

Examining our Conditionings: A Session with Postgraduate Students on Critical Pedagogy¹

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (2020) calls upon schools to develop caring, inclusive communities. Looking inward and confronting our thoughts and biases is an important step in this journey. While reading Paulo Freire's classic work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2005), as well as the conversation between Freire and Macedo on critical pedagogy (Freire and Macedo, 2003), I was struck by how meaningful this was as pedagogic practice. Freire's exhortation to educators and students to be conscious of their individual subjectivities while being part of social practice is even more significant with the current crises of different kinds: social, economic, political, religious, etc., all over the world. We are alerted as educators, also to our conditionings from our growing up years, and our internalisation of norms, often without our own knowledge. Unpacking these conditionings therefore, with a group of potential educators and teachers, seemed essential. This paper analyses a classroom exercise, which was part of a discussion on critical pedagogy with students in a curriculum studies core course within an MA Education programme. I had asked students to note down and bring up for discussion, ways in which each of them felt 'conditioned'. What emerged was a fascinating narrative cutting across multiple topics and themes: caste, religion, region, physical appearance, bodily functions, public and private schools, values, the idea of success, dominant school subjects, gendered professions, class consciousness, media messages, assessment structures and failure, growing up, mental health, hierarchical structures, etc. It helped students re-look and articulate what they had taken for granted, as problems, which need to be re-thought and to be eventually acted upon.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy; Pedagogy of the Oppressed; Curriculum Studies; Postgraduate students; Conditioning; Paulo Freire

Introduction: Reflections on Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed'

The National Education Policy (2020) (NEP) emphasises the need to transform schools into supportive spaces and build “vibrant, caring, and inclusive communities of teachers, students, parents, principals, and other supporting staff, all of whom share a common goal: to ensure that our children are learning.” This further underlines the need to examine our biases, fears and

recurrent thoughts to understand what may prevent the creation of inclusive school and classroom environments. In this context, I will be presenting some analyses of a classroom discussion on critical pedagogy with students of an MA Education programme. The class period was located in a curriculum studies core or foundational course in the first year of the programme.

While engaging with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005), I felt challenged in introducing it meaningfully to students. Freire, a Brazilian educator, well-known

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for his approach to literacy education (Freire and Macedo, 2003), discusses the 'problem-posing method' of teaching and learning in his book. This became known as critical education and the larger process of investigation it led to, as critical pedagogy. Freire contrasted the consciousness required from teachers and students to participate in this critical process, with what he called 'banking education'. He described this as a static process undertaken by teachers and students, in not being engaged with or relating to the content of what is taught and learnt. As in the banking system, "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits." On the other hand, problem-posing education, takes cognisance of the active role that teachers and students in an educational context could play in acknowledging, naming and acting on oppressive structures, which even they may not have been conscious of. The book and the particular edition which I had with an introduction by Macedo, had several meaningful insights and statements, the truth of which I was able to reflect upon, also in the context of a science pedagogy course, which I have been teaching for three years now. As an educator, the process of moving away from a distant, unconnected pedagogic practice was imperative. While I have consciously tried to engage with this kind of practice, Freire and Macedo's cautioning was at the forefront. I am increasingly aware of "what it means to be an intellectual who fights against the temptation of becoming a populist intellectual." Below I discuss some strands and reflections concerning this pedagogy, even while I consider myself to be an engaged, conscious teacher.

A mechanical methodology

While the truth of a critical approach is often clear even from a quick reading of this text, our tendency to reduce it to something concrete and actionable in the classroom maybe problematic. Macedo discusses how Freire's language is often criticised for being abstract and complex. He counteracts this

by laying out how peasants have often discussed with Freire that they have finally found a language, which they could consider to be theirs or as their voice. Macedo then insightfully argues how most individuals can only find appealing what they can identify with in terms of their own experience, or what deepens their understanding of themselves. However, as Freire himself points out, "the fact that I have not personally participated in revolutionary action, however, does not negate the possibility of my reflecting on this theme" (Freire, 2005: 39). In this context, are there possibilities, which could be meaningfully generated in the classroom to question privileged understandings? Are there possibilities to move beyond the static realities of our lives, beyond comfortable 'circles of certainty' or traps: comfortable on the one hand, and dead and fatalistic on the other? Could there be a historical consciousness generated, indicative of possibilities, rather than pre-determination? Could there be pedagogic possibilities, which are indicative and transformative, rather than fixed and lifeless? To quote Freire again: "Fed up as I am with the abstractness and sterility of so much intellectual work in academic circles today, I am excited by a process of reflection, which is set in a thoroughly historical context, which is carried on in the midst of a struggle to create a new social order and thus represents a new unity of theory and *praxis*" (Freire, 2005: 31).

Over celebration of theory or practice

Another thought-provoking and relevant theme can be found in how we could be embedded or even stuck as academics or practitioners in an 'over celebration' of theory or practice. There were several questions which emerged for me in this context: How could dialogue be responsive to an 'epistemological curiosity' moving beyond the participant individuals? As an educator, am I looking at easy ways to be pedagogically engaging to students in the classroom? Could I draw upon lived experience in the classroom without 'exoticising' it as a

process of coming to voice? Could pedagogy move beyond method to reflect on larger structures? While the trap of elite verbalism is laid in an over celebration of theory, a sway towards practice leaves the discourse disconnected and without an anchor.

Fear of freedom

A theme which could be easily related to in Freire's analysis is the fear of freedom that oppression produces. This fear of freedom is tangible in the patterns of conformity that individuals and groups are trapped in without being conscious of possible, better choices. It could even be observed in following structures, which are familiar and therefore, comfortable. The idea of freedom as contributing to the fullness of oneself and one's well-being, while also liberating the oppressed, the oppressor and oppressive structures is meaningful. It is further meaningful in helping to sensitise students who see themselves as privileged, to understand how self-centred and fearful of change they may have become. Another relevant and related argument is the condition of contradiction within the oppressed. Even when there is some recognition of need to have choices and finding oneself, there continues in an individual, a feeling of being trapped in a drifting movement leading to docility and sameness. This is clearly a concern, which could meaningfully resonate across economic class structures.

Investigating generative themes

Freire describes discussion along with the oppressed to identify generative themes, or problems that require further investigation and action. These themes are sensitive to and involve the particularities of the context of the oppressed, and necessarily involve them in taking meaningful action. While the particular group of students I was teaching were not expected to take up action, what eventually transpired in the classroom was the identification of some generative themes. As Freire points out "Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards

awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character" (Freire, 2005: 107).

Meanwhile feminist critiques of Freire's approach urge multiplicity in looking at the oppressor and the oppressed in terms of language and intersections between multiple social categories (Ellsworth, 1989). This helped me think about the suggested approach in a nuanced manner. What seemed to be liberatory in terms of bringing about a critical consciousness could sound vague and distant if not brought down to specificities of classroom discourse as well as the content of a particular course. It also assumed clear boundaries between 'them' and 'us' and a common understanding of what oppression meant. In reality, such homogenous assumptions may only perpetuate 'myths' about the emancipation achieved from a unified consciousness. It is important for a teacher to acknowledge that the issue will need to be sufficiently complex and cannot be simplistically looked at as merely them and us. On the other hand, there is a need to get into specifics of the classroom transaction in order to bring about a nuanced understanding of pedagogic practices which follow from this approach.

Context of the course and classroom transaction

The described conceptual framework enabled the articulation of my intentions in thinking of an appropriate exercise to discuss critical pedagogy. Curriculum studies as a foundational course is offered in the second semester of our MA Education programme. While the course takes up meaningful philosophical analysis linked to the Indian thinkers, Gandhi, Tagore, Krishnamurti and Aurobindo, it also deals with specific themes linked to curriculum development, and related concerns such as, textbooks, pedagogy, assessment, etc. While discussing pedagogy and teaching as reflective practice,

critical pedagogy was taken up, while also locating this as part of overarching curriculum theory. While this topic has been taken up in some other foundational courses such as Sociology of Education, and maybe revisited later as part of pedagogy courses, it was pertinent to eventually link this to the problem of curriculum. How do these structures and resultant conditionings come to bear on curricular and pedagogic processes? There were boundaries too considering that this was part of a larger core course. Hence, I was looking at this exercise as an attempt to uncover the various ways in which we have been conditioned, and how these conditionings have had or still influence our lives today. I was also hoping that this would lead to the generation of themes as problems with potential scope for further investigation. I mentioned to the class that these conditionings need not necessarily be looked at as oppressive or problematic during articulation if they felt so, to see various possibilities that emerge during discussion. I asked them to try and look for situations, which point to historical or political structures. Trying to explain this within the scope of a classroom exercise, I wrote down the following on the board:

Give one or two examples of situations, experiences or conversations where you felt that:

- a. You were 'conditioned'
- b. The person, group or institution you were dealing with was 'conditioned'

I also described how I felt conditioned as a teacher, even while trying to be this facilitator of students' learning. For instance, being aware of my positional authority in the classroom helped me in responding to questions in the classroom, negotiations regarding assignment content and submission dates, responding to grievances about institutional structures, etc. At the same time, I was aware that I could not shake off the normative expectations of my role as a teacher within institutional structures of a certain kind. Also, as a woman there were many ways in which

I felt connected and empathetic to other women: patriarchal structures, bringing up children while engaging with academic work, exercising agency when familiar and comfortable, often fatalistic structures, produce conformity and docility in everyday life, etc. However, in many ways I also saw myself as being privileged and fortunate in having many choices available and being able to ask for it when not given them. With this brief introduction we proceeded with the classroom exercise. I mentioned that each of them may write down their experience in their notebooks, which were later collected as part of a larger assessment of class notes and reflections. There was a quiet and excited murmur and discussion when we started the exercise. I noticed that this was an exercise that all of them had got into with the required seriousness. After about 20 minutes or so we were ready to begin a discussion on what different students had written down. What emerged was a fascinating narrative: some from individual students, and others in groups. They cut across varied and significant topics and themes: caste, religion, region, physical appearance, bodily functions, public and private schools, values, success as being of monetary worth alone, dominant school subjects, gendered professions, class consciousness, messages conveyed by the media, political 'connections', assessment structures and associated failure, growing up, mental health, hierarchical structures in society and institutions, etc. Below are examples of larger themes which I built up from the generated examples, with some discussion and reflection for each case.

Generative themes and analysis

Patriarchy

Several students brought up tangible examples to illustrate patriarchal values, reminding me of hooks' description of this political system: "the one that we all learn the most about growing up, is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned

to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles” (hooks, 2004: 1). hooks’ poignant description of being denied experiences she particularly enjoyed on account of being a girl, resonated with some of the examples generated in class. She vividly recounts her competitiveness and aggressiveness, quite different from her brother’s passive, quiet qualities as being clearly different from the gender roles she was expected to internalise, and hence not considered desirable. There were also clear expectations in terms of games she was allowed to play as a girl. Not being attentive to such norms led to severe action for her from her parents, which was her first enculturation into the system. Similarly, in the context of the class discussion, Tannu¹ wrote and spoke about her experience as a girl who aspired for an education outside her state: something very few women from her community and area aspire towards. She wrote about her family’s reaction to her having secured admission into a liberal university outside her state:

It is my personal experience. When I was coming here, my family told me what to do and what not to do. They said that since they weren’t present in that place, I have to go on one condition. I do what they do, meaning that in our family no one does inter-caste marriage or love. So, I should also not do any such thing. That is the big condition in my life. I relate to it (historically because going out from the home and specially a girl always faces some conditions).

While she may have internalised and accepted this rule to fulfil her aspirations, it may also have influenced the way she interacted with students around her, and in the social events and interactions she thought fit to participate in. At the same time, as Freire points out, locating historical exclusion, need not close or prevent the possibility of engaging meaningfully, but may bring about hope. “History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined.”

¹ All names of students used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Also, in responding to the oppressor by a defiant act or longer, conscious action, there arises the possibility of hope and liberation for both the oppressor and the oppressed. In another written experience, Sumana wrote:

During my Bachelors’ I used to read the newspaper. There, especially in the bride and groom section, I found out how our mind is conditioned. We give the description of women: height, bride complexion, education, co-curricular activities, age. Groom: income, wealth. Also, I found one more example, that a girl is a divorcee but without establishing any intimate relationship. Patriarchal society still continues the oppression, in one or the other form.

While these messages are being read and assimilated by young women who may see themselves entering the institution of marriage eventually, it also presents educational opportunities in bringing up for discussion ways by which women have been objectified. Other students also pointed to how professions too, such as teaching are similarly gendered in being considered as contributing to a meaningful ‘work-life balance’ for women. Such a balanced state, besides being difficult to achieve, also becomes a source of constant worry when important situations, events or requirements at home or at work could likely take up more time than usually provided or given.

The imagination of ‘work’ and ‘life’ could also be completely restricted to the space of the home and family. As one student in class puts it, while referring to the expectations from girls in her family and society: “Most of them think and aspire to become a housewife only because the dominant gender sees education as influencing a girl’s thinking.” Similarly, the response from another woman student: “Girls are conditioned to believe that after studying they need to marry and care for others.” The ethics of care in any institution while being heavily gendered also forecloses the possibility of any other person providing care or involving oneself in a conversation around practices of care. While

typically, children within the family, and at school look to women teachers as providers of care, there could be possibilities for all participants to provide meaningful care and support depending on the context or requirement. This is particularly important during painful experiences leading to significant change in life trajectories: such as when a child decides to drop out of school on account of unpleasant school experiences (Sunandan, 2017).

A more obvious example, which came up in class from several of the women students brought up the serious issue conveyed by advertisements of products used by women in caring for their appearance. While students claimed that these advertisements do not overlook any part of a woman's body (typically a different product for each body part!), there are also other messages pertaining to 'poise', 'personality', etc. which privilege looks over everything else: for instance in handling an interview successfully. Students also questioned whether understanding and reflection did not matter in being suitably qualified to take up a particular job.

The described practices have been looked at as clearly gendered with links to caste and class in some cases such as with gendered professions. However, as hooks (2004) points out, these structures severely impact the upbringing of boys as well. They would, for instance, internalise roles such as being the 'breadwinner' of the family, and the associated anxiety in securing and succeeding at 'work'. A different and relevant example came up in the recollection of so-called 'good behaviour' among men: not often looked at as being influenced by patriarchal structures. An example is the felt need among men to 'be soft/help/support the female' even when not required or asked for from women. hooks' arguments are particularly pertinent in discussing the role of women as well, in unconsciously perpetuating these structures even in women-centred, single-parent households. She describes how these structures take hold in forms and behaviours that are

subtle and do not lend themselves clearly to examination. Hence, "Dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together" (hooks, 2004: 3). This could take more grotesque forms in the various assumptions we form and use. A painful reminder came from another example of typical associations with child sexual abuse. Perpetrators of such abuse are looked at as being male, and the victims as being necessarily female. There have been several incidents in the recent present, which clearly point to such patterns: violent in its assertion and questioning of such established biases.

Intersecting caste and class structures

Intersections between class, caste, gender, ethnicity, etc. have been consciously worked with by several researchers in Indian and Western contexts. The earlier examples have also consciously involved some of these linkages. Here I will present clear intersections of caste and class coming through from students' narratives. Karuna spoke and wrote about the experiences with her family members and their views on people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This primarily involved people engaged with domestic labour at home, with linkages to caste as well. The practices adopted at home such as making use of separate serving glasses for domestic help, led to a brief discussion on modern practices with links to untouchability. It was quite heartening to hear her discuss this openly in class, without being self-conscious, and also admit "Not proud to say I believed it for a while." A comparable narrative emerged from Reena, a reflective student, who surprised me with her openness to discussing a sensitive and thought-provoking issue. She indicated how discussions about the reservation system in her family as well as issues related to religion and caste were biased and conditioned her while growing up. It made her uncomfortable to discuss such concerns and issues openly, and constrained thought in a certain sense, when 'negative consequences were

overlooked'. She also wrote, considering her upper-caste background:

I have been told by members of my family and considering the background I come from which has been blamed for practicing caste. I, being at high position in hierarchy, my family is scared that my opinions would result into a backlash on me in terms of violence and even legal action considering the atrocity acts we have committed.

She also pointed out how a liberal position could be justified meaningfully by invoking values, without slipping into being 'anti-Hindu'.

Circles of certainty

The next theme which is to be presented here draws upon Freire's phrase 'circles of certainty' to look at structures, which have been preserved without critical analysis and reflection. These examples also made me reflect as a teacher of another course on 'Science Education', particularly the Unit on 'Science and Society'. In some of the papers we took up for class discussion, Vidita Vaidya (2017) elaborates on the need to question practices of science and scientists, particularly when it is unthinkingly passed on as norms. An interesting example is the unquestioned use of dull background colours for posters to be presented, and her surprise when asked by a student if pink could be used as a background colour. Another example from her articles points to how male animals have been used as models for testing because of the methodological ease it presents for researchers.

Examples which students came up with included the often-acknowledged dominance of desirable careers in medicine and engineering, also, associated norms such as 'success' as being of monetary worth alone, marks as deciding one's value as a student, the textbook as the authority in matters concerning school knowledge, etc. Nandish, while describing the examination culture in his hometown wrote: "All collectors and DEOs force all teachers to get 100 per cent

results: then they have to be committed to mass copying" indicating how pressure from authorities to present good pass percentages, have led to insidious practices influenced by fear of failure. Another student mentioned how performing well in certain subjects, such as Math was indicative of being 'intelligent' and 'brilliant'. The value associated with this subject is also linked to stereotypical imaginations of a good Math student: as being male, and often associated with an upper caste. These distinctions particularly for Mathematics as a subject are identified early on among children, leading to particular anxiety and stigmatisation associated with the subject for the others (National Curriculum Framework, 2005).

Unquestioned hierarchies in our institutional structures: in the classroom between the teacher and student, at home between parents and children, at the workplace among juniors and seniors, etc. also point to meaningless practices. Ramesh described the discipline enforced at school to be blindly accepted when he wrote:

During my school I feel I was conditioned to believe punctuality and discipline are virtues that one needed to succeed in life. Rules were always to be followed and never questioned.

Even punishment from an authority was considered good for one and not questioned.

Another student Sharada, echoing a similar thought added:

Children are told to study, so that they can do well in life. What that means is neither explained nor examined. The child and parents do not really think about the purpose and aim of education. Each child will certainly interpret well in his own way, but it is often influenced by parents' expectations.

As a few more students pointed out, these patterns are also emphasised when children are exhorted to 'grow up', meaning to take up more responsibility, reduce playing, etc. Being a student with a number of years of industrial work experience, Ramesh further

adds that such disciplinary structures continue into the world of work: “Productivity was more important than anything else at work: usefulness.”

Religious rituals and superstitions were also strong examples of practices reinforcing such certainty. As one student pointed out “Some families practice certain rituals like going to the temple every Tuesday or fasting on some festival days. Rarely do people think about why they are going. They simply accept it as a given”. While most students reflected on being embedded in these structures resembling ‘circles of certainty’, the awareness of being trapped as Freire discusses, point to signs of hope and possibility for meaningful action, even if such action is not immediately tangible or practical.

Regional locations and divides

Some students also brought up connotations associated with people from different parts/regions of the country, and also religions. This is amply reflected in prejudiced statements from our everyday conversations. Rani pointed out how “A family friend once told me that she was surprised to hear me converse in English because she thought that people from Kanpur weren’t well-versed in it.” Others indicated how cultures of intolerance are nurtured within communities against people from different religions. Mohan had a positive example in speaking about an experience from his home-state while describing a state-wide youth festival. The festival brought together young people from different religions to emphasise art and dance forms associated with them and encourage children to engage with all of them as a reflection of the State’s traditional cultural forms. Since the MA Education programme brings together students from most states of the country, discussion about regional understandings and biases come alive in the classroom. In several other courses, I have heard and discussed issues such as practices of girls from different states of the country affecting living together

in the hostel, connotations associated with dressing up, talking to members of different genders, etc.

Taboo subjects

Societal conditionings are particularly tangible in discussions about topics or themes considered to be taboo. Though a lot of awareness is being built on mental health issues and the need to treat intervention pertaining to mental health as a requirement, students acknowledged that it continued to remain a topic that could not be discussed comfortably. While this remains an issue, the other extreme is to look at medical intervention in the form of various cocktails of drugs as the solution to good mental health. This is particularly true for school children diagnosed with multiple learning difficulties, such as attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, etc. While the school and family along with the healthcare system, would like to look at such issues as biochemical imbalances alone, the pharmaceutical industry is quick to formulate a series of drugs and clinical interventions as primary ways of tackling these concerns (Monchinski, 2008). Taboo subjects include natural bodily processes such as menstruation and its association with impurity. While there is currently a fair level of comfort that has been built in discussing menstruation, particularly in our classroom discourse, in public spaces within the university, etc., the conditioning which starts from a girl child’s school days continues to fester and rear its head in hideous ways. Students in other courses that I have taught, have referred to the particular attention that girl students get in preparing for field trips from school in terms of advice from teachers regarding handling one’s period, etc. Such discussions have serious overtones and are often discussed without the presence of boys from the same class, who are sent away to play or engage with activities of their choice. Not acknowledging the place of this important bodily function has repercussions such as priorities given to understand the

process and variations of this process, as well as menopause, within medical research programmes. It may lead, on the other hand, to too much emphasis on so-called psychological and behavioural attributes affected because of the menstrual cycle. While acknowledging and paying enough attention to medical research programmes investigating this process is imperative, not being overly protective of women undergoing a natural process is also important. This will also allow women to see themselves as being engaged with activities and vocations they consider to be meaningful and enjoyable.

The public and the private

In educational discourses, debates on the public and private in education have been looked at critically and meaningfully. While the popular conditioning of only private and English medium schools as being 'good' has been reported widely, students brought up other acknowledged aspects of this conditioning extending into healthcare, transport, etc. Public healthcare is looked down upon as with public transport: the use of which is supposed to change with increasing social and economic 'mobility'. Some students spoke about how owning a car was an important part of the narrative that one had 'arrived'.

The classroom discourse and way forward

In the beginning of the paper, I had reflected on how Freire's pedagogy had alerted me to my own teaching practices for a few years now. This particular classroom transaction sensitised me to different experiences of students, and how they had consciously and critically looked at their experiences as problems. The described session moved on with further discussion about critical pedagogy, also drawing

connections from what had been dealt with in other core courses handling this theme. Also, as stated earlier, while this particular exercise did not lead to action with the oppressed, it helped to identify and speak about various structures and practices which have led to us being conditioned, and ways by which we could consciously bring up and share them meaningfully through classroom discourse. As a teacher, I was struck by the seriousness with which students entered into this discussion, documented and spoke about these conditionings and larger structures contributing to them. It was heartening to see how they were able to discuss this in a diverse classroom where they were open about being oppressors in one context and oppressed in another. This brought out clearly that they were aware of and were acknowledging these as problems, among peers who could be representatives, in some sense, of the community they could work with through a dialogic process. The entire experience, therefore, was educational for me. I did not see myself as having contributed more than as a moderator of the discussion. In other longer conversations with some of these students, I was further sensitised to the long and arduous journeys they had made in coming into this MA Education programme: battling illnesses, family pressures, patriarchal structures, etc. Though I am unable to write about how these conversations enriched some of the discussions I have described, it is worthwhile acknowledging them here. Quoting Freire's words in this context:

The task of the dialogical teacher in an interdisciplinary team working on the thematic universe revealed by their investigation is to "re-present" that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it—and "re-present" it not as a lecture, but as a problem (Freire, 2005: 109).

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