

## On the borders of Pedagogy: Implementing a critical pedagogy for students on the Thai Burma Border

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*This article uses an auto-ethnographic approach to explore the reflections and insights that occurred during my teaching of a subject in adolescent development on the Thai Burma border. This paper adopts a relatively descriptive style to a personal reflection of teaching on the border and how it transformed the way I teach and made me look at the pedagogy that underpins my teaching practice. I found a lack of congruence between the pedagogical theories that are espoused and how I could apply these to a border setting. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways I began to develop a Thai Burma classroom praxis that drew on the theoretical underpinnings of a humanising critical pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** *refugee, Burmese, critical pedagogy, transformation, collaboration*

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## **Introduction**

The border between Burma and Thailand represents the beginnings, endings, and blending of languages, cultures, communities, and countries. It also reflects the complexity, juxtaposition, and intersection of identities, economies, and social and educational issues. Since 2008 the Australian Catholic University has delivered a diploma in liberal arts for Burmese refugees living in this border region. The circumstances for students in these borderlands create significant and complex challenges within a tertiary education environment. This article uses an auto-ethnographic approach to explore the reflections and insights that occurred during my teaching of a subject in adolescent development. This paper adopts a relatively descriptive style to a personal reflection of teaching on the border and how it transformed the way I teach and made me look at the pedagogy that underpins my teaching practice. I found a lack of congruence between the pedagogical theories that are espoused and how I could apply these to a border setting. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore some of the ways I began to develop a Thai Burma classroom praxis that drew on the theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy.

## **Background: Burmese Refugees and Education on the border**

For decades Burma's population of approximately 50 million has struggled for democracy and human rights against a brutal military regime (Allden, 2015:4). With over one hundred ethnic groups, Burma is said to have the richest ethnic diversity in Asia. The largest ethnic minorities typically live in mountainous frontier regions. Minority group demands for autonomy and self-determination, often in the form of militant insurgency have been brutally suppressed by the Burmese military. Civilians in these ethnic areas suffer the most and thousands have been forcibly relocated and their land confiscated. Increasing campaigns against ethnic groups have driven an estimated 500,000 people from their homes into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) areas inside Myanmar or across the border to refugee camps in Thailand (Allden 2015:5).

The conflict has resulted in over 3,000 ethnic villages being razed to the ground, poor farmers being killed or abducted, and educational, health and social services being destroyed. While the inhabitants of the

camps have mostly fled violence and oppression in their homeland, an increasing number are leaving for reasons of poverty and educational opportunities (KHRG 2009).

Zeus (2011) estimates that around 150,000 refugees live in refugee camps along the Thai Burma Border, and have done so for a quarter of a century (2011:257). Until 1995, refugees on the Thailand-Burma border lived in village-type settlements and were allowed to travel outside the camps to get food and shelter materials. Camp life changed dramatically in 1995 after attacks by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the village-type settlements were merged into large, sprawling camps that became increasingly dependent on outside aid as residents became more and more restricted on space and movement (TBC, 2004). Due to this restriction on movement, there has been a ‘whole generation who have been born and raised in the artificial environment of a refugee camp’ (Zeus 2011: 257). This is what is known as a protracted refugee situation (PRS), and one in which the typical response is a process of encampment, where refugees are contained in isolated camps, mostly in border regions (Zeus, 2011: 257).

Worldwide, two-thirds of all refugees now live in protracted refugee situations (PRS), defined by UNHCR as ‘25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries’ (Maclaren 2010:105). Such situations ‘involve large refugee populations that are long-standing, chronic or recurring, and for which there are no immediate prospects for a solution’ (Maclaren 2010:105) a description that perfectly fits the plight of Burmese refugees in Thailand. This ‘trend’, recently termed the “warehousing” of refugees” (Loescher *et al* 2007:3) has existed along the Thai-Burmese border for about a quarter century. Having spent much or all of their lives in confinement, young people ambitiously progress through the basic camp education system only to find themselves with few opportunities to further their studies. Although Higher Education has been made available to a select number of refugees through various modes, increased student demand exceeds current provision.

Higher education in protracted refugee situations (HEPRS) might appear like a series of paradoxes, contradictions in terms, or situations which seem impossible or extremely difficult to achieve for they contain

two opposite characteristics or social meanings. The most obvious might be that universities are generally associated with freedom, be it academic freedom or freedom of thought and speech more broadly. Refugees, however, are deemed to be 'unfree', for many spend much of their time in exile in camps where restrictions are placed on their basic rights and freedoms. Moreover, higher education institutes are considered long-term, sustainable institutions, whereas refugee camps, although having in many cases existed for several decades, still carry a connotation of temporariness (Zeus, 2011).

### **Crossing into educational Borders – the ACU diploma**

The Australian Catholic University (ACU) was the first tertiary institution to offer accredited university education to refugees and migrants in protracted refugee situations. The program is funded solely by ACU as part of its community engagement program and is offered in western Thailand in Mae Sot and Ranong in Southern Thailand.

Since 2008, the diploma has offered units which adhered to what the Burma community itself regarded as useful. Lecturers progressively changed the content of their units to be of more relevance to the Burmese or refugee context. The Diploma is taught in mixed mode—online and face-to-face teaching by ACU lecturers. The first unit of the Diploma in Liberal Studies is English Communication Skills, which covers academic English and academic practices such as proper referencing. Students then study Global Environmental Change, Introduction to Development, Introduction to Management, An Introduction to International Human Rights Law and Practice, Issues in Global Health, Adolescent development and wellbeing and Education for Sustainability.

Initially, ACU elicited the assistance of some Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in identifying potential students who had the commitment to remain on the border. In addition, only students who had been through post-10 secondary education, had passed a written and oral English test, and had not applied for resettlement at time of application for the course were accepted. More recently, the Memorandum of Understanding between ACU and the students asks them to devote at least two years of their time after graduating to the refugee or migrant community. Whereas all students in the past

belonged to the majority ethnic group, the Karen, a deliberate attempt was made to include students of as many ethnic groups as possible. In the current Diploma program, there are eight Burmese ethnicities represented. There was also an attempt to maintain gender equality and, in the current program, there are thirty six females and twenty five males undertaking the course. Students must have completed year 12 – within the camps or Myanmar, and pass the English language test, which is administered by ACU staff within the camps. Each year applications well exceed the number of places offered. Once the students are offered a place they are able to stay in the group houses funded by ACU for the duration of their course.

Each Diploma course begins with an orientation session lasting at least a week on topics such as introducing the participating universities, dealing with expectations of the students as well as the universities' expectation of them, critical thinking, peace-building exercises, and guides to study. There are resident tutors who work with students to improve their academic English and assist them with assignments. There is a resident tutor is on hand to guide the students on a day-to-day basis and there is a local Burmese coordinator who looks after the students' well-being and security, liaison with the local authorities, and logistical matters.

### **Auto ethnography**

Although I have worked and lived in refugee communities for over thirty years, my role as a teacher on the Thai Burma border has significantly changed my outlook on how I teach as it required me to reflect carefully on how I practice, why I teach the way I do and how I could adjust class content to make this relevant to the students in Thailand. In order to reflect on this and in the writing of this article, I have drawn upon methodology from auto ethnography, a research process where the researcher becomes the phenomenon under investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:741). Auto-ethnography is a useful methodology for researchers and teachers in settings such as the Thai Burma as it can lead to greater understanding for the researcher of their own practice (Chang, 2008 p. 51). Auto-ethnography can also assist in examining the assumptions that are usually overlooked but influence our actions in life and work (Muncey, 2010, p.xi). Furthermore, reflexivity researchers consciously reveal their beliefs and values when selecting their research

methodologies and writing about their research (Hellowell, 2006). When I began preparing for my class in Thailand I looked to the literature for a pedagogy I could draw on that took into account the experience of teaching in protracted refugee settings. While much has been written about the need for education in short-term emergencies, there is dearth of research that analyses refugee camp education from a long-term perspective (Corrigan, 2005). I then looked towards the literature on critical pedagogy where although rich in theory lacks in guidance about its implementation (Estes, 2004; Keesing-Styles, 2003). Finally, I looked at literature on experiential education where a lack of congruence between what is theoretically espoused and what is practiced again emerged (Estes 2004). Consideration of these three factors further motivated me to explore my own practice.

Therefore this article is based solely on my reflections and perceptions and the insights that I gained during my time in Thailand. In this way it draws on my personal experience and connects it to the wider issues and culture of the class (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). As auto ethnography draws on reflexivity, and situates the personal experience within that of the wider group, it does not sit within the more conventional styles of academic writing. Given this, I do not pretend to be objective.

Alongside my experience as a teacher I am also mindful of the ethics of refugee research which demand the, 'intersecting issues of power and consent, confidentiality and trust, ... as well as the broader cross-cutting issues of gender, culture, human rights and social justice' (Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Hugman, 2010). As I initially had not considered writing about this experience, I had not applied for ethics approval. When I realised I would like to document this experience, I spoke about it with my class. They all expressed willingness for me to do this. I have put several drafts of this paper on the ACU e-learning site where students have commented on content and my interpretation of events.

### **Looking for a Thai Burma Critical Pedagogy**

'Critical pedagogy' is the general name given to theoretical perspectives and oppositional pedagogies that promote educational experiences that are transformative, empowering, and transgressive (Giroux, 2004; Kincheloe, 2005; McLaren, 2003). It is a 'way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among teaching, the

production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relationships of the wider community, society, and nation-state' (McLaren 1999:454). Critical pedagogy is drawn from many theoretical streams (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003) including liberation theology, Freirian pedagogy, the sociology of knowledge, the Frankfurt school of critical theory, feminist theory, neo-Marxist cultural criticism and, more recently, postmodern social theory. It is influenced greatly by the work of Freire (1974) and seeks to expose and deconstruct conceptions of truth that privilege those in power and perpetuate injustice (Darder et al., 2003).

Critical pedagogy also views education as a form of cultural politics and as a means to social justice and change (Giroux, 1992, 1994), since education always involves an introduction to, preparation for and legitimisation of, certain ways of seeing and behaving in the world. Education always involves power relationships and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge. Invariably, these forms of knowledge serve to reproduce social inequalities linked to racism, sexism, class discrimination and ethnocentrism. Therefore Critical pedagogy aims to engage teachers and students in a critical, dialectical examination of how existing curriculum, resources and approaches to teaching offer students a perspective on the world that serves to marginalise certain voices and ways of life. The task of critical pedagogy is for teachers and students to make explicit the socially constructed character of knowledge, and ask whose interests particular 'knowledges' serve. Armed with such awareness, students and teachers should be able to challenge unequal and undemocratic structures (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 1992, 1994, 1996; McLaren, 1995, 1999).

Although critical pedagogy has been in the forefront of discussion it appears that it still exists more as a theory of pedagogy rather than a practical guide for educators about the principles that should govern their work (Osborne, 1990; Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993). It is agreed that critical theory continues to be excessively abstract and too far removed from the everyday life of educators. Giroux (1988) declared that critical educational theory has '[been unable to move from criticism to substantive vision' (1988:37). He maintains that critical theory has been unable to 'posit a theoretical discourse and set of categories for constructing forms of knowledge, classroom social relationships, and

visions of the future that give substance to the meaning of critical pedagogy' (Giroux: 37-38). Gore (1993) argues that, in fact, some of the best writings of critical theorists offer little suggestion of strategies that teachers might use in the classroom. Indeed, critical pedagogy and its theoretical language does not rest easily sit with other contexts, such as the Thai Burma.

As a teacher it is often difficult to reconcile the emancipatory claims of the critical pedagogy literature with the day-to-day reality of working in institutions that appear to work in the opposite direction. However, I would argue that critical pedagogy does provide a set of ideas with which teachers can work to explore new pedagogical possibilities, and it is in this vein that this article works. The literature of critical pedagogy provides a resource with which to interrogate existing educational practices. This is the value of some of the more 'practical' works of critical pedagogy that provide examples of how teachers have attempted to develop critical pedagogies in their classrooms (Peterson 2009; Perry 2008). They provide examples to be rejected, modified or attempted in new contexts.

### **Critical Praxis in the Thai Burma classroom**

Taking of my shoes and walking into the wooden house that serves as the ACU class room on the border, I was aware I would be teaching in a context of 'unprecedented historical trauma' (Worsham, 2006: 170) and must adapt my teaching to the 'posttraumatic cultural moments' which would infiltrate my class room – both for myself and my students (Zembylas 2013). I was mindful of the work of Zembylas (2013: 177) who uses a concept of 'troubled knowledge' (knowledge coming from the "profound feeling of loss, shame, resentment, or defeat that one carries from his or her participation in a traumatised society"), and argues that there is a need to acknowledge the consequences of the emotional complexity or 'difficult knowledge' in conflict and post conflict situations in order to enrich the radical potential in creating transformative classrooms.

Critical pedagogy in these contexts, should not simply rest on questioning but it should also be 'the people there, the bodies in the classroom, who carry knowledge within themselves, that must be



engaged, interrupted and transformed' (Jansen 2009:258). Therefore, I was aware that I must somehow turn the theories of pedagogy into meaningful classroom teaching. In the rest of this article I will draw on Freire's (1970) concept of praxis as a basis for addressing how I worked with some of the aforementioned incongruence in developing a praxis that acts on the theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy applicable for the Thai Burma setting.

### **Developing an Authentic curriculum**

Curriculum in Critical pedagogy is based on the idea that there is no one methodology that can work for all populations (Degener, 2001). As Bartolome (1996) also maintains, there is no set curriculum or program because all decisions related to curriculum and material to be studied are based on the needs and interests of students (Giroux, 1997; Shor, 1992). In developing the curriculum for this unit, I was reminded of how both the content and form of the curriculum are ideological in nature (Giroux 1988). This means that both the knowledge that inform the subject and the way it is taught also affirm the values, interests and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society (McLaren, 2003). This was particularly relevant in my unit as I was teaching a subject on adolescent development, to students whose society does not recognise adolescence. Additionally, there has been virtually no dialogue between the global 'North' and the 'South' in youth studies, which means that dominant interpretive paradigms describe most accurately young people in the nations and cultures where these paradigms are produced rendering them useful only to nations such as Australia (Nilan, 2011:21). Historically, in the West, the term 'youth' has been variously constructed as a category of people who are not children, yet neither are they adults. This definition has to be contextualised in the Thai Burma context where young people have faced the lived experience of trafficking, war, work and early marriage, often at a time of life that we would consider in the West to still be childhood. Thus, the curriculum needed to be framed through the use of student experiences and realities of their lives (Degener 2001).

Prior to leaving Australia, I had met with two Burmese graduates of my youth work course in Melbourne, both who had come through the ACU program on the border. They offered me suggestions about how

the subject could be adopted to the border context. Although armed with ideas, I deliberately left deciding on the topic sequence and assigned readings until I got to the border. On our first day together, we discussed forms of knowledge and information that reflect the experience of young people in the border. It was agreed by the class that experience is an essential part of knowledge and that we would draw on our experiences to explore the issues surrounding wellbeing for young Burmese adolescents. Following the suggestion of Kessing Styles (2003) the lesson plans were based on materials from Burmese writers and popular culture which are representative of the realities on the border and within Burma and which would serve as the basis for discussion and critical reflection of the culture (Ohara, Safe, & Crookes, 2000). The texts and their themes were provided by myself, and the students who bring their experiences to the classroom and place that knowledge with the context in which it took place (Kincheloe (2005).

### **Teaching Methodology**

Teaching methodology can be a source of educational hegemony. Freire (1974) refers to the 'banking model' of education whereby the student functions as an open repository to whatever knowledge the teacher chooses to deposit that day. This methodology further supports the dominant educational ideology that silences and marginalises students' voice and experience.

One method to counter the 'banking model' of education is the problem-posing (liberatory) method of education espoused by Freire (1974). Within this practice, dialogue is employed as a pedagogical method in juxtaposition to the oppressive monological methods of knowledge transmission. Problem-posing education counters the hierarchical nature of 'banking' education by suggesting that education should be co-intentional, involving both teachers and students as subjects. Through dialogue new relationships emerge, that of teacher-student and student teacher (Freire, 1974). Within this context, there is opportunity for moving beyond some of the limiting factors of banking education.

The Thai Burma classroom is not a homogenous environment with a common understanding of oppression, but in fact a deeply divided space of several ethnicities all who have their own experience of living in and escaping from Burma. It was critical at the start of the class that

I constructed a safe space to enable critical and productive dialogue. This safe space was not intended as a therapeutic intervention, but rather a space of ‘critical emotional praxis’ (Zembylas 2013:203). This is described by Zembylas (2013) to be a space where pedagogical opportunities are created for critical enquiry and where a restoration of humanity, healing and reconciliation can take place. When a class is a safe place, and common feelings of vulnerability and empathy emerge, and we can relate our stories, we set up better conditions for new relations. As Zembylas (2013) notes this occurs as it ‘offers opportunities for transformation because teachers and students translate emotional understandings into new ways of living with others’ (2013:177).

As a starting point, I moved students into a circle and we began a process of collectively establishing classroom ‘expectations’. I reminded the students that we had all agreed that experience was important knowledge and we would be drawing on our own experience and therefore confidentiality was important. There was some discussion as we translated the concept of confidentiality into Burmese and Kareni as the closest words to confidentiality in Burmese are *Liu wak* and *teb dot the er*, which translate to ‘secret’ (Erikson et al, 2015:141). Being mindful of the impact of secrecy and silence perpetrated by the Burmese regime, we discussed this more in terms of not ‘gossiping’ outside the classroom, and that ‘what is said in here stays in here’. One student referred to the Buddhist concepts of sanctuary and refuge as a living space within the class. At this point I also told students that the content of this subject may cause students worry or *sou: jeinde* and reminded them that they had the choice whether to talk or not and they should weigh up the risk and consequences of doing so, but that I was here for them to talk to me should they need.

My aim from that point on was to create a student-teacher led classroom process. To start with I asked the class what music young people like to listen to on the border. Students were keen to tell me about a Burmese band called ‘Iron Cross’ – the most popular band in Burma. They play western style music with Burmese lyrics that first have to be approved by a Board of censors. Students all comment that Lay Phyu, the group’s lead singer, is the most admired celebrity in the country because he taunts the government at every opportunity. In class we listened to songs from an album called ‘Power 54’. Students told me that apparently

it was on the shelves and people were buying it before the government realised 54 is Aung San Suu Kyi's street address. Another time, his hair was down to his waist and the government told him to cut it. So he shaved his head. And then a military officer asked him to perform at the wedding of his son and Lay Phyu said, 'These are not our people'. Using this a starting point allowed a discussion around young people and rebellion, resistance and disaffection, and some of the issues Frymer (2005:1) would suggest are symbolic of this disaffection – drugs, gangs, suicide and violence.

Another song, 'Yoo Shin The BarWah' is about obtaining a 'simple, happy life' and so I asked the students 'what does a 'happy life' or wellbeing look like for a young person in Burma and on the border and much to my surprise there were many overlaps with young people in the West – friends, belonging, family, protection, good mental health and freedom. There were also vast differences, as students described a life free of trafficking, working, being recruited as a soldier, early marriage and a myriad of health and trauma related issues. This was how the class started each morning, and when the song concluded I asked the students to summarise the major themes discussed in the lyrics and relate these to the lecture or discussion topics. Students were asked to make connections with their own lives and experiences. Did they have any personal experiences that would support or undermine the situations described in the songs? This created a powerful setting for presenting and reviewing material and making connections between their own experiences and the larger social, economic and political context.

The songs students chose are also important for another reason. Building a classroom community was one of the central features of the critical praxis employed. It has been questioned that such collaborative learning may motivate students but can it bring about a more socially just world? Students told me that they feel that the ethnic reconciliation amongst the Burmese is essential for the future of their country. This does not mean 'social forgetting and silent sufferings and grievances' (Gravers, 2007 cited in Costello 2008: 112), but building a community of trust. The breakdowns in interpersonal relations in Burma and the border have inhibited the formation or, and trust in, friendship and support networks. Aung San Suu Kyi (2004) has written that 'the greatest obstacle in the way of peace and progress in Burma is the

lack of trust: trust between the government and the people, between different ethnic groups, between the military and civilian forces. Trust is a precious commodity that is easily lost, but hard indeed to take root' (cited in Skidmore 2004: 51). In one song, by Zae Win Htut, '*Si Lone Chin Atwet Tha Chin Ta Pote*' each of the main ethnicities of Burma are represented. When this song was played the students from each of the ethnic groups stood up and did the particular cultural dance to their part of the song – it was done with great pride and their fellow students listened, clapped and smiled and encouraged them. We then talked about what unity of Burma means to them and the role young people can play in achieving this. It was the creating of this democratic space through such constructivist oriented classroom practices that in many ways was an act of social justice itself (Dewey 1938).

I generally used a mixed methods approach with most classes including experiential activities, small-group work, student presentations, discussion, and creative expression. I would begin by identifying a clear purpose to the lesson and identify related readings. I then moved on to incorporate a mini-lecture, guided discussion or small group work, and an experiential activity. To initiate dialogue, I included dialogue 'triggers' – photos, cartoons, comics, poems, digital material and stories – all with a focus on young people in Burma.

I also followed Wallerstein and Bernstein's (1988) 'SHOWED' technique to respond to such triggers (cited in Peterson, 2009: 313)

- S** what do you See?
- H** what's Happening to your feelings?
- O** relate it to your Own lives
- W** Why do we face these problems?
- E**
- D** what can we Do about it?

As Peterson (2009) describes, what is the most useful about this method is that it directs students away from 'spontaneous conversation to a progression that moves from personal realities to social analysis to consideration of action' (2009:13). I often took this task further in asking students to identify two or more opinions on an issue and then talk about the evidence that supports what they believe. For example,

in one class I showed a photo of a young punk in Burma. There were various reactions to this, but mainly laughter, ridicule and shock. We then read several newspaper articles about the rise of punk in Burma. Using print media in this way can be particularly useful, if the teacher can assist students to unpack the ways in which unequal social relations are 'reinforced by those institutionally empowered to do so' (Kelly, 2006: 27). As youth subcultures are a particular area that attract considerable news coverage and are often over sensationalised, this is a good opportunity to examine theories of 'moral panic'. I then showed the students blogs written from within Burma about how young punks were feeding the poor and had started a chapter of 'Food not Bombs' in Yangon. This enabled a good discussion on about whose ideological interests stigmatised images serve and what impact such reports may have about young people in society and any subsequent coercive measures. This exercise also enabled students to differentiate between opinion and evidence. Students then were asked to write a small report on the issues of Punks in Burma from different perspectives.

When we explored different topics I would always ask students 'Is this useful for your community?' 'How will your community react to this information?' 'What will happen if a young person does this?', 'How would you change or improve this topic?' These suggestions were first asked about the class itself, but I then incorporated them into specific subjects such as mental health, drugs and alcohol and violence. This enabled me to see how these issues were thought about and addressed within the community context.

## **Assessment**

If multiple 'ways of knowing' and multiple sources of knowledge are valued, then multiple methods of assessment must also be considered. As I had initiated a collaborative learning model from the start of the class, I felt that bringing in a standardised assessment from the outside, or designed by me separate from the class, would only 'contradict the emergence of students as subjects' (Shor, 1980: 112). Assessment was developed so that in their assignments students were able to pick up the themes that are most meaningful and most relevant to their own lives and the content in which they work (Kessing-Styles, 2003). In this way assessment became part of the learning activities that are

consistent with the democratic processes of the classroom. I had been warned that such processes take some time to establish as they often challenge all the preconceived notions of education and teacher power that students enter with from their previous experiences, however I was remarkably surprised how quickly students engaged with this process. Two of the themes that had emerged throughout the class were how adolescence was experienced differently on the border and what programs could be developed for young people in a border context. Therefore, the class decided that the development of a 5 minute digital narrative on adolescence and the development of a youth community program would be the two main forms of assessment. Because these were both group projects, students worked together in groups to define assessment criteria to assess their practice and learning. Here, the dialogue, mentioned by Freire (1974) as being an essential part of critical pedagogy is again enacted, and students can interpret the assessment criteria in their own context. Once the groups had developed criteria, we together selected those that were most appropriate to their practice and context, enhancing a possibility for engagement in a “transformative critique of their everyday lives” (Simon, 1992: 60).

## **Conclusion**

The critical pedagogy developed by Freire is as ‘superbly applicable’ to the Thai Burma context for its timeless synergy between the transitional contexts of Brazil in the 1970s and the struggle of people in and from Burma in 2016 (Costello 2008:19 ). Freire (1974) describes Brazil as a ‘society in transition’ or a ‘closed’ society where ‘splits between different interest groups, the small elite and masses of submerged people’, ‘the lack of critical awareness or democratic experience’ (19) and ‘the peoples entrenched habit of submission, adaption and adjustment to oppression’ all seem remarkably familiar to the oppression operating in Burma and on the border (21).

Although Freire made numerous contributions to liberatory educational paradigms, Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010) argue that humanisation is the single most important element to Freire’s philosophical approach. Freire describes humanisation as the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world (Freire, 1993).

According to Giroux enacting this philosophy of humanisation requires radical reconstruction of teaching and learning (Giroux, 1988); with pedagogy being both meaningful and connected to social change by engaging students with the world so they can transform it (Giroux, 2010). Curriculum must be tied to the needs of students and locally generated (Giroux, 2004) in order to transform existing patterns of marginalisation and exclusion. Thus, humanisation in the classroom cannot occur without educators having a clear ethical and political commitment to transforming oppressive social conditions (Roberts, 2000:13). In the Thai Burma classroom I have tried to use Freire's work as a guide to how I can live as an educator rather than draw strictly from a kit bag of decontextualized techniques, skills or methods (Roberts 2000).

It is fair to say that implementing a critical and humanising pedagogy on the border was not without its challenges. In writing this article, I do not want to present the subject as an easy process. To be honest, there were many times where I wondered if I was on the right path. Being in Thailand for a short period of time, I felt pressured to deliver information and subject content and on one occasion got angry, when after a large lunch to celebrate EID, two students fell asleep.

One problem that emerged early on was the discomfort students felt when I asked their opinions and acknowledged the relevance of their previous experience. Until beginning the ACU diploma, students had been rote taught via the 'banking method' of education (Freire 1974). Some students initially said they would prefer an essay as an assessment and more traditional approaches. They commented that they were not used to having their voices recognised and respected, but they did adapt. It was important here that I acted as a facilitator and a guide and engaged in a meaningful praxis with the students. Democratising the classroom, also had an opposite effect to what I thought when I realised that I had gained more respect and paradoxically, more authority among the students (Bickel 2006). Furthermore, collaborating in the classroom does not mean that I no longer taught, in fact as an educator, I have never felt more exhausted. As Freire (1998) notes 'to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge' (1998:30), this required the creation of a genuine space for students to contribute. When this space was opened,



students began to use language to name their experiences and explore their feelings within the group. At times this was overwhelming, for example when we were discussing family violence, one student cried as she recounted the effect such violence had on her life, another student described the experience of having his village burnt down a dozen times and having nothing to eat, another described his feeling of fear as a child soldier, and how he would get drunk before going to fight. At such moments students reached out to each other physically, or sat in silence, bearing witness to each other's stories, requiring no language at all. Witnessing these social and emotional transformations left an indelible mark on me. Throughout the class the students embodied deep mutual trust, humility, and love for one another, elements Freire identified as necessary for true dialogue (1993).

Ultimately, what stands out is that, even in these challenging conditions, critical and humanising pedagogy based on dialogue affirmed, validated and gave voice to student's experiences, creating space for a collaborative learning and empowering and transformative educational experiences for the student and the teacher.

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