Digital Critical Dialogue: A Process for Implementing Transformative Discussion Practices within Online Courses in Higher Education

Jason T. Hilton
Assistant Professor
Department of Secondary Education / Foundations of Education
Slippery Rock University
Slippery Rock, PA 16057 USA
jason.hilton@sru.edu

Abstract

This article seeks to suggest a method for those who teach online courses to move beyond passive instructional techniques so as to foster critical dialogue that actively engages learners in an educative process meant to uncover hidden socio-historical dynamics and inspire transformative possibilities in a digitally connected future. The article provides theoretical background for the use of critical dialogue in online contexts, building on critical digital literacies as an analytic model for engagement with digital texts. This is followed by implementation suggestions for creating, encouraging, and determining signs of successful implementation of critical dialogue within online course contexts in higher education.

Key Words: critical pedagogy, critical dialogue, critical literacy, online education, higher education, online identity, virtual learning space

Introduction

With online instruction now a common feature of higher education, it is important that instructors of courses that are either fully online or that make use of online components not lose sight of beneficial possibilities present within group communication and collaboration, including the capacity for critical analysis. This article seeks to assist educators who create and instruct in virtual learning spaces to realize possibilities for critical group conversations that stretch over both distance and time, through the fostering of critical dialogue within online courses in higher education.

Following a theoretical discussion of critical dialogue, virtual learning spaces, online identity formation, and critical literacies, the article turns toward envisioning a process for the fostering of critical dialogue as a central element in an online course. Though critical dialogue is not new, this conceptualization aims to account for advances in the way students learn and in the way education is being provided in the 21st century. As such, this conceptualization is guided by three questions meant to follow logical steps in online course creation and implementation:

1. What design features of a virtual learning space make critical dialogue possible?
2. What processes encourage the growth of critical dialogue within a human-centered virtual learning space?
3. What are signs of successful implementation of an online critical dialogue?

Insights gained through this questioning process are meant to assist educators in bringing the transformative potential of critical dialogue to online courses in higher education settings.

Theoretical Framework

In order to best frame a notion of critical dialogue in an online course, it essential to describe a number of key theoretical foundations that underlay such a conceptualization. This framework begins with a discussion of critical dialogue as a consciousness-raising action, followed by a discussion of virtual learning spaces as sites in which critical dialogue can occur. The author moves further to discuss online

identity formation as a necessary part of the critical dialogue process and the use of critical digital literacies as an analytic process that promotes a more meaningful critical dialogue.

Throughout this discussion a number of key terms are used. The author believes every teacher has the potential to become a *critical pedagogue*, a term used to describe an educator who attempts to raise awareness of hidden socio-historical power dynamics and who attempts to enable individuals to act toward social justice (Freire, 1970). *Critical stance* occurs when individuals question the authority of texts they encounter and make use of alternative epistemologies to construct meaning (Spires, Huntley-Johnston, & Huffman, 1993). *Text* is meant to include any written, visual, audio, and/or alternative form of communicative media, rather than just "text-based." *Identity* is meant to describe an individual's beliefs about who they are, qualities they may possess, and how these qualities are perceived by others (boyd, 2007). Finally, *learning space* describes both physical and virtual locations people enter to engage in knowledge acquisition as a central activity (Oblinger, 2006).

Critical Dialogue

In 1970, Paulo Freire, concerned with changing the social and material imbalances oppressing peasants in Brazil, elaborated on a process of critical dialogue as a means through which to bring about social liberation (Freire, 1970). Today, educators and researchers concerned with critical pedagogies wish to alter educational landscapes to include more diverse experiences, more equitable access and opportunity, engagement with socio-historical constructed power relationships, understanding of indigenous ways of knowing, acknowledgement of personal biases, and preparation of learners to become more critically-engaged participants in society (Griffin, Brown, & Warren, 2012; Kincheloe, 2007; Lukinbeal & Allen, 2007; Suoranta & Vaden, 2007). To accomplish this, critical pedagogues make room for and pay attention to the diverse social and cultural locations of their students (Cho, 2010), most often through a process of the creation and facilitation of "Freireian" critical dialogue.

Critical dialogue is a problem-posing discussion setup to ensure equitable access and participation by all members, constructed to focus on a multiplicity of viewpoints, and designed to bring awareness to social and historical power imbalances to promote action (Cho, 2010; Freire, 1970; Kauffman, 2010; Kincheloe, 2007; Lukinbeal & Allen, 2007). Through a critical dialogue, participants learn from one another, allowing critical pedagogues to counteract more typical individualistic and competitive approaches to education (Johnson & Morris, 2010; Lukinbeal & Allen, 2007; Suoranta & Vaden, 2007). Within these critical dialogues, participants are encouraged to share explicit elements of their own culture, both providing legitimacy to cultural diversity and incorporating these cultural understandings into ontological and epistemological exploration (Cho, 2010; Edwards, 2010). For the teacher and the students, the use of a problem-posing focus—one that connects course content to the real-world struggles of students—helps to highlight and challenge hidden cultural and historical societal dynamics that create imbalances of power (Edwards, 2010; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007), ultimately, providing "…new ways for students to claim authority for their own experience" (Cho, 2010, p. 313).

As Wilhem (2009, p. 36) remarks, "If we want to work toward any of our goals as educators, we must be willing to try innovative, problem-centered, and meaning-constructive ways of teaching…." Through critical dialogue, the classroom is transformed from a location for the dispensation of knowledge to passive recipients into a place where knowledge is disassembled, approached from multiple and missing perspectives, and reassembled in ways that create both critical understanding and paths for social change (Giroux, 2010; Griffin, et al., 2012; Johnson & Morris, 2010). While not everyone may benefit equally from participation, critical dialogue presents the opportunity for each participant to become conscious of previously hidden power struggles, more understanding of those with whom they interact, and able to work toward a more just future.

While critical dialogue in classroom settings can be a transformative practice, it is important to acknowledge limitations and intrinsic barriers imposed by institutionalized higher education settings that may be challenging for educators to overcome. Beyond the use of grades, the inherent imbalance of power that accompanies the teacher-student relationship, and the physical and social boundaries of the classroom environment (Kincheloe, 2007), higher education institutions are increasingly subordinated to capital—repurposing higher education from a site for civic and social engagement into a site for economic commodification (Giroux, 2011). If not careful, critical dialogue designed to explore multiple viewpoints can reinforce these same hegemonic positions of power if marginalized individuals feel

required to share of themselves when they otherwise would not have (Gorski, 2009; Lukinbeal & Allen, 2007). An effective critical dialogue would need to both acknowledge and account for these limitations in order to realize its fullest potential as a critical collaborative venture.

Courses designed to facilitate critical dialogue in virtual learning spaces gain a number of opportunities often not present within traditional classroom settings. The often-asynchronous nature of online learning can improve the content and depth of class discussions, making collaborative learning more efficient (Francescato, et al., 2006). Online, students have more time at their disposal in which to think about the words and thoughts of others and to formulate their own responses. Indeed, Ghodarti and Gruba (2011) note in a study of online discussions that most students preferred asynchronous forums for discussion as this gave them more time to structure their posts and reflect upon them. This presents an opportunity for students to return to course readings, previous posts, and/or to engage in "reflexivity" practices (Wilhelm, 2009) that allow them to think from multiple perspectives before issuing their own written responses. Furthermore, in US higher education settings, online courses benefit non-native speakers of English who can be more deliberate in their writing while receiving constant feedback on the meaningfulness and efficacy of what they have said (Burbules & Callister, 2000). Even for native speakers of English, Burbules (2002, p. 389) explains that,

> Some students speak up more under such circumstances; there is more time to reflect on what one is writing or reading in an online discussion, as opposed to the rapid flow of live conversation; students are required to be more independently motivated, and to find other sources of feedback and support than immediate teacher recognition or approval.

The asynchronous nature of interaction, and the time to engage in reflexivity practices allow a properly designed and facilitated online course to provide opportunities for an effective critical dialogue. Instructional design that supports engagement in this type of dialogue would necessarily need to account for the creation of human-centered virtual learning spaces, provide opportunities for identity formation/modification based on interaction with others, and make use of critical digital literacies to approach course content.

Virtual Learning Spaces

As online learning has flourished in a variety of educational settings, the capacity to design, shape, and modify learning spaces has grown as well, leading "…to unprecedented possibilities and combinations for learning spaces and pedagogies" (Al-Mahmood, 2006, p. 43). Learning spaces designed to suit the learning needs of students should account for recent thinking in learning space design that suggests an increased role of collaboration and community building in the learning process.

The design of learning spaces, in both physical and virtual environments, shapes the learning that can occur there (Chism, 2006). Learning space design can either bring the students together through flexibility, permitting collaboration, exploration, and discussion with one another, or the design can incorporate rigid and inflexible boundaries that carry a silent message of disconnectedness and solitude (Oblinger, 2006; Thomas, 2010). For higher education institutions, researchers (e.g., Al-Mahmood, 2006; Gee, 2006; Oblinger, 2006; Thomas, 2010) advocate a human-centered design philosophy for learning spaces that is focused on student collaboration and flexibility.

A number of principles of human-centered design easily translate into the creation of virtual learning spaces. First, learning is a social activity and the space connects its people (Al-Mahmood, 2006; Gee, 2006). Second, learning spaces need to create opportunities for socialization while maintaining room for privacy (Gee, 2006; Wheeler, 2009). Third, learning spaces need to encourage active engagement by their participants, including making space for listening, presentation, critique, and social construction of knowledge (Brown & Long, 2006; Thomas, 2010). Fourth, the learning space needs to incorporate flexible design elements that allow it to respond to a variety of learning and teaching needs (Al-Mahmood, 2006; Gee, 2006; Watulak & Kinzer, 2013), including the capacity to move beyond text to incorporate audio, video and images (Lomas & Oblinger, 2006). Finally, the learning space needs to give ownership to those within, providing inhabitants with a say in how the space looks (Al-Mahmood, 2006; Avila & Pandya, 2013; Gee, 2006; Milne, 2006; Santo, 2013).

The ultimate purpose of a learning space, which applies human-centered design principles, is the creation of a learning community. A learning community functions as a nexus between the personal and

social spaces in which identity is formed, fostering reflective and collaborative learning through discourse and dialogue (Al-Mahmood, 2006; Wheeler, 2009). In online contexts, formation of the community requires as much attention to the background knowledge, understandings and personal interests of the community members as it does to the content that may be the focus of the course (Oztok, 2013). As Bickford and Wright (2006, p. 41) point out "a real community, however, exists only when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and leads to learning." Learners need to challenge each other and be challenged in their own thinking (Bickford & Wright, 2006; Wheeler, 2009), but they also need to feel a sense of belonging to the learning community (Lomas & Oblinger, 2006). When creating a learning space that fosters such a community, designers need to take care to account for ways in which learners can learn about each other, as well as challenge, engage and feel connected to one another, in order to facilitate deep and meaningful ways of learning.

Unfortunately, the institutional nature of higher education can present limitations for virtual learning space design. In online courses, while instructors can allow for choice and flexibility, they are still bound by institutional form and function (Kincheloe, 2007; Scherff, 2012). The learning management systems provided by higher education settings often mirror the content delivery structures present in traditional classrooms that favor teacher-centered instruction (Thomas, 2010). Pierce (2009) raises this concern, arguing that learning within online contexts often creates an automated process through which technology is used to replicate the sort of historically oppressive "banking education" (Freire, 1970) that persists in many education landscapes. In addition to borders suggested by learning management systems, boundaries are also created by the limits of the mediums through which communication occurs (Al-Mahmood, 2006) and the ideologies of the instructor and students (Scherff, 2012). Finally, individuals may struggle to make the personal connections with others that allow for deep and lasting learning communities to form in the short period of time in which most higher education courses take place (Oztok, 2013). While these boundaries cannot be eliminated, appropriate learning space design should try to lessen their influence through the implementation of human-centered design principles and critical dialogue.

Online Identity Formation

Current advocates of critical pedagogy renew the call for a focus on identity and the social construction of self (Davis, 2012; Kauffman, 2010; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Indeed, as Gomez (2006) argues, identity formation actions within virtual spaces are necessary for a subject to develop a critical higher consciousness, which includes possibilities for increased online awareness and engagement, allowing individuals to become participants and producers of knowledge in the modern digitally-connected world. Identity formation is a process marked by constant change. Identity is negotiated through the ways individuals experience themselves, how others experience them (Freeman & Bamford, 2004), and the beliefs individuals have about the ways in which they are being perceived by others (boyd, 2007). As a result, in different social settings it is common for individuals to tailor different identities as they engage in a process of constructing and re-constructing their identity in relation to the perceived norms of groups with which they interact (boyd, 2007; Hughes, 2007). This includes efforts to claim membership in certain groups and exclude oneself from others through the highlighting and downplaying of certain identity characteristics (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Hughes, 2007).

Recognizing the role social construction of identity and expression plays for online learning/learners is essential for understanding the function and possibilities of discussion in online learning contexts (Davis, 2012; Delahunty, 2012; Schmier, 2013). Learners must have opportunities to interact in order to construct and project their online identities (Delahunty, 2012), a process which is often more transparent in online discourse due to the common use of written text (Hughes, 2007). Owing to a lack of immediate interaction and meaning-making cues, online "…what students mean when they post to forum discussions becomes crucial in understanding how they construct their identity and to what extent this is made transparent to others" (Delahunty, 2012, p. 409). In order to provide context for understanding the interactions of others, participants in online discourse must have the ability to connect the expressions of others to each member's backgrounds and interests (Oztok, 2013). To that end, those interacting with individuals online tend to most value, or pay attention to, elements of the self that either come through or which they consider distorted (Davis, 2012). In other words, the perceived background, context and authenticity of an individual's online identity is under careful scrutiny. Bullingham and Vasconcelos

(2013) and Davis (2012) found that participants in online settings generally reproduced, and valued the reproduction of, their offline selves but chose to emphasize certain parts of their identities while downplaying others, which was made easier by the distance between performer and audience created by the online environment.

Online, just as in traditional social settings, there are pressures to conform and to belong to groups that can positively or negatively influence identity formation. These pressures—and social inequalities—are often as strong online as they are in face-to-face interaction (Francescato, et al., 2006; Gorski, 2009). What students write in discussion forums gives valuable insight into their identity, and belies both their self-perceptions of legitimacy and their belief about how others view them (boyd, 2007; Delahunty, 2012). Participants in online discussions often will change or edit their online identities in an effort to better fit into the group(s) with which they are interacting (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Delahunty, 2012; Kincheloe, 2007). Throughout online presentation of identity, individuals are conceptualizing an imagined audience and altering their presentation to fit; therefore, the more one understands the scope of one's audience, the easier it may be to properly present oneself (boyd, 2007).

For some, it can be challenging to find ways to connect with other group members. Eurocentric patterns of speech can exclude students of color from conversations (Kauffman, 2010), gender bias is often present (Groenke, 2008), and disenfranchised groups may struggle to find affirming content (Gorski, 2009). Often, just supplying those from disenfranchised backgrounds with access to digital tools, without the ability to be critical, can result in the replication of mainstream discourses (Schmier, 2013). To provide equity, it is important to challenge mainstream and popular discourses that currently lead to disenfranchisement of some groups (Hughes, 2007). Within the online setting, failure to find ways to make connections to other members of a group can have a negative impact on an individual's identity formation (Delahunty, 2012; Oztok, 2013) causing individuals to disengage from social learning activities (Hughes, 2007). Online pedagogies and instructors need to account for the ways in which mainstream discourses and ways of communicating influence identity formation if they are to create more equitable and transformative learning spaces. This is made possible through the use of critical digital literacies as an analytic framework through which one can approach both class texts and interactions with others.

Critical Literacies

Because of the open nature and ease of publishing online, the onus is upon educators to equip students with the ability to sort, analyze and critique online resources (Avila & Pandya, 2013; Merchant, 2007; Milne, 2006; Wilhelm, 2009). Through the practice and development of critical digital literacies individuals can gain a personal critical stance that will improve their ability to question and interpret online texts in ways that highlight alternative possibilities (Groenke, 2008; Scherff, 2012).

To guide the formation of critical stance, it is useful to think of critical literacies as four interrelated dimensions, suggested by Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002), used to guide the study and interpretation of information. These dimensions include "…(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (Lewison, et al., 2002, p. 382). Just as critical dialogue promotes a greater awareness and a call for action, each of these four dimensions challenges learners to become more conscious of hidden messages within texts that promote social-historical power imbalances, and assist these learners in envisioning more just alternatives.

In disrupting the commonplace, critical literacy practitioners recognize common modes of perception, and look for new modes of understanding (Lewison, et al., 2002; Scherff, 2012). To accomplish this, those analyzing texts need two skills: the ability to select texts that represent alternative viewpoints and the ability to recognize and evaluate how common discourses are constructed within texts (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Lewison, et al., 2002). By interrogating multiple viewpoints, one engages in an essential critical literacy skill— "reflexivity" (Wilhelm, 2009)—the ability to take up the positions of others, seeking to understand differing perspectives concurrently, and to recognize which perspectives are present and which may be missing (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Lewison, et al., 2002; Scherff, 2012). Focusing on socio-historical political issues allows individuals to seek out ways in which texts contribute to the social construction of power relationships (Groenke, 2008; Kauffman, 2010; Lewison, et al., 2002; Scherff, 2012; Schmier, 2013). This includes the ability to recognize and critique legitimacy claims, as well as the ability to move beyond the personal to recognize the larger social and political discourses that beget and

withhold power (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Lewison, et al., 2002). Finally, in taking action and promoting social justice, practitioners move to a position of "praxis" (Freire, 1970), wherein they make use of new information, insights and perspectives gained from literature to reflect and/or take action toward a more just society (Laman, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Suoto-Manning, 2012; Lewison, et al., 2002; Scherff, 2012). Critical literacies promote a transition from the position of passive reader to one who is actively engaged with others and who is seeking ways to challenge dominant power relationships.

Recently, scholars have considered more specifically the idea of critical digital literacies, an application of critical literacy to online media. As Avila & Pandya (2013, p. 3) explain, "critical digital literacies…are those skills and practices that lead to the creation of digital texts that interrogate the world; they also allow and foster the interrogation of digital, multimedia texts." Critical digital literacies recognize that digital spaces present unique types of texts and unique ways of dealing with text. While critical digital literacies still acknowledge the importance of understanding the language of power, accessing multiple and diverse texts, and reconstructing narratives to create transformative possibilities (Schmier, 2013), they additionally include the critical analysis of digital sources, an ethical approach to authorship for distant audiences through digital means (Smith & Hull, 2013; Watulak & Kinzer, 2013) and a capacity to adapt and produce within new media forms (Santo, 2013).

Because many online discussions in higher education courses make use of written text, and online courses draw on digital media for analysis, one cannot foster critical dialogue in an online course without simultaneously incorporating critical digital literacies. Online courses centered on critical dialogue create openings for students to practice essential critical literacies, including: reading selectively, questioning relationships between language and power, recognizing the social construction of power, and considering actions that promote social justice (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Scherff, 2012), all while authoring web content for class participants in distant locations.

Implementing Critical Dialogue

While critical dialogue has been a tool for transformative learning for over four decades, it is important to turn toward a process for the fostering of critical dialogue within virtual learning spaces to account for advances in the way students learn and in the way education is provided. This analysis may be most appropriately thought of as questions.

1. What design features of a virtual learning space make critical dialogue possible?
2. What processes encourage the growth of critical dialogue within a human-centered virtual learning space?
3. What are signs of successful implementation of an online critical dialogue?

What design features of a virtual learning space make critical dialogue possible?

Technological features can be incorporated into a virtual learning space that will make room for identity construction, provide flexibility, and generate opportunities for collaboration, helping to create a learning community that makes possible engagement in critical dialogue (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Oblinger, 2006). This begins with the creation of a virtual learning space based on human-centered design principles, where students can adapt their activities to fit the space and adapt the space to fit their activities (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Gee, 2006).

For critical dialogue to become a possibility, all participants need the opportunity to establish meaningful and connected identities within the learning community. One part of this process is a focus on the use of a central online discussion forum in which all users possess the same level of control over topic creation and modification (i.e. all students gain "instructor" privileges). Additionally, all members should be given control over the capacity to create, join, and leave groups within the learning management system, each of which would then possess its own, more private discussion forum. This practice allows participants to belong to multiple communities within the online space, bolstering identity formation/modification opportunities, avoiding the imposition of the views of a single group on the entire population, and permitting sub-communities of participants to provide the support required to bring contested issues into the more public central discussion forum (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005). As an example, in reading through a lengthy discussion thread on the main forum, a few students may decide that a particular view is being over-represented. While individually, they could struggle to figure out how best to broaden the

dialogue beyond this largely accepted view, by forming a smaller group of like-minded individuals, students can work together to locate and highlight alternative perspectives and then add these into the main discussion forum in a more efficient and effective way. While it is easy to imagine abuses that could occur from giving students both the power to control topic creation and group formation, critical dialogue is a process that cannot happen without faith in fellow critical dialogue participants to respect the community within which they are collaborating (Bickford & Wright, 2006; Freire, 1970; Kauffman, 2010). This equity approach allows the discussion forum(s) to become more participant-driven and participant-focused, with the "teacher" guiding from the periphery rather than the center (Laman, et al., 2012).

Additionally, all participants—including instructors—must be encouraged to construct their virtual profiles in ways they feel best communicate the aspects of their identity they wish to share with the community. It is important that profiles include both background and academic interests, so that learning community members can make explicit the contexts from which they originate and in which they think about knowledge to be gained in the course (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Oztok, 2013). By including the capacity to create meaningful personal profiles, the opportunity to form multiple sub-group memberships, and equal power to control discourse within multiple discussion forums, the virtual learning space becomes one that encourages members to participate in an identity formation/modification process necessary for critical dialogue to take place.

Finally, the virtual learning space must account for time. Time plays an important role in both the quality and quantity of online interactions (Ghodarti & Gruba, 2011), and is a requirement in discussion for a critical dialogue to evolve—time to construct knowledge of oppressive issues, to deconstruct and make issues problematic from multiple perspectives, and to reconstruct issues with more critical understandings (Laman, et al., 2012; Poster, 2006; Schmier, 2013). Time should be respected through the limiting of material exposure as well as provision of enough time for students to engage with the materials presented. If students, inundated with material, are unable to engage with the material in a critical fashion, they may find their voices and perspectives diminished (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Rice & Vastola, 2011). This means that learning cannot move from concept to concept in rapid and sequential fashion, but must instead take time to allow dialogue to progress and to take new directions or revisit past content in ways often unforeseen by dialogue participants. To accomplish this, it is important to limit a semester long course to four or five key concepts for investigation, choosing those which present the most opportunity for critical analysis.

While the time and capacity to produce profiles, join groups, and control discussions reflects human-centered design principles, these technological affordances can as easily be used for the replication of hegemonic social practices as they can be used to foster transformative critical dialogue. By choosing to incorporate these powerful features within a virtual learning space, the instructor becomes responsible for making pedagogical choices throughout the course that allow these features to benefit all students. To ensure that online courses are those that will foster critical dialogue rather than replicate hegemonic practices, instructors must design them in ways that turn them into learning spaces which provide opportunities for discussion and collaboration, as well as room for identity formation, and which provide time for students to create their own language and critical understandings of their experiences. Designed with these goals in mind, a virtual learning space improves the possibilities for creation of a meaningful learning community for all participants.

What processes encourage the growth of critical dialogue within a human-centered virtual learning space?

To foster critical dialogue, it is important for the instructor to make the intent of this human-centered design explicitly clear from the outset. This begins by acknowledging that within this particular online course the instructor's goal is not just to pass on knowledge, but to make use of critical dialogue to facilitate a personal and collaborative journey alongside students, where each can actively transform knowledge by highlighting hidden struggles and imagining more just alternatives.

After members have been encouraged to complete their personal profiles, within the discussion forum, it is important to make room for initial identity formation as well. However, this is also the time when students are most vulnerable to social pressures (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Delahunty, 2012), requiring vigilance on the part of the instructor to monitor and address social inequalities as they

develop. When starting a discussion with traditional ice breakers (such as "tell us about yourself"), students will naturally begin to present information that aligns them with some while excluding other members of the group (Delahunty, 2012). Alternatively, the instructor could begin the discussion process by centering the first entries into the dialogue on a popular current dilemma, inviting students to provide depth for their first posts by basing their responses on moral and/or ethical insights into the issue. As Lukinbeal and Allen (2007, pp. 199-200) explain, "developing critical moral consciousness in a classroom is an essential first step in group dynamics and challenges the group to change the norm and create social order where learning is shared equally." The author has previously found current events in mainstream news connected to the content of the course to be excellent potential topics for first discussion. While engaging students in this first dilemma is a more effective way to bring students together, it is important that the instructor choose a well-known dilemma with which all students are familiar, to avoid excluding some participants. Furthermore, asking that students include moral and/or ethical interpretations in their first posts communicates to participants that the course is built on their interests, knowledge, and judgments, rather than the acquisition of previously unknown facts. By beginning the discussion process with this focus, students are constructing identities through discourse within the virtual learning space, while engaging in the beginning of a critical stance-taking process that forms the backbone of any critical dialogue (Giroux, 2010; Laman, et al., 2012; Rice & Vastola, 2011; Wiggins, 2011).

In order for the critical dialogue to progress, students will need exposure to content and questions that further develop critical digital literacies necessary for more effective participation. Instructors can begin this process through juxtaposition of traditional course content with preselected texts that represent alternative perspectives (Kauffman, 2010). By preselecting texts that represent diverse viewpoints, students coming from disenfranchised populations do not feel required and/or expected to share these aspects of their identity for the sake of adding diversity to the critical dialogue. Starting with a few competing texts encourages participants to recognize the legitimacy of alternative viewpoints and to evaluate how contending discourses of power may be constructed within each text (Avila & Pandya, 2013; Lewison, et al., 2002). Depending on the critical literacy proficiencies with which students enter the course, this may require that the instructor make explicit which viewpoints are being expressed and how discourses are being constructed within the texts. If the texts are editable word documents, this can most easily be accomplished through highlighting and comments used as part of the track changes feature in Microsoft Word. If the texts are in PDF format (to which web-based texts can easily be converted), the use of software such as Adobe Acrobat also makes highlighting and commenting possible. Visual or audio texts may require more creativity to comment on, although Web 2.0 tools (such as Voicethread (http://www.voicethread.com/) make this easily possible. Any of these methods provides students with an opportunity to see these skills applied to texts in a way that models a critical literacy approach.

Even though these first texts serve as an example of how to deconstruct discourses within texts, students should still be encouraged to enter into dialogue concerning these interpretations. It is important that the instructor make room for alternative interpretation, encouraging participants to look for and make explicit their own knowledge and understanding of the texts. Reminding students that it is the differences between participant perspectives that drive a critical dialogue, rather than agreement (Giroux, 2011; Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005), may lend support to those with alternative views looking to become more involved in the dialogue. Because this dialogue is happening in a digital format, both the words participants write/speak and the responses they receive take on a lasting character, allowing the process to gain a level of permanency often unattainable in face-to-face dialogue. To go further, students ought to be challenged not only to highlight and make problematic imbedded socio-historical discourses within the texts and previous postings, but also to imagine and suggest alternatives, allowing students to build knowledge collaboratively, constructing critical identities through group discussion(s), and developing a habit of working within the critical dialogue to envision more just possibilities (Delahunty, 2012).

As the course progresses, the instructor might further facilitate the critical dialogue by making explicit their own recognition of imbalances of power that become apparent through critical reading of the texts and/or dialogue posts; however, it is more important that students take the lead in recognizing views alternative to their own, locating and making problematic imbedded social-historical power dynamics,

suggesting alternatives that disrupt these imbalances, and questioning the understandings and interpretations of others. By challenging others, students take control of the critical dialogue, broadening their identities to include the authority to question the claims of others and to deepen personal and community understandings of the social construction of knowledge (Giroux, 2010, 2011). For the instructor, explicitly acknowledging points in the dialogue where differences result in more complex understandings reminds participants that difference is both desired and useful, and that agreement is not a requirement for success.

As students become more comfortable and skilled in identifying hegemonic discourses, locating missing perspectives and offering alternatives, they should become the primary providers/creators of new texts for the dialogue. To further create space for difference within the dialogue process, the instructor takes on the responsibility of bringing supplementary texts to the discussion that challenge notions around which students may be too easily uniting or highlighting alternative perspectives participants may be missing. Because this dialogue is taking place in a more permanent, digital space, not only does it become much easier to locate and present a wider variety of texts to the members of the dialogue, but it makes returning to these texts for new analysis far easier. Additionally, students should be encouraged to start new discussion threads focused on their interests, as well as create, join and/or leave sub-groups with the purpose of testing/refining interpretations with smaller audiences before bringing them to the larger public forum (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Oztok, 2013).

Throughout the critical dialogue process, though participants will be examining larger social-historical perspectives, participants need to be reminded to remain conscious of change at the most local of levels—the self. Members ought to indicate their own new understandings and previously unseen perspectives explicitly in the dialogue process, highlighting their own identity (re)construction as more critically aware and engaged members of both the learning community and the larger society (Hughes, 2007; Oztok, 2013). By making use of the technological affordances of the discussion forum in this process—such as referencing and directly quoting past posts/texts—it becomes easier to trace connections between dialogue interaction and identity formation allowing aspects of identity to become visible that may not have been apparent in face-to-face interactions. By asking that members stay cognizant of change—in encountered texts, personal identity, and the identities of others—the critical dialogue works to position learners as integral actors in the meaning-making and future-making process (Giroux, 2011), with a raised consciousness of the ways in which digital communication serves in the construction of new identities and subjectivities (Gomez, 2006). Equipping students and instructors with the ability to recognize signs of successful implementation of a critical dialogue process can allow all participants to evaluate the progress of the course along the way.

What are signs of successful implementation of an online critical dialogue?

Critical dialogue represents a change from a way of educating in which students are seen as passive, unknowing recipients of knowledge to one in which students participate in the active creation and transformation of knowledge and themselves. Signs that a critical dialogue process has been successfully implemented are rooted in this active engagement and should be perceptible by all members of the critical dialogue process. When assessing virtual learning space design, determining success involves examining how the learning space facilitated or inhibited student identity creation and interaction, as well as whether or not learners were able to use the learning space to effectively locate, question and propose alternatives to socio-historical power imbalances (Hunley & Schaller, 2006). However, it is important to realize that while flexibility provides more opportunities for student engagement, there are also more opportunities for students to disengage (Hughes, 2007), and while it is important to create opportunities for all students to participate, one should not expect participation to be equal.

While not all participants experience critical dialogue equally, successful implementation of such a process allows each participant to gain the opportunity to benefit from the consciousness raising efforts of the group. To that end, while the goal of critical pedagogues is to empower students to bring about future social change, for participants in this digital critical dialogue, successful praxis involves increases in self-awareness and the recognition of social change as both possible and a worthwhile goal. Therefore, successful implementation is demonstrated when participants begin to self-reflect on their biases, recognize multiple perspectives, question the claims of others and become more comfortable

with disagreement as a locus for understanding rather than marginalization (Burbules & Callister, 2000; Griffin, et al., 2012; Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Kauffman, 2010; Lewison, et al., 2002). Additionally, participants should develop critical stance (Scherff, 2012), make use of a more active voice that calls for social justice (Habermas, 1979; Laman, et al., 2012; Rheingold, 2008), and communicate a sense of responsibility for bringing about future change (Giroux, 2011). This vision of praxis answers a call from critical digital literacies researchers "…that digital citizens should be reflective practitioners who must possess awareness of social, cultural, and historical contexts and functional skills, but also should reflect on their position and practices within these contexts and the outcomes of the uses of their functional skills" (Watulak & Kinzer, 2013, p. 135).

Conclusion

Online courses in higher education present opportunities for students and instructors to engage in powerful and transformative learning experiences. As Freire (1970, p. 92) reminds us, "only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking." This critical thinking, as a consciousness-raising endeavor, allows participants to see the connections between people and ideas, stimulating new interpretations of socially-constructed knowledge and new possibilities for action meant to bring about a more just future (Freire, 1970). As Gomez (2006, p. 54) exclaims, "Thus, independent from the education or basic preparation of a person, a critical understanding of the knowledge embedded in the digital world is indispensible." Through the use of critical dialogue within a virtual learning space, built following human-centered design principles, students can practice essential critical digital literacies, become more aware of hidden forms of inequality, and learn to value the opinions and perspectives of others. By fostering critical dialogue within online courses, students have an opportunity to make use of advances in digital communications to move beyond passive consumption of digital content to become active agents for future transformation within a society that is increasingly digitally-connected.

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