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Digital Critical Pedagogies: Five Emergent Themes

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Abstract: Critical pedagogies are characterised by meaningful dialogues, connections with learners' experiences and an understanding of the learner as a whole person (hooks, 2004, 2013). Digital critical pedagogies attempt to apply these principles in the context of digitally mediated learning, but how this manifests continues to be an area for exploration. In this paper, we present five themes that emerge from existing literature on digital critical pedagogies. These are: 1) digitally mediated communication, 2) creating 'safe spaces' online, 3) interweaving public pedagogies, 4) expanded definitions of digital inclusion and 5) pedagogical risk-taking. We suggest that individuals teachers in HE, as well as institutions, can reflect on these themes as a step towards articulating, implementing and advancing digital critical pedagogies.

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In this project, we draw particularly on the writing of bell hooks (1994, 2003) to suggest that critical pedagogies are characterised by meaningful dialogues, connections with learners' experiences and an understanding of the learner as a whole person. Digital critical pedagogies attempt to apply these principles in the context of digitally mediated learning, but how this manifests continues to be an area for exploration. As part of a wider university project, we undertook a literature review focused on articles exploring the nature of digital critical pedagogies (DCP) with a particular focus on how DCP could be used to foster more authentic dialogues with learners around equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Our project is situated in a pragmatist tradition - it is research designed to enable those working 'on the ground' to collaboratively problem-solve in response to challenges we face as a university community. The wider project incorporates three strands of investigation, the first of which is the literature review presented here. All strands are co-produced with a diverse range of academics from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. The ultimate aim of the project is to foster open conversations about DCP and EDI in the context of learning and teaching.

Together with an advisory group of 12 interdisciplinary academics at Middlesex University (MU) we established a review methodology. We digitally searched six education databases and 22 high-

ranking education journals for literature relating to digital critical pedagogies published in the last 10 years (2011-2021) using a wide range of relevant search terms. 34 articles were retained after sifting carefully through the abstracts, and 21 articles were retained after a complete reading of each piece. These articles were then subject to a collaborative and iterative thematic analysis coordinated between the two researchers and the emergent themes were developed through feedback from the advisory group.

The five themes can be thought about as potential elements in the ongoing articulation of digital critical pedagogies, as well as avenues for further exploration.

- Shaping digitally mediated dialogues to take into account inequities in voice and presence and how these interact with the affordances of particular digital platforms (e.g. Bali, 2014; Borup et al., 2013; Boler, 2015; Regan et al., 2012; Smith and Jeffery, 2013).
- Conceptualising and creating 'safe space' online, where the need is to ensure that learners are safe from abuse and harm - particularly when engaging in public pedagogies with social media - while not overly sanitising experiences (e.g. Hill, 2018; Ringrose, 2018; Castillo-Montoya et al., 2019; Sakr, 2020; Rosenblum & Harris, 2019).
- Interweaving public pedagogies so that traditional digital learning and teaching spaces (such as the learning management system) are opened up and begin to interact with dialogues taking place in digital counterpublics (e.g. Hill, 2018; Ringrose, 2018; Castillo-Montoya et al, 2019; Sakr, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2018; Talib, 2018; Berman, 2020).
- Expanding definitions of digital inclusion to take into consideration digital empowerment, equity and participation as well as access and use; considering the role of digital citizenship and digital literacies as part of digital critical pedagogies (e.g. Seale & Dutton, 2012; Bali, 2014; Talib, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2018).
- Pedagogical risk-taking and collaborative navigation/innovation in order to create room for 'productive failure' as befits a critical pedagogy, recognising that not all teachers and learners are given the same space in which to fail productively and that those already marginalised will feel that experimentation and the possibility of failure are too burdensome to bear (e.g. Rosenblum & Harris, 2019; Anderson, 2020; Regan et al., 2012).

In addition to these themes, it is important to recognise a gap in current research suggested by the literature review. We found only a few students that focused empirically on learners' experiences of DCP. The vast majority prioritised the experience of teachers in exploring and implementing DCP. While these pedagogical reflections are invaluable, hearing from learners about DCP 'on the ground' is an essential next step.

In this paper, we explore further the meaning and landscape of each of these themes, how they work together and suggest points of reflection that have the potential to influence practice, both at an individual and institutional level. We also suggest some productive avenues for further research.

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