

# Doing Critical Pedagogy Together A Case Study in a Norwegian Postgraduate Program

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## Abstract

This paper applies a critical lens to a Master's degree program in education in one University in Norway and its stated aim of promoting critical skills in students from the global south in particular. Two groups of students, one an international mix in Oslo, and the other, South Sudanese students studying in Hawassa, Ethiopia, were compared. The study employed tenets of action research, with the aim of boosting the continuing professional development of both students and course instructors. The findings reveal varying levels of challenges related to, among others, uncritical deference towards course instructors and literature and varying levels of language proficiency which, it is argued, undermines critical thinking. Despite the above, it is argued that the degree programme furnishes an important platform for culturally diverse students to interact and foster the kind of critical thinking skills valorized in the course aims.

## Keywords

critical thinking, higher education, action research, Norway, global south, Freire

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## Introduction and Rationale

This article applies a critical lens to a Master's degree Program in education in Norway and its stated aim of promoting critical skills in students from the global south in particular. The purpose is to go beyond instruction and traditional pedagogy in the classroom and interrogate what we (lecturer and students) mean by critical thinking. In addition to the cohort of students in Norway, Oslo Metropolitan University ran a parallel Program in Hawassa, Ethiopia, for students from South Sudan who were unable to pursue the course in Juba, South Sudan, due to the civil war at the time. This study has focused on students enrolled in the two countries. Norway is a member of the so-called "Troika" countries, along with the USA and the United Kingdom, which issue joint statements at intervals in regard to South Sudan (see US Department of State, Troika Statement on South Sudan, for instance) ([US Department of State, 2017](#)). The triumvirate have invested considerably in "capacity building" in the newly independent South Sudan. In regard to education, for instance, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), which is under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, writes, "This collaborative project between universities in South Sudan, Ethiopia and Norway is intended to build competence of universities to enable them to contribute to educate candidates for governance and peace building" ([NORAD, 2015](#)).

The Master's program features the following statement on its website under "skills": "We expect that a student successfully completing the program will be able to critically evaluate and analyse various issues related to the multicultural school and the relationship between education and development and can conduct studies relevant to the academic contexts within the field" ([Oslo Metropolitan University, 2017](#)). The author has taught various modules and served as both internal and external examiner for all 35 students (20 in Norway and 15 in Ethiopia) in both countries in the course of the academic year 2016–2017. The following research questions have been distilled from the author's experience of the program and commitment to its aims: in a course that puts a premium on inculcating critical thinking skills in relation to education in the global south, what conclusions can be drawn from students' responses as crystallized during classroom discussions and oral/written examinations? And, equally important, in the spirit of a Freirean pedagogy of critical thinking, what shortcomings—even failures—does such a study throw up for faculty members (in this case the author)?

In Norway, the new national curriculum for secondary education (2020) highlights the importance of critical thinking and democratic values. No doubt the zeitgeist of our times, characterized by the propagation of terms such as "fake news," "alternative facts," and the proliferation of conspiracy theories through the omnipresent internet, have exercised educators in finding ways to enhance critical thinking. The research focus was further informed by [Dewey's \(1938b\)](#) hope that participation and communication will lead to the making of something new. [Biesta and Miedema \(2002, p. 180\)](#) are concerned not with schooling and education's instructive and pedagogical tasks alone, but the notion of transformative education:

We have given a description of the process of education as communication in which the central concept is not that of transmission but that of transformation and where transformation is affected by participation. An important implication of this approach is that participation is seen as a process in which the whole person is involved, not only his or her cognition, but also his or her feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, volitions, habits, predispositions, and actions (Biesta & Miedema, 2002, p. 180).

The ultimate aim, although unstated, is to arrive at a transformation of the whole person—not just cognition, but “feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, volitions, habits, predispositions, and actions,” as Biesta and Miedema (2002, p. 180) contend. The author concedes the difficulty of such a project—students were often more interested in efficient instruction, the evaluation criteria in order to score the highest grade, and information about their job prospects upon graduation, among others.

### *Reflexivity*

It is incumbent upon researchers to engage with the complex and conflicting insider-outsider positionalities when teaching students from the global south, commensurate with Freire (1970), Fanon (1986) and Memmi's (2000) postulation about the futility of jettisoning one's own privileges. The author has roots in East Africa, grew up in an Anglo-Indian boarding school in a hill station west of Mumbai—an anachronistic piece of a bygone British Raj era surrounded by an ocean of an increasingly assertive Hindu nationalism. While the latter situates my formative experiences in the camp of the “globalized,” and arguably more sensitive to the experiences of students from the global south, I have also lived most of my life in the West—hence the salience of repositioning myself as a “globalizer” too. Whatever tacit bonds of understanding and good will the sight of a black lecturer in white Norway may have engendered in these students, my accent, western education and mannerisms drew some puzzled stares at times. It is in the interstices of such plural, fluid and critical self-positioning and repositioning that “we see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions” (Apple & Au, 2009, p. 991).

The next segment will seek to flesh out the concept of critical thinking in international higher education before methodological issues are discussed.

### *Conceptualizing Critical Thinking*

Mezirow (1998) highlights the importance of critical reflection of assumptions (CRA). Critiquing the premise of a view or emotion that has been uncritically assimilated, for instance, “a woman's place is in the home,” is central to CRA. Mezirow (1998) states that CRA is principled thinking, ideally impartial, consistent, non-arbitrary and predicated upon universal principles. Furthermore, the practitioner is aware of the need to participate in discourse to corroborate beliefs, intentions, values, and feelings—the

aim is not consensus, but development. Commensurate with the tenets of Transformation Theory, Mezirow (1998) argues that inquiry grounded in the empirical world, and not some transcendental order of reality, drives critical reflection. The alternative would be a discourse underpinned by tradition, authority or religion. CRA aligns with Freire's (1970) educational ideas in interrogating taken-for-granted cultural systems (economic, ecological, educational, linguistic, political, etc.) that hamstring the development of our point of view and foster dependency relationships, according to Mezirow (1998, p. 193). The latter is especially relevant to the analysis of the findings in this paper where Freire's theory is central. For instance, the findings mention a classroom discussion among the South Sudanese students enrolled in the Master's program in Ethiopia. The men were eager to shut down the discussion about the deleterious consequences of dowry in South Sudan for women. Mezirow's (1998) understanding of CRA calls for precisely such a dialogue if transformative learning is the aim:

The organizational norms that commonly inhibit critically reflective learning include: let buried failures lie; keep your view of sensitive issues private; enforce the taboo against public discussion ... protect yourself by avoiding interpersonal confrontation and public discussion of sensitive issues; protect others in the same way; control the situation and the task by making up your own mind and keeping it private; and avoid public dialogue that might refute your view. If transformative learning is important, then traditional mindsets of this kind must be identified and replaced with a more open model of communication (Mezirow, 1998).

Brookfield (2009) is concerned with ideology critique which resonates with Mezirow's systemic critical reflection outlined above. He draws a sharp distinction between reflection and critical reflection: if the imbricated structures (capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, etc.) remain untouched, one simply engages in reflection and not critical reflection, according to Brookfield (2009). Of significance is how ideology "lives within us and works against us by furthering the interests of others" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 299). Brookfield (2009) contends that such a distorted logic can be subverted and "remade by human effort" by "looking at situations sideways and making imaginative leaps."

As the second and third themes in the findings section are closely related to the context of international higher education, a brief review follows.

### *Context of International Higher Education*

Surveys conducted by the Institute for the International Education of students found a raft of benefits that accrue to international students. Among others, the improvement of language learning and fostering of intercultural understanding (Gu, 2012; Dwyer & Peters, 2004), improved rates of completion, retention and grade points (Gu, 2012), increased employability and career skills and the ability to manage identity change in a

global world (Stier, 2004). In a study of an exchange program in higher education between China and Canada, Liu (2019) outlines four major benefits to the Chinese students: raised historical awareness of higher education development; raised contextual awareness of the policy framework for international education; raised cross-cultural awareness of student development and formation of a professional learning community for international education. This accretion of what Jones (2018) calls enlightened nationalism—tolerance of different values seen as non-threatening to one’s national security—is captured in the following citation:

The most common goal for education abroad programs is to help students acquire intercultural competencies so that they are able to fully participate in the international world. Education abroad experiences benefit university students in their development of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills in cross-cultural communication so much so that it can be a transformative experience for some individuals (Liu, 2019, p. 308).

One could ask the question: why do countries, particularly in the West, promote international student exchange programs? Healey (2008) underscores the fact that universities are inherently international. Research, pedagogies, faculty, and other dimensions of academia have always been arenas of mutual exchange of shared cultures, common queries, learning, and discovery. This collaboration across borders has, according to some scholars, led to the “great convergence”—a benign convergence of world interests driven by enabling catalysts such as economic growth, information and communications technology, the spread of English and shared cultural platforms (music, art, sports, etc.) (Mahbubani, 2013; Baldwin, 2016; Northrup, 2005). Healey (2008, p. 344) argues that western governments recruit foreign students at best as “a form of international development policy and, at worst, a tool of strategic foreign policy.”

### *Freire’s Critical Pedagogy: Power Dynamics and Researcher Assumptions*

Freire’s critical pedagogy has permeated much of the Master’s courses over the years and, as such, constitutes a vital component of the course’s discourse on critical thinking. Freire’s concern is with the conundrum of knowledge imposition in education. To his mind, “banking education” is the nemesis of a genuinely liberating pedagogy which he understands as one that is problem-posing and dialogical (Freire, 1970, p. 65). Banking education is shot through with binary principles—the teacher teaches, knows, thinks, talks, disciplines, acts, chooses and is the subject of the learning processes, among others, while students learn, know nothing, are thought about, listen, are disciplined, comply, etc. (Freire, 1970). Paramount in a Freirean pedagogy of dialogue is the jettisoning of the traditionally stratified roles of “teacher-student and student-teacher” which is supplanted by one where both learn in a mutual dialectic.

They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side* of freedom, not *against* it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher (Freire, 1970, p. 61).

The place of Freire’s critical pedagogy in critical thinking in education is assured and rightly celebrated. However, given that this study, commensurate with the second research question, is an attempt at taking a few steps back and critically evaluating the staff and course’s apparent facilitation of critical thinking (put differently, a meta-critical perspective on our own discourse of critical thinking), it will be necessary to bring a critical lens to the assumptions behind Freire’s critical pedagogy, something which, to the author’s knowledge, has become sacrosanct in the discourse at this Master’s programme. Apposite in this regard is the critique leveled at Freire from Mejia (2004):

On the one hand, particular views of society are said to be imposed by the very Freirean teachers who are supposed to empower students; and on the other it is said that a Freirean pedagogy is not really able to help people intellectually emancipate from views that they have adopted or will adopt uncritically, and that come from other sources (Mejia, 2004, p. 64).

Mejia (2004) points, among others, to the a priori assumption of the neo-Marxist readings that underpin Freire’s pedagogy. For example, rather than “a dialogue among equals,” the teacher in reality is expected to guide the students towards “empowerment” understood in terms of a particular ideology. In essence, the student would find herself incarcerated in a contradictory dilemma of regulations where the teacher first pre-determines who the “oppressed” are with the student expected to acquiesce. The student who disagrees with the teacher’s designation of the “oppressed” runs the risk of being labeled “uncritical.” Buckingham (1998, p. 5) gives succinct expression to the tension in stating, “what if they do not want to be ‘liberated’ or ‘empowered’ in the way that the teacher has envisaged for them?”

### *Postcolonialism and Linguistic Challenges*

Every language has its own social and cultural basis, and these are instrumental in the formation of mental processes and value judgements (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 99).

In the aftermath of Berlin 1884, the “night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard,” according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, p. 9). “Language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation.

Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 9). As mentioned in the findings and discussion section, the lack of mastery of English undermined the confidence of some of the students who were non-native speakers. Significantly, however, none would overtly critique or contest the all-pervasive dominance of English for fear of being perceived as less intelligent. While not as extreme, one is reminded of the metal plate around the neck of Kenyan students who dared to speak Gikūyū in Thiong’o’s colonial schools (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 11), “I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.” It is difficult to ignore parallels with Thiong’o’s critique: “English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child’s progress up the ladder of formal education” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 12). In particular, Thiong’o’s (1986, p. 16) contention “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” is apposite. By virtue of this, the laudable efforts of academics engaged in the task of undermining post-colonialism are hampered by offering the course in English—the paradox of counter-hegemonic thinking offered in a partially mastered language of the former colonizer.

The critique above is somewhat ameliorated by the preponderance of the Master’s programme course literature written by the likes of Fanon, Thiong’o, Said, Césaire and others who have furnished the subalterns with “tools of self-definition in relationship to others,” but the challenge of native tongue is still bedeviling. Thiong’o (1986) was critical of what he called the petty-bourgeoisie (comprador, native elites of Africa) who engaged in class analysis, but “within the confines of the languages of Europe . . . So its quest was hampered by the very language choice . . . caged within the linguistic fence of its colonial inheritance” (Thiong’o, 1986, pp. 21–22).

For the Martinician, Aimé Césaire (2000), *Négritude* was intended to be precisely such a tool of self-definition for black people. He was concerned about the expunging of Africa and its culture from world history summed up in “colonization = thingification” (Césaire, 2000, p. 42).

Therefore we affirmed that we were Negroes and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of the humanity; in sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world (Césaire, 2000, p. 92).

Clearly, the ethos of the Master’s program was commensurate with Césaire’s (2000) sentiment captured in the citation above. That Africa was being put on the mental map of these students is evident in the findings section where some acknowledged that this was the first time they had come across an African novel (e.g., *Matigari ma Njiruungi* written by Thiong’o (1986)). Yet the questions are plethora: does offering a course on postcolonialism alienate the very students whom we seek to emancipate by “cocooning ourselves in English French and Portuguese” to borrow from Thiong’o?

## Methodological Issues

*Participant action research.* Lewin (1948), who first introduced the term “action research” (AR from hence) in 1948, described it as an iterative process where educational practitioners and other stakeholders plan for action, act and then engage in reconnaissance. Insights and discoveries made during each stage of the process may lead to a redefinition of the overall problem. A subset of action research is participant action research, which has informed this study. In this form of inquiry, the researcher is an active participant setting the agenda and facilitating skills, knowledge and reflexive thinking, but not decision-making (Zukas, 1986). This study, commensurate with the aims of participant action research, valorizes the improvement of practice. As Cassara (1991) emphasizes, the aim of action research is not generalizability, but improved local conditions.

Action research as a method has been applied to the continuing professional development of teachers (Cohen et al., 2007; Greenwood & Levin, 2005). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research as a form of collective self-reflective enquiry has as its aim not only the improvement of teachers’ own educational practices, but a more critical engagement with the cognitive and affective machinations that inform our actions. Put differently, *why* we do what we do cannot be extricated from *what* we do (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The Master’s program consists of five courses taught over the course of 2 years.

*Ethical issues and process.* The Norwegian Centre for Research Data states that research projects involving adults who give their informed consent and names anonymized do not need to seek approval. Nevertheless, the particular burden of being a teacher-researcher with pastoral responsibilities saw the need to put some ethical standards in place: students were first taught a course on action research after which those who wished to participate in the project gave their informed consent. Furthermore, the duration of 1 year was stipulated and students were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Not least, it was made clear to the students that their participation would have no bearing on their final grades—a point which had to be emphasized throughout the project. Approval was also sought and granted by the Institute leader.

The procedure for implementing action research was inspired by McNiff and Whitehead’s (2002, p. 71) eight-step model. In reviewing current practice (first step), the author and the students agreed that there was a clear need to interrogate the meaning of critical thinking given the vagueness of the term. Indeed, similar discussions about the concept earlier led the author to suggest and invite students to conduct action research in the academic year 2016–2017. The latter is commensurate with McNiff and Whitehead’s (2002) second, third, and fourth steps: identify an aspect that you wish to improve, imagine a way forward in this and try it out. The students were proactive from the start and consensually agreed to monitor and jot down notes of classroom discussions, pronouncements about the course literature and subject the course itself along with the exam criteria to critique. Only about half consented to



submitting their exam papers for the entire class to discuss. Winter (1996) outlines several principles of action research where the following were incorporated: *collaboration*—with the aim of taking everyone’s view on board and *risking disturbance*—willingness to submit all practices to critique. Sagor (2005) underscores the importance of participants’ involvement in problem-posing and problem-solving in action research. Students submitted their reflective notes once a month and these were submitted for classroom discussions with suggestions invited for any changes to the research process. McNiff and Whitehead’s (2002) fifth and sixth steps recommend monitoring, reflecting, and modifying where deemed necessary. While views were often disparate, no one wanted to abort or modify the process. One evaluative criterion consensually agreed upon was to continue as long as participants were of the opinion that we were making progress on our initial focus—learning about critical thinking and the extent to which we were becoming critical thinkers. Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) are of the view that action research participants ought to persistently evaluate the extent to which the project contributes to living your educational values. There was a consensus that this was the case for the majority.

Right at the outset of the semester, the tenets of action research were clearly spelled out to the Master’s students the majority of whom had some experience with classroom teaching either as former full-time teachers or supply teachers. They were invited to embark on a journey of critical engagement with the course literature, the author’s own teaching methods and their own learning in an iterative process. Students were encouraged to keep a personal journal critically examining their learning and progress during the course. The data in the findings segment was collected through notes of classroom discussions, course literature, student submissions, course evaluations and exam situations.

In what follows, findings from the two cohorts in Oslo, Norway, and Hawassa, Ethiopia, will be presented and analyzed. The most pressing challenges to critical thinking were thematised and are presented first.

## Findings and Analysis

### *Uncritical Citation and Deference to Influential Course Instructors*

Besides lectures, classroom discussions and colloquial groups, students are assigned supervisors who facilitate drafts prior to writing up exam papers in the various modules. Prior to the Master’s thesis oral exam, students attend writing seminars where they are given opportunities to experience various academic roles—for example, presider, opponent, etc. Students in the main, and students from non-western backgrounds in particular, would often cite one or two of the course instructors profusely. For instance, five students cited one course instructor almost exclusively for up to six pages. During the oral exam, which was based on students’ written papers, the external examiner and the author decided to press students about this preoccupation with citing course

instructors inordinately. Responses often assumed one of the versions below (some statements have been translated from Norwegian):

Before the exam, we did not know that we were supposed to critically engage with the literature (male, Hawassa).

We thought we were only supposed to focus on the positive aspects of Cuban education (female student, Hawassa).

With hindsight, I realize that this was not appropriate. However, such people obviously exert a powerful influence, and, if I am honest, we tailored our answers to align with the discourse (female, Norwegian).

There are four courses taught in the first year. The last course is called “Education, Culture and Sustainable Development” and it is here that the educational achievements of Cuba are extolled. The citations mentioned above revolve around this course and Cuba in particular. Cuba is touted as a success story and one that is worthy of emulation by countries in the global south. The historical trajectory of Cuba since Castro came to power in 1959, the campaign to eliminate illiteracy which was accomplished in 1961, the country’s endeavors in bridging the educational disparities between various segments of the population (e.g., blacks and whites) and in depth analyses of the policies that have seen Cuban students outperform peers in Latin America, are a mainstay of this course. According to the literature, “Cuban students average more than one standard deviation in language tests compared to students in Latin America (i.e., if other students average 50%, Cuban students average 84%) and one and a half standard deviations in math (i.e., if other students average 50%, Cuban students average 90%) according to the Laboratory of Educational Evaluation (LLECE)” (Carnoy et al., 2007, pp. 64–65). Students from western nations have often remarked that they were taught to eschew Marxist-inspired educational systems. A student from the UK, for instance, shared how reading about Cuba’s educational trajectory flied in the face of the neoliberal bias she had uncritically imbibed through her schooling in England.

While few would deny the impressive achievements of Cuba despite being saddled with crippling sanctions, the challenge for us as examiners was the almost total inability or recalcitrance on the part of the students in nuancing their hagiographic depictions of Castro and Cuba’s educational system. In all fairness, the course instructor, a Professor, cannot be held responsible for students’ determination to inundate their paper with his name. The author was his student almost a decade ago and clearly remembers being challenged on several occasions to critique his writings and the course literature. However, and commensurate with this study’s aim to reflect critically on what we as academic staff can do, Lipman’s (2007, p. 429) statement, “Inquiry, then, is self-correcting” and the need to “begin looking for and correcting each other’s methods and procedures,” is salutary.

The above is reminiscent of Mejía’s (2004) critique of some teachers whose ideological underpinnings inform the path to “empowerment” while failing to put a

critical spotlight on these latent convictions. During classroom discussions and the oral examinations it was quite clear that several students, although aware of Marx and some neo-Marxian theorists (e.g., Gramsci), were taken aback when asked to critique Marxist ideology. Hence, while students were clearly influenced by Marxist thought, they struggled to link them to Marx and subsequent schools of Marxist thought. It must be emphasized that the problem here is not a Freiran, Marxist-inspired ideology which has been widely recruited in myriad efforts at destabilizing oppressive hegemonies, but the extent to which students are able to identify and critique the particular tools that this Master's program expects them to utilize in the quest for "critical thinking" so valorized in the aims of the program.

There is no doubt that a process of critical reflection was triggered, what Brookfield calls the need to take cognizance of how ideology "lives within us and works against us by furthering the interests of others" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 299). The, until then, taken-for-granted, "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971) idolization of textbooks was destabilized. That the students made the leap to macro structures, such as politics and leadership in Africa, is commensurate with Brookfield's (2009) insistence that

The second purpose of critical reflection is to uncover hegemonic assumptions. Hegemonic assumptions are assumptions that we believe represent commonsense wisdom and that we accept as being in our own best interests, without realising that these same assumptions actually work against us in the long term by serving the interests of those opposed to us (Brookfield, 2009, p. 301).

In addition to the problem of uncritically over-citing course lecturers, this study, commensurate with the aims of action research, helped us to acknowledge the paradox of language-in-education policy.

### *The Paradox of Language-in-Education Policy*

The university website has this to say about language and education in the second module where this topic is central: [The candidate ...] "has extensive knowledge of international perspectives and discussions about universal rights, such as for example language rights" (Oslo Metropolitan University, 2017). Below are some examples cited verbatim from students' exam papers which showcase the linguistic challenges they face:

In connection to the concept of relevance in education mentioned in the objectives above, I would rather say, relevance to how the educational system in Cuba is closely or appropriate to the students learning in ensuring quality and sustainable development (male, Hawassa).

It will put them into the dilemma situations without being examined their potentials and the initiatives if the perception to skills and knowledge acquisition limits at school approach only (male, Oslo).

I therefore agree that education can play role in sustainable development because education is vital in developing awareness of the ruined environment and building conscious regarding wise and sustainable use of the environment (female, Hawassa).

Some of the Norwegian students in Oslo who had written their papers in English asked whether they could do the oral exam in Norwegian. When asked why this was the case, one replied “obviously, it is my mother-tongue and I feel less nervous.” The external examiner reflected over this paradox in stating that all this appears to undermine the very mission of this degree. According to him, “If these [students from the global south] students could write and defend their exam papers in their native tongues, they would no doubt express them much more coherently and score a higher grade.” The course aims, regrettably, come short. These students are expected to demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills employing a non-native language. Two students from the USA and United Kingdom scored As. Although not the only reason, the external examiner and the author noted the advantage their native tongue conferred on them: the broad vocabulary and impeccable grammar not to mention that subtle sense in which Anglo-American accents can be deployed advantageously—what Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1991) calls *habitus*—all went into tilting the scales towards an A. *Habitus*, to Bourdieu’s mind, comprises systems of durable, transposable dispositions which are often not consciously employed.

### *Applying/Misapplying Concepts*

Students in both countries demonstrated a lack of understanding of some of the key concepts and theories pivotal to the program’s discourse. It is argued that the two underlying reasons analyzed thus far (i.e., desire to please course instructors and the issue of language) exacerbated the conundrum. One typical example is that of the concept “global architecture of education” which Jones (2006) delineates below:

For education, nation states are located within a complex web of ideas, networks of influence, policy frameworks, financial arrangements and organizational structures. These collectively can be termed the global architecture of education, a system of global power relations that exerts a heavy, indeed determining influence on how education shapes the relationship between education, development and poverty strategies. It determines how education takes its place as a dimension of economic, political and social policy at country level (Jones, 2006, p. 43).

When students were asked to elaborate on the meaning of this concept, the ensuing answers revealed a fundamental misconception. Disconcertingly, their answers meandered into the territory of conspiracy theories and hidden agendas. One student stated, “These are people who have an agenda. They are working towards hijacking power.” Another was convinced that this group was similar to a clandestine military order that works ceaselessly to overthrow legitimate governments. When pressed for

details, one even went as far as to say that this organization works through the United Nations while failing to identify who these nefarious stakeholders in the global architecture of education were. The heuristic nature of theories and frameworks and the need to apply rigor and debate to emerging ideas seemed puzzling to these students. “As examiners, it was disconcerting for us to witness that several of the students struggled to unravel abstract concepts, such as the global architecture of education, given that a Master’s program in international education is peppered with similar concepts.” Such challenges, buoyed by the principles of action research, clearly showed the need to rethink what we were doing. When challenged in the hope of inviting students to reflect and hopefully experience a Freirean *conscientization*, we only succeeded in instilling palpable fear in the students who were more concerned for their grades rather than an attempt at a Freirean dialogue where the “teacher-student” ideal is modified into a “student-teacher” egalitarian one more amenable to dialogue. It was also obvious that students from the global south generally struggled more with the kind of critical thinking that was outlined in the theory section. One student from Pakistan explained how disagreeing with the textbook was something she only experienced in Norway, and that voicing any critique of the canon of approved literature in school or university back home would certainly draw the wrath of the system. Dewey’s (1938a, p. 40) admonition to educators to consider the backgrounds and contextual upbringings of individuals is apt.

### *Doing Freire Together*

Despite the above challenges, there were moments when, having goaded the students to attempt at a genuine Freirean dialogue, discussions broached topics considered out of bounds. For instance, in Hawassa, the cohort of students from South Sudan began a discussion on dowry and its legitimacy. The female students who raised this issue argued that men exploited dowry to keep the women from gate-crashing into bastions of male domination. As one female said, “The men keep reminding the women about the exorbitant amounts they paid which wives/mothers ought never to forget.” Visibly shaken, some of the men retorted that this issue ought not to be discussed in such a forum, but, after some heated exchange in a mixture of English and “Juba-Arabic,” one female, who also served as the class representative, summarized the majority view: “Normally, this is an issue men do not wish to engage with women, but, given that this is a Master’s degree where we are ultimately supposed to be learning and become enlightened, we should not shy away from this matter.”

The course itself has much to recommend it. From the very first module, it invites students, many from teaching backgrounds, to jettison an “apprentice model” which had been inculcated through a more “domesticating” curriculum on the Bachelor level. As one student from a Norwegian background told the author, “I feel as if all that I was told before is being torn down now.” Understandably, few can withstand the probing and scathing onslaught of a syllabus which has Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, racism in education, indigenist research methodologies

and a host of similar anti-hegemonic discourses on the menu. Nevertheless, this study is an attempt, albeit modest, at reflecting over the discrepancy between the ambitious and high ideals of the course with the perception that students are struggling with its aims.

There is a “pedagogy of fear” inherent in some of the contrived responses of the students in regard to mis/applying concepts and generally critiquing the course literature, lecturers, etc. In this sense, one is reminded of Frantz Fanon’s colonizer who brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject (Fanon, 2004, p. 4). Fanon argues that education, while purporting to be dispassionate and enlightening, is in essence the handmaiden of colonial domination. There is a sense in which the students, thoroughly immersed in a host of values amenable to capitalist exploitation, were skeptical of the sudden spaces of critical dialogue the course presented. There are echoes of Fanon’s (2004) calls for psychic violence in critical education—a humanizing violence that restores the agency and subjectivity of the wretched of the earth. Rather than recognize and seize spaces of critical dialogue as spaces of risk and hence emancipation, Fanon (2004) would argue that the fear of confrontation, a denouement of the domesticating discourse of bourgeois societies, intent on policing safe spaces for the perpetuation of the status quo, has the effect of silencing students. This insight from Fanon (2004) was not lost on the lecturers. The onus on us as facilitators of critical reflection would be upend this pedagogy of fear that seeks to put students in their place as a result of the psychic educational violence they have experienced—to upend what Sartre (2004) called the neurosis of the “native.”

Has the course genuinely empowered these students to return home and lock horns with the enormous challenges that bedevil many countries in the global south? While the lion’s share of examples mentioned so far are problematic, several positive ones have also been recorded in addition to those who were delighted to have read an African novel for the first time and others who gradually began to express their, until then, stifled critique after much encouragement.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching students to think critically in relation to education in the global south is central to the aims of this Master’s degree in Oslo, Norway. This study explored aspects of this aim as manifested in students’ responses in classroom discussions and exam situations. In addition, the study used the lens of action research to critique the course material and the author’s own role in facilitating critical thinking. Employing the theoretical lens of postcolonial analysis and a Freiran (1970) pedagogy, the project sought to destabilize the asymmetry inherent in a “teacher-student” hierarchy which is not conducive for genuine learning to transpire. This study has shown that although the latter is too ambitious in its aims, several students were challenged—many for the very first time—to appreciate the fallibility of both academics and the course literature.

There are several issues thrown up by this study which, it is argued, cannot be dismissed as peripheral if those who have crafted the aims are serious about critical thinking. That students often wish to impress course instructors by citing from their

works is not a surprising finding by any means. That academics are aware of this conundrum is also well known. The Master's degree program enrolls students from wide-ranging academic backgrounds such as pre-school/early childhood education, general teacher education, development studies and pedagogy. One can also add to this the disparate countries students come from and the varying quality of education and exposure to critical pedagogy. As a former student in the course and subsequent lecturer, it was not uncommon to hear students state that they had never before grappled with any of the theorists in the syllabus. Students' Bachelor degrees must evince a closer fit with the course contents of this Master's degree if some of the challenges mentioned in this study are to be ameliorated.

It is hoped that the conclusions, however modest, could be usefully considered in the program. Students stated that lecturers should continue to co-research similar topics with cohorts of students for a semester or an academic year. This sends the message that lecturers are equally concerned with improving their own learning by co-learning with their students, and embodies Freire's democratic pedagogy where teacher-student becomes student-teacher. Furthermore, as one student remarked with many nodding in agreement, this was a powerful demonstration of how one concrete research method on the syllabus, action research, actually works. To their minds, lecturers tend to teach about research methods abstractly with little or no opportunity to engage in a practical, hands-on manner reminiscent of a Deweyan "learning by doing" approach.

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