

"I DON'T WANT TO BE IMPORTED OR EXPORTED:"

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE ENGLISH WRITING
AND RESEARCH COURSE IN THE UAE

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Abstract

Freire developed his theory and practice in literacy courses in Brazil and although his work has had global influence, critical pedagogy's relevance in the Arabian Gulf remains unexplored. Freire wrote, "I don't want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them." The present study examines the role that critical pedagogy plays in the English writing and research courses offered at three private Universities in the United Arab Emirates. The paper focuses on student experience, culture, and critical thinking, and relies upon interviews with course directors and administrators, teacher surveys, and analysis of teaching artifacts. Results reveal the need to introduce critical pedagogy in English learning classes in UAE universities but with a localization process of the Freirean philosophy to fit the local culture and students' experiences.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, University Writing, Critical Thinking, Arabian Gulf

First-year writing is required at most U.S. colleges in part due to the increase in linguistic and dialectic diversity within U.S. higher education during the twentieth century and the subsequent growth of the field of writing studies, a discipline focused largely on developing teaching methods to meet the needs of these diverse students (Berlin, 1987; Crowley, 1998; Miller, 2011). The burgeoning field turned to various models including critical pedagogy to develop engaging classroom methods to connect students with the world (Shor, 1987). As English-language institutions open and expand in growth areas like the Arabian Gulf, “first-year writing” is also spreading. The field of writing studies is serving as a disciplinary home to a growing number of teachers of English-language writing, rhetoric, and research courses around the globe—and it is again turning to Freire for insights with regard to connecting the classroom to society. In global contexts, that connection becomes more complex, and the United Arab Emirates represents one such context where that complexity is especially pronounced. The present study explores critical pedagogy’s efficacy for an English-language research writing course taught at several universities in the UAE. The paper explores the extent to which Freire’s work might be influencing research writing courses specifically.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Various challenges face critical pedagogy in the Arabian Gulf and indeed across the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Research suggests that “rote learning” is the dominant pedagogy in MENA, that the teacher is often seen as an ultimate authority figure, and that education at most levels is centrally administered (Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2012; Ibrahim, 2012; Nasser & Abouchedid, 2007; Romanowski & Nasser, 2012; Roth, 2008). Freirean pedagogy assumes a postmodern worldview in which knowledge is contingent and context-dependent. Freire drew on Lukacs’ contention that false consciousness is imposed on us by hegemonic forces, Foucault’s assertion that overt and covert forces keep us disciplined so that we adhere to dominant belief systems, and Althusser’s claim that dominant culture uses apparatuses like schools, religion, and family to enforce ruling ideologies. Freire calls

on learners to critique these forces, but to what extent can education institutions in MENA encourage a critique of dominant culture and its hegemony without violating cultural taboos?

Regarding Qatar's new critical thinking-based educational reforms, Romanowski and Nasser (2012) write, "Religion and tradition... govern the political, economic, social, legal and educational aspects of society" (p. 124). They point out that religious principles in various MENA states inform civil practices, suggesting that these practices thus become "beyond question" (p. 125). Higher education in the MENA region may appear incompatible with Freirean pedagogy's focus on the "common good." For example, Salame (2012) suggests higher education has neglected sustainable development. Some Middle-Eastern states even practice "state censorship" (p. 125). Academic freedom is not seen as a fundamental facet of higher education (Nasser & Abouchedid, 2007, p. 10). Nasser and Abouchedid recount the story of a professor and her department head who were both fired after the professor led an in-class discussion of the Danish cartoons seen as blasphemous to Islam. Gender roles are also deeply ingrained in parts of the Arabian Gulf, making critical inquiry into gender and its power dynamics especially risky.

Freire (1997) urged his readers to pay careful attention to "cultural differences" and "context" (p. 42) insisting that education should neither impose nor colonize. His awareness of the potential of education to disregard and disrespect local culture is especially instructive in the UAE where Emiratis ("locals") are outnumbered by internationals, including South Asians, non-Emirati Arabs, and Westerners. Given this demographic reality, Boyle (2011) states, "As foreign workers constitute about 90 per cent of the workforce of the UAE, English is used as the country's acrolectal lingua franca" (p. 143). As such, Gallagher (2011) notes that there is a lot of exposure to English in the UAE "through tertiary education, the media, tourism, the petroleum industry, global consumerism and international business and finance" when compared with "other countries in the Arab world where access to English may be limited" (p. 66).

During his own years in exile in Chile, Freire (1997) insisted upon “respect for the host country” (p. 51), for the “local” (p. 86), and for “positions opposed to my own, positions that I combat earnestly and with passion” (p. 79). This tension between critical, even oppositional thinking and respect for an intensely traditional culture informs any project looking at Freire in the MENA region. Freire saw literacy and learning as tools for disrupting the status quo. He didn’t seek to change students as much as build capacity in students. Too often, Freire (1997) wrote, “[F]amily and school were so completely subjected to the greater context of global society that they could do nothing but reproduce the authoritarian ideology” (p. 20). He urged teachers to “instill a taste for democratic practices, among which should be an ever more active intervention” (p. 21) so that students could come to see their realities and worlds not as fixed but rather dynamic. Freire stated that a primary learning outcome was to help students learn to use language: not the authoritarian, sectarian gobbledygook of ‘educators,’ but their own language—which emerging from and returning to their own reality, sketches out the conjectures, the designs, the anticipation of their new world. Here is one of the central questions of popular education—that of language as a route to the invention of citizenship (p. 39) and “the transformation” of their lived realities (p. 42). Thus, language is not a skill but an apparatus to write and rewrite the world.

Freire proposed introducing students to information and then collaboratively investigating that material, thus giving students an active responsibility in claiming their education and thinking about the material contained therein. Freire (2005) introduced problem-posing education where the teacher’s role became that of a constant questioner, asking students to explain their own experiences, but also to place those experiences in broader cultural and historical context. Stories, anecdotes, and experiences are combined with ideological analysis. This form of critical analysis, which reveals the influence of particular, dominant ideologies, allows students to reflect and think but also to prepare to act; theory and practical action work together to instill both a consciousness and an ethic of action in students (Freire, 1996). Above all, Freirean critical thinking as a learning outcome

involves rejecting fatalism, or the notion that the world is fixed. Instead, the world as it currently exists, Freire wrote, is a “historical reality” subject to “transformation” (p. 66).

Though Freirean work has informed teachers in a wide variety of social contexts, the question as to critical pedagogy’s efficacy in the MENA region remains unanswered. How have teacher-scholars in the Middle East interested in Freire’s work modified the tenets of critical pedagogy (as Freire himself encouraged) to adapt to the region’s dynamics? Freire (2005) famously wrote, “I don’t want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them” (p. x). In this study we examine the ways that MENA teachers and scholars have attempted this reinvention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature suggests that the tenets of critical pedagogy have not been thoroughly theorized as a critical lens and practice in the MENA region (Izadinia, 2009; Raddawi & Troudi, 2012;). Further, the dynamics of the region writ large and the gulf in particular may make instituting the tenets of critical pedagogy in the context of higher education seem untenable. Consider for instance the aborted Conference on Middle Eastern issues in the UAE (Lindsey, 2013) as an example of the higher stakes involved in academic discussions of controversies. One of us, teaching in Lebanon several years ago, used Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” after years using the essay numerous times in Western academic contexts. In Lebanon, soliciting examples of Orwellian discourse was more layered than doing so in the U.S., one difference being that in the U.S. there are partisan differences while in Lebanon there are sectarian differences. The notion of a politicized classroom resonates differently in MENA contexts—a consideration that matters when enacting a critical pedagogy.

Although highly politicized discussions can be perceived as risky in MENA contexts, the literature suggests a good deal of receptiveness to regionally appropriate (critical teachers must work with students to reflect on what this means) iterations of critical pedagogy. For instance, Fairley found through her action research in EFL classes in

Egypt that both the introduction of controversial debate topics and the classroom practice of assigning roles to mixed-gender debate teams had a “de-silencing” effect on women who had not been participating due to “male conversational dominance” (Wachob, 2009, p.61). Subjects including the role of Arab women and freedom of expression equalized participation, as did the defined role that allowed students preparation time before class. Critical pedagogy is, in theory, quite popular. For example, another action research project in Egypt revealed broad support among students—especially female students—for pedagogies granting learners greater agency and autonomy (Matbouli, 2009). Further, a quantitative study in Iran suggested that teachers are largely supportive of critical pedagogy even though—or perhaps because—the practice is largely absent in Iran’s schools (Aliakbari & Allahmoradi, 2001). Phyllis Wachob’s (2009) graduate course in English as a Foreign Language methods in Cairo used critical pedagogy principles and also opened up space for teachers in the course to consider Freirean methods. Described in her collection *Power in the EFL Classroom: Critical Pedagogy in the Middle East*, Wachob’s course was called Gender, Space, and Power in the EFL Classroom and foregrounded Freirean concerns like the physical layout of classrooms and power relations therein. Six contributors to the collection were her students. Not all pieces in the collection are by teachers using critical pedagogy and some of the action research projects eschew explicitly Freirean pedagogies for broad, student-centered classrooms and inquiries into attitudes toward language. These are useful contributions, but they aren’t necessarily “critical pedagogy.” The Ma’an Arab University Alliance for Civic Engagement is a collective of thirteen Universities in the region, focused mainly on leadership development, hands-on volunteer initiatives including service learning courses, and engaged teaching—but also not critical pedagogy (Ibrahim 2012).

Qatar’s *Education for a New Era* suite of state-sanctioned educational reforms emphasizes “questioning and critical thinking skills” (In Romanowski & Nasser, 2012, p. 120). This phrase is not necessarily an explicitly Freirean framework but it does suggest skepticism about the material world. Further, the reforms suggest

the possibility of the type of critical pedagogy reinvention we have been suggesting. Similarly, the Doha Debates show that—to an extent at least—there are opportunities for critical exchange about “controversial issues” in the Gulf (Romanowski & Nasser, 2012, p. 130). These don’t take place within a higher education context, but can serve as a classroom text. The American University of Beirut’s Neighborhood Initiative is a collective of academic programs ranging from non-credit-bearing classes for senior citizens to community-based research and teaching projects focused on inquiry into problems and dynamics of the Hamra area of Beirut. Once again, it is perhaps best-described as pseudo-critical pedagogy, borrowing from Freirean tenets like focusing on local concerns.

METHODS

Critical pedagogy has influenced teachers of writing and rhetoric in the Western world (Seitz, 2004; Tassoni & Thelin, 2000), leading them to experiment with de-centering their own authority in various ways, challenging cultural norms through countercultural readings, and asking students to research subjects connected to their own cultures and experiences. The present study examines the extent to which Freirean philosophy was utilized in English research writing courses in the non-Western universities under scrutiny.

The study’s main questions include:

1. In what ways has critical pedagogy influenced curricular leaders overseeing the research-writing classes at these institutions?
2. In what ways has critical pedagogy influenced the classroom teachers teaching the research-writing classes at these institutions? What challenges connected to the dynamics of life in the UAE make Freirean pedagogy difficult in this cultural context (if any)? What opportunities connected to the dynamics of life in the UAE make Freirean pedagogy relevant and efficacious in this cultural context (if any)?
3. In what ways do these classes foreground critical thinking, the everyday lives of students, and students’ cultures, and how

might these emphases be used as starting points for Freirean curricular revisions?

To describe the various classroom approaches used in these English courses and to understand the motives and strategies employed by curriculum directors, we conducted open-ended interviews with the department chair or course director at each of three Universities in the United Arab Emirates—one in Dubai, one in Ras al Khaimah, and one in Sharjah. We recorded the interviews and combined them with ethnographic notes taken during the interviews in order to contextualize responses from subjects. Interviews centered on four themes or concerns central to various iterations of critical pedagogy: Culture, Experience, Critical Thinking, and Familiarity with Freire. The goal was to understand more deeply the extent to which Freirean teaching methods informed instruction and/or had the potential to inform the curriculum. Though interviews took on a free-flowing ethos, questions about teaching practices guided the interviews, including queries about the degree to which culture, experience, and critical thinking influence curriculum. Data was subsequently analyzed rhetorically and qualitatively, and responses were coded using an open-ended, descriptive approach.

In addition to these interviews with curriculum leaders, we conducted an online survey of the course instructors so as to explore the motives and philosophies of those teaching the classes. We surveyed all eighteen faculty members at the three institutions who regularly teach the classes. The subjective and multiple-choice questions focused on educators' roles in promoting critical thinking among their students and whether they encourage these students to write about their own culture and experiences. Questions on the survey included: "When teaching English 204 (or equivalent research writing courses), to what extent do teachers encourage students to write about their own experiences? (all the time, frequently, sometimes, rarely, never)," and the online survey service we used computed what percentage responded "all the time," etc.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to study how critical pedagogy might be influencing curriculum and practice in three university writing programs, we delineated several common characteristics of critical pedagogy—(a) the inclusion of and critical examination of cultural topics into course curricula, (b) respect for student experience in class activities and discussions, and (c) the encouragement of critical thinking in course assignments. As he is generally regarded as the founder of critical pedagogy, we also examined the respondents' familiarity with Freire so as to gauge

CULTURE AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Critical pedagogy necessarily involves teachers building capacity in students to read cultural topics critically. Freire himself, writing in *A Pedagogy of Hope*, urged educators and *educands* (students) to both pay close attention to “cultural difference” (p.42). *Pedagogy of Hope* is perhaps Freire's text that most intimately engages with this theme, foregrounding cultural pluralism as an ethical good. Freire's corpus of work likewise placed a great deal of value on rooting all learning in the material conditions and real, lived experiences of students, urging teachers and students to reciprocally and collaboratively identify generative themes rooted in real experiences. For these reasons, we found *culture* and *student experience* to be two important characteristics of critical pedagogy.

Most teachers who were part of our study say they encourage students to write about culture (defined on our survey as “ethnic, and/or racial affiliations and traditions”). 41% do so frequently and 35% do so sometimes, with only 24% reporting that they rarely or never encourage students to write about culture. Fewer, though, say they ask students to *question* their cultural traditions, ideologies, and values: 25% frequently, 41% sometimes, 31% rarely

Many suggested that they do not so much *encourage* students to explore culture as much as students just happen to *choose* topics related to ethnic, national, and racial heritage. However, faculty responses also suggested that some of their pedagogical choices and

their institutions' curricula seem to lead students in this direction. One teacher discussed how her thematic focus on literacy often leads the subject matter toward a cultural framework: "Their ethnic and national identity and the contexts in which they have lived are deeply implicated." Another discussed encouraging students to write about a social problem. Others discussed how they encourage their research writing students to localize topics—de facto ways of fostering "culture" talk. Some may shy away from cultural critique per se because teachers are not of the same "culture" as students: one respondent said this explicitly, noting "I do not feel that it is my place as an outsider."

According to the four interviewees, there seems to be an implicit mandate that prevents the instructors from discussing certain topics. One department head stated that constraints are usually just understood: "It is safer to discuss issues in distant regions than local issues." Conversely, the Director of English in another university stated: "Our philosophy is a liberal arts education [which] is about open and free exchange of ideas so no topic should be off limits." But the Chair in the third university emphasized: "Although no restrictions are imposed by the institution, my personal sensitivity to the local culture prevents me from being too liberal with the topics of discussion." She believed that her students were "pretty sensitive to topics that are taboo." These forbidden topics included sexuality and democratic reform in the region. She had taught a course in gender that included explicit sexual materials in her home country, but she could not even imagine the possibility of teaching such a course here in UAE. The Chair considered these obstacles to fulfilling the purpose of liberal education because they thwarted the opportunity for open inquiry. The coordinator of 40 or more sections of Advanced English Writing course was the only instructor who expressed having no reservations in including any topic in classroom discussions as she told her students that there were no taboos. Nevertheless, she stated: "My students could have personal reservations. If I encouraged them to challenge authority at some macro level, they could fear being ostracized."

Given these constraints, it is difficult for teachers to practice critical pedagogy in the classroom because democracy is at the heart of critical pedagogy. Kincheloe (2008) defines critical pedagogy as “a perspective toward education that is concerned with questions of justice, democracy, and ethical claims” (p. 7). If cultural sensitivities stop teachers from asking questions about justice, achieving a “critical pedagogy”—at least the way Kincheloe uses the term—is certainly difficult.

On the other hand, one of the interviewees stated that culture is one of the themes for their course, and students usually have a lot to contribute to the discussion as they have experienced various cultural encounters and possibly assimilation to a relatively different culture. This is especially valid in a context like UAE in which many racial and ethnic groups mingle. Providing a venue for reflection and inquiry into the mingling may be one of the valuable ways critical pedagogy is being reinvented in this context.

Freire in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” underlines the role of the student as potential human agent and contributing to the learning process. In the same context, teacher and student are perceived as co-learners and not one party (the teacher) “depositing” information into the other party’s (student) mind. The classroom would be “a microcosm of the social order” (Pennycook, 2009, p.116). Thus, a diverse society like UAE with more than 200 nationalities require a classroom that reflects on and celebrates the country’s multiculturalism.

Yet, the tension over the viability of “cultural critique” remains. Teachers were evenly divided when it came to asking students to critique. 47% of respondents said they frequently or sometimes do so, while 53% rarely or never ask students to write about themselves. Faculty expressed a range of perspectives about the usefulness and appropriateness of the student experiences. Some dismissed the notion wholesale: “It’s a research class. One does not investigate one’s own experience using scholarly journals.” Another respondent stated: “Personal experience is irrelevant and non-verifiable through scholarly methods.” Others talked about scaffolding assignments that involve students exploring and articulating their connection to

the chosen topic. Several suggested that experience comes into play through reflective writing. When asked about encouraging students to critique, few faculty intimated that cultural or ideological critique play a role in their pedagogy, though many suggested that through class discussions students do indeed have the chance to “question” their experiences. Several, though, insisted on the value of asking students to “distance themselves” from their own experiences. One respondent went so far as to suggest: “first- and second-year college students have barely lived, and there is no educational purpose served by having them ramble on in hyperbolic terms about the meaning of their experiences.” These responses indicate that instructors’ classroom practices vary widely in terms of fostering student exploration of their own experiences, with some teachers encouraging such and others outright denying such an activity’s relevance. The latter attitude of teachers who discourage students’ reflection on their own experiences in a research paper or classroom might reveal a sort of ethnocentrism from the side of the teachers if culture is defined as a set of shared experiences by members of a community in everyday life whether in education, architecture, transportation, healthcare, agriculture, arts, or religion (see Raddawi, 2011; 2015).

Apple (1999) and Schubert (1998) state that learners and teachers might work on the assumption that the school curriculum reflects the cultural diversity of our modern world but a close inspection reveals that it is based on the views of the “dominant cultural, class, and gender groups” (as cited in Kincheloe, 2004, p. 1). It is therefore important not to accept information at face value. Paulo Freire advanced the concept of epistemological curiosity according to which the recipient with this type of consciousness not only learns the information as it is but also learns about its origin and purpose (Kincheloe, 2008)

According to Kincheloe (2008, p.6) any curriculum that ignores the power-related dimensions of knowledge production is essentially “bankrupt.” Bringing positive social change through education is the central concern of critical pedagogy. Since schools are embedded in their social contexts, empowering learners and encouraging them

to become critical thinkers can help them transform their social conditions (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011).

Our respondents suggested that, ultimately, incorporating culture and experience into the research writing course meant granting students greater agency and greater potential for learning. One respondent, for example, maintained that her students are more responsive and engaged when the research topic is related to their culture, identity, and experience: “students are more motivated and interested when asked to talk about their own cultures and experiences.” Her observation is in line with studies on Freirian pedagogy in other contexts that also found that student engagement and motivation increased when their studies directly connected to their lived experience. Another respondent did not refer to any personal effort on her part to incorporate culture in her course except that she sometimes included readings on culture. However, she stated that her students “often bring in experiences with their own culture” to the classroom without prompting. This suggests that students have a natural tendency towards discussing issues related to their own cultures. Instructors should encourage analysis of both lived experience writ large and, more specifically, students’ cultural identity, if they wish to abide by the principles of critical pedagogy. Cho (2013) states that with its emergence, critical pedagogy shifted the focus from economy to culture and the need to develop human agency in order to resist oppression. Cho’s useful analysis underlines the imperative to foreground culture and experience—not to mention the value, more broadly speaking, of approaches rooted in the tenets of critical pedagogy.

CRITICAL THINKING

Freirean pedagogues sometimes define critical thinking as the capacity to question dominant or ruling ideology. Though the term can be ambiguous, it can also foster interesting conversations. Freire wished for education to be a process of instilling a “critical consciousness” in all members of society, a capacity to think about the material conditions of society and “intervene in reality in order to change it” (Freire, 1974, p. 4). Faculty overwhelmingly voiced

support for “critical thinking” in the research writing class, with 94% reporting that they frequently emphasize critical thinking and 6% saying sometimes. In lauding this concept, respondents used phrases such as “one of the most important learning objectives” to convey the value they place on thinking critically. Of course critical thinking is a concept that few would wholly dismiss. Despite the term’s ambiguity, though, it is still significant that diverse faculty with varied approaches and orientations so overwhelmingly see an emphasis on critical thought to be a primary goal. Interestingly, there was a more diverse spread in terms of how faculty responded to the question “To what extent does your institution support the teaching of critical thinking?” 53% said very supportive, 35% said somewhat supportive, and 12% said not at all supportive. Many said they found that critical thinking takes a long time to learn and that one class can only begin to address thinking openly about the world. They discussed specific strategies—many focused on textual analysis, logic, reasoning, and the study of bias—which they thought were helpful in this regard. Virtually all agreed that critical thinking is among the most “vital” learning outcomes for the class. One commented that she tells students she hopes they allow research and new information to potentially change their minds about what they think is true.

Questions about critical thinking also got faculty talking about being insiders and outsiders of local culture. Several faculty said that when encouraging critical thinking, they are admittedly careful about how they talk about subjects that are taboo or that raise religious or cultural sensitivities. Some said they allow students to write critically, but avoid giving their own opinions, especially about local figures and public policy. Several respondents emphasized their own statuses as visitors and guests in the country, not necessarily seeing this as a weakness but rather a reality. One expressed concern about being on “ethically questionable grounds...[when] challenging” local values.

All interviewees strongly supported critical thinking, too. One stated that she expected her students to think critically all the time and gave them ethical queries to generate discussions where students could question values and assumptions. Topics included potentially polemical or loaded topics like family, divorce, and gender. To

emphasize critical thinking in his classroom, another interviewee used the Socratic Method where students are challenged to explain themselves more clearly and consider other perspectives, too. In support of critical thinking, a third educator mentioned that it was closely tied to curriculum via course learning outcomes. She asserted that instructors should facilitate critical thinking through a “bottom-up, not top-down” approach. She felt instructors should promote critical thinking at the classroom level rather than expecting intervention from an administratively mediated level. In the absence of critical thinking, composition would be a “drab course” she added. Interestingly, the “bottom-up” paradigm she desires seems to be much more democratic than a pedagogy imposed by central administration, although in Freirian terms, this approach is still coming from the teacher and not the students so perhaps is indicative of the limits of the iteration of “critical thinking” often in effect in this particular cultural context. That is to say, while quite useful, the approach she describes may not indicate a Freirian version of critical thinking in that it doesn’t reject the “banking model” (i.e., material is still coming from the teacher) and it doesn’t necessarily take an additional step toward the facilitation of social change. Recall Freire’s (1974) Marxist invocation that critique involves seeing reality and changing it (p. 4). Riasati and Mollei (2011) theorize that the desire for social change sets critical pedagogy apart from more neutral iterations of “critical thinking.”

FAMILIARITY WITH FREIRE

Classroom practices, as reported by faculty, are consistent with Freire, inasmuch as lecturing plays a relatively minor role and discussion a relatively major role. There is, though, a wide range of familiarity with Freire and his writings: 18% of respondents are very familiar, 47% somewhat familiar, and 35% not at all familiar. A few specifically voiced opposition or resistance to critical pedagogy in their classes but others found the practices useful in the UAE. One respondent stated that “critical pedagogy is a much-needed approach in the Arab world where people are opening their eyes to ask for freedom of speech and other liberties while yearning for democracy and a better life.”

Most survey respondents expressed a desire for effective and appropriate engagement with elements of critical pedagogy focused on critical thought and were skeptical of the facets that seem to impose an outsider perspective on students. One respondent mentioned that students sometimes see cultural critique as an “attack,” a perception that limits what can be done in the classroom. Another summed up this tension as follows: “Critical thinking—with obvious respect for cultural values—free as much as possible from instructor’s ideological bias—should form the basis of an argumentative approach to researched academic writing.” There seemed to be widespread acknowledgment of the need to respect local culture and utilize the diversity of college student populations in the UAE to increase engagement.

Only two out of the four interviewees showed some familiarity with critical pedagogy. One stated that critical pedagogy is about upsetting the status quo (Freire, 1996). He added that the next step is to bring about social change, but the UAE may not be amenable. To illustrate, he said that talking about the conditions of cleaning workers on campus is pointless because local culture is not yet ready to listen. It can be inferred that his understanding of critical pedagogy is in line with that of Riasati and Mollei (2011). Another interviewee maintained that critical pedagogy does not apply to a teaching context where the student body is privileged. She explained further that her students, unlike Brazilian peasants, are not in need of revolution as much as a change in individual thinking.

Confining critical pedagogy to the sociocultural setting of the Brazilian peasants is a limited perspective on a very broad concept. Shaull (1993) states that although Freire was responding to the situation in Brazil, his philosophy has universal appeal. The relative unfamiliarity of the educators with critical pedagogy is supported by research. A cursory review of the teachers’ training programs in Indonesia reveals that critical pedagogy is not prominent in the curriculum despite its transformative effects (Hayati, 2010). After reviewing the literature, Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) likewise conclude that the presence of critical pedagogy in Iranian ELT curriculum is very limited. In the Arab world, there is a “lack of emphasis on critical

pedagogy in educational institutions in the Middle East and the Gulf region” (Raddawi, 2011, p. 72).

A central tenet of a democratic curriculum is to explore “where knowledge comes from, the rules of its production, and the ways we can assess its quality and the purposes of its production” (Kinchloe, 2008, p. 3). One interviewee stated that she helps her students locate at least 25 tentative sources that they could use in their research without commenting on the nature of these sources. Another mentioned that evaluating the credibility of sources is an important part of composition instruction. He added further that although they teach a hierarchy of sources, personal experience is considered a type of evidence with less academic credibility. Another mentioned that she sometimes has students read a news story provided by two different media sources and critique their language and content. Limiting oneself to widely acknowledged sources of information works against the principles of critical pedagogy because it endorses singular knowledge sources. Published material by the elite class ought not be the only source of information for critical pedagogues as they penetrate the marginalized classes of society in their quest for knowledge (Kincheloe, 2008). Only one educator referred to an example of one of her students who interviewed “working girls” as part of her research about legalizing prostitution. It can be inferred from this example that she considers the marginalized sectors of the society as valid, but the same cannot be said about others.

IMPLICATIONS

By engaging with culture, experience, context, and critical thinking about the material world, Freirean pedagogy can seem risky to some stakeholders. Perhaps what makes critical pedagogy potentially dangerous in MENA is the way Freire’s methods have the potential to disrupt the status quo. Freire saw his own pedagogy as “a criticism of sectarianism” (1997, p. 8), meaning the hegemony of a platform or affiliation:

The sectarian wishes the people to be present at the historical process as activists, maneuvered by intoxicating propaganda. They are not supposed to think. Someone else will think for

them; and it is as protégés, as children, that the sectarian sees them. (Freire, 1974, p. 9)

Though our study suggests that a less risky version of critical pedagogy maybe be more palatable in the region (consider, for instance, the iterations of critical thinking in effect the writing classes we surveyed), critical pedagogy as defined and theorized by Freire is seldom used in MENA—particularly the Arabian Gulf—and even less frequently researched and theorized (Raddawi & Troudi, 2012; Izadinia, 2009). The region sometimes makes critical pedagogy a “riskier” proposition. Still, the results of the present study suggest there are opportunities to incorporate tenets of Freire in the Arabian Gulf—and throughout the MENA region. Using culture as a theme, for instance, seemed to lead to engaging discussions and engaging writing in the classrooms we investigated. The plurality of ethnic and national identities in the UAE, specifically, can be seen as an asset in this regard, as students in a Freirean classroom have an opportunity to explore culture in a critical way and learn from one another’s points of view in a productive fashion. While our findings suggest the region is likely open to critically thinking about culture and identity, there may be challenges to questioning culture and identity. Some teachers and curriculum leaders associated with the research and writing course expressed concern about violating local taboos. Ultimately there is receptiveness to a kind-of qualified version of Freirean pedagogy, which is consistent with findings of other scholars who have investigated similar matters.

The enthusiasm that many of our respondents have for emphasizing critical thinking and that some of our respondents have for using generative concepts like “culture” and “personal experience” in research writing classes suggest there is interest in practices loosely connected to Freire’s legacy. The largely untapped potential in critical pedagogy’s is not necessary unique to these private universities in UAE. From Cairo to the Levant to the Arabian Gulf, universities are attempting to engage with local concerns and increase civic skills like critical thinking. These are the very skills emphasized by a course like the research writing class, which could feasibly be retooled to foreground engagement with the public sphere. Kanpol (1994 & 1997)

describes critical pedagogy as a vision of inclusive social democracy. It is a pedagogy of inclusion. It is about “relating classrooms to social, cultural, political, and ideological concerns” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 117). The type of education referred to by Freire (1996) as “banking education” wherein the teacher is the “depositor,” the students are the “depositees,” and the educational experience itself as “an act of depositing” (p. 53) should be replaced in the Gulf Universities with more student-centeredness in which teachers focus on helping students develop their cognitive abilities because critical evaluation and personal development are inherent human tendencies. In the learning situation of liberating education, the teacher-student hierarchy diminishes and instead they become co-learners in the classroom where information is shared through dialogue.

Critical pedagogy reinforces the idea that students should be treated as political agents capable of bringing social change. The interviews of the four research participants along with survey respondents discussed in this paper rarely indicate that English instructors are heading in this direction. This is mainly because of institutional and cultural constraints and probably due to the educator’s lack of understanding of critical pedagogy and its pedagogical implications. The Freirean ontology emphasizes looking forward; the world is not static and fixed but in flux. Freirean pedagogies do not colonize but rather listen to local concerns and provide students with opportunities to develop proficiency to engage in working toward ethical social change. Research writing can further take up the work of helping students decode dominant culture and then intervene to promote the kinds of democratic reform they feel would be most productive for themselves and their communities. Freire puts the “subjective” self in conversation with the “objective” world (1996, pp., 32-33). The dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity cannot be dissociated (Freire 1996; Horkheimer 1972 cited in Darder et al., 2009; Jacoby 1980). It would mean a world without humans. Research writing classes can be sites for enacting that conversation and fostering the kinds of agency and confidence necessary for selves to enter into the objective world and advocate for social change. Education is more than “speaking” or “writing”; it is rather another way of articulating

reality (Pennycook, 2009, p.130). It is a form of education that permits the students to think on their own and eventually suggest a different approach and vision of the world. In a culturally and linguistically diverse region like the Gulf and specifically a country like the UAE which is constantly developing at a fast pace in all fields, critical pedagogy seems to be a must. These multicultural communities need to communicate, mingle, and work on a team in a global era that is subject to a world economy and to the internationalization of education. With critical pedagogy, education can be perceived as a liberatory learning process in which all individuals regardless of class, race, gender, language of origin and ethnicity become conscious of their ability to promote effective change for the betterment of society.

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