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The Seminar as a Site of Critical Pedagogy: Progressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Across EUt+

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The seminar as a site of critical pedagogy: Progressing equity, diversity, and inclusion across EUt+

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ABSTRACT

A concern for inclusivity has become a strategic planning of higher education institutions throughout Europe. The purpose of this A key mechanism through which this concern for inclusivity can be realised is through an approach to processes of curriculum design and teaching practice that are informed by the core commitments of critical pedagogy. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the extent to which seminars organised around the themes of inclusivity successfully enacted a critical pedagogical approach in each of our respective contexts. Our paper reflects on our experiences organising and engaging in these seminars with the view to offering 'lessons learned' for future seminars within EUt+.

Keywords

Seminars; equity, diversity, and inclusion; critical pedagogy; EUt+

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Introduction

A concern for inclusivity has become part of the strategic planning of higher education institutions throughout Europe. Indeed, the EUA's recent vision for higher education in Europe in the coming decades states that:

Diversity and social cohesion are important components of sustainable development. Universities will provide a scientific mindset and opportunities to people from different backgrounds and reflect the diversity of society. Access to higher education will be equitable and open to all who qualify. Universities will be equipped to welcome students and staff from all backgrounds. Through this, universities will play an important role in addressing social disparities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. This will be a crucial element in Europe's recovery. Universities and their missions will widely benefit from equity and inclusion, and it is therefore in their core interest to promote these values in society. (European University Association, 2021)

A key mechanism through which this concern for inclusivity can be realised is through an approach to processes of curriculum design and teaching practice that are informed by the core commitments of critical pedagogy. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the extent to which seminars organised around the themes of inclusivity successfully enacted a critical pedagogical approach in each of our respective contexts. Our paper reflects on our experiences organising and engaging in these seminars with the view to offering 'lessons learned' for future seminars within EUt+. But first, we delineate some brief notes on critical pedagogies themselves.

Critical Pedagogies

Critical pedagogies begin from the assumption that teaching is never neutral or value-free, but is instead necessarily implicated in processes of knowledge production and exchange that (historically to the present day) reinforce systems of power and privilege across interconnecting categories of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, socioeconomic class, etc. (Giroux, 2016). Beginning from this assumption, critical pedagogies are committed to offering educational experiences where students can solve social problems (e.g., inequality and exclusion), but can also critically pose further problems of society too in ways that enable the most marginalised to 'name' their world (Freire, 2005). In this sense, critical pedagogies problem-pose, as well as problem-solve, in order to create the conditions for students to resist systems of power and privilege.

In order to achieve this, critical pedagogical approaches prioritise dialogical educational spaces, where students can engage in democratic forms of conversation and collaboration (Fernandez-Balboa and Marshall, 1997). This entails challenging conventional, authoritarian views of teaching (what Paulo Freire refers to as 'banking' approaches to teaching) and replacing these with pedagogies that prioritise the articulation and mobilisation of student voice. On the level of curriculum design, a critical pedagogy can involve designing educational experiences in a co-constructed manner, where students play an active role in developing not only how they learn, but also what they learn. This is done to democratize curricular content and transgress the boundaries of oppressive knowledge across multiple disciplines (hooks, 1994). Finally, critical pedagogical approaches to teaching resist positioning education in a vacuum, and alternatively see teaching as a practice that extends beyond the immediate confines of the classroom to encompass the wider structural forms of exclusion (for staff and students) that characterize educational institutions. In this way, critical pedagogies require holistic responses to inequity that account for the local, national, and international ways in which structural exclusions persist.

To what extent did our seminars enact a critical pedagogy? Considerations on content and participation

In considering the extent to which seminars organised around the themes of inclusivity successfully enacted a critical pedagogical approach across institutions in EU+ we focused on two issues specifically: the content of our seminars, and the nature of the participation at these

seminars. The paper arises out of ongoing reflexive, dialogical work between the authors in the context of EUt+. This dialogical work has taken place in oral as well as written form, where the authors have engaged in writing as a mode of collaborative inquiry (Speedy and Whyatt, 2014). We share our reflections below from the vantage point of our institutional contexts.

Seán's reflections from Technological University Dublin

In reflecting on my own experiences organising and participating in the 2021-2022 RINCE seminar series at TU Dublin, I focus on its content and on participation as a way of exploring the extent to which it enacted a critical pedagogy.

In terms of content, much of the series spoke well to critical pedagogy's commitment to providing opportunities for people to engage with 'problem-posing' material that would allow them to query the structural nature of inequality and injustice. The series was focused on extending the concept of intersectionality in new directions, and it did so through invited speakers and discussants giving online presentations on: disability and workplace culture; affective inequalities and theories of justice; antiracist and feminist approaches to climate leadership; intersectional methods in educational research; the gendered impacts of Covid-19 lockdowns; and feminist epistemologies in science. Each of the speakers and discussants shared a core academic commitment to structural change, mobilising literature and ideas to resist inequitable systems of power and privilege.

In terms of participation, however, the series may not have been as critically pedagogical as I might have liked. For example, early on in the series I received feedback from a member of the TU Dublin community who felt that the timing of the seminars (5.30pm) was potentially exclusionary to members of staff with caring responsibilities, particularly women. Though I then changed the timing to 2pm in response to this, some early career academics with heavy teaching duties then contacted me saying they couldn't make any of the sessions because of their timetables. While attendance was good in the series overall (averaging in the region of 20 participants per seminar), I was conscious that this key and interested demographic were absent from our conversations. I also received some criticism from a member of Dublin's deaf community, who couldn't attend the seminar on disability that she was interested in because I had not

organised a sign language interpreter for the event (an ironic example of ableism). While I had hoped to remedy this by offering closed caption subtitles, she said that reading these captions during online seminars was tiring for members of the deaf community, and that she would not attend as a result. Again, a key demographic excluded from the conversation. Finally, feedback on the seminar praised a session that had a lot of participant interaction (namely the seminar on intersectional research methods), though most of the other seminars were more traditional, with speaker input, discussant input, and short Q&A. In this model, opportunities for participants to pose questions at length was limited, and they certainly did not shape the planning or content of the seminars in any meaningful sense. In this model, the power imbalance between those who organised the seminars (myself) and those who participated or wanted to participate in them remained largely unchallenged.

In summary, the RINCE seminar series at TU Dublin was ambiguous in its enactment of a critical pedagogy. It made significant strides in this regard in terms of content, but how that content was designed and engaged with by participants still needed a more coherent engagement with critical pedagogical principles, particularly in terms of redistributing power.

Eleni's reflections from Cyprus University of Technology

At CUT we have organised a series of two face-to-face workshops addressed to students and staff members respectively - academic and administrative. An invited trainer from the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus facilitated the workshops who has experience on the topics of Equality and Education. The topic was 'Dealing with Multiple Racisms and Discriminations'. It was agreed that for the moment we would assume that the audience had never encountered the term of Intersectionality, and thus, to consider those sessions as introductory ones in order to build on them in the future. Both workshops had similar structure and type of activities aligned to the concept of critical pedagogy.

Reflecting on the content, I strongly believe that the fact that workshops have been experiential ensured their alignment with critical pedagogy. Firstly, the workshop was navigated by the subjective experiences and knowledge of the participants. What has been really effective was the interchange of personal to the collective aspect shaping what Freire would say as contextualization where firstly, it is important to realise your own reality – in this case, participants could realise their own embedded stereotypes, assumptions, prejudices; and secondly, it is

important to name this reality in order to reflect on it and decide changes and next steps in order to change it – in this case, participants through activities have been able to experience ‘aha’ moments realising and identifying stereotypical thinking as well as privileges and disadvantages that they may experience and how their own behaviours and how these may have impact on others in society. At this point, dialogue has been an important tool to navigate critical reflections and allow diverse views, knowledge and experiences to be heard and valued, and their perspectives were respected, however different or contradictory may they were between them. The facilitator created a dialogical, democratic, open space, participants would share their own experiences, reflect on them and learn together with the educator-trainer.

What has been another important fact was that activities have followed problem-posing approach to learning, where the understanding of a term or theory was based on a gradual step-by-step process from the personal experience and arriving into understanding of the term/theory; also, based on the interchange of theory and interaction through small activities that kept increased interest and engagement of participants. One cycle of activities would begin with sharing our own ‘three identities’ through an online quiz using our mobile phones, to initiate a discussion on our diverse identities. Then moving to a ‘test’ – a questionnaire based on a given story, through which we were able to realise our stereotypical way of thinking and making assumptions about gender roles, followed by a video on the impact of reproducing stereotypes to kids, to finish with the term stereotype. This interchange from the personal to the impact on others, using interactive methods in order to arrive at theory, I consider it successful, depicted on their written and verbal feedback at that time.

Reflecting on participation, it has been a puzzling issue especially for the staff members and the best that could fit their schedule and achieve the highest participation possible. Therefore, we organised the workshop during working hours, and on lunch time, offering also a small lunch as an extra incentive. But although we were expecting around 35 participants – a sign that the time slot was convenient – in the end, less than half managed to come. In terms of students, for this time we decided it was better to agree with an academic staff member to use one of her teaching sessions, although the invitation was open to all students of the university, which proved a success as we had 38 participants in the venue. However, in both cases we didn’t achieve a balanced participation in terms of gender, with males being only 2-3 overall.

However challenging it may have been to achieve balanced, diverse and rich participation, feedback from both workshops was only positive and reflects the need for such discussions, which is a priority for the next academic year’s planning. On the question what did you like the most and

what did you like the least, student participants mentioned different activities that made them an impression, highlighting that they were interactive and playful, and they liked the fact that they could discuss and that they had realisations they wouldn't otherwise be able to identify -such as stereotypes- as well as that they like that it kept their interest increased until the end. Staff participants said that the workshop helped them understand terms and they liked the topic, while they want this to be repeated.

To conclude, this series of workshops proved to be effective enacting critical pedagogy with an interesting content design and learning methods. However, it remains a challenge to create consistency and awareness to the level that participation will be balanced.

Aurelia's reflections from Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

Two online seminars on "Widening Access and Participation through Universal Design for Learning" were conducted, between March – April 2022, within the Technical of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, an engineering HEI with a population of over 19000 students and 900 higher education teachers. The instructional design of both sessions addressed a practice-sharing approach, based on real-life scenarios, with the scope of identifying interest that may foster the development of an institutional Community of Practice among educators, to promote practices, policies and tools that foster an equitable environment for education.

Key topics were addressed incrementally, from theoretical terminology to a practical examples, covering a multidisciplinary background in both humanities and engineering and enacting critical content. Topics addressed during the 1st seminar provided the context and the general terminology, specifically: Equity and equality in higher education; Introduction and principles of UDL; while the 2nd seminar focused on; UDL from an ecosystem perspective; Practice sharing over technological prototypes that foster AWP; Key actions and means in applying UDL from a pedagogical perspective, demonstrating the positive outcomes of using cross-field cooperation in creative problem-solving of use cases present among underrepresented groups, such as students or pupils with disabilities.

The target group consisted of teachers, educators and staff with activities related to teaching-learning processes, where participation was voluntary. 27 participants (77.7% - F; 22.3% - M) attended the two sessions, while 29,6% participated in both. Feedback was collected at the end of each session, following 3 dimensions: content, session and impact that would drive intention. Most of the testimonials highlighted a well-organized session, that enabled reflection over quality inclusive teaching: "I appreciated the quality of the organization, of the session itself and of the content"; "nothing to improve"; "nothing to improve at the moment. I find the topic highly interesting and solutions should be found to integrate these concepts into daily practice, and not to remain at a pure theoretical level", "looking forward to getting more information on these practices that improve the quality of teaching".

Aspects to be improved were related solely to organizational matters, where 2 participants highlighted the need of receiving the seminar agenda well before the session. Reflections that followed highlighted some key pieces of learning by the end of both sessions: The benefits of online sessions in facilitating participation and a more informal environment for people to explore ideas (positives), though this was balanced by the difficulties of facilitating meaningful engagements online (a negative); The benefits of online sessions in facilitating synchronous resource sharing (a positive); The value of pedagogy as a key development pillar in teaching activities under technical domains (a positive) and the need for advancing a context that facilitates quality training (a negative); The value of seminars for assessing the extent to which critical content can be engaged in the context of the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.

Yoana and Rositsa's reflections from Technical University Sophia

We at the Technical University of Sofia have organized two series of online seminars among students from different engineering specialties. The total number of students who participated was 60 aged 19-25, with an almost equal number of boys and girls.

The topics that were selected for the seminars aimed to introduce students to the ideas of equality, and diversity. The focus in the preparations of the seminars was on the selection of topics and their appropriate presentation. The aim was to provoke students to be active participants in the seminars. After discussion with the lecturers, it was decided that the seminar topics would be: History of the women's empowerment movement; Feminist theories and approaches; Gender, equality, and diversity policies and practices; Behaviour and generational differences.

The duration of the seminars was two hours each. The lecturers used a multidisciplinary approach to present the information. Students were challenged with different visuals and examples to discuss the different issues. Existing stereotypes and attitudes were analysed and conclusions were drawn based on scientific literature and research.

The success of the workshops can be judged from the feedback made: "very interesting topics"; "we learn very useful things"; "Will you organize another seminar?".

Interestingly, no dissatisfaction, objection, or outrage was expressed. We take the absence of such to be a sign of a meritocratic presentation of provocative and often stereotyped topics and issues. The positive thing about the workshops for us is the participation of the students and their engagement with the themes of equality and diversity. The use of the method of critical pedagogy showed in which direction it is desirable to develop and enrich the curricula and the teaching methods themselves. The possibility of reflecting on different societal dilemmas is one of the fundamental missions of higher education.

In the conduct of the workshops, the difficulties we encountered were a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions. Online communication poses corresponding barriers to having a meaningful discussion and engaging all participants in the process of demythologizing existing social constructs of thinking. In conclusion, it can be said that the use of critical pedagogy in the conducted workshops is necessary for the active involvement of students in the construction of content, solutions, and concepts on the topics of equality and diversity.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, we home in on key insights gained through the process of reflecting on the critical pedagogical potential of each of our respective seminars, with the view to offering concrete advice for future seminars organised across EU+.

Firstly, reflecting on our narratives foregrounded to us the importance of curating opportunities for the content of our seminar and the nature of seminar participation to speak to each other. Indeed, for critical pedagogues, what matters is not only *what* is explored in pedagogical spaces, but also how it is explored: given the limits of online interfaces, we felt some of our seminars lacked the degree of dialogical participation one would expect of critical pedagogical work, even if the content being explored was committed to tackling structural exclusions and achieving equity and inclusion.

Building on the question of participation, through the experiences at CUT, it seems that experiential learning as an approach to deconstructing embedded structures of thought and achieving desired levels of mindset transformation is very much needed. Also, it seems to be more effective when adult learning is designed for physical settings. Combining these elements can ensure participant-centered learning, where (to use Freire's phrasing) participants can 'name' their world, feel confident and comfortable articulating and critiquing personal experiences, and discuss and analyse stereotypes and other social inequities. There is also a need to ensure decisions around the timing and location of seminars are made in ways that maximise participation for diverse cohorts so that a variety of epistemic positions can be shared and engaged with.

However, in order to achieve this rich and diverse form of participation and engagement (especially with staff members) there is a need to build a culture of continuous learning across our contexts beyond discrete seminars themselves.

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