

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Teaching in Higher Education published online on 9 December 2013 and published in Vol 9 Issues 2, 2014), available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13562517.2014.8676>

20

Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? The challenges of web-based intercultural dialogue

By Maha Bali

Ellsworth's (1989) article entitled "Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy" raises issues about the complex dynamics of implementing critical pedagogy in real classrooms, and the difficulties and paradoxes of putting the empowerment rhetoric into practice.

This article analyzes the challenges of putting the rhetoric of web-based intercultural dialogue into practice, based on my previous experience as a facilitator and trainer/coach-of-facilitators of such a program: one which involves web-based video-conferencing dialogue between students from the Arab/Muslim world and those from the US/West.

Keywords: intercultural learning; critical pedagogy; intercultural dialogue; social justice; web-based dialogue

Introduction

Ellsworth's (1989) article "Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy" raises issues about the complex dynamics, difficulties and paradoxes of putting the empowerment rhetoric of critical pedagogy into practice. Dialogue is important in much Western-style education (Burbules, 2000), but Ellsworth questions its unquestioned centrality in critical pedagogy, as exemplified by Freire (1970):

Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there is no education. (pp. 92-93).

This article follows Ellsworth's approach of critiquing ahistorical and decontextualized notions of pedagogy. Ellsworth also highlights how educators' acknowledgment of power inequalities does not translate directly into student empowerment or examination of solutions. Furthermore, she highlights how her own privileges and interests, as instructor, influences power relations in dialogue, as do differences in student power and privilege. One example is the difficulties of discussing gender oppression when the teacher is a woman with institutional power but societal disadvantage compared to White male students, and the dynamics are more complex for male/female students of color. Ellsworth suggests the impossibility of achieving an ideal dialogue situation where all parties have equal communicative ability, and argues that this may not even be desirable, that sometimes "partial" (meaning both incomplete, and biased) voices of students should be valued, as opposed to merely submitting to a hegemony of rationalistic dialogue.

This article analyzes the challenges of putting the rhetoric of web-based intercultural dialogue into practice, based on my previous experiences in such a program, described next.

Introducing the Program

The program¹ was provided by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which allowed different universities from the US/West and Arab/Muslim world to "add-on" dialogue sessions to regular semester-long courses. Students met weekly for two-hours in diverse groups of around eight students from different universities. Web-based video-

¹ I choose to keep the program name anonymous to preserve privacy. Even though I have permission to use the program name in my PhD thesis, I did not obtain permission to use the name in other publications.

conferencing was used to discuss topics of identity, culture, politics, and religion. A facilitator from each "side" attended these discussions, the larger aim of which was to improve intercultural understanding and contribute to a more socially just future for humanity.

Such intercultural dialogue can potentially promote highly esteemed educational goals, such as developing critical thinking, "narrative imagination" (the empathetic ability to understand the world from another person's point of view), and "world citizenship" (where one's loyalties go beyond local citizenship and towards recognizing common humanity) - three dimensions Nussbaum (1997) considers essential for college students.

The use of technology here widens access to those without resources or opportunities to travel and interact with culturally different others. The presence of facilitators from both "regions" reduces the usual issue of which "side" the "authority" (usually teacher) in the intercultural dialogue belongs to. Students at the American University in Cairo (AUC) surveyed in Bali and Bossone (2010) found this program more conducive to developing intercultural knowledge and skills, compared to a campus-based program mimicking it, due to the difficulties of balancing the numbers of local and international students in the campus-based version. The majority of students participating in the web-based dialogue perceived it improved their abilities to express their opinions to people of other cultures (74%), understand different worldviews (67%), and listen/learn about other cultures (63%). End-of-semester comments included how the course opened students' eyes to worldwide media bias, how it improved tolerance and respect of other views, and how it motivated some students to become more involved in politics and in actively making a difference in the world

beyond academia. In other words, the program helped develop their "intercultural maturity" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005)².

The program fulfils a role Edward Said considers essential for universities, where:

...we should be able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure....in this joint discovery of self and other...to transform what might be conflict, or contest, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, creative interaction (Said 1999/2007, p. 33)

The dialogue program itself was not designed with a necessarily Freirean understanding of dialogue, but it did place students at the heart of the dialogue, with non-didactic/non-authoritative facilitators. The dialogue was hoped to involve the Freirean notions of love, humility, hope and faith in humankind (Freire, 1970). While not explicitly attempting to raise student consciousness of their own oppression, it encourages questioning hidden biases and understanding different worldviews; while it does not directly prompt action towards social justice, facilitators are intentional in their attempts to make the dialogue situation as egalitarian as possible, and students worked in cross-regional pairs towards solving problems affecting intercultural relations. A student in Bali and Bossone (2010) said he became "more tolerant and respectful of others' point of view, even though I disagree with them". Another student said:

It really opened my eyes to how complacent we have become to the society we live. I hope to do my part in creating more awareness further down the line in my academic career, and not just because I am forced to take part in a program for a class but because I want to do something.

However, this article argues the program faces challenges in meeting its goals and potential, and I divide these into three types: those related to the use of technology;

² This contains elements of cognitive, intrapersonal/reflective and interpersonal/social development when dealing with different cultures.

those related to the use of dialogue as the predominant pedagogy, predominantly using the English language; and the dynamics of interculturality itself. Before discussing these, I first make explicit my positionality with regards to each issue.

Where I Come From

I consider myself a "cultural hybrid" following Bhabha's (1994) term/concept that maintains that cultures are not "pure" and exclusive, that each individual's identity can encompass a combination of different cultures. Cultures therefore communicate in a "Third Space" where cultural difference is articulated, sometimes with colonial or postcolonial influences (Bhabha, 1994). Born to Egyptian parents, and living my childhood in Kuwait, my hybridity came from my British/American education. English is my academic language, and my fluency in it is near-native. My current employer is my alma mater, AUC. It is not uncommon to find Arabs comfortable in Western culture, because of Western education and immersion in American pop culture, as well as travel experiences.

All of the above contributed to my general comfort with intercultural situations, since I grew up surrounded by culturally-different teachers, and multinational peers. However, I also sometimes felt "Other" (e.g. I felt "Other" to the local Kuwaiti population; I felt "Other" to my school's dominant British culture). As reflective adult, my feelings echo Edward Said's towards his colonial education: "I felt out of place. There was something that didn't correspond between what I felt to be myself and that kind of [colonial] education" (2001, p. 281).

Returning to Egypt to study at AUC, I felt "Other" to Egyptians who had grown up in Egypt, and this confirmed my hybrid identity, as I did not "fit" completely into mainstream Egyptian culture, either. In general, however, I consider myself to be comfortable in intercultural situations, I developed a kind of "intercultural maturity"

(King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), developed further by having lived in the US/UK for some years. But my comfort with intercultural communication was not enough for participation in this program: the use of technology for communication adds another layer of complexity.

Although initially uncomfortable with computers, I obtained a degree in computer science with highest honors, and later an online Masters of Education in eLearning. My current work includes helping others teach using technology.

When I joined the dialogue as a facilitator I was generally comfortable with using educational technology, but had limited experience with web-based video dialogue. After two semesters of facilitating dialogue, I became a coach-of-facilitators, and later co-trainer-of- new-facilitators.

Despite my with the language, format, and technology used, I now reflect on the challenges these posed for dialogue participants.

Challenges in Web-Based Intercultural Dialogue

Technology's failure to empower relates to issues of access and infrastructure. Clearly, those in the West have access to stronger internet infrastructure, which improves session attendance, and have better technical support and facilities for webcams/mics/headsets, which enables smooth audio/video participation. However, the "digital divide" is not truly a divide between the haves and have-nots; it is a continuum (Warschauer, 2003). Within the Muslim/Arab world, there are huge variations in students' infrastructure and technical support, where elite (often Westernized) universities, such as AUC offer excellent on-campus access to facilities, infrastructure and technical support. . Elite universities worldwide are generally better-resourced.

A rare but extreme situation occurred while I was training new facilitators: the

internet was completely cut out of the Arab world for several days due to physical infrastructure issues. A more common situation was to have one Arab student from a less privileged university who rarely made it to sessions on time, and who had faulty technology or weak internet connection, limiting her participation sometimes to writing and reading text instead of audio. In all these ways, her "voice" was not as "present" as those of the other students in the group. Despite equal numbers of Arab/Muslim and US/Western students in each group, the voices of the Arab/Muslim side were unevenly represented, because technology unequally privileged the voices of the already-privileged Arabs/Muslims in the group (Burbules, 2006), while also increasing the overall privilege of the US/Western students in relation to the Arab/Muslim students, creating at least two levels of complexity. Sometimes, the Arab/Muslim facilitator had technical issues, and the dialogue became facilitated solely by the Western facilitator, creating further imbalances of power.

The second challenge was the use of dialogue as the main pedagogy. Dialogue is often perceived in the West as an ideal pedagogy (Burbules, 2000), but no one pedagogical approach suits all cultures (Skelton, 2005) or teaching situations (Burbules, 2006). Dialogue can take different forms (Burbules, 2000) that offer various levels of critical engagement and empowerment potential (Freire, 1970). It may become authoritarian and manipulative, even when intentions are good (Burbules, 2000; Ellsworth, 1989). Dialogue assumes, incorrectly, that all members have equal power to speak (Ellsworth, 1989), but it actually privileges students comfortable with spontaneous and oral, rather than reflective and written communication. It privileges

Western students generally more familiar³ with the idea of interactive classrooms, than those unfamiliar with it, such as Arabs schooled in traditional ways that discourage student participation altogether.

Dialogue here had a second dimension of complexity: it was mainly conducted in the English language as the common global language of communication, which privileges native/fluent speakers. Here, the Arab/Muslim students are on a spectrum: those in Western-based universities have some exposure to dialogue in their classrooms and have better English language mastery, whereas others may have had no exposure to classroom dialogue, and are often much less fluent/eloquent in English. Once, I had an Arab student who constantly asked for permission to speak, even though we kept explaining that this was not required. I also observed misunderstandings related to language nuances in some sessions. For example, in a discussion on homosexuality, two Arab students repeated that in Egypt, "we deny this act". This seems to imply the non-existence of homosexuality, when in reality, the students meant to say⁴ "our religion condemns this behavior as sinful", something that would have been clearer for Westerners to understand. The lack of sensitivity and political correctness of such candid expression will be discussed later.

Another issue dialogue creates is in its approach to "quiet" students. Silence is often seen as a kind of disempowerment, but we ignore its potential as a form of resistance, an intention to withdraw, or even a preference to learn by listening (Li,

³ I intentionally say "familiar" but not necessarily "comfortable", as students from minority backgrounds, or even those who are simply "shy" may be exposed to interactive classrooms but not feel comfortable in them.

⁴ Had I not been an Egyptian myself, I might have missed this meaning. I was watching a recorded session and so was unable to intervene to correct the misunderstanding.

2004). Silence has many unclear interpretations, and it is difficult to decide whether it indicates a problem to overcome, or a student position that needs to be respected. But respecting a student's decision to remain silent limits the dynamics of learning through dialogue for both the silent individual and her colleagues, as the colleagues' potential to learn from the silent student is reduced.

One of the ways of addressing some of the difficulties posed by dialogue (and the English language) was that facilitators typed summaries of what was being said, and participants could choose to participate via text instead of voice. This may have helped some of the students who were shy, or unable to keep up with the pace of the audio discussion. However, audio had more prominence than written text in these dialogues, and some of what was written was not necessarily "heard" as clearly as what was said aloud. Voice is not just about what is spoken, but what ends up being actually "heard" (Jones, 1999).

Facilitators were trained to explicitly address how language affects power dynamics (Agabria & Cohen, 2000). Facilitators were advised to inform participants that the dialogue was bilingual, and that they should feel free expressing themselves in English or Arabic⁵, then asking the facilitators to translate. Some students took advantage of this opportunity. However, this further created two problems: first, students' translated meanings could be distorted by the non-expert facilitator translation; second, it meant the Arab facilitator could become distracted/overwhelmed by the translation and unable to facilitate fully (this happened to me on occasion). Also, by

⁵ Later iterations of the program involved students from more countries and therefore more native languages became involved. Also, not all Arab/Muslim facilitators were fluent in Arabic, but other students could do the translation where needed.

requesting this kind of help, a student risked singling themselves out as needing more support than others.

Beyond the complexities posed by technology, language, and dialogue, the "intercultural" nature of the discussion has the potential to be colonizing. Again, it would seem obvious that the US/Western students belong to the more dominant part of the world, with a history of colonizing the Arab/Muslim, less-dominant side.

Facilitators were trained to explicitly address these power dynamics, encouraging participants to reflect on how such dynamics are enacted in group discussion, and how individual behavior can increase or reduce these power dynamics (Agabria & Cohen, 2000). However, within each of these sub-groups, there existed further divisions of privilege related to gender and social class.

There was once a discussion where an Arab male student suggested that governments should require females to wear the "veil", a view to which the three Arab female students (some of whom wore the veil) took offense and objected. As a veiled female Arab facilitator myself, this put me in a difficult situation as to whether I should defend a feminist perspective, or maintain a guise of neutrality by remaining silent (in the end, the student participants managed well without my intervention).

Moreover, differences in intercultural exposure and maturity among students affected their capabilities to see different worldviews, understand different sides of a discussion, and benefit fully from dialogue on controversial topics.

Returning to the homosexuality discussion mentioned earlier, the Muslim students who said "we deny this act" established it as a taboo and closed room for further discussion. In contrast, one American-educated Arab student took a more liberal and politically correct approach to the topic, and tried to further his knowledge asking sensitive questions that could satisfy his curiosity without offending others. More

intercultural sensitivity may, however, result in politically correct behavior, which is not necessarily conducive to further learning, and individuals from the dominant side often avoided challenging the views of the Arab/Muslim students (as predicted by Agabria & Cohen, 2000). Extreme tolerance of differences among cultures could prevent one from taking action against social injustices (Nussbaum, 1997; Brookfield, 2007).

Which brings us to the final issue that I found problematic: the divergence in views of what constitutes social justice. In critical pedagogy, the instructor is often said to take the socially just stance, and to facilitate raising students' consciousness towards this view, challenging the dominant views of society. But the "dominant" and "socially just" views are rarely, if ever, black and white. A stark example is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The dominant Arab/Muslim view is pro-Palestine, and this dominant perspective is passionately seen as socially just, despite disagreements on the details (e.g. whether violent resistance constitutes terrorism). In contrast, views on Israel-Palestine elsewhere are more complex and diverse. Following Brookfield's (2007) suggestion to remove the "dominant" view from the discussion in order to seriously consider alternative views becomes almost impossible in such an emotional topic discussed in a culturally diverse setting.

Conclusion

In many of the above criticisms of intercultural dialogue, I have highlighted nuances of power dynamics related to differences in technology access, language fluency, and level of familiarity with dialogue as a pedagogy, as well as intercultural knowledge and maturity.

Intercultural education that does not primarily strive towards "establishment and maintenance of an equitable and just world" can unintentionally create "educational colonization in which inequity and injustice are reproduced under the guise of

interculturalism” (Gorski, 2008, p. 517). Even though the program I have described clearly had equality and justice as end-goals I have shown that the process itself contains inequalities and power imbalances. As facilitators, we often asked ourselves and each other:

- (1) Do we exclude those who will be disempowered for fear of disenfranchising them? But that diminishes their agency by not giving them any voice at all
- (2) Do we include them, and try to support them better? (e.g. language and technology support)

However, I believe we should instead ask what it is we are doing that continues to reproduce these inequalities. Dialogue can be potentially colonizing, as it empowers one group by inherently being on their terms and serving their interests (Burbules, 2000; Gorski, 2008; Jones, 1999). Even benign dialogue can provide colonizers with a tool for "surveillance and exploitation" (Bhabha, 1999, p. 98 cited in Jones, 1999). The actual processes of dialogue can perpetrate inequality. Critical intercultural dialogue requires participants to

...adopt an attitude of openness towards each other's cultural perspectives; ... come to understand each other's perspectives; and ... communicate under conditions which they mutually can accept as fair.. (James, 1999, p. 590)

The following quote by Lugones in Lugones and Spelman (1983) sums up one of the biggest challenges in intercultural dialogue⁶:

We [the minorities] and you [the dominant] do not talk the same language. When we talk to you we use your language... But since your language and your theories

⁶The context of this quote actually refers to women of color having different experiences than white women, but I believe it re-contextualizes well to other situations of power imbalance.

are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion. We cannot talk to you in our language because you do not understand it. (p. 575)

The question is: how do we re-conceptualize intercultural dialogue/communication programs in order to improve student learning and empowerment while adequately addressing the inevitable imperfection and inequality of the dialogue situation?

Acknowledgements

I could not have written this paper without the thoughtful exchange of some of the ideas in it with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Alan Skelton on the one hand, and the intercultural dialogue program's coaches and facilitators on the other. The final writing of this paper has been much improved by the thoughtful peer reviewers' feedback.

References

- Agbaria, Farhat, and Cynthia Cohen. 2000. *Working with groups in conflict: The impact of power relations on the dynamics of the group*. Brandeis University, The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. Accessed June 11, 2013. http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/pdfs/publications/Working_Groups.pdf
- Bali, Maha, and Andrew Bossone. 2010. Intercultural and Multicultural Education in Universities and Studies: a comparison of two programs implemented at the American University in Cairo. *The Arab-Turkish Congress of Social Sciences*, Ankara, Turkey Dec 10-12, 2010.
- Bhabha, Homi. K. 1994. Cultural diversity and cultural differences. In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (Eds.), *The post-colonial studies reader* (pp. 206-209), London, England: Routledge.
- Brookfield, Stephen. 2007. Diversifying curriculum as the practice of repressive tolerance. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 12(5&6), 557 – 568.
DOI:10.1080/13562510701595085.

- Burbules, Nicholas C. 2000. The limits of dialogue as a critical pedagogy. In *Revolutionary pedagogies: Cultural politics, instituting education, and the discourse of theory*, edited by Peter Pericles Trifonas, 251-273, New York: Routledge.
- Burbules, Nicholas. C. 2006. Rethinking dialogue in networked spaces. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 6(1), 107-122.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. 1989. Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard educational review*, 59(3), 297-324.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970/1993. *Pedagogy of the oppressed. 30th anniversary edition*. New York, NY and London, England: Continuum International.
- Gorski, Paul C. 2008. Good intentions are not enough: A decolonizing intercultural education. *Intercultural education*, 19(6), 515-525.
DOI:10.1080/14675980802568319
- James, Michael Rabinder. 1999. Critical intercultural dialogue. *Polity*, 31(4), 587-607.
Article URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3235237>
- Jones, Alison. 1999. The limits of cross-cultural dialogue: Pedagogy, desire, and absolution in the classroom. *Educational Theory*, 49(3), 299-316. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.1999.00299.x
- King, Patricia. M., and Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, Marcia. B. 2005. A developmental model of intercultural maturity. *Journal of college student development*, 46(6), 571-592. DOI: 10.1353/csd.2005.0060
- Li, Huey Li. 2004. Rethinking silencing silences. In *Democratic dialogue in education: Troubling speech, disturbing silence*, edited by M. Boler, 69-86. Peter Lang publishing: NY
- Lugones, Maria C. and Elizabeth V. Spelman (1983). Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice' *Women's Studies International Forum*. 6(6), 573-581.
- Said, Edward W. 1999, 2007. On the university. In F. J. Ghazoul (ed). *Edward Said and Critical Decolonization* (pp. 26-36). Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo.
- Said, Edward. W. 2001. I've always learnt in the class. In G. Viswanathan (ed). *Power, politics and culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (Pp. 280-283). New York, NY and Toronto, Canada: Vintage and Random House of Canada.

- Skelton, Alan M. 2005. Internationalization and intercultural learning. In A. M. Skelton (Ed.), *Understanding teaching excellence in higher education: Towards a critical approach* (pp. 102-115), London, England and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Martha. C. 1997. *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Warschauer, Mark. 2003. Dissecting the "digital divide": A case study in Egypt." *The Information Society*, 19(4), 297-304. DOI: 10.1080/01972240309490