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Title 'Transformative Intellectuals': Exploring qualities of critical pedagogues

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There are many different definitions of critical pedagogy, and the aim of this paper is not to come up with a definition of what it is to be a critical pedagogue, or to judge whether someone is a true critical pedagogue or not. In fact, many hold that the imprecise definition of critical pedagogy supports the context specific nature of the theory, and the idea that one way of knowing and doing doesn't necessarily work elsewhere. Instead, the aim of this paper is to use Aronowitz and Giroux's (1985) work on transformative intellectuals to explore observation and interview data from three case studies of self-identifying critical pedagogues (SICPs) in an effort to address the gap in the literature surrounding the practice of critical pedagogy at university level (Breunig, 2009). Looking at critical pedagogical practice through the concepts of critique, action, and praxis, I hope to explore whether there is still space in higher education for transformative intellectuals.

Breunig's (2009) research into self-identifying critical pedagogues began as a reflective exercise about her own practice, considering the disparity between what she teaches (critical pedagogy and social justice) and her teaching practice (which she describes as 'didactic'). Her paper led me to question whether other SICPs may also struggle to make their beliefs and theories more explicit in their practice, and why that might be. In this paper I will focus on preliminary data collected from three SICPs through participant observation of 2-3 classes and an hour-long reflective discussion about the classes I observed and the SICPs views of critical pedagogy in HE. This data will then be examined using a model based on Aronowitz and Giroux's (1985) paper on transformative intellectuals, which looks at different characteristics and functions of educators as intellectuals.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) proposed a way of conceptualizing educators as intellectuals who could prevent schools from reproducing hegemonic ideologies, instead instilling students with the capacity to critique dominant ideologies that perpetuate inequality and instrumentalise education. They felt that by considering teachers as intellectuals they could challenge their position as social actors, making the pedagogical more political and the political pedagogical (ibid, p. 56). Their conceptualization of educators as intellectuals was broken down into four categories (although they recognize that the lines are often blurred): transformative intellectuals, critical intellectuals, accommodating intellectuals, and hegemonic intellectuals. The most important characteristic of transformative intellectuals is that they act upon their critical beliefs. "These teachers as intellectuals are by no means limited by the professional and academic discourse within which they are obliged to function" (ibid, p. 56), they engage

in self-criticism about their pedagogical practice, and encourage students to engage in critical reflection as well. Reflection is seen as a way for students to better understand the education system that they are a part of, but also to see how they can act as agents for change within it. Transformative intellectuals utilise “forms of pedagogy which treat students as agents, problematizes knowledge, invokes dialogue, and makes knowledge meaningful so as to make it critical in order to make it emancipatory” (ibid, p. 56). Critical intellectuals are critical of dominant modes of thought but avoid political action. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) propose that this may stem from a desire to remain removed from society so as to be more objective. Accommodating intellectuals are generally ideologically aligned with dominant society and its powerful elite. They may be unaware of the fact that they are perpetuating the status quo—“they function primarily to produce and mediate uncritically ideas and social practices that serve to reproduce the status quo” (ibid, p. 58). As they do this unknowingly, they are not considered to be politically active. Hegemonic intellectuals, on the other hand, “do more than surrender to forms of academic and political incorporation...they self-consciously define themselves through the forms of moral and intellectual leadership they provide for dominant groups and classes” (ibid, p. 58). Figure 1 shows these concepts on a grid, where the vertical axis represents a range from political critique to political reproduction, and the horizontal axis ranges from inactive to active. Looking at the four different intellectuals in this way helped me to grasp the role of fundamental concepts in critical pedagogy: critique and action.

Figure 1: Adapted from Aronowitz & Giroux (1985)

Preliminary data from three SICPs highlights barriers to using critical pedagogy in HE, and mentioned “working in the university and against it at the same time”. All three SICPs are politically active and value the opportunity to put their beliefs into action through demonstrating and try to make a difference through their jobs at the university. In discussing critical pedagogy and its role in education, one of the participants mentioned that they feel that critical pedagogues often forget that critical pedagogy is more than just offering a critique of the current way of doing things—its about coming up with an alternative and fighting for those changes. The SICPs also stressed that they try to make the content of their courses relevant to their students’ lives, drawing connections between theory and current social movements (like Black Lives Matter) or the marketisation of higher education. Although all three SICPs are politically critical and politically active, they still expressed frustrations when it came to teaching in what Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) would consider an ‘emancipatory’ manner. Not because they didn’t think this was their place (as in the case of a critical intellectual), but because the current system of HE and the neoliberal context makes it difficult, either due to practical issues like class sizes, or ideological resistance from students. Although Aronowitz and Giroux allowed for movement of intellectuals from one category to another based on context or circumstances, viewing the data through the lens of this model made me wonder whether there is still a space in HE for transformative intellectuals.

When Aronowitz and Giroux wrote this paper in 1985, they started by saying that they were “in the midst of a new debate on the role of intellectuals in processes of social and historical structure and transformation” (p. 48). I would argue that we are still in the midst of this debate 32 years later just under different circumstances, which is why I think that research into critical pedagogy and the transformative capacity of intellectuals is so important. Inherent in Aronowitz and Giroux’s conception of the Transformative Intellectual was a certain level of professional autonomy over curriculum, pedagogy and research, which are currently being stripped away from university lecturers by external assessments such as the NSS, TEF and REF. The question I will continue to explore is how can critical pedagogues, or transformative intellectuals, “work in the university and against it at the same time” in this neoliberal era when student consumers consider it the job of educators to give them what they want and tell them what to think (Fielding, 2004).

References

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