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Mon 06 Dec 2021

12:15 - 12:35

Theorising a Critical Relational Pedagogy for the Future University

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Research Domain: Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: The paper moves from a critique to outcome-based university models, such as constructive alignment, which reduce teachers' imagination and foster market-oriented values. From this analysis, the paper theorizes an alternative pedagogy for the future university, based on a critical relational approach. This theoretical exercise can provide us with insights on teaching and learning, which are especially relevant since the pandemic breakdown, when digital technologies have started to be used as surrogates of face-to-face lessons in universities worldwide. Imagining the future of hybrid university inspires counter-dominant discourses based on different ontological assumptions and alternative scenarios. Drawing on literature that seeks to define a political ontology for the common good, our proposal is to consider critical relational pedagogy as a process of knowledge enactment, related to uncertainty, and aiming at creating university teachers' empowerment. Ultimately, it relates teaching with different ways of being and gives space to variety and imagination.

Paper:

The growing complexity of university and the epistemological questions it engenders make it evident that we need critical, relational (Ulmer et al. 2020), and interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to address educational research and practice (Osberg & Biesta, 2020). In this paper, we present a theoretical reflection that shifts the attention from outcome-based university models to pedagogies that embrace radical uncertainties (Callon et al. 2001e), non-linearity (Pischetola, 2020), and ultimately the 'darkness' of the unknown (Barnett, 2007).

Much of the current focus of teaching in higher education is framed by the logic of efficiency and learning outcomes, which has taken the theoretical form of taxonomies (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and measurable results (Hart et al., 2007). A dominant taxonomic model of the last two decades is constructive alignment, a pedagogical theory developed by John Biggs (1996) and enriched later by the contribution of Catherine Tang (2007).

By focusing on outcome-based education, Biggs and Tang claimed to be concerned with improving teaching practices, rather than accountability on the institutional level (Fransson & Friberg, 2015), and considered constructive alignment as an answer to the increased number of students attending university education. However, a growing body of literature is criticising this approach, which is said

to increase dualisms (Macfarlane, 2015), to reduce teachers' creativity and imagination (D'Cruz, 2020), and to foster neoliberal values over a wider spectrum of knowledges (Sutton, 2015).

In this paper, we look for alternatives to constructive alignment, working with the idea to overcome its dualism (e.g. teacher/student, deep learning/surface learning) and consider theory as practice (Lenz Taguchi, 2011). In line with Swartz and Wasko (2019), we argue that it is fundamental to seek the relationship between theory and practice as 'enacting immersion'. Theories are powerful analytical tools for interrogating educational research (Jackson & Mazzei, 2019), which allow scholars to expand beyond disciplinary boundaries and explore new frameworks for conceptualizing university communities.

The framework we propose is grounded in the encounter of critical pedagogy and sociomaterial studies. This theoretical exercise can provide educational research with insights on teaching and learning, which are especially relevant since the pandemic breakdown, when digital technologies have started to be used as surrogates of face-to-face lessons in universities worldwide (Buckingham, 2020; Selwyn et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). The hybrid university is not merely a space where 'blended' teaching and learning practices. Rather, we understand 'hybrid' here as the assemblage of tools and practices, where boundaries are blurred boundaries and new spatiotemporal configurations occur (Gourlay et al., 2021). Hybridity generates new challenges and opportunities.

Imagining the future of hybrid university inspires counter-dominant discourses based on different ontological assumptions and alternative scenarios (Grant 2020). Several scholars have suggested looking at the future university through a perspective of 'political ontology' (Di Napoli 2014; Lewis 2008; Molesworth et al., 2010) which can enable us to include critical and relational aspects in academic teaching practices. Political ontology is a multi-faceted concept that integrates the dynamic forces at work, including values of academic developers, institutional interests (Di Napoli,2014) and 'trials of strength' (Sørensen, 2009). Values can be considered 'affective forces' (Mouffe, 2005) which are often implicit in pedagogical practices and can be difficult to disentangle (Harland and Pickering 2011). They need to be exposed, to address academic work as an 'imaginative profession' (Di Napoli, 2014) and think of scenarios for a vibrant hybrid university.

Szadkowski and Krzeski (2020) stress that a political ontology for higher education can be based on the centrality of the individual, the public, or the common good, being the latter form the most 'relational'. Referring to the work of Hardt and Negri (2009), the authors argue that "the common lies at the heart of the university" (Szadkowski andKrzeski 2020, 43), as knowledge is the result of a process of inquiry, where the potential of pedagogical relations is fully expressed. In the same line of thought, Barnett and Bengsten (2020) highlight that the academic tradition relies on the search for truth about the world, and the 'knowing effort' is precisely what defines the very core purpose and spirit of the university.

Based on these insights, a critical relational pedagogy understands knowledge production as a process of enactment, related to uncertainty, and aiming at creating empowerment (Pischetola, 2021). It mobilises discourses of "care, support ,and criticality" (Di Napoli, 2014, 9), in contrast to perspectives of efficiency and institutional accountability. Ultimately, it gives space for a variety of pedagogies that correspond to different and multiple "ways of being university teachers" (Dall'Alba, 2005, 363).

References: