

Learning Without Sages? Reflections on “Flipping” the University Classroom

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There is a serious crisis in education. Students often do not want to learn and teachers do not want to teach. More than ever before...educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, difference strategies for the sharing of knowledge. We cannot address this crisis if progressive critical thinkers and social critics act as though teaching is not a subject worthy of our regard.

- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*.

It was a decision whose time had come: in January 2012, I left a well-paid job in the union movement. After seven years, I felt disconnected from labour’s activist base; in general, my work involved meetings with union officials, and overseeing large projects. Those efforts, while useful in some respects, fell short of my own pedagogical expectations. I had learned valuable administrative skills, but wanted more exposure to a classroom setting as well as learning opportunities with students and fellow educators. I wanted to change my situation, so a new set of circumstances could change me.

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But where was I going? My answer at the time was two-fold. On the one hand, I wanted to be more present for our young children; my partner had a very busy job, and I wanted to bolster our existing child care arrangements. On the other hand, I had been writing a manuscript about contemporary social movements (based, in part, on my own doctoral dissertation) and, by 2012, it was time to re-commit myself to that project. From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, dissent was making its mark around the world, and I needed to absorb the meaning of this moment in history. Over the course of eight months, as more social movements (e.g.: Idle No More, Chicago's teachers, anti-pipeline movements) shook North American society, I wrote a book (2013) for a broad audience of researchers, students, curious readers, and activists; but a unique place was needed to test the book's merits beyond activist publications or scholarly journals. That led me back to university teaching, with all its opportunities and constraints.

And so, in the Fall of 2013, I re-joined the ranks of the campus precariat. For about \$6,500 per half-semester course, I found work as a sessional instructor in Carleton University's Department of Law and Legal Studies, right around the time my book was released. I facilitated a first year seminar on "Security and Social Movements" (with twenty-two participants), a third year course on "Crime and State in History" (with forty-six participants), and a fourth year seminar on "Environment and Social Justice" (with thirty-five participants). My re-entry into university work would be a teaching-intensive year. These courses were largely based on the Canadian political context, though aspects of them ranged beyond these parameters. I used my book for each of these courses, and also utilized recent movement publications, historical studies, and scholarly research.

By this point, I had also made contact with several impressive colleagues at Carleton, and was excited to be part of a community with like-minded thinkers and doers. The campus was also home to my son's daycare, and many of the movements in which I was active. But as I thought about "how" to re-engage as a university educator, I struggled with several vexing questions. In using my book, was I compelling students to engage with my ideas, and would they be interested in "dissent and the law" from a movement perspective? And how would I learn from what students brought to class, while still addressing my responsibilities in evaluation and mentorship, and the inevitable power dynamics that exist in university classrooms?

This article describes my journey in seeking to answer these questions. It documents my use of critical pedagogy, a term widely used to describe teaching that challenges narrative, instructor-centric models of teaching and learning (Giroux, 2011; McLean, 2006). It also documents the challenges I faced in doing so, and the insights this provided about current debates on “flipping the classroom” (Mazur, 2009; Schell and Lukoff, 2012; Bergmann and Sams, 2012). As I explain, I find much in common with advocates of flipped learning, particularly in their efforts to challenge traditional models of education (an objective that, until recently, had largely remained within the concentric circles of radical academe, or popular educators in social movements). And yet, I also worry that flipped learning, in our age of austerity, could become the latest strategy to infantilize students, placate professorial egos, and justify massive spending in technology-based education at the expense of academic staff. Locating “flipped learning” inside the political goals of critical pedagogy, I think, offers the best means for educators to resist that outcome.

REVISITING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

As I designed my teaching for 2013-2014, I revisited two sources of critical pedagogy. The first of these could be loosely called “radical academe”: scholars who challenge historic forms of exploitation and oppression, while blending the realms of progressive dissent and academic research in doing so. In the North American context, I am thinking of people like Angela Davis, Michael Apple, bell hooks, Howard Zinn, Greg Albo, Sunera Thobani, Henry Giroux, David Graeber, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Epstein or Cornel West.

My second source was “popular education”, a pedagogical approach that has challenged passive models of student learning. For popular educators, students are co-learners with teachers, and not empty vessels awaiting the wisdom of some sage. Students have their own valuable ideas and experience; popular educators understand this, and design learning environments accordingly. Paulo Freire (whose work as an educator began working with illiterate peasants in Brazil, and later inspired millions around the world) was a forerunner of this method, but others soon followed in his footsteps. I had encountered popular education in graduate school, but immersed myself more deeply in this community while working for unions, notably as Education Director for the Canadian Labour Congress. While expert-driven learning had been dominant in unions for decades (Taylor, 2001), most labour educators

I met were inspired by popular education, and sought to apply its philosophy using an array of updated materials (e.g.: Burke et al., 2002; Martin, 1995).

But as I assessed the merits of radical academe and popular education for my own teaching, various strengths and weaknesses were apparent. Radical academe had inspired a generation of social scientists (like me) to question assumptions, and urge students to do likewise. Popular education had fostered a vibrant approach that challenged expert-driven teaching, built confidence in learners, and humility in educators. And yet both approaches, in my experience, were focused on narrow left-wing communities, and reliant on a limited pool of trained hands (or wise sages) to survive. As I refined my own university teaching, I wondered how to transcend these limits. Could I challenge students with radical academe *while using* the pedagogical insights of popular education? Could I utilize critical pedagogy in a way that retained its principles, but reach out to a broader audience?

As I developed answers to these questions, I discovered a recent literature on “flipping the classroom” that had Freire-like themes, and met colleagues at Carleton University who used this pedagogical approach. The flipped class, according to its advocates, was less about students receiving the wisdom of a wise lecturer. It was, instead, about creating learning environments where students could test the merits of course materials in class after parsing through them first at home. Students would receive articles, videos, or recorded lectures by email, or these would be posted to the course website. Educators then used class time to facilitate learning exercises designed to apply the insights of course materials; this could involve completing a written assignment, a quiz, or debates in small groups. This method has been used for classes of varying sizes, from large lecture halls to small seminar rooms. As students engage in this process, professors or teaching-assistants circulate throughout the learning environment, listening to discussion and posing questions to stimulate debate.

Flipped classrooms, as I came to understand them, were more interactive than traditional lectures, and allowed students to influence the direction of their own learning. This approach appealed to my pedagogical instincts, and spoke to my own frustrations in university learning. As a student, I struggled with being “talked at” for extended periods of time, and generally found extra-curricular debates more useful than classroom discussions. In class, it seemed to me, most students were performing for professors or teaching assistants with the hope of earning

high grades, strong reference letters, and related academic success. They rarely engaged their educator critically; but in lively conversation outside of class, many spoke more openly about their opinions. To my colleagues in graduate school, I lamented how this reflected the meritocratic role of universities, and their function in “sorting” our future roles in society. But must thoughtful educators, I asked, affirm this process? Were there not other teaching methods that inspired independent thinking, or intellectual capacities that build engaged, active citizenship?

It was questions like these that led me to Paulo Freire in the mid-1990s. In fact, I remember first reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in Toronto’s Annex-based Future Bakery, soaking in its counter-vailing wisdom between gulps of coffee and bites of mashed potatoes. In page after page, Freire named the flaws of what he called “narrative learning”, or the “banking system of education”:

“Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers”, into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. The more completely [s/he] fills the receptacles, the better a teacher [s/he] is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are...In the banking system of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, s/he justifies their own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence -- but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.” (53)

Nearly two decades after I read these words, I revisited critiques of narrative learning, only now espoused by advocates of “flipping the classroom”. The most astute of these writers cited Freire as an influence, quoting his remarks that “education is suffering from narrative sickness”, and that “passive education cultivates passive people” (Schell and Lukoff, 2012). But could “flipping” legitimately claim the mantle of popular education, and meet the analytical rigour of radical academe? Was “flipping” truly about building intellectual capacities of student

learners, or prettifying the massive classes that financed university budgets? Were students being challenged as intellectuals, or entertained through nuanced teaching methods? These were the questions I asked while considering the merits of flipped learning, and planning my teaching work for 2013-2014.

MY ADVENTURES IN (AND LESSONS FROM) FLIPPED LEARNING

In 2013-2014, my approach to “flipped” learning involved regular writing, limited lecturing, and creative discussion in both small and large groups. In three Carleton University courses for the 2013-2014 academic year, I asked for weekly written reflections (including a thesis, evidence, antithesis, and synthesis, to a maximum of 500 words), group facilitation, a short paper (1,000 words), a major essay proposal (1,500 words), a major essay (3,000 words), and discussion-based learning in class. This meant an increase in my evaluation workload, but it helped me regularly convey a clear sense of my expectations. For shorter weekly reflections, my comments were more succinct; for longer assignments, I offered more substantive feedback.

No quiz, mid-term, or exams were scheduled, and students were freed from worrying what aspects of our course would show up on tests. Instead, in our initial discussions, they were asked to focus on three things: to be “present” (completing written work, participating in class debates, and actively listening to others); to be “honest” (and convey their actual opinions, not ideas they believed were sanctioned by me or our course materials); and to be “fair” (by taking our class seriously, and accurately depicting perspectives with which they disagreed). Their final grade was based heavily on class participation (40 percent), while the balance was distributed between the assignments named above.

Inspired by various popular educators, I ensured the physical layout of each class was amenable to debate and discussion. This meant avoiding rooms with fixed chairs or row-based seating, where students, in my experience, typically search for anonymity in the back with screened devices. Instead, tables were pushed against the wall, and chairs were arranged in an horseshoe or circle format. Class started with an opening roundtable where everyone provided brief responses to two questions. After that came limited remarks (5-10 minutes) from me, followed by a range of group work (or interactive, popular-education-based exercises), where various multimedia tools were used to engage different learning styles. In one course (“Security

and Social Movements”), students helped choose curriculum readings in the second semester; in this and a second course (“Environment and Social Justice”), students led in facilitating class discussion. They did so after I demonstrated appropriate readings, and interactive facilitation techniques in previous classes.

Inspired by radical academe and social movements, I chose provocative topics for our survey of dissent and Canadian law. Many were introduced for the first time to moments in North American history with which they were rarely familiar: the Red River and North-West Rebellions of 1869-1870 and 1885; the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919; the On To Ottawa Trek (and Regina Riot) of 1935; Quebec’s anti-communist Padlock Law of 1937, and Canada’s related Gouzenko Affair of 1945; the eviction and relocation of black Africville residents by Nova Scotian officials from 1964 to 1967; the longest student occupation in Canadian history of Sir George Williams College (now Concordia University), inspired by black power activism, in 1967; the pro-choice movements of the 1970s and 1980s; the Stonewall Riot of 1969 in New York City, and gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered activism in North America since. Added to these cases were more recent examples: anti-oil-pipeline movements, Palestine human rights campaigns, Occupy Wall Street, Slut Walk, Pussy Riot, and Idle No More.

As I canvassed colleagues on this selection of topics, I generally heard two criticisms. First, that this course material may provoke more than was necessary, and second, that I risked providing scant attention to many cases over considered attention of a few. My experience, in fact, revealed the precise opposite. Students appreciated a larger sweep of history which allowed them to make a more informed choice about the research focus for their major essay. I also found, in general, that controversial topics improved class discussion. The most memorable classes featured tough, passionate debate which generally stayed within the boundaries of respect.

But how, overall, was my pedagogy received? In retrospect, it yielded mixed results. Our learning, as several students explained in course evaluations, was not “what they expected”, but most enjoyed a different perspective on law and society, and the manner in which we engaged course materials. At the same time, many found the writing demands of our work onerous, and a vocal contingent insisted on more lecturing and testing. My teaching evaluation scores, historically well above average, were fixed more in the average range. The decisive factor were a few

frustrated students who provided very low assessments which impacted my overall scores.

There were two moments that embodied this frustration, each of which yielded valuable learning for me as an educator. In the first instance, I was challenged by an infuriated student who received a lower-than-expected grade for his first essay. His essay, in my view, did not demonstrate a critical grasp of our course materials; the text was also loosely cobbled together with little effort at proper editing. And so, as I entered the hallway after class, I was accused by this student of being “biased”, and pigeon-holing him at a “B” level (which, he impressed, he had never been). After listening for some time, I asked the student what he wanted from our conversation. Did he want me to re-grade his assignment? Did he want to withdraw from our class? Or did he just want to communicate his frustration, and leave it there?

After more fulmination, the student indicated a potential interest in me re-grading his work, but he wanted more time to consider his options. Soon after that, I was contacted by our Department’s Undergraduate Coordinator. The student had now changed his grievance towards the entire course, and alleged it was “unfair” to expect weekly writing given this was not explicitly referenced in our course outline. After I demonstrated that this was mentioned in class, the expectations for which were communicated several times by email, the grievance went away (but I learned, after this experience, to list all my expectations in the course outline). Of course, because the quality of this student’s work did not improve, things did not end there.

At one point, I was accused of racism by this student in an email following a meeting he had with our Department Chair (which, I surmised, did not go well). At the Chair’s request, the Head of Carleton’s Student Services then got involved, and this prompted an apology from the student (retracting the racism charge, but re-asserting the belief that our course had unfair expectations). The student later appealed his final grade to the Registrar’s Office, which meant several queries that took valuable time to answer. After this experience, I had a better understanding about why many educators prefer a lecture-and-testing approach; in a context of a massive workload (which is true for most tenured, tenure-track, and sessional professors), why not choose a pedagogy that is less time consuming, and easier to defend when challenged? Writing-and-discussion-based learning requires more effort for both

student and educator, and leaves much open to interpretation should emotions run high.

Another instance of heightened emotion happened the same year, but this time with a much different outcome. In this case, I was approached early in the semester by a student who had shown great promise, but was concerned about her prospects for a decent grade given the demands of her part-time employment. Her “part-time” work day, I learned, consisted of waking up at 4:00am and commuting to the Ottawa Airport. Upon arrival, she booked in travelers as a flight attendant, and staffed the rapid route between Ottawa and Toronto.

And so, when our three-hour seminar was held (at 8:30am on Tuesday mornings), this student had already worked a half-day shift, which didn’t bode well for being “present” in class discussions. But this job, the student insisted, was crucial as a means to finance her undergraduate studies. She was a first time university goer from a racialized family, and faced intense pressure as a consequence. She was also excited about our learning, and very much engaged in debates over human rights. She asked if I could be flexible in assessing her participation grade, given some days it would be impossible to attend class (as her employer required help as a flight attendant after check-in was completed).

After further reflection, and some indication of how many classes would be missed (only three, as it turned out), I agreed to accommodate this request. While some might dispute that choice, my notion of supportive pedagogy does not require identical treatment. I knew I was challenging students, and that some of them faced unique learning challenges and constraints. Some of these had institutional supports on campus, while others proved more difficult to assist. For that reason, early-on in our learning, I urged students to approach me personally (or through an institutional advocate) if they needed an accommodation. A few did, and I took their requests, in general, at face value (particularly if they were made well in advance of deadlines).

So the student-flight-attendant I discuss here, it should be understood, was following up on an existing invitation. In her case, I asked that her weekly written work be submitted by email; I would look to its quality to evaluate her participation grade for classes in which she was absent. This arrangement worked relatively well, until later in the semester when the intensity of employment/education demands (and, I gathered, a consistent lack of sleep) was having its toll. After receiving the grade for her major essay proposal, this student nearly came undone in a tense conversation, and lamented the effort necessitated by a

writing-based course. With further discussion, however, she was able to focus her research, and produce a strong final essay. Despite the challenges she faced, this student scored in the top ten percent of the class.

That, of course, was a good news story, and there were other cases where students produced strong work in spite of various challenges (mental health and employment were common reasons). At the same time, I empathized with students who also struggled because my pedagogy was atypical. University education, after all, is a high stakes enterprise – and this is particularly true for first-time university goers in their respective families (a reality which is quite common at Carleton University). In our increasingly “marketized” society, parents expect a “return” on their investment, and students want grades to meet such expectations. Post-secondary institutions, as many argue, are catering to such sentiments, and designing academic programming based on the “attractiveness of student life”, the “employability of graduates” or “likelihood to attract outside funding” (Cairns and Cairns, 2014; CBC, 2014; Giroux, 2013; Groake and Hamilton, 2014). These pressures make alternative learning methods dangerous, raising any number of legitimate questions about my motives. How could students, accustomed as most are to lecture-and-testing pedagogy, earn high grades in a flipped classroom? Could I be trusted to assess varying points of view (certainly those critical of social movements) fairly? And why place such an emphasis on writing, which is onerous for learners more accustomed to lecture-and-testing classes?

FLIPPING INTO THE FUTURE? (YES, WITH A FEW CAVEATS)

As I struggled with these questions, I gained insight from educators at Carleton who had also used versions of flipped learning. Melanie Adrian, a colleague in the Department of Law and Legal Studies, hosted a lunch seminar discussing her effort to bring “democracy” into the classroom (2014). She described how (in a second-year Human Rights Law course) students were invited to help co-create the course outline, or accept a syllabus that had already been prepared. If the students opted for the former, they were expected to design a process by which decisions could be made, and present their final syllabus to Adrian for comment and approval.

To Adrian’s surprise, students developed their own course outline over the first three classes, utilizing a painstaking, consensus-driven process in doing so. The reading and assignment expectations were

more challenging than what Adrian had designed in her prepared syllabus, and classes brimmed with lively debate from start to finish. At the same time, a committed minority also wanted a return to more lecturing and testing, and hid behind laptops (or other devices) during class discussions. In debates over the course outline, however, these students realized they could not persuade others and opted, instead, to “go along for the ride” (Adrian, 2014). Adrian’s takeaway from the experience was two-fold: first, that most students wanted a new challenge, and would rise to the occasion; and second, that some would resist but not, as it turned out, prevent learning opportunities for others. This, she concluded, validated her belief that it was worth taking risks in pedagogy, and pushing students to demand more from their classroom experience.

Richard Nimijean, another Carleton colleague based in Canadian Studies, recounted a similar experience (2014). In his case, he opted to flip large classes (with over 150 students) by circulating pre-recorded lectures, and using lecture time for small group exercises where students (with the help of Nimijean and teaching assistants) applied the insights of course materials. In doing so, he noticed a few developments. First, that this methodology “drew out” keen learners who used classroom interactions to advance their research interests. Second, that it “woke up” other students who had previously ignored class discussions, and compelled them to either participate or absent themselves (in general, Nimijean found the former more common). And lastly, it frustrated those who preferred the anonymity of a large class, and the reception of knowledge through lectures and note-taking. In general, Nimijean found the last of these trends did not impact the tenor of class, or the outcome of his teaching evaluations. He therefore concluded, like Adrian, that the benefits of flipped learning outweighed its potential negative consequences.

Like these colleagues, I will continue my use of flipped learning, and largely for two reasons. First, because I fear we often infantilize undergraduate learners, and avoid challenging them with work that respects their intellectual potential. Reinforcing this tendency, as Giroux (2014) explains, is our neoliberal age of austerity; as social science departments compete to recruit students (and retain crucial funding), educators are resorting to strategies that simplify learning in unhelpful ways. Multiple choice exams or are preferred over written assignments, extended film segments over lively debate, or “TED Talk” lectures over teaching that develops capacities for engaged citizenship.

These trends, I believe, undermine the potential of social science, and transform learning into a limited, self-congratulatory process, and my experience suggests that students expect better. Many want to be challenged, to be taken seriously as thinkers, and not mollified as consumers of a pleasant experience. In saying this, I do not deny the appeal of flashy styles, thoughtful lecturers, or the possibilities inherent in new communication technologies. My point, instead, is that educators must set their sights much higher. We live in a moment when students, staff, and faculty of our institutions are justifiably frustrated with the status quo. The same is true for most in our society who rarely set foot on campus, and regard postsecondary learning with great suspicion. Mindful educators must enter this context with creativity, humility, and ambition. We must also recall Freire's notion that critical pedagogy is never neutral, but carries an important political vision: it either challenges the status quo, or it facilitates the "integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system..." (1970, 43).

Second, taking another cue from Freire, I also regard teaching as a learning opportunity for educators, and that process is undermined by pedagogy that promotes passive absorption, descriptive analysis, and rote memorization from students. An instructive defense of such pedagogy was made during Adrian's seminar, when a film studies professor remarked, in discussion, that his goal was to actually "disempower students", and avoid the "vain pursuit" of democracy in the classroom. "Too many", he explained, "think they know cinema after lengthy tours on the internet, or visits to film festivals." "My role", he claimed, "is to use twenty years of experience to challenge that attitude, and to educate students in way they could not manage on their own."

Of course, that observation misses the point of flipped learning, and critical pedagogy in general. The goal is not to dismiss an educator's expertise, but to re-imagine teaching in a way that values student experience, the ideas they bring to class, and their own ability to test the merits of course materials. Creating space for interaction facilitates new learning opportunities, and avoids the hubris, in fact, of educators who believe they alone have an answer for every question. Powerful writing, active listening, and vigorous debate assisted my survival of narrative teaching. These skills, as I constantly refined them, helped me grasp ideas, and grow in intellectual terms.

As I did so, there were certainly moments when a "wise sage" was useful, and I owe these mentors a debt of much gratitude. But those moments were far outnumbered by my own efforts to understand, apply,

and assess the value of what I was learning. We must encourage that kind of self-reliance in postsecondary learners, and this requires careful thought and practice from educators. That is what I attempted in 2013-2014, and what I will continue to attempt looking ahead. Where will it lead, you might ask? Only more experience, more breakthroughs and failures, will reveal that for me. For as Friere once said to his colleague Myles Horton, “we make the road by walking” (1990, 76).

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