include theory, policy, and practice of curriculum, assessment, effective teaching, and educational research methods. The teaching load per semester is typically around three, which is not a lot for teaching-focused institutions, but considered heavy for those at research-focused campuses. The number of students per class in upper-division courses is higher than in North America, with about 35-40 undergraduates per class. In addition most of the students are taking 5-7 courses per semester, which is about double the amount taken by students in other leading countries of internationalisation. These numbers, coupled with pre-established course structures that put almost all marks on one or two final assignments (with no marks for class participation), tend to promote a culture where students try to efficiently focus their efforts on finals, and not on class engagement during the semester. This presents challenges to using student-centred learning and LTL practices, especially when students do not feel that comfortable speaking in EMI courses.

To address these challenges, I have kept in mind the simple concept that prioritising classroom engagement, instead of management or discipline, can make teaching more dynamic and effective. One way is by promoting a fun atmosphere in the classroom, such as through jokes (often with the course instructor being the subject of the joke), and explaining concepts through using pop culture such as film clips, cartoons, and anime. This lighter atmosphere tends to relax and open up students' socio-emotional state to diverse ideas. This seemingly simple practice is informed by critical and sociocultural theory, which encourages the use of popular culture to access students' everyday literacy practices, and encourages students to critically look at things found in their daily lives (Jocson, 2006). A related practice that lightens the atmosphere is something my mother encouraged me to do when I taught my first class as a schoolteacher. I occasionally get small snacks for the students, which surprisingly go a long way in showing students I am interested in their well-being and that I think of them beyond my compulsory workload.

A third way I promote engagement is explicitly taking the time to get to know students. Due to the enrolments I usually have each semester, I am not able to replicate some small group practices I have used at other campuses. However the guiding principles of sociocultural and critical approaches to student-centred pedagogy remain the same. These emphasise addressing students' lived experiences, which may include their backgrounds, hobbies, struggles, and aspirations. Some areas of educational research frame this approach as one of care (Howard, 2002), but I also connect it to the notion of re-humanising education for students and teachers alike (Tan, 2009), as they are often relegated to being just another number or low-priority customer/worker in the enormous machine that is today's university corporation. Some practices I use include:

- having students fill out a survey about themselves and education, and sharing it on the first day; this survey is compiled and I read it over to remember their names (I have them include their photo) and get to know them better to tailor the curriculum

- taking the time to briefly chat with students in and out of the class (e.g. in the canteen line, on the shuttle bus), and seem generally friendly or accessible

- being visible on campus by asking students to inform me about their events so I can possibly drop by and support; these include competitions of student-athletes, performances by music majors, and 'cultural awareness' days for 'ethnic minority' and 'foreign' students

In addition to asking students to share about their ideas and lived experiences in class, I also do the same to model the types of engagement that would benefit the class. This includes filling out and sharing the survey, letting students know about my background and interests (e.g. martial arts, hip-hop), and updating them on some things in my life. These practices are employed to foster a more humanising classroom in the sociocultural and critical sense, but they have also been used long before they were studied and theorised as such. In a recent meeting with three veteran teachers at a low-banded secondary school in Kowloon, they talked about how neoliberalisation has all but thrown practices of care and connection out of the window. These teachers remarked that they still make the time to do such practices because care and connection not only make teaching more worthwhile, they also enrich any lesson and are often the thing that students build their engagement and persistence on. Indeed in my experience, care and connections are some of the only things that students, especially from marginalised communities, can draw upon while immersed in the official curriculum and other alienating schooling structures.

But what of actual 'academic' practices? Thus far I may have seemed to only discuss pop culture, food, and socialising with students. To some, these practices represent the soft-side of education that are not in line with the hard data-driven, exam-oriented policies that signify twenty-first century education and global standards of excellence and

accountability (Martin, 2017). My point in discussing the aforementioned 'soft' practices is to show that they should be prioritised in the classroom, especially when there are numerous constraints in context and structure towards meeting 'international' standards and reforms. Without care, connection, and humanisation, other 'more academic' practices may be less effective, if at all. However, I do design and implement such practices concurrently with critical and sociocultural methods. Examples of more mainstream practices include:

- assigning heterogeneous and homogeneous group work in-class, moving from smaller to larger collaborative groups; these groups are assigned or student-selected, but the premise is to diversify their social environments to better grasp and apply concepts

- conducting brief formative assessments, mostly in-class, and occasionally on-line, where students have to articulate their individually-informed ideas about content (e.g. occasional texts introduced via guided reading)

- assigning group presentations on topics of students' interest; these emphasise engaging pedagogy and require pre-presentation consultations in their small groups

- writing self and course assessments at the course's middle or end, concerning how to improve the course and their group presentation's strengths, weaknesses, and roles of group members (which addresses 'free riders')

Such practices are designed to provide a variety of participatory structures that students of diverse backgrounds and skills can engage in. Not all of them work for all students all the time, but that is not the objective. The objective is to purposely build in a host of 'angles' for different students to approach the content. They should be able to gravitate towards some of these 'angles' and apply them to their lives and society. Along with developing various 'angles' of student engagement and application, the activities are meant to promote reflexivity by the students and teacher. Here I employ a critical and sociocultural definition of reflexivity where students not only learn theories, policies and practices, they also explicitly and implicitly practise being reflexive. This means looking at the relationships and inter-connectedness of phenomena in schools, society and their own lives, and the roles that individuals and larger structures play in creating and possibly changing these phenomena (Doherty, Dooley, & Woods, 2013). When students practise reflexivity, they sometimes become more aware of their agency as an educator, researcher, or person in general. In critical pedagogy, this is called the process of developing critical consciousness, or conscientization, where learners feel more self-empowered to take steps to alter and improve their lived realities (Goodwin, 2010).

In classroom and academic discourse, educators who advocate practices of reflexivity, classroom community, and a more humanising pedagogy are sometimes criticised as being 'too soft' or not preparing students for the 'real world.' Having taught and researched with students from marginalised backgrounds of all ages, I have not found this to be true. Actually students from less privileged backgrounds are rather common at EdUHK, and they are quite cognisant of life's harsh realities. What the aforementioned practices can do is help students develop their own individualised foundation through which to tackle life's realities and develop as intellectuals and educators. On that note of being 'hard' or 'soft' when teaching, although I promote a classroom culture of care and community, I will also occasionally do things like scold students, take away their phones, and assign D or F grades to students who repeatedly do not engage in activities/assignments, or do not attend class. From day one I tell the students that the course atmosphere will generally be relaxed and fun, but when there is work to do, I expect them to get it done. By the time the class has developed a more cohesive culture and community, if they need accommodations they are expected to speak up and articulate themselves. Across these various elements of teaching and learning to become an effective educator, students sometimes ask me for a list or something to help them remember the different terms and concepts. While I tell them that we should be wary of essentialising effective teaching and that there is no 'magic bag of tricks' that applies everywhere, I do share an informally devised acronym of core teaching competencies ("PEPPRR") that helps them organise their thoughts:

- **Pedagogy** (clear connections between curriculum, instruction, assessment, policy, culture, politics)

- **Engagement** (active investment by students and teachers)

- **Praxis** (theory ← reflection → practice)

- **People Skills** (strong speaking, leadership, teamwork)

- **Reflexivity** (consistent open-mindedness, critique, adjustment)

- **Resilience** (on-going capacity to self-renew)

While I remind students that there is no one checklist for good teaching, it appears that explicitly tying these concepts together over the semester supports their learning processes as they are able to critique and bounce ideas off the "PEPPRR" conceptualisation.

## Teaching outcomes and feedback

So what have been the outcomes of sociocultural and critical pedagogies in the first

stage of our educational pipeline? Officially, evaluations from students and colleagues have been positive. In a previous section I mentioned distinctions awarded, which include "Outstanding Teaching Performance" in the Curriculum & Instruction (C&I) Department for the last two years, as well as "Top 10% Teaching" by the Faculty of Education & Human Development. These awards are generated at the department level, and then awarded within the faculty. Receiving these recognitions within C&I has been an honour as the Department has received the university's highest mean on student evaluations. As a professor who is not fluent in Cantonese, there have been obstacles in communicating with students. I know there is much room for improvement, but to receive distinctions, particularly those generated by students, lets me know that at least some of what we have been doing is effective.

Aside from official metrics, feedback from individual students has usually been positive. Godfrey (all students' names are pseudonyms), is a locally-born third-year Liberal Studies major. He commented that despite his limited English, our course got him talking with other students, meeting new people from other majors, and applying critical concepts to his secondary school teaching practice. Several second-year Science & Web Technology students, Michael, Pius and Alex, wrote that the formative assessments pushed them to do readings that they normally would not do, and they found the content helpful for their teaching despite being in English and often having international contexts. Finally, Sara, a student from mainland China I taught as a second-year English major, wrote me two years later to tell me that our class was the most useful for her teaching career. While there have of course been issues within classes, and the pedagogy will need to be continually updated, receiving the above feedback has been encouraging when trying to teach content and use methods consistent with international standards. In the next section on our educational pipeline, we move from teaching to developing a team to conduct research.

*Stage 2: Assembling a diverse team*

Aside from teaching, professors are expected to do service and research aligned with internationalisation. Often times, university academics find themselves working in silos, isolated from even their department colleagues, as evaluations of their work tend to reward individual 'performance.' For example, collaborative publications with colleagues from the same institution are indirectly discouraged as each author has to split credit for the article, which effectively reduces each person's funding and merits received. My personal approach to these policies has been to still engage in scholarly dialogue with EdUHK colleagues, but also foster collaborations with external academics. Another challenge has been finding research assistants (RAs) who are qualified, dependable, and willing to come out to our campus in the New Territories. As a junior scholar new to the SAR, I did not have many students or RAs seeking me out. In addition, being a scholar of critical theory and qualitative action research did not appeal as much to those who wanted to work within

dominant paradigms of positivist and quantitative methodology (Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002). These difficulties pushed me to look towards EdUHK students I did have access to, and develop an educational pipeline with those that had taken courses with me. In other words, since I did not have sustainable connections to research staff, or even research sites, I invested my time in training students to help with projects and become potential collaborators as future teachers and researchers, all while I further studied and made connections to the local context.

I began by contacting a few students that had received a Bs or As in the same class, but more importantly had asked questions and were open-minded to educational reform. I determined these factors by reviewing their work and my notes, and then contacted the students. I asked if they were interested in paid on-campus work, which would include teacher research projects and some administrative duties. I first recruited four students, two locally-raised 'Hong Kongers' of Chinese heritage, one from South Korea, and one from northern China. Some were from working-class families, others were from more upper-middle class backgrounds. I recruited this group because I wanted to allow for more diverse experiences and international considerations while researching Hong Kong, and because these students showed willingness to engage with different communities beyond typical 'mainland,' 'Hong Konger,' or 'ethnic minority' divisions. Informed by critical and sociocultural research on learning with and about diversity (e.g. language, class, nationality) beyond just tolerance, I believed that our members' backgrounds could facilitate transformative insights for all involved (Chang & Lee, 2012). This included myself as a diasporic Chinese raised and educated in the US, with parents who were born in China but migrated through Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam.

Before finalising the team, I asked each to submit a CV and come in for an individual interview. From the start I let the students know that their work was to be more than just clerical busywork or data entry. I informed them that the team would help holistically develop their skills as educators and researchers, that I would work with them to hone specific skills related to their aspirations, and that we would start with improving the CVs they had submitted. I also mentioned how the team would be an evolutionary next step of what we had developed in our class, moving beyond coursework to actual projects and programs on and off campus. After discussing logistics (e.g. office work for two hours each week, bi-monthly team meetings), I told them that they were on a trial run and if their participation was not consistently working out, I would have to let them go. After the interviews were conducted and the four signed on to the team, we began a series of introductory meetings devised to bring them up to speed with what I expected. As they had already gone through the same class, the team knew that the work culture would be more relaxed but a certain amount of focus, commitment, and sensitivity was required. We had about two readings to discuss in each initial meeting, which I allotted paid time for them to review in advance. These readings were a blend of classic international texts by scholar-practitioners that explored the use of critical and sociocultural pedagogies, as

well as papers written by scholars in Greater China that addressed local issues. As all of the members planned on becoming teachers, I made it a point to read studies about how action research can be utilised to improve teaching and address educational inequities (Chiang, 2004; Storms, 2015). After a few reading group meetings, I had the students do on-line searches for research on related topics and personal interest. As they were somewhat familiar with doing APA-style bibliographies from university courses, I had them download free versions of EndNote and they practiced compiling a few entries that were shared amongst the team on-line. At this point the team was capable of helping me with basic literature reviews and notes on references.

At each meeting, an agenda was created with minutes taken by a different member each time. Taking minutes, writing bibliographies, and conducting literature reviews were activities I started the team on through a 'workshop' approach during each meeting. We did discuss the business items on our agenda, but I also trained them on effective ways of doing their tasks of scholarship and pedagogy. This approach provided a base of 'hard' skills for our research, but like my classroom teaching, I was also developing 'soft' skills. For example, crafting meeting agendas included scheduling and following-up on action items after the meeting, but there was also an opening 'Check-In' section where members briefly shared things they had been doing since the last meeting. When our schedules aligned, we would go to lunch or tea after meetings, and birthdays were celebrated through dinner off campus. These activities, like the 'Check-In,' were not academic in nature, but meant to build the team's cohesion similar to the aforementioned practices of getting to know each other in courses I taught.

*Stage 3: Developing an action research project*

The first project we worked on was a qualitative action research study examining uses of pop culture and education. The project conducted surveys, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group with about 35 students, teachers, and artists based in Hong Kong. At this point we collectively came up with the name PCRP for our team, which stood for the "Pop Culture and education Research Project." Funded by a small university grant, I deliberately progressed at a slower pace in conducting PCRP's activities, taking the time to walk the team through steps such as piloting the survey and interview protocols with peers, and then having them accompany me for initial interviews. While I could have completed PCRP more quickly on my own, I viewed it as the next stage of our educational pipeline that was building the capacity of our team to collect and analyse data. Here a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis worked well for the team (Charmaz, 2008; Morrell, 2006). The iterative and reflexive nature of grounded theory with critical action research encouraged us to consistently and purposefully communicate about our research questions, what we were noticing within data collection, and how we might modify the next stage of our project to more dynamically address our lines of inquiry. This 'real-time' process usually took place at our team meetings or in office hours where we worked the

data by hand.

After the five of us had been working together for over six months, some personnel changes were on the horizon. Yuri, our Korean team member, needed to return to her home institution to graduate, and the other three members (Charlie, Monica, Claire) were going abroad on their summer language immersion programs. This forced me to step up further development of the pipeline by recruiting another two students. In order to bring the new members up to speed, the existing team needed to coordinate the documentation of our project, reflect on our processes up to that point, and make modifications: all while wrapping up the interviews and transitioning towards the final data collection stage. So we streamlined the readings and workshops on methods, organised meeting minutes and data matrices, and compiled "Top 5" lists on things to know about PCRP. By the time we conducted the focus group in May, we had two new members of the team, former students of mine from a different class than the first PCRP cohort. Chelsea was of Chinese background who was born in Hong Kong but went to school in Southeast Asia. Brenda was born and raised in Hong Kong while her family was originally from India. As we prepared for the summer, all team members had experience in applying qualitative methods to research focused on improving teaching. Aside from our next steps in the educational pipeline, this training prepared the students for their university honours projects.

*Stage 4: Building connections and collaborations*

PCRP and the educational pipeline have emphasised theory/reflection/practice, or praxis, throughout its progression. In Stages 1 to 3, we learned key steps of social science research methodology and applied them in a research project. We also studied effective teaching in sociocultural and critical theory, and examined those effective practices with students/teachers in the field. Another important stage of praxis in the pipeline was connecting our work to the world beyond our team, projects, and campus. Key activities at this stage included coordinating events to share PCRP's work and collaborating with scholars (local and abroad). These activities helped the team to broaden their skill sets as they learned to plan and implement engaging events connected to our themes of pop culture, teaching, and educational equity. They also worked on these events with various scholars and their students/staff, which generated valuable experiences in bringing different people together under common goals. This also helped team members to network and build a more nuanced understanding of research in Hong Kong and abroad. Finally, they added to their skill sets by presenting and teaching about our research to their peers, the university community, and off-campus stakeholders like teachers and principals.

Our first effort was the "Critical Issues in Education Seminar Series" (CIES1) with Peter McLaren (Chapman University, USA). For CIES1, team members coordinated a social justice roundtable event with Peter and Margaret Lo (Hong Kong University), as

well as an individual seminar by Peter. As this took place during the summer with less people on campus, the team had more opportunities to deliberate and arrange coordination. For CIES1, Yuri flew back from South Korea to help Chelsea and Brenda while the others were on immersion. For CIES2 the following semester, the program coordination was more complicated as we had two scholars visiting, Liang Du (Beijing Normal University) and Wayne Au (University of Washington, USA), and we coordinated two individual seminars, two school visits with teachers, and a roundtable with Angel Lin (University of Hong Kong). While team members were busier with CIES2 taking place during the semester, all but one were present so it enabled greater collaboration and communal support. This also allowed the team to run a workshop that shared PCRP's findings via activities about effective teaching and educational reform. Throughout these events, EdUHK colleagues were supportive and PCRP members were able to make connections with them and their work. Altogether, the team's praxis was strengthened at this pipeline stage by going beyond readings and individual research, to fostering connections and collaborations with educators doing related critical and sociocultural work. At this stage the benefits of the pipeline progressed in multiple directions as it merged with the activities and programs of other scholars, faculties, and institutions, including international work.

## Towards future praxis and sustainability

At the time this article was written, the team was preparing for CIES3 and was accepted to do a group presentation at an academic conference with other Hong Kong teacher educators. PCRP also shifted its efforts to new projects addressing high-stakes exams and parent resistance, Filipino/a secondary teachers, and pre-service teachers and interculturality. With these shifts we refashioned our name to the "Project for Critical Research, Pedagogy & Praxis." During this period, I asked the six members to reflect on their experiences. At the time Brenda and Chelsea were year-three students, working as tutors and applying their PCRP training to their B.Ed. courses. Monica, Charlie, and Claire were beginning their senior thesis projects and classroom field experiences, and were thus utilising their PCRP experiences. Yuri had become an English teacher but was also planning to eventually apply for Master's programs. To maintain her research skills, she applied to a Korean national conference on multicultural education, and was accepted to present on a comparative project she had done in Hong Kong. All members seemed to make positive connections between their lives and PCRP, but I did ask them to further critique their process with PCRP and the educational pipeline.

Coming from Southeast Asia, Chelsea said she benefited from learning more about Hong Kong's system in comparison with other countries through literature review and engaging with international scholars. In her everyday studies she built up the confidence to persistently tackle difficult readings in her coursework, given her experiences with PCRP's more rigorous scholarship. Brenda indexed her development of reflexivity, stating

that she was able to, "reflect on my own experiences and think deeply about the issues that affected me as a student." She also wrote about how she had improved her ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds, and her mindset concerning what a teacher can actually do.

From the first cohort, Claire talked about how PCRP presented her with analytical tools to look at problems in more dynamic ways. She stated, "I discuss more complicated issues and concepts with others now…I'm more able to react to different issues. I sometimes think of solutions to social problems that seem feasible." For Charlie, he saw the benefits of using international perspectives for research. As a primary teacher, he stated that his pedagogy would be able to mediate between traditional direct instruction and critical dialogue. Coming from mainland China with the least English experience, Monica did not have the most confidence in her communication and also noted I could be strict at times with deadlines and sensitivity to issues. However, she appraised her skill set as having improved in not only speaking, but also academic readings, research skills, and critical consciousness. Monica, Charlie, and Yuri reported that our educational pipeline served as an equitable space to think and work on ideas to improve their own everyday agency. Finally Yuri shared, "It always felt like I was having private tutoring when we talked about concepts during the PCRP meeting and further readings…what I learned in HK during 1 year was so much more than I learned for 3 years before." She also wrote, "All of the inspiring researchers I've met were actual teachers who worked in classrooms before they got into research. By witnessing their authentic work, it made me desire to have the same experience." Aside from the individual feedback above, all members expressed the goal of at least earning a Master's degree that would include further research. Between their studies, jobs, and future aspirations, PCRP and the educational pipeline appeared to provide experiences that would help sustain their development.

In looking back to the past 2.5 years of the PCRP team, there were some challenges in terms of communication and task delegation. We were often pressed for time and had to multi-task, and we had to be supportive when we were under stress or made mistakes. Occasionally the newer members were confused when they first joined, although the other members helped bring them up to speed. At times I questioned my ability to guide the team along various paths of pedagogy and methodology, and see the projects to fruition in an environment that is not always friendly to critical theory and action research. The classroom sections of our educational pipeline also had their share of difficulties when students were confused, lacked confidence, or did not see the relevance of personal and societal issues to Hong Kong education. In such times I had to revisit some of the great mentorship I had in the past as a student, teacher, and researcher, and how strategies of dialogue, problem-posing, reflexivity, and community-building were key.

Overall, whether it was previous mentors or theories, being mindful of our foundations of care, humanisation, equity, and social justice was helpful as we travelled

new and divergent paths with PCRP and its embedded educational pipeline. It took more initial planning to get going in my courses, but eventually it saved time as the courses were cohesive and students got much more out of meeting 'internationalisation' standards. The end result of these pedagogies was a more rewarding experience for teacher and student, and they allowed me to establish the pipeline that would cultivate subsequent opportunities for all of us to more authentically and sustainably learn, teach, and research at 'appropriate' levels of internationalisation. Instead of duplicating a stereotypical teacher-centred pedagogy in the daily pursuit of 'international' curriculum, a sociocultural and critical pedagogy helped me, not just the students, grow in the classroom beyond well-meaning but often stifling benchmarks. While internationalisation standards and policies will continue to shift in Hong Kong, and contexts of students and communities will change, the aforementioned experiences and feedback gathered with students have provided some solid and flexible strategies to move forward in our capacities of teaching, service, and scholarship in higher education.

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