Us and Them: Challenging Boundaries of Ethnicity and Culture in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper delves into the personal teaching journey of the author, focusing on challenges and transformations encountered while teaching courses in Media Arts. It aims to explore strategies to facilitate active student participation and promote transformative learning experiences, particularly within a diverse classroom environment. Drawing from the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1968), particularly his emphasis on dialogic education and the role of students as active participants in the learning process, this study is grounded in constructivist (Olson & Ramírez, 2020) and social constructivist theories (Lumen, 2020). It also incorporates concepts from performance studies, including Augusto Boal's (2020) "Theater of the Oppressed", to inform teaching methods that encourage critical engagement and creative expression. The author's teaching approach is examined through a qualitative lens, utilizing reflective analysis and classroom observations to document experiences and outcomes. Interviews with students and thematic analysis of classroom activities provide insight into the effectiveness of strategies aimed at fostering openness, inclusivity, and critical thinking. Through innovative teaching methods, such as project-based assessments and creative exercises, students were empowered to explore diverse perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue. These approaches facilitated deeper learning, challenging students to confront biases and societal norms, leading to transformative growth and increased empathy.

Keywords: *Transformative learning, Dialogic education, Social constructivism,*

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Introduction

Having been involved as writer, director, producer in the media arts industry for over two decades, mostly in India, and now in Canada, I am conscious of how our cultural background and experiences influence the concerns, the stories, the characters and the themes we articulate in our creative work. In turn, the perspectives offered through mass media shape and impact the world view of our audiences. It would be naïve to claim that we as humans are free of bias or that our perceptions are unaffected by our cultural context and socially conditioned lived experiences. However, being given the gift of reasoning and the power to change, as a species we are privileged to have the ability to think differently, be open to diverse perspectives and embrace a willingness to shift our perceptions. Teaching lab courses in media may have granted me a sense of agency, but this approach can be applied to teaching any subject across a variety of disciplines. In this paper, I will deliberate and reflect on my personal process and teaching methodology, which occasionally diverged from established educational norms.

What we hear all the time is that human behaviour and emotions are universal. However, when we migrate to a Western society, at all times we are calibrating our responses to match the generally acceptable norm, from our accents to socially acceptable behaviour patterns (Anushree, 2020). We do this to camouflage and blend into a society that is essentially *western*. We do this so we do not stick out or stand out from the crowd and appear different (Goffman, 1959). The desire not to "stick out" or "stand out" reflects the pressure to conform to social norms. By blending in with the crowd and avoiding behaviors or traits that make them appear different, individuals minimize the risk of negative judgment or social exclusion. Goffman (1959) argues that individuals engage in "impression management" to control how they are perceived by others. This involves adjusting their behavior, appearance, and communication to fit social norms and

expectations. The goal is to create a desired impression and avoid being perceived as different or deviant. So, although in Canadian society we are encouraged to be proud of our cultural roots and expression, we are at the same time developing social responses, typical of the majority culture, which may not necessarily be in alignment with our *home* culture. It is an unconscious process. I became even more aware of this dichotomy when I started teaching advanced filmmaking courses in Canada. At the essence of my being, I identified as an artist, leveraging my creativity and diverse experience to impart knowledge in areas close to my heart: filmmaking and creative writing. My students were diverse, but easily distinguishable as *locals* and *foreign students*. The former being primarily Caucasian and the latter mostly from the South Asian sub-continent. Some of the themes discussed in this paper reflect the issues and barriers experienced in my screenwriting class.

Confronting Bias: Navigating Identity and Empowerment in the Classroom

I was responsible for teaching the art and craft of audio-visual production right from the scripting to the production and post-production stages. Initially, I was confronted with a wall of discrimination: "*SHE* will teach us how to make films? We did not come here to learn from a 'desi[1]! She's not even *mainstream.*", and so on. I was caught off-guard: I experienced "othering" not only by the dominant culture, but also by my own people! The "Other" is often defined in terms of cultural, racial, or ideological differences. These distinctions serve to reinforce the identity of the dominant group by portraying the Other as fundamentally different or inferior (Said, 1978). And here I was all excited to make a difference in my new home! In her book chapter 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' (hooks, 2015), bell hooks reflects how in relocating, we

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[1] Colloquial term for a person of South Asian descent

are challenged to make choices, often resisting constraints imposed by systems of 'race, gender, and class domination':

> Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location. Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing mentality?...This choice is crucial. It shapes and determines our response to existing cultural practice and our capacity to envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts. It informs the way we speak about these issues, the language we choose. Language is also a place of struggle. (hooks, 2015, p. 145)

I begin by laying bare my positionality alongside the personal nuances of my challenging experience of living in two worlds, two cultures, and multiple languages. I related to the cultural diversity and disparity in my classroom and was determined to break through the wall of alienation of oneself from oneself. As critical theorist and expert on literacy and critical pedagogy, professor Donaldo Macedo aptly describes it is an experience of 'being present and yet not visible, being visible and yet not present.' (Macedo, as cited in Freire, 2000). From the very beginning, I made it clear that I was equally eager to learn from *them*, openly acknowledging my vulnerabilities and imperfections. I had to think out of the *box* (and often on my feet) to break such barriers. Improvisation became my best friend. What could I do differently so that my students become active and equal participants in their own learning and growth? What would be the best 'approach' given the strict (and limited) timeframe of the semester to garner mutual trust to facilitate learning? How can students be empowered to look past their own biases, fear of being judged and criticized by their own peers? Is radical transformation even possible in the classroom? Radical transformation in education is important because it fundamentally reimagines and reshapes

traditional educational practices to address systemic inequities, embrace new pedagogical approaches, and prepare students for a rapidly changing world (Freire, 1970). This transformation incorporates innovative technologies and teaching strategies, ensuring that education remains relevant and effective in equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed for contemporary and future challenges. For me as an artist-educator, I was able to shift my role from being an authoritative figure (a know-all instructor) to becoming a facilitator of learning. This shift promotes my continuous professional growth and allows me more creative freedom. It encourages me to adapt my methods and collaborate with colleagues to design engaging curricula. For my students, radical pedagogies enhance their agency by involving them actively in their learning process, encouraging critical thinking, and fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Establishing Connection: Sharing Positionality and Educational Philosophy

I introduced my creative work to students by sharing clips of my films which were primarily autoethnographic, deeply personal and stark, giving them a sense of my background and my world view. I revealed that my student film on black and white film stock was banned and put away in cold storage due to subject matter which was not in alignment with the policies of the censor board and the political party in power at the time.[2] I also explained how I managed to obtain a low-resolution (pirated) video copy and offered to share it with them confidentially on eClass. Appearing "badass" made them feel that I was "one of them" after all. By presenting myself as a fellow artist rather than as their "teacher," I was able to diffuse barriers of age, ethnicity, accent, and culture. Or so I thought. The arduous process took me over six weeks, which was quite concerning for an artist still working to establish her credentials as an educator.

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[2] *Telephone* (1995) was adapted from a story written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "I only came to use the phone".

My first insights into educational philosophy emerged when I left my corporate media job in Mumbai to volunteer as an elementary school teacher at my daughter's boarding school. Nestled on a hill with breathtaking views of the Bhima River and the winding Sahyadri mountain range, it was a scenic and inspiring environment, ideal for cultivating a love of learning. Sahyadri school's approach to education is embedded in the teaching philosophy of educationist and philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurthy:

> Truth is a pathless land. Man cannot come to it through any organisation, through any creed, through any dogma, priest or ritual, not through any philosophical knowledge or psychological technique... There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning. (Krishnamurti, 1929)

The core of Krishnamurti's teachings is contained in this passage which emphasizes holistic development of individuals, fostering freedom, self-awareness, critical thinking, creativity, and a sense of responsibility towards oneself and the world. He emphasized the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of cultivating a sense of stewardship towards the world. Clearly, Krishnamurti's work has made a lasting impression on the development of my journey as an educator.

Crafting Methodology: A Process-Oriented Approach

I was eager to demystify and democratize filmmaking, a craft often placed on a pedestal and reserved for a privileged few. In my classroom, this privilege was monopolized by students with a seemingly close connection to 'Hollywood' film culture, while those from foreign

backgrounds were marginalized. Students with outgoing personalities and a natural ease with language felt entitled to claim professional space in the creative field, further perpetuating this exclusivity. How could I guide them to break down their preconceived notions to critically analyze their instinct to mimic Hollywood-style storytelling? How can they be prompted to challenge the conventions of the 5-act structure, unlearn outdated techniques, and instead embrace their unique potential to craft original, radical narratives using contemporary technologies?

Conversely, how could I create an invitation for the 'others' who felt ill-equipped, lacking in confidence, and without the overt dynamism – to find the courage to unearth and share the stories deeply rooted in their consciousness, stories from their own 'backyards?' I adopted the active learning model in education drawing from Constructivism, which assumes that all knowledge is constructed from the learner's previous knowledge, regardless of how one is taught, and learners experience the world and reflect upon those experiences, they build their own representations and incorporate new information into their pre-existing knowledge (UB – Center for Educational Innovation., 2020). While the theory worked well – in practice I observed that students from diverse backgrounds, particularly from India, were often eager to create fictional worlds in their stories that were significantly different from their own realities. Without being conscious of it, they were creating *western* characters, alien to their own lives. So, they wrote characters such as Jane, Judy, Tom and Rick – over Radha, Maneka, Ram and Shiv. I felt troubled by the lack of genuine connection my students had with the characters they had crafted in their stories. It seemed they had forfeited the opportunity to express their distinct perspectives, opting instead for a more conventional choice. This was the main problem: my students thought they were creating a narrative through a universal prism of emotions by adopting the vision of the dominant *Other*. Being labeled as the "Other" usually involves being framed as different in a way that emphasizes

inferiority or exoticism, often to reinforce the power and identity of the dominant group (Said, 1978). This process is not just about acknowledging differences but about framing them in ways that justify unequal power dynamics. I became more curious to explore and challenge the influence of western (Hollywood) media, literature, and other mainstream art forms on their individual (subjective) expression. By examining key moments in the history of cinema, from the first moving image of a train arriving at a platform (Lumière & Lumière, 1896) to the diverse genres that emerged over the decades, we analyzed how cinematic grammar and storytelling evolved from within distinct socio-political contexts in different parts of the world. Through a series of critical, self-reflective exercises using discussion and peer feedback, we were able to unpack our biases and tendencies, breaking free from conventional definitions of genres and opening up the possibility for them to discover and cultivate their unique style and vision.

During this time, I studied Paulo Freire's educational philosophy that characterizes education as holistic, involving active engagement in intellectual, sociological, and political realms, wherein students are not merely recipients but active participants in the learning process.

> Education... is the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women
> deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the
> transformation of their world (Freire, 1970, p. 23).

Freire's ideas were in alignment with what I had imbibed from Krishnamurti while teaching at my daughter's school. Making these connections, helped me validate and formulate my own philosophy towards education. Freire (Year citation) emphasized the need for education to be dialogic, fostering continuous interaction between learning systems and students. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Professor Donaldo P Macedo, emphasizes that [if] "students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a

process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing." (Freire, 2000, p. 19). What I understand is that 'Dialogue' is not a mere technique used with students to accomplish a particular task. It characterizes an epistemological inquiry piqued by a curiosity that results from the relationship building process between the learners (including the teacher) with the aim of nurturing a connection between the humans engaged in the teaching-learning environment. This dynamic communication between teacher and students provides a segue to deep 'knowing', and it is not a mere tactical learning strategy used by the educator. It highlights education as a complex system, where each component is interconnected and plays a role in shaping the cause-and-effect dynamics of the overall learning process – thus viewing education as a reciprocal learning system, against the backdrop of a level playing field in which both the teacher and student are in the pursuit of knowledge as equals:

> I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379).

How could I approach dialogic communication that encourages equitable and inclusive collaboration in my classroom? I decided to deploy theatrical strategies based on Forum Theatre (1974) which uses "out of the box" strategies to find a solution to confront oppression. Forum Theatre is a form of interactive theatre developed by Augusto Boal as part of his 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal, 1974). It is designed to explore and address social and political issues through participatory performance. At first, I was met with resistance when students argued why they were asked to "perform" when in fact it was a creation class. I justified by highlighting how improvisation through embodied movement can be a powerful method for sparking creativity,

fostering interaction, and enhancing engagement and collective problem-solving. I randomly divided students into smaller groups, offering them prompts to begin a discussion around characters that 'speak' to them, both real and imaginary. For instance, they developed a scene showing a character's conflict between two students. The scene ends with an unresolved issue. Spect-actors are then invited to suggest and act out different responses to the conflict. As they intervene, the group discusses the effectiveness of various approaches and reflects on how these changes might impact real-world situations. This prompted them to develop interesting (original) scenes, with compelling flesh-and-blood characters dealing with 'real' problems. By using Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre in this way, I created a reflective environment facilitating the investigation and enhancement of dialogic communication that encouraged students to actively participate in a discussion, drawing from their lived experiences and interests. It made them feel collectively 'seen' and valued.

Evaluation: third degree of judgement

I had to re-imagine evaluation to gauge student learning while fostering an environment conducive to open-minded learning. I used assessment methods that prioritize critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. Instead of relying solely on traditional exams or quizzes, I used project-based assessments, analytical discussion forums, presentations, and self-reflective assignments. I encouraged students to explore diverse perspectives (what if...), ask difficult (and sometimes uncomfortable) questions, and engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers– drawing from their core experiences as a wellspring of inspiration. Constructivist teachers do not take the role of the "sage on the stage," (Citation for this? Or just common expression?). Instead, teachers act as a "guide on the side" providing students with opportunities to test the adequacy of

their current understandings (again if 'guide on the side' is from a text a citation here is needed). The creative exercises fostered a deeper exploration of their concerns, including unspoken or taboo narratives, and empowered them to explore ideas in a safe and supportive environment, working in small groups. For instance, they delved into stories of same-sex love, mental illness, and shed light on invisible discrimination and its impact on individuals, among other topics. By providing constructive feedback, highlighting areas for improvement, and encouraging further exploration, I gave them the permission to fail. By creating a supportive classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for growth, and where students felt comfortable taking risks and sharing their ideas openly, students were able to shift their focus away from solely providing right or wrong answers. I soon understood that by creating a balance between a commitment to nurturing curiosity and open-mindedness, we, as educators, can help students thrive academically and personally.

As we approached the end of the semester, the stage for radical transformation had been set in which students had developed different ways of approaching education, depending on their personal learning style and abilities. I learnt that by implementing innovative teaching methods, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and empowering students to critically engage with the material, we, as educators, can inspire profound shifts in thinking, behavior, and perspectives. Through personalized learning experiences, meaningful discussions, and hands-on activities, students can develop new insights, skills, and attitudes that can positively impact their lives both inside and outside the classroom. I continue to learn from my students who are not a homogenous entity – but unique individuals with diverse experiences, economic backgrounds and cultural upbringing. Along with them, I continue to evolve and transform as a teacher/ facilitator.

Education and Freedom: Two sides of the same coin

Freire (2000) views education as the practice of freedom, as opposed to education as the practice of domination. Krishnamurti (add year citation) sees education as a means to achieve inner freedom and self-awareness, transcending societal conditioning and external authority. Both ideologies on freedom in education intersect in their commitment to liberating individuals from constraints, though they approach this liberation from different angles, socio-political versus personal, they complement each other. Our individual experiences of oppression, discrimination, or inequality in educational environments are not isolated incidents but are reflective of systemic issues within society.

"*SHE* will teach us how to make films?!" The students' skepticism was palpable as I entered the classroom. When I was confronted with a wall of discrimination, my initial thought was to leave the classroom. I was unable to come to terms with the negativity and bias – but at the same time, I wanted to understand where they were coming from. I had entered their world, their reality and wanted to become part of it. So, what was I willing to do, or more aptly, what was I able to do in the given situation? The contrast between the diverse groupings in my class was strikingly evident. Unlike members of dominant groups, who may have the privilege of seamlessly blending into a predominantly white or mainstream environment, racially marginalized people often face unique barriers in doing so. I was born in India, where I completed most of my undergraduate and postgraduate education and worked for several years before moving to Canada. I quickly laid bare my positionality, performing myself as "me"; it was my way of combatting preconceived "colonial" notions. I had intentionally used this self-introduction icebreaker to ease the underlying tensions in the classroom. On closer examination of my strategy, by stating my migration narrative, and declaring my subalternity, I was in fact increasing the chasm between

them and *me.* I inadvertently established "boundaries" by positioning myself at the "margins." Moving forward, I began to "perform" a fluid identity that could facilitate a deeper exploration of positionality and its potential as a creative method for self-expression. In the weeks that followed, I re-calibrated my "performance" by adopting an improvisational approach within the framework of the course outline.

One of the key intentions of my essay is to urge educators and practitioners to become more attuned to the diverse and often overlooked bodies that form the unseen foundation of teaching in diverse classrooms; at the same time, acknowledge instances in educational settings where this foundational awareness fosters a dynamic and fluid interaction between the teacher and the broader educational environment through the lens of critical improvisation or through an adaptive lens. This approach highlights the transformative potential found in embracing the 'not yet' of an ever-evolving teaching context:

> To surmount the situation of oppression, [or to be 'seen'] people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. (Freire, 2000, p. 74)

Such a process involves a rigorous examination of the systems, structures, and historical contexts that perpetuate marginalization. Once this understanding is in place, it paves the way for transformative actions – strategic and deliberate efforts aimed at dismantling these oppressive systems and creating more equitable conditions where everyone can thrive.

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