Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments: A literature review

SANA FAROOQ
LEON BENADE
Auckland University of Technology,
Auckland, New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Freire's (1993) notion of dialogical pedagogy, where the student and teacher mutually grow and learn together and provide opportunities for personal and social gains, assumes the development of deep and meaningful dialogue between them in the learning environment. A healthy dialogue between the teacher and students, where each is encouraged to actively engage in discussions and amend or revise their views about various aspects, can make the process of teachers' reflection more productive. Developing critically meaningful relationships with students, through dialogue, complements critically reflective practice. The virtual learning environment poses an interesting challenge to the compatibility of these two notions, whereby dialogue is constrained by time lags in communication over discussion forums, blogs and even over email. Successful online courses must, therefore, go beyond technological changes only, and require teachers to commit to pedagogical changes while transitioning from a classroom environment to an online environment.

This literature review is a condensed version of one prepared for a small-scale qualitative study of educators (Farooq, 2019) who have recently transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching at New Zealand tertiary providers of education. The study aimed to understand how online educators picked cues from the discussion platforms offered by virtual learning environments to critically reflect on their pedagogical practice, and the associated changes they made to help students achieve their learning outcomes. It critically assessed how dialogic pedagogy and critical reflection can be adapted to fit in the framework of virtual learning, and contrasted these philosophical ideas to the Western criticism of automation and de-professionalisation of universities in the wake of increased distance learning options provided by tertiary institutes. The findings were discussed within a post-intentional phenomenological framework. In what follows, significant literature that illuminates this question has been critically analysed.

DIALOGUE AND DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY

Published literature has numerous definitions to offer for the term dialogue, ranging from those that consider it as a purely linguistic phenomenon, to those that define it in relation to the existence of human beings (Dafermos, 2018). Bakhtin, for instance, defined dialogue in relation to consciousness. His claim that "to be means to communicate" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 287, as cited in Dafermos, 2018, p. 3) implied that the existence of a person who has the ability to think and reason made it necessary for the person to communicate with others, consequently allowing for truth to be born collectively between individuals. Along similar lines, Rule (2004) considered dialogue "as a process that involves conflict, tension and growth; an unfolding of selves within particular contexts" (p. 326). He considered those who participate in dialogue as being distinct individuals and thinkers, but conversation brings them together, resulting in mutual growth.

With truth being "born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110 as cited in Dafermos, 2018, p. 4), Freire (1993) questioned the conventional outlook of education. Labelling it as 'banking education', in which knowledge was considered "a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1993, p. 72), Freire contrasted it with 'problem-posing education', which regarded "dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality" (p. 72). Problem-posing education formed the basis of dialogic pedagogy. The underlying assumption in Freire's dialogic pedagogy is the development of meaningful dialogue between the student and teacher, or even among the students themselves. Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) defined meaningful communication between students as "the ability of learners to demonstrate critical thinking skills by (a) relating course content to prior knowledge and experience, (b) interpreting content through the analysis, synthesis, and evaluations of others' understanding, and (c) making inferences" (p. 6).

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ITS LINK TO DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY

The terms 'reflection' and 'critical reflection' are often confused and wrongly assumed to be interchangeable (Mann, 2016), making it necessary to distinguish between them at the outset. In his book *How We Think*, Dewey (1933) defined reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). This thinking may happen 'in the head', through writing (e.g. journaling), or even while talking to someone else. The outcome of this process, when undertaken by education practitioners, is usually a systematic and evidence-based change in practical action.

By itself, reflection is not necessarily critical (Brookfield, 2015). Critical reflection involves both the capacity for critical inquiry and self-reflection (Larrivee, 2000). When practiced by educators, it enables them to move beyond merely analysing whether their techniques are working or not, to a critical examination of values and ideologies. As a result, critical reflection is more likely to "challenge assumptions, interrogate the ideological status quo, question institutional norms and confront inequality, discrimination, gender bias, and marginalisation" (Mann, 2016, p. 10). Considering it impossible to separate the

micro level in education, i.e., what is going on in the classroom, from the macro level of education in general, i.e. the complex socio-cultural and policy contexts, Sullivan, Glenn, Roche, and McDonagh (2016) suggest that critical reflection allows practitioners to intentionally look at issues from as many angles as possible, analyse them for their effects on us and on others, and finally take informed decisions about them.

Freire's rejection of 'banking education' in favour of 'problem posing education' also assumed reflection and action by both teachers and students. By recognising *'the word'* as the true essence of dialogue, he contested that "only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education." (Freire, 1993, p. 93).

TECHNOLOGY AND DIALOGUE IN ONLINE EDUCATION

The fastest growing phenomenon in the use of technology in education is online learning (West, Jones, and Semon, 2012). Both synchronous and asynchronous modes of online learning allow for there to be communication between the teacher and their students. In order to develop this communication, the virtual learning environment is increasingly making use of emerging Web 2.0 technologies, such as discussion forums, student blogs, class wiki projects, twitter exchanges, online social networking, and video presentations on YouTube (Friedman & Friedman, 2013). Since discussions are simply not possible without reciprocity, the shift to Web 2.0 technologies has brought dialogue in the online learning environment closer to face to face interactions.

Research supports the use of threaded discussion forums to communicate asynchronously. Their use has proven to improve students' perceived learning and enhance students' academic performance (Wu & Hiltz, 2004), and has been shown to promote higher-order critical and thinking skills (Swan et al., 2000). At the same time, several constraints arising from the use of discussion forums have also been recognised in the existing literature. These centre on the chronological and hierarchical structure of the threads posted in these forums hindering the development of new ideas, making it difficult to keep the discussions focused, and preventing effective discussions from happening (Sun & Gao, 2017). Discussion forums are also not a perfect substitute for spoken language—spoken language is fleeting, whereas asynchronous forms of communication are more permanent because the conversation is written down (Delahunty, 2018). While proponents of online education argue in favour of the time lag prevalent in communication in distance learning, allowing students to write well-articulated responses to the topics being discussed, opponents contest that dialogue occurring in face-to-face encounters is more creative and liberal (Skidmore, 2016). Adult learners themselves are reluctant to participate in online discussion forums, viewing it as an added burden, particularly when they are already managing other commitments alongside education (Bailie, 2017; Delahunty, 2018; Lander, 2014).

The use of technology to assist in delivery of course material has met with its share of criticism. The advantage of accessibility, most often cited by proponents of distance education, needs to be critically analysed, since a simple increase in the number of students enrolled does not automatically translate into an increase in accessibility of university education (Lee, 2017). When providing

access to previously disadvantaged groups, universities need to keep in mind their special needs as well (Levin, 2007), since students from disadvantaged backgrounds require more support than students from affluent backgrounds (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Research also points towards the higher dropout rates in distance learning compared to traditional university classes (Levy, 2007).

THE POLITICS OF TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Although the students in the twenty-first century have been referred to as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), the actual use of technology seems to be constrained and compromised (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger & Aston, 2015; Lai & Hong, 2015). For instance, while comparing the use of technology among different age groups of tertiary education students in New Zealand, Lai and Hong (2015) concluded that the use of digital technologies is not age dependent, and the range of technologies being used by students is limited across all age groups. Jelfs and Richardson (2013) found similar results for students enrolled in universities in the United Kingdom, confirming that the terms 'digital natives' and 'net generation' have little validity when it comes to using technology in education. Directly attacking celebratory ideas of young people being 'digital natives', Facer & Selwyn (2013) believed that such terms "obscure the economic and social differences in young people's lives and have been recruited as justification for political projects from individualised learning to the marketization of education systems" (p. 2).

With regards to the effects on the teaching staff of making use of technology for distance education, Noble (1998) discussed the 'automation and deprofessionalization' of this profession as universities move more towards online education. Noble (2001) also compared the division of labour witnessed in industries making its way into education as well, with educators having to mass-produce course material and then having to hand it over to the university. In an interview, Ira Shor argued that by itself, digital technology cannot guarantee anything critical about the process of learning, just as books, pens, papers, and blackboards cannot guarantee critical teaching by the teacher or critical thinking by the student. While billions have been spent on developing computer hardware, software, peripherals, bandwidth, and the exploration of how technology is capable of supporting, assisting, and even enhancing the act of learning (Shor, Matusov, Maranovic-Shane, & Creswell, 2017), the reality still remains that "most of the *fundamental* elements of learning and teaching remain largely untouched by the potential of educational technology" (Facer & Selwyn, 2013; emphasis added). These fundamental elements require a personalised, professional relationship between the teacher and the students.

CONCLUSION

The development of tools that assist in online education seems to suggest that online education is moving away from what Freire termed 'banking education' towards what he called 'problem-posing education'. A deeper examination into the political environment surrounding the transition of universities towards online education seems to suggest otherwise.

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