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Sunny Dhillon

Critical Self-Reflection

12

Critical Self-Reflection in Learning Development

Sunny Dhillon

I argue that learning developers may better enact the values articulated by ALDinHE through engaging in immanent critique of their roles, of knowledge (re)production within HE, and of normative learning practices. This piece builds upon the principles of Critical Pedagogy and, reading them through a Frankfurt School of Critical Theory lens, combines them with tenets of heutagogy. There is no articulation of a 'how-to' approach to criticality. At this juncture in the historical development of LD, the context deems that learning developers must negotiate the need to continuously articulate their worth, whilst resisting falling foul of undertaking their roles in an instrumental manner. Instead, enacting an ALDinHE ethos means that learning developers could transmute fear, and critically reflect upon what they, as well as fellow staff and students, are often encultured to do in the name of effective practice and outcomes.

*'The problem with you, Sunny, is that you overthink things. What can you "do" with your theories? Can you please stop with the intellectual masturbation? Or at least do it in private and stop subjecting the rest of us to it?!'*

*That's the stock response from loved ones and colleagues to my philosophical musings. Until the final year of my BA Spanish, I didn't know Groucho from Karl. Thereafter, enraptured by the diagnoses of Friedrich Nietzsche, and challenged by the works of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, I've been away with the Critical Theory fairies ever since.*

## Overview

I argue that Learning Developers may better enact the values articulated by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE, 2022) through engaging in immanent critique (Adorno, 1984) of their roles, of knowledge (re)production within higher education (HE), and of normative learning practices. This piece builds upon the principles of Critical Pedagogy (Freire et al., 2018), and, reading them through a Frankfurt School of

Critical Theory lens, combines them with tenets of heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013). There is no ‘how-to’ approach articulated below. At this juncture (2023) in the historical development of this community of practice, the context deems that Learning Developers must negotiate the need to continuously articulate their worth (Biesta, 2015), whilst resisting falling foul of undertaking their roles in an instrumental manner. Instead, enacting an ALDinHE ethos means that Learning Developers could transmute fear, and critically reflect upon what they, as well as fellow staff and students, are often encultured to do in the name of effective practice and outcomes (Allen and Goddard, 2017).

## Critical Theory

From the Ancient Greek *kritikos*, ‘critical’ means a skilled ability to judge (Allen and Goddard, 2017, p.139). In HE, countless texts, resources, and how-to guides abound, promising to provide checklists of how to do ‘it’ effectively; namely, in the service of high grades. I read ‘critical’ after the Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer. Horkheimer differentiates ‘critical’ from ‘traditional’ theory, arguing that whilst the latter seeks to understand the workings of society in order to better serve its needs and interests, Critical Theory is ‘dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions for life’ (Horkheimer, 1975, p.199). This broad conception can be sharpened by Adorno’s (2005) declaration that ‘there is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no one shall go hungry any more’ (p.156). So, to be critical in this Frankfurt School–inspired reading is not about a checklist approach or instrumental toolkit. Rather, it is about highlighting existing tensions and contradictions that prevent a life of dignity. Such criticality is, in my repeat experience, often subjected to the kind of disparaging remarks as noted in the epigraph. Those invested in mores often ‘attack critical voices for having nothing positive to offer, which is to say, nothing which can realistically be rolled out. Critics are attacked for their self-righteous judgmentalism, for refusing to reduce their expectations to what can be practically achieved’ (Allen and Goddard, 2017, p.151). Critical Theory is not, however, mere abstract intellectualism. Materially grounded in seeking to cultivate conditions where ‘no one shall go hungry anymore’, it is a way of spotlighting ‘hidden assumptions which underlie dominant social practices’ (McArthur, 2016, p.973).

LD may be conceptualised as critically reflective practice in action. Giving over to a ‘totally administered’ (Adorno, 1973, p.141) culture through measurements and metrics would be to render LD merely instrumental. Writing in the context of post–World War II, when musing on the efficiency of the administered machine of the Third Reich, Adorno (2005a) argued that ‘the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection’ (p.193). Put in a milder context, but certainly more ambitious manner, is that university education ought to focus upon producing ‘reflective, responsible citizens free from political, military, bureaucratic or market demands in a modern industrial society’ (Strohl, 2006, p.134, as cited in Barlow et al., 2011, p.48). The best-intentioned Learning Developers cannot ‘produce’ such individuals, for we ourselves cannot be free from such demands. To claim such a vantage point would be at best naïve, and at worst hubristic. Rather, the Learning Developer may, in Adornian manner, engage in continual critical self-reflection and subject contingent concepts to rigorous scrutiny. This kind of critical self-reflection cannot be neatly rendered into a ten-point plan of instrumental, results-oriented, action.

## Immanent Critique

The ostensible function of LD has, since its inception, been about demystifying HE practices for ‘non-traditional’ learners, and in turn, contributing to high satisfaction, retention, and completion rates. LD must continually recognise that its very existence is thus founded in a neoliberal project (Ball, 2021); it is an inextricable part of an ideology that so many Left-leaning colleagues rally against (for example, the messaging in University and College Union (UCU) materials). The role of a critical Learning Developer is, arguably, one of necessary immanent critique; we cannot claim a holier-than-thou Archimedean standpoint from where we are supposedly exempt from the critiques against the ills of the neoliberal university. Rather, our livelihoods, and potential resistances, are funded by a neoliberal project.

Whilst Learning Developers may model heuristic critical thinking models when engaging with literature, policies, and practices, it is more ontologically taxing (Barnett, 2011, p.43) to engage in critical self-reflection, as well as embolden students to be critical in the context of a culture of instrumental outcomes; for example, when narratives surrounding student success, as well as LD efficacy, involve metrics of grades, improvements, and intervention outcomes. As Biesta (2016) argues, what makes a “good education” requires value judgments, and

cannot be articulated through measurable outcomes, or “managerial forms of accountability” (p.128). It is tricky, for example, to instrumentally measure the value of supporting a final year BA Education Studies student to write a dissertation that argues against entering the teaching profession (which yes, I unapologetically did, and yes, the student graduated with a grade that they were happy with).

Inspired by the mythical archetype of the Trickster (Bassil-Morozow, 2015), as opposed to the Hero, I see it as my role as a Learning Developer to encourage students to continually spotlight the contingent, over apparently necessary, working practices of HE. That is, none of this has to be the way it is, but in this particular context, these are the norms of engagement. They are not sacrosanct. They can be played with, stretched, and squeezed. Amidst a culture where HE staff are too often busy going nowhere on a ‘treadmill of justification’ (Education Support Partnership, 2018, p.12), too often falling foul of the pitfall of justifying existence, value, and likeability (often through doctored satisfaction surveys), this piece challenges Learning Developers to transmute fear-based practices into ones of generative immanent critique. Simply put, this means to recognise the contradictions and tensions within normative discourse and, instead of attempting to continually weave a positive story about ‘value added’, engage in a critical task of persistent self-reflection, including of one’s own professional role.

## ALDinHE Values

Practising LD in a critically self-reflective manner, it is important to subject the ALDinHE (2022) values to scrutiny. Whilst there is not the capacity to do so in a detailed manner here, below is a snippet of the approach I argue for.

1. Working in partnership with students and staff to make sense of HE – Genuinely transgressive partnerships of this kind, most notably championed by the late Mike Neary at Lincoln University through the ‘student as producer’ project (Neary, 2020), is to be encouraged, as is any sense-making exercise. Regarding the latter, note how ‘sense’ is not necessarily concomitant with ‘solution’.
2. Respecting diverse learners through critical pedagogy and practice – This is to be encouraged, especially when critical pedagogy is employed along with

heutagogy; that is, self-directed learning (see Hase and Kenyon, 2013, below). The recent update (June 2023) to this value marks a significant shift from the previous iteration, which argued for ‘making HE inclusive through emancipatory practice’. Biesta (2015) argues against the notion of ‘emancipatory practice’, noting via its colonial connotations that it implies ‘one who knows better and best and who can perform the act of demystification that is needed to expose the workings of power’ (p.83). Returning to the point above concerning hubris, this value update changes the self-concept that Learning Developers would like to have; in effect, one that emphasises critical self-reflection over potentially opaque emancipation.

3. Advocating for effective Learning Development practice to promote student learning – ‘Effective’ is a contested concept. See above concerning the tension of disseminating what is neatly measurable.
4. Critical self-reflection, ongoing learning, and a commitment to professional development – I am, predictably, all in favour of item one. ‘Professional development’, however, contains tensions. Being a ‘professional’ can often be all too concomitant with acting as a ‘functionary’ (Hargreaves, 2000). In the interest of social justice, again, it may be appropriate to act in an unprofessional manner.
5. Commitment to a scholarly approach and research related to Learning Development – What is deemed ‘scholarly’ changes depending on discipline related, as well as sociopolitical, norms. Consider, for example, contemporary debates surrounding Eurocentric modes of knowledge exchange (Gopal, 2021) (such as this chapter and the volume as a whole!).

Understandably, some readers may now wish to return to the comments cited in the epigraph and skip to the next chapter! For those who continue, I will explore how Learning Developers may harness their positionality within institutions to enact critical self-reflection.

## Marginality

As Linda Morrice (2009, as cited in Sinfield et al., 2011) argues, ‘knowledge is not the value-free, decontextualized, neutral and apolitical construct it is thought to be’ (p.54). Critical Pedagogy after Freire et al. (2018) advocates a ‘problem-posing education’, in which

participants ‘develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation’ (p.56). This perception involves recognising perpetual contingency over necessity. Being in an often marginalised ‘third space’ (Whitchurch, 2008), instead of continually trying to argue our way into existence via that consuming ‘treadmill of justification’, efforts may be better served in problem-posing provocation. So, embracing the relative marginality of LD within HE, rather than experiencing this as a lack to be rectified through laborious claims to exist, playing, and taking risks within a precarious field means having the ability to act with utopian curiosity, enacting the ‘desire for a better way’ (Levitas, 2011, p.198).

In concrete terms (lest there be yet another charge of intellectual masturbation), as Rebecca Bell argues (2011), ‘Learning Developers have a very important central role to play not only in the creation and support of teaching resources, but also in challenging teaching and learning methods and perspectives’ (p.153). Furthermore, ‘working closely with academics, support staff and students, Learning Developers are privy to most sides of the learning process. Being in a unique position; they are often able to see the whole picture, mediating between the often-competing perspectives of students and staff’ (Bell, 2011, p.144). Acting as problem posers in quasi-intellectual exile, Learning Developers are well placed to model Adornian critical self-reflection. What they cannot do, however, is ‘see the whole picture’; therein lie the risks of naivety and hubris, again. Instead, the Learning Developer may engage with content and context in a continually critically reflective manner.

## Beyond Pedagogy

The value of a Freire-inspired Critical Pedagogy to LD is apparent through the above. Indeed, Freire and his successors, such as Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, are often cited in works in the field. However, one theory of education mostly conspicuous by its absence is heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013). Whilst Pedagogy is the teaching of others and Andragogy is the teaching of self-motivated adults (Knowles et al., 2020), Heutagogy builds upon the latter, and, foregrounding the learner, would advise that the Learning Developer facilitate self-directed and self-determined enquiry. This is not to argue against pedagogy, but

to recognise its limits. Heutagogy helps to evade the limitations of a strictly pedagogical approach, which, owing to the predilections of the Learning Developer, will necessarily limit the possibilities and creative articulations of the learner.

So, linked to a heutagogical approach, Critical Pedagogy is not a formula about a repeatable formula, but instead, as McLaren (2000) articulates: ‘a politically informed disposition and commitment to marginalized others in the service of justice and freedom’ (McLaren, as cited in Trifonas, 2000, p.169). Similarly, heutagogy is about the learner going beyond the inevitable dogmas (however socially progressive) and limitations of the Learning Developer, who in a heutagogical approach would embody King’s (1993) oft-quoted ‘guide on the side’.

Critical Pedagogy is instructive in the development of thinkers invested in a concept of social justice and Critical Theory-informed ‘reasonable conditions for life’. Whilst we may ostensibly be Vygotsky’s ‘better knowing others’ (1978), we too, as argued throughout, are implicated in the very neoliberal tensions and contradictions that we often rail against. Thus, as critically self-reflective Learning Developers, we ought to encourage heutagogy (Abbeglen, Burns, and Sinfield, 2019). Still, whilst Abbeglen, Burns, and Sinfield (2019) refer to themselves as ‘emancipatory educationists’ (p.7), this piece argues to supplant such a self-concept with that of immanent critique in Adornian vein, as it more transparently recognises complicity and entanglement. The tensions in the discourse of emancipation are, as noted above, rooted in colonialism (Biesta, 2015, p.7). Though well-intentioned, emancipatory education becomes a manner of legitimising one’s position (based upon measurable worth, etc.) and relies on ‘something that is done to somebody and hence relies on a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated’ (Biesta, 2015, p.71). Instead, what critical reflection grants the Learning Developer is an ‘infinitesimal freedom’ (Adorno, 2005b, p.6); a recognition of their complicity and positioning within a discourse that they seek to redress.

## Discomfort over Fear

Allowing the fear of needing to justify one’s worth and impact upon desirable student outcomes problematically implicates the processual nature of LD practice. Discussing teaching and education practices is often an emotionally loaded issue, exacerbated by the



anxieties of practitioners (SEDA, 2014). In a community of practice like LD that consists of members from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, the strength of having a multiplicity of perspectives is somewhat mitigated by many of us who feel that we have either accidentally landed into the community, or had the moniker thrust upon us. As such, Learning Developers may often shy away from engaging in critical self-reflection – it is too epistemologically and ontologically taxing. It then becomes simpler to practise ‘helping’ students, and demonstrate worth, invariably in metrics related to satisfaction, retention, and completion rates. In sum, the *modus operandi* becomes to act pedagogically and pastorally, and showcase the efficacy of input as much as possible to secure employment under precarious working conditions concomitant with the norms of neoliberalism. A summary to describe the ethos of the majority of colleagues I have worked with in the community would be along the certainly well-intentioned lines of ‘I want students to do well, be well, and like me’ (not necessarily in that order!). However, a problem with this ethos is that ‘the dark irony of hegemony is that teachers take pride in acting on the very assumptions that work to enslave them’ (Brookfield, 1995, p.17); namely, that efficacy ought to be measured by ‘happy and healthy students who like me’. Rather, in our unequal and unjust society, holding a space for heutagogical, over pedagogical, discomfort (Amsler, 2011) is crucial to nurturing learners who can critically reflect and develop creative articulations of ‘better’ ways.

## Conclusion

To be critical in LD is to continually foreground contingency, positionality and undertake immanent critique of what we are doing, in the service of what, and in the interests of whom. Whilst this may appear a sobering take on the potentiality of LD, it actually is – sorry. Eschewing reifying and paradoxically limiting conceptions such as being emancipators, and thus, perhaps unwittingly, privileging ourselves and our practices owing to professional insecurities that remain concomitant with neoliberal governance, immanent critique means that nothing is sacred, including our professional identities (Eyre and Slawson, 2018). The tension remains, then, how to confidently articulate what LD is, how to be a Learning Developer, and engage in social justice pursuits such as championing the causes of historically marginalised demographics within HE, without undertaking some reification (McArthur, 2016, p.974). Perhaps there are, on balance, more positive aspects to having a hook on which to hang one’s identity hat than not. Still, it is hoped that this chapter will foster

an ethos of immanent critique when engaging with arguments put forth in subsequent contributions.

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