

Transforming University Teaching: Integrating Conscientization and Problematization

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Abstract

This paper explores an instance of activism in education for University teaching, specifically the transformation of a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. This transformation is defined by its focus on conscientization and problematization. Conscientization fosters critical awareness leading to transformative action, while problematization involves critically analyzing taken-for-granted norms. The revised Graduate Certificate program employs problem-based learning (PBL) to problematize teaching, encouraging educators to see issues as troublesome to current ways of thinking. Conscientization enriches the program by emphasizing reflection combined with action (praxis), empowering teachers to transform educational environments. This dual approach equips university teachers with the tools to challenge and reshape dominant ideologies and practices, promoting meaningful and transformative educational practices. Participants are encouraged to explore speculative possibilities for a better future.

Full paper

In this paper, I explore an instance of activism for University teaching, specifically the transformation of a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. This activism is defined by a focus on conscientization and problematization.

The challenge of any form of activism, is the capacity to allow for imagined possibilities within spaces and relations shaped by dominant ideologies (Bridges & Hartman 1975: 75). Education

about University teaching that aims to foster awareness and alternatives to dominant ideologies must use reflexive teaching.

Two processes that foster this reflexivity are conscientization and problematization. Foucault, interested in how different regimes of truth and power shape who we are and what we do, developed problematization as a means for critically analyzing taken-for-granted truths and widely accepted norms (Ambrosio 2022). Freire developed the notion of conscientization to foster social justice, defining it as “the deepening attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergences” (Freire 2005: 107). Conscientization involves developing a critical understanding of social reality through reflection and action (Freire 2005). Conscientization and problematization are distinct but overlapping and coessential processes in transformative University teaching.

Activism is typically considered as intentional, forceful, and purposeful action (Marshall & Anderson 2009) and some academics actively pursue this course of action (Thobani 2002).

Teaching has been considered activism (Marshall & Anderson 2009) when it enables critical thinking about the world or teaches tools, strategies, and tactics for social change. Perhaps more often, activism in Universities, teaching especially, falls into what Grant calls inactivism, where agency is manifest as a “muddled and failing,” recalcitrance against the normalization of University expectations (Grant 2021: 542).

The Graduate Certificate for Tertiary Teaching is designed for University teachers. It was revised following a review that found it did not foster personal meaning and identity development around teaching. The program was completely redesigned around problem-based learning (PBL) to problematize teaching. PBL for critical contestability (Savin-Baden & Major 2004) does not aim to merely invoke a description of “what a teacher knows” and “doesn’t know” about teaching, though the activation of prior knowledge is important. Neither is the intent to simply generate a problem solution, though that too is important. It entails problematizing teaching,

provoking educators to be affected by the issues associated with the problem, wherein they see the problems as troublesome to current ways of thinking. The problem posed help to problematize by posing something familiar in an unfamiliar way, creating uncertainty, leading to identifying genealogical difficulties and contestations (Marshall 2007).

The endeavor is for academics to recognize what frames their understanding as teachers, through dialogue with peers about the discursive policies and practices that occur within the University. Tangled by the complexity and paradoxes of teaching (Palmer 2017), teachers must break through discursive practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (Foucault 1982: 64). The negotiation with others often starts at the most basic of assumptions about teaching, for example, the impossibility of education (Biesta 1998).

Conscientization in the Graduate Certificate brings a unique dimension by fostering a deep, critical awareness among university teachers about their roles and the broader socio-political context of their teaching practices. Unlike problematization, conscientization is concerned with the development of a critical consciousness leading to transformative action. This process involves recognizing the contradictions within the social structures that shape educational practices and understanding the ways in which these structures perpetuate certain behaviours (Freire 2005). By incorporating conscientization, the program encourages teachers to not only question and reflect on their teaching but also to understand their potential as agents of social change, capable of transforming educational environments.

Moreover, conscientization enriches the program by emphasizing the importance of reflection combined with action (praxis). This approach aligns with the program's goal of fostering personal meaning and identity. Through conscientization, academics engage in a process where reflection on their own experiences and the structural constraints they face leads to actionable insights and strategies for change. This iterative cycle of reflection and action empowers

teachers to develop a deeper understanding of their social reality and their capacity to transform it. This not only enhances their teaching practices but also equips them with tools needed to challenge and reshape the dominant ideologies and policies within universities (Freire 2005). Thus, conscientization complements problematization by ensuring that the critical insights gained are translated into meaningful and transformative practices.

Teachers in the program are dared into trusting their own uncertified, indeed improbable and speculative – possibilities that may seem foolish, but as Stengers suggests, asserting these possibilities are necessary to have lives worth living (Stengers 2021).

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