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Institutional Culture, Departmental Expectations, Professors' Dedication to Teaching, and Students' Success: The Nexus

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the claim that universities coddle some students, affording student-clients with deep pockets preferential treatment. Autobiographic and auto-ethnographic methods are applied for student evaluations and statements, to examine the author's experiences with privileged students and the benefits accruing from the student-professor relationship, particularly fostering their learning ability and intellectual development. The paper centres on student responses to critical pedagogy and the synergy that develops when such pedagogy coalesces with student activism in the classroom. Also discussed are the benefits to be derived from introducing humour into the classroom.

Keywords: academic capitalism; critical pedagogy; Giroux; humour; Kincheloe

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding its many rewards, teaching at a university can be a nerve-wracking experience. Institutional politics in a pseudo-corporate environment must be navigated to avoid unmarked minefields. In universities where students are viewed as prize milch cows, policies must often be turned on their heads to placate the "fowls that lay the golden eggs" (Gibbs, 2002, p.353). For professors who subscribe to the culture of academic excellence, it does not take long to identify those students who perceive university education as a service and professors as service providers whose job it is to appease the student-customer-if they wish to advance their careers and attain the holy grail of tenure (Cuthbert, 2010). Next, there is the unwritten rule: the student is "always right" (Cuthbert, 2010, p. 12). According to Pitman (2010), universities treat students as "customers" (p. 170) whose tuition is crucial for ensuring the operation of universities, including paying professors.

While Cuthbert (2010) and Pitman (2010) highlighted the power students may wield over professors, my experience as an academic at a university on the East Coast of Canada tells a very different story. I never witnessed any sense of entitlement on the part of any student, however privileged, nor have I ever been disrespected, bullied, or threatened by some student brandishing the "Damocles sword" (Cicero, 1990, 45 BCE, 5.61) to coerce me into upgrading their marks or allowing them to rewrite an exam. While still new to this university, I am not familiar with the Dean's Office protocol for discussing with a professor a parent filing a complaint of an alleged insensitivity or micro aggression on the part of a professor.

On the contrary, virtually all my students have collaborated with me in realizing their learning goals. Those who have requested extensions for assignments have done so respectfully and provided good reasons for submitting late. Moreover, on those few occasions when department policy dictated that I deny such a request, the student was understanding. However, I am fully aware that not all students behave in so exemplary a fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ball (2012), the deregulation of education under neoliberalism has changed the traditional goal of higher education, where knowledge was disseminated with the primary purpose of transforming the human mind for the greater good of society into a (monetized) business venture (see Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Ball (2012) posited that under neoliberalism, universities have turned the recruitment of students, particularly those from developing countries, such as India, China, and Brazil, where there is demand for Western education, into a business (Ball, 2012;

Troiani & Dutson, 2021). They "set up off-shore campuses [and recruitment offices] in partnerships with private providers" (Ball, 2012, p. 21) to increase enrolments in programs such as business, law, medicine, and engineering, where international students pay prohibitive tuition and ancillary fees for education (see Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000; Troiani & Dutson, 2021).

According to Ball (2012), higher education has metastasized into a business. Universities have converted education into attractive goods and services sold to the highest bidder at their peril, and students find themselves saddled with debt with marginal returns on their investment (Ball, 2012). By commodifying education, universities have subjected professors to the "tyranny of metrics" (Ball, 2012, p. 20). For example, teaching evaluations give students control and a level of power over measuring the effectiveness of professors that makes some professors, especially those without tenure, quiver. Professors surrender their authority to students and are silenced by university management with "not now" (Troiani & Dutson, 2021, p. 9) in response to their requests for reform.

According to Brienza (2016), since the establishment of universities over five hundred years ago, they have been tasked with training students, in "law, medicine, and theology" (p. 94), and supplying the state with professional public servants without financial motivation. Brienza contented that the spirit undergirding universities to provide free education is different today. In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the demise of the nanny state-government as the funder of students 'educational needs came a new arrangement that compelled universities to seek alternative streams of revenue outside those allotted to them by the government; that is, to "charge [students] for services that once were free" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000, p. 76).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) called higher education in the neoliberal economic order "academic capitalism" (p. 73). I gather from the term "academic capitalism" that universities are no longer altruistic settings where, once upon a time, ideas were made accessible to all kinds of students without financial barriers. Under the oppressive diktats of neoliberalism, universities, in their current state, are knowledge mills that train student-clients at a speedy pace, turning them into disposable cogs in the squeaky wheels of a knowledge-based economy where "long-term thinking . . . [is] replaced by short-termism" (Bauman, 2007, as cited in Troiani & Dutson, 2021, p. 7). In a corporate structure, compassionate policies, such as tuition freezes, are the least considerations on the minds of higher education managers. Students are obliged to pay for the rising cost of "new and upgraded services (e.g., student union renovations and recreation centers)" (p.

74). According to Slaughter and Rhoades (2000), higher education is no longer a "right or a public responsibility" (p. 74) but rather a financial burden to be borne by students. Without equivocation, Slaughter and Rhoades contended that universities, despite public relations performance, "see students as revenue sources . . . as tuition monies account for increasing shares of . . . university expenditure" (Slaughter & Rhoades, p. 74).

According to Hanley (2005), as "state funding of [universities] . . . decreases, universities have engaged in a radical privatiz[ation][1] of higher education by shifting the budget burden to students" (p. 3). Building on the work of Slaughter and Rhoades (2000), Hanley (2005) cited "academic capitalism" (p. 3) to foreground universities' affection for and addiction to profit extracted from students as a covert form of exploitation that is retailing education to the highest bidder, particularly international students who see universities in the West, especially those in the upper rankings, as providing them with a competitive edge in the labour market. According to Hanley (2005), "affordability, not access," (p.4) is and remains a key condition to acquiring higher education. By affordability, I assume that Hanley is not referring to access to education by bright students but rather to students who possess the proverbial *pot of gold* and whose families or employers are ready and willing to fund their education.

Autobiography and Auto-ethnography: An Overview

To recount my experiences with students that have demonstrated an appreciation for learning and intellectual curiosity, I use student evaluation and in-class statements, two components of autobiography and auto-ethnography, to centre what students thought of my effectiveness as a professor and areas that needed improvement. According to Lapadat (2009), autobiography represents a "particular kind of narrative" (p. 959). Citing Brockmeier (2001), Lapadat (2009) defined autobiography as "a story, or part of it that refers in one way or another to one's life history" (Brockmeier as cited in Lapadat, p. 959). It represents personal experience, "a person's account of [them]self[2]. . . in a social world . . . [wherein the] teller selects,

[1] Privatization of (higher) education refers to a transactional arrangement where students bear the costs. In this relationship, education is treated as a commodity, with its value agreed upon by both the university and the students (Ball, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

[2] The self, in the context of autobiography, allows the person telling the story the freedom to formulate an account of an experience drawn from memories (Lapadat, 2009).

relates, and gives interpretive force to specific memories" (Lapadat, 2009, p. 959). Moreover, it is a medium through which the teller re-experiences their experience while commenting on it vis-à-vis what others think of it and about them (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

According to Staude (2005), autobiography is a "dialogue of the self . . . for the purpose of self-understanding. . . . [It represents] our inner conversations about the meaning of our experiences and those conversations" (p. 252). For Sommer (2003), autobiography is "an extended and cohesive narrative written by a person describing her or his life or portions of it. It may incorporate diary notes, letters, or other personal documents, but typically involves integration, editing, and reflection" (p. 199).

Poulos's (2021) extensive definition of autoethnography is instructive. For him, autoethnography is a genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. (p. 4)

As a mode of inquiry, it delineates the "researcher's experiences and insights regarding the subject(s) under study. Through the medium of writing, the researcher shares their experiences by laying out their thoughts about the subjects or objects under study" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Through observation and participation, autoethnography allows the researcher to centre their experience with and perceptions of "contact[s] with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis (i.e., action, performance, accomplishments)" (p. 5). Autoethnography affords the writer a medium to compose "creative narratives shaped out of [their] personal experiences within a culture" (p. 5).

Using "data gathering and research tools common to other forms of qualitative social research, including . . . conversational engagement, . . . narrative analysis, . . . and storytelling," (Poulos, 2021, p. 5) the writer constitutes "compelling narratives that work to evoke and capture her lived experiences (and that of her coparticipants, as applicable) in relation to the phenomena under study" (p. 5). Using students' evaluations and statements, I foreground my students' voices on my pedagogy and how they led me to modify my approach to teaching to address their diverse learning needs. I write this paper in the hope it will inspire educators and students to work together to promote learning.

A Professor's Journey to an Institution where Education Matters and Learning is Supported through Dialogue

I shall introduce this section with an African proverb: A good tree produces good fruit. As Africans, we are enjoined by our elders to share good fruit with members of our village and those from adjoining communities. When sharing fruit, we also share the skills required to plant the seeds of fruit trees that will sustain communities in future years. In this paper, the "good tree" refers, metaphorically, to my department, the "fruit" to my students, and "farms" to universities across Canada. I believe that introducing a student-oriented learning approach in my department could help universities produce good students. I hope that this paper will inspire professors to work with students to ensure they acquire the requisite education and skills to improve themselves and change the world.

In the Fall of 2022, I accepted a limited-term appointment at a university on the east coast of Canada. A few weeks into the semester, I noticed that some students were performing beyond expectations. For example, they arrived at class prepared and took advantage of the least opportunity to share their insights. To foster their undoubted brilliance, I made myself available after classes to those who wished to talk with me informally. Those unable to visit during office hours were given the option of meeting with me via Zoom.

To ensure their needs were accommodated, I introduced an open-door policy allowing students to drop by without an appointment to discuss academic matters. These meetings provided an opportunity to direct students to resources, particularly academic journals, of which they were unaware. Making myself accessible and dispensing with student-professor power dynamics helped to build trust. I soon became the go-to person for discussing all things course-related. These meetings also had the effect of enhancing student self-confidence as well as cultivating a desire to learn **(**Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

In class, students proved not to be sheepish about engaging me in intellectual debates focusing on new concepts encountered while reading articles I may or may not have recommended. What dynamic, I asked myself, could be driving such lively, even heated debates? After much thought, I hit upon two likely dynamics at work: a critical pedagogy and humour. To test the validity of these hypotheses, I surveyed my students to elicit their views regarding these two-headed dynamics.

Toward the middle of the semester, I asked the students in all three of my courses—Social Power Relations, Race, Racism and Colonialism, and Corporate and State Crime—to critique my pedagogy, focusing on the

assigned readings and lectures. They were instructed not to reveal their names or provide clues that might identify them.

> **Student 1:** In terms of course delivery, it's fantastic. Everything is explained well with fantastic examples. I don't think anything should be changed. The [course] delivery is great; the explanations are great! Thank you for your help so far and for teaching us. It's greatly appreciated! I look forward to the rest of the semester. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)
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> **Student 2:** Class is going [well]. I have no issues. Lectures are interesting. What we are learning is interesting. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)
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> **Student 3:** I am enjoying this class, and the course material is interesting. The lectures are very engaging, and I always feel excited about sharing my thoughts and analysis of the topic. I don't know what I would change. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)
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> **Student 4:** I like the mode of delivery. I think the way you lecture is quite effective because of the strong examples you use. Also, you make sure everyone understands what you are explaining, which is great. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)

While most of the students found my teaching style effective and my courses interesting, a few suggested changes to accommodate their needs, different interests and learning abilities. Their diversity of opinions on these matters, expressed below, was intended not to criticize my teaching style but to highlight the need for pedagogic strategies capable of addressing their learning needs.

> **Student 5:** I'd like more opportunities to discuss the group discussions with classmates. I would like more local examples in Canada as well as what we've been covering, (i.e., [resource] extraction [from Indigenous] lands and Indigenous sovereignty). (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)
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> **Student 6**: Powerful delivery of lecture[s]. . . . Reminds me of my Baptist Church where the preacher was always theatrical. . . . [You should] add more photographs to the slides. I am a visual learner. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022
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> **Student 7:** I personally enjoy your lectures. They make me think critically and out of the box. . . . The only change that could be made is allowing us to write down notes before . . . discussion[s] or tell us what's important to note [down] (other than what's on the slides). Thanks for being a great prof. (Personal communication, September 20, 2022)

> **Student 8:** I would understand better if you . . . explain . . . the big words. . . . In your class, [examples are] mostly about Whites and Blacks. As a Brown person, I would like to know where we Browns stand. (Personal communication, September 30, 2022)

The above comments suggest that some professors may, notwithstanding their best intentions, be insensitive to the needs of minority students and consequently neglect aspects of teaching that are essential to learning, sharing ideas with students, listening to their concerns, recommending journal articles, and additional learning resources (Moriña, 2017). Aware of this pitfall, I strive to make class discussions more inclusive by posing questions that provide First Nations students the opportunity to speak of the violent expropriation of Indigenous lands by colonial authorities and the social and economic implications for Indigenous communities.

For Indigenous students attending my classes, colonialism did not end with the birth of Canada on July 1,1867. According to them, it merely mutated into a new variant in the form of White corporate capitalism. Henceforth, powerful corporate interests would collaborate with multilevel government and state institutions to deny Indigenous Canadians their right to full citizenship and ownership of their former lands. For these students, bromides such as we recognize the lands on which we are located as unceded territory of the First Nations are nothing more than a sham, and the term "unceded" nothing less than an inoffensive admission that Indigenous lands were "stolen". These students always held their ground when arguing the case for repatriating ancestral lands and receiving reparations for mistreatment at the hands of colonial authorities. For these students, education is viewed as a political act directed against racism and as a means of advancing the interests of First Nations.

According to Fine (1994), education should aim to help students build an intellectual foundation rather than "simply [turn them into] vehicles [of knowledge] transmission with no voice of their [own]" (p. 17). Put another way, it must avoid converting students into "talking heads," for this would mean forfeiting their "authorial subjectivity" (Fine, 1994, p. 19). As I understand Fine, authorial subjectivity enables the researcher, or student in the context of this paper, to assume ownership of their experiences and communicate their thoughts rather than have others speak on their behalf. Granted the right to speak and a platform from which to be heard, the speaker, (i.e., the author recounting their experiences), empowers themselves by mining and sharing knowledge; they empower their audience by sharing their experiences to the best of their ability (Fine, 1994).

Given my students' diverse interests, I encourage them to seek knowledge outside conservative or neocolonial ideological frameworks; for example, define sexuality through the tropes of heterosexuality, heteromasculinity, and hypermasculinity. My students are required not to reiterate the content of course materials but share their analyses and interpretations of what they have imbibed and how it has informed their lives. By adopting this approach, they are able to retain knowledge gleaned from the readings. They can also deepen their understanding of the subject matter and share their thoughts regarding how the readings have impacted their lives by offering up personal accounts for which they can claim authorship, as opposed to transmitting someone else's ideas wholesale, all the while believing they are true reflections of the human experience, including their own. I attribute students' ability to speak out, formulate, and disseminate independent thought, in part, to a departmental culture that fosters critical thinking, respect for diversity, and opposition to oppression in all its disparate forms. Students get the self-assurance and courage to share their knowledge when they are encouraged to take on the role of independent thinkers.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: NUTURING EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

As a scholar, I am neither a passive actor in the classroom nor a neutral educator of students. I believe the world is plagued by oppressive power formations and that activism in the classroom has the potential to foster a level of consciousness capable of combating the forces working to suppress human freedom and agency. By activism in the classroom, I do not mean that professors should create an army of *au contrarians* that see nothing but evil in colonial canons and challenge authority at every turn. For me, activism signifies the freedom to be self-aware and to avoid being entrapped in repressive and racist ideologies framed as innocuous knowledge systems.

In the Fall of 2022, I asked my students what motivated them to take my courses. While all their answers were thought-provoking, one above all stood out: "I come to school because of Patrick," which is the first name of this writer. "Any time I leave this class, I want to go out and tear *shit down* [emphasis mine]." (Personal communication, January 16, 2023) While I was musing over this student's remark, it dawned on me that she drew her strength from critical exchanges with classmates over such weighty questions as how best to confront the tyranny of the minority—the powerbrokers—and how to solve the world's problems. This student views the world for what it is: a Darwinian jungle dominated by networks of powerful people for whom the

"greater good" is little more than a bromide. For her, these power networks have no place in the world and thus must be torn down.

Critical pedagogy has its origins in the work of activists and educators, among them Paulo Freire (1970, 2020), who "played a crucial role in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil before the onslaught of the junta in 1964" (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed***,** Freire (1970, 2020) argued that for education to achieve its true meaning and purpose, it must reject efforts to recondition the human mind using colonial epistemic templates. For education to have a positive impact, it must, he posited, equip the disenfranchised with "knowledge, skills, and social relations that can enable [them] to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy" (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). Dubbed a "project of freedom" (p. 715), critical pedagogy enables students who are far removed from progressive movements to become politically astute enough to challenge colonial canons that continue to impede them.

According to Freire (1970, 2020), critical pedagogy must move beyond preparing students to write standardized tests, something that requires merely regurgitating white-centered creeds. As an innovative method of teaching, critical pedagogy requires educators to oppose "regimes of educational degradation organized around the demands of the market, instrumentalized knowledge, and the priority of training over the pursuit of the imagination, critical thinking, and the teaching of freedom and social responsibility" (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). Thus, the role of the student in the fight for change should be determined according to the principles of citizenship and not primarily on the basis of individual goals such as forging a successful career. For the advocates of critical pedagogy, students are not empty receptacles to be filled with filtered knowledge; instead, they are co-producers of knowledge. Moreover, critical pedagogy requires educators and students to subject themselves to self-criticism, a *sine qua non* for developing a critical self-consciousness, and thus the ability to form "better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility for [the citizens of the world]" (p. 177).

According to Kincheloe (2008), critical pedagogy emerged during the post-World War I period, a time of great social and economic dislocations, and subsequently in Brazil in the mid-twentieth century. Kincheloe contended that the principal objective of critical pedagogy lies in elucidating human acts and their consequences, (e.g., the crimes against humanity stemming from waging wars). Critical pedagogy analyzes human suffering and the forces and

institutions responsible and proposes radical education as a remedy. Critical pedagogy rejects human exceptionalism, (i.e., artificial accolades of superiority or claims of divine entitlement to rule over others). In a world saturated with violence, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, critical pedagogy aims to "develop, promote and sustain] new forms of understanding that connect us . . . to understanding, empathizing with, and acting to alleviate suffering" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 401).

In a world of increasing internecine conflicts, corruption, poverty, famine, epidemic diseases, and a host of other ills, critical pedagogy has gained favour in educational institutions, especially those of higher learning. According to Kincheloe (2008), while education is crucial to addressing human suffering, some knowledge systems—Eurocentric colonial and neocolonial systems, to cite but a few—work to "anesthetize [the public] to human pain and suffering" (p. 401). Education predicated on the ideology of White supremacy not only reinforces dominant and racist epistemes, but its appeal to White supremacists provides the grounds, however tenuous, for the extermination of adversaries and competitors, imaginary or otherwise.

As a scholar, I am committed to the principles of critical education. I ask students to come to class prepared and to have completed the required readings to acquire a deeper knowledge of the subject matter for discussion. I also ask them to bring to bear a critical perspective on the required readings: one attentive to both the nuances of language and the validity of the claims being presented. As a critical educator, I believe that education should provide students with the intellectual tools to critically investigate the world and the sources of the information fed to them. They must also be able to interpret current events and plan for the future by "entering into a critical dialogue with history and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present" (Giroux, 2010, p. 715).

On the first day of my Social Power Relations class, I gave the students the option of working independently or in groups. Those that formed groups were tasked with formulating, presenting, and addressing momentous questions pertaining to Canadian colonial history and its impact on First Nations, identity politics, and the impact of globalization on the Global South, particularly developing economies. While most students viewed group presentations as a confidence-boosting exercise, for Indigenous students, they provided a cathartic opportunity to contest colonial narratives such as those purporting that residential schools were established to benefit Indigenous children by, among other things, educating them. It soon became clear that the White students understood how deeply colonialism had traumatized

Indigenous populations and how neocolonial structures are reproducing their oppression and marginalization even today.

> **Student 9:** I think this [course] is important in terms of the acknowledgement of the colonial agenda. White people really do not understand their privilege, nor just how deeply [e]mbedded their colonial roots exist in the . . . foundation of our society. It allows White people to continue being the narrators of (stories) and dismissing their responsibility [and] privilege. (Personal communication, January 16, 2023)
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> **Student 10:** I really enjoy how the many examples given make everything more concrete and engaging. I want to be pushed farther. I like it when you push our thinking to a deeper level. (Personal communication, January 16, 2023)
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> **Student 11:** [Your] use of examples when speaking of political/societal issues is much appreciated. It helps broaden one's horizons and steers the student in the right direction. [Your] explanation of analytical topics/questions . . . helps to guide the [student]. (Personal communication, January 16, 2023)
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> **Student 12:** What I like about the [course] is [how you] involve the class . . . and engage with students and give [us] opportunities to voice out [our] thoughts and . . . debate. (Personal communication, January 16, 2023).

A common theme to emerge in these student assessments is an appreciation of critical pedagogy, as evinced by comments such as "I want to be pushed farther. I like it when you push our thinking to a deeper level" (Student 10. Personal communication, January 16, 2023). This critical approach to learning pushed students to assume the role of scholars in their own right; they were unafraid to formulate ideas and share them while referencing their lived experiences and theories. They also rejected the colonial master scripts by contesting racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, and Islamophobic narratives couched in geniality, decorum, and the liberal cliché that we are all equal.

For students, once a critical pedagogy is deployed, the voice becomes a weapon of liberation. As hooks (1989) points out, the voice is essential to transforming one's being as well as the world; it helps the oppressed to "speak truth to power,"(Said, 1994, p.102), that is to confront institutions and persons that, for the longest time, have been shielded from the vagaries of human suffering, yet they pretend to understand the oppressed. The voice conveyed the courage within students; it afforded them, especially those on the margins of society, the tenacity to resist ideas that limit growth, human agency, and

experience. To deny students their voices, including their views on the professor and the course, is akin to an "act of persecution, torture—the terrorism that breaks the spirit . . . [and] makes creativity impossible" (hooks, 1989, pp. 7–8). For hooks, the voice has political significance:

> [The voice] is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination. . . . It . . . represents a threat [to dominant discourses and actors]. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must . . . be wiped out, annihilated, [and] silenced. (p. 8)

In the context of my teaching, the voice afforded the students a sense of their democratic right to free speech—the freedom to speak of all the wrongs afflicting the world. The voice can set students on a path to becoming public intellectuals, adept at "speak[ing] directly to political issues outside of academe's safety zones . . . to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods" (Cushman, 1999, p. 329). The public intellectual is something more than a scholar toiling away in some ivory tower or securing grants to fund research. According to my definition, they are willing and able to speak with and for "individuals who have no home, not enough food, or no access to a good education" (p. 329). As per the values I bring to the teaching profession, a public intellectual is a highly informed servant, committed to work in the service of others, especially the voiceless, out of a sense of moral and civic responsibility.

Mixing Critical Pedagogy with Humour

For many students, the onslaught of COVID-19 was cause for considerable stress occasioned by the fear that remote learning would undermine their ability to learn to the extent that it would deprive them of the support provided by professors and peers (Neuwirth et al., 2020). In my early post-COVID classes, with a view to dispelling such fears and cheering them up, I introduced the practice of combining critical pedagogy with humour. During the first week of classes, I began lectures by posing a very serious, indeed daunting, question: Does race matter? A deep silence pervaded the class. The students had no idea where I was taking them. I assume some may have viewed this approach as a tactic to tease out responses that would sow general discomfort, and they were not wrong. I observed some students nervously biting their fingernails; others refused to look me in the eye. Such a response was to be expected in light of the emotions that race invokes, even among progressive minds.

To break the ice, I recited Michael Jackson's famous lyrics "It does not matter if you are Black or White" from the song *Black or White* (Bottrell

& Jackson, 1991), which were accompanied by Jackson's unique and unforgettable choreography. Needless to say, the students greeted my dance kinesthetics with shrieks of laughter. This strategy succeeded in allowing them to reflect on the complexities of race without fear. It was also my way of telling them that I could relate to their generational hopes and concerns, and I was willing to go the extra mile to help them achieve their learning outcomes. Humour proved to be a way to bring students closer to me**.**

> **Student 13:** [Give us] more Michael Jackson impressions, more dancing examples; you are doing great! Just because most of us are White does not mean we cannot handle a wonderful accent. I am just kidding. I can't wait to take this class, and I am in another one of yours tomorrow! (Personal communication, October 4, 2022)

To ensure my African inflection did not compromise my pedagogy or become an excuse for some students to drop the course, I informed all my classes that I was taking accent-reduction medication. As per my physician's advice, I had to self-censor certain words that, when enunciated, sounded like expletives, (e.g., beach and horde). With their permission, I continued, I would prefer to write such words on the whiteboard or spell them out aloud. The students laughed along with me, indicating they understood my predicament and sympathized with me. Wrote one student: "Patrick has a bit of an accent, but he acknowledges it, and writes out words on the board if he has trouble pronouncing them, so I understood him perfectly. 10/10 experience in this class!" (Personal communication, February 13, 2023).

According to Appleby (2018), using humour increases learning, self-motivation, class attendance, test performance, divergent thinking, and interest in learning. It also "reduc[es] anxiety and stress when dealing with difficult material [and creates a] psychological bond between students and faculty" (p. xx). In my classroom, moreover, humour was always used in a way that respected students' racial, cultural, gender and sexual sensibilities and sensitivities..

CONCLUSION

While the belief that all universities view students as customers persists, their cultures vary in this respect. Moreover, whether students conduct themselves as customers depends on the kind of relationship professors build with them over the course of a semester. By reaching out to students and treating them as extended family members who occasionally quarrel, professors might encourage students to reciprocate, thereby creating bonds of mutual respect. This implies that the professorial role should extend beyond teaching, grading papers, publishing articles, and conducting research

to include understanding how students behave and working with them, along with departments and faculty, to foster learning through mentorship (Kim & Sax, 2018; Wilson & Ryan, 2013).

The rise of ultra-right-wing movements across the globe makes critical pedagogy even more essential to fostering among students an understanding of the forces working to keep them and the general public in a state of perpetual ignorance (Appelbaum, 2023; Galamba & Matthews, 2021). When guided by university professors and supported by progressive institutions, students are better able to reject efforts aimed at turning them into plantation intellectuals, sedated androids fed a steady diet of neocolonial canons framed as neutral bodies of knowledge. When encouraged by professors, students are more likely to commit their time and resources to fighting alongside the oppressed, who, for lack of education, are unlikely to achieve anything resembling social mobility(McLaren, 2010).

In African folklore, the human world, including universities, is akin to the web of the Ananse (Pelton, 1980), the spider. Just as the Ananse labours to connect the individual strands comprising her web, professors must work with students to build connections that not only bring out the best in students but also motivate them to become activists. I use the term connections here to refer to partnerships between professors and students, the purpose of which lies in creating a better world wherein every individual enjoys freedom from fear, want, and oppression in addition to a modicum of dignity and respect. I believe that as educators of the future leaders of the world, professors are uniquely well-positioned to build such connections.

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