Inclusive spaces: re-imagining critical pedagogy as an experiential approach within the neoliberal university

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the potential of critical pedagogy as an experiential approach within the neoliberal university to support inclusivity. I argue that the university is neoliberal in its promotion of individual and self-interested self-gain at the expense of a more democratic and collective understanding of success. Critical pedagogy is founded on principles of democratic ways of working for social justice, and I argue that operationalised through active experiential learning, it can be used to support students to develop the skills to be democratic and inclusive both in the classroom and beyond.

Introduction

I believe that higher education is dominated by neoliberalism, especially in relation to policy and governance. Whilst there is less scholarly work on the impact of neoliberalism on pedagogy (Tight, 2019), there is emerging evidence that educators find the neoliberal context restrictive and aim to resist its influence on their pedagogical practices (Pye, 2025; Evans, 2020). This paper extends this discussion by suggesting that critical pedagogy, operationalised through experiential learning, can be one way of resisting the neoliberalism of pedagogy. I believe this is important because critical pedagogy supports students to develop a citizenship-orientated view of society which pushes back against the very individualising and self-interested principles of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is exclusive, it does not value inclusivity and as such, I argue does not help students to be democratically, inclusively orientated citizens of the future, which I and others (for example, Watson, 2014) believe should be the core aim of higher education. However, critical pedagogy as an approach grew from the work of Freire (1970) which was developed originally outside of the higher education sector meaning that the

enactment of critical pedagogy within education settings is far from straightforward (Shor, 1996).

This paper has been prompted by analysing data generated through narrative discussions with 15 students and recent graduates of an undergraduate sociology programme. To be clear, the data generated was for a different project and used here as a thinking and reflection resource rather than being used directly quoted in this paper.

The neoliberal university

The impact of neoliberalism on higher education in the UK and globally has received a great deal of scholarly attention, most of which gives an important critical perspective of what neoliberalism has meant for universities (Olssen and Peters, 2025; Naidoo and Willians, 2015). In basic terms, neoliberalism is a belief system that understands market logic as the most effective and efficient way to administer all aspects of society, which includes higher education. It pushes universities to be competitive in the recruitment of students who, in England, make a significant financial commitment through the fee and loan regime to their higher education experience. This understandably means students can become focused on employment as an instrumental outcome of their experience because they are motivated to pay off their debts at the end of their programmes (Marginson, 2024). Students are framed as consumers who can choose their institution within this competitive market. As a result, all aspects of university activity must be measurable and quantifiable, including employment rates, to enable the production of metrics (Peseta et al, 2017; Ball, 2015), which are often problematic (Wilsden et al, 2015). The belief is that these metrics give students insight into the performance of institutions to help them make a choice about where to study. Within this competitive context, individual self-interest is promoted because neoliberalism creates conditions in which self-beneficial outcomes are considered successful at the expense of collective achievement. As an educator interested in how we create inclusive spaces, this paper explores the possibilities of using critical pedagogy to try to alleviate wherever possible these individualising impacts of neoliberalism and instead promote a more collective approach to supporting inclusivity.

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy has a long history and tradition as a holistic pedagogy which refuses to reduce pedagogy to a set of actions, methods and techniques of 'best practice' within learning and teaching environments. Rather than seeing pedagogy as a set of actions, methods and techniques, it offers a philosophy and theoretical approach to teaching that can be adapted to different disciplinary contexts. It is widely accepted to have developed from the work of Freire (1970) and his influential text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* The term critical pedagogy is often attributed to the scholar Henry Giroux who writes extensively and passionately about how essential critical pedagogy is to foster learning that supports people to critically consider the role of power, hegemony and inequalities within our society and prepare people for democratic citizenship. This is not a pedagogy which a neoliberal context supports because it is built on principles of collective action for the benefit of all, rather than exclusive, competitive self-interested principles of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2020). To do so, critical pedagogy considers classrooms as places where everyone is valued and people's experiences of the real world are considered essential to connect learning with societal systemic power structures. Therefore, knowledge is not thought to be held by the academic to be transmitted to students. Instead, knowledge is co-created and transformed rather than being reproduced. The classroom is a place to practise democratic and inclusive learning and in recent times it has been used to guide work which involves co-creation and/or partnership working with students (Seal and Smith, 2021).

Experiential approaches

Critical pedagogy has been criticised for being rather abstract in its failure to give concrete direction to educators wishing to use this approach. However, I see this as an advantage because in offering a philosophy and theory, it allows educators to adopt the practice of critical pedagogy in ways that support specific disciplinary contexts (Biesta, 2015). Experiential approaches are one such way that educators can use critical pedagogy to develop inclusive and democratic experiences (discussed further below) to support students to critically consider the role of power and inequalities in society and help them develop skills to counter this through engaged and critical citizenship. Experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) involves students having some kind of concrete experience, reflecting on that experience, theorising

about the experience and then making plans about how to use the knowledge they have gained in future experiences. I therefore think it is a particularly useful approach when aiming for 'deep' or transformational learning because it requires students to engage in reflexive and critical thinking in relation to the experience. It is usually presented as an ongoing cycle which models the importance of learning from experiences. It is not an approach which is always intended to be critical, its focus is learning from experience through reflection. Here I am suggesting that when combined with critical pedagogy, it could be an approach that operationalises critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy as an experiential approach?

Combining these two approaches means students can be asked or encouraged to engage in an experience which features inequality, discrimination and/or oppression. This could be anything either outside of the classroom for example a visit to a local organisation, reading materials, a film, or within the classroom such as hearing from a person with lived experience of marginalisation and/or exclusion. Deeply considering the experience through the process of critical reflection collectively including the educator creates a shared experience which is likely to be uncomfortable and challenging as the group engage with the troubling reality of inequality. The group can then be supported to theorise about their collective reflections which is likely to surface awareness of unequal power, dominant discourses and hegemony as systems which enable and support inequality. The group can then be supported to consider what this might mean in terms of their own responses either collectively or individually in terms of actions they may commit to taking in the present and future to try to challenge inequalities. What I am describing here could clearly be very challenging and requires careful and sensitive facilitation and ethical boundaries (Zembylas, 2013). The key point is that critical pedagogy as an experiential approach values the process as much as the outcome.

Conclusion: Critical pedagogy and inclusive spaces

There have been important developments in higher education over recent years to improve inclusivity in the classroom. One of these has been the much-used mantra of being 'inclusive by design' which reminds all to centralise inclusivity when designing any learning and teaching activity. However, there are risks with this in the potential for a reductionist, 'tick box' approach

imposed by people who are understood to know 'best' about inclusive practices which aligns with the point made above about the importance of finding ways to make practice 'measurable'. The danger of this is it risks performativity (Ball, 2012) whereby the need to confirm with metrics is understood to be more important than how students experience pedagogy. I am suggesting here that an alternative, but more difficult and complex approach, is to think instead about being 'inclusive by values' based on the values that critical pedagogy is founded on, that is democratic inclusivity. This would require classrooms to have space for students and facilitators to come together to collectively consider what inclusivity in that particular space must look like. This, in line with critical pedagogy, frames the students as experts who know 'best' with valuable knowledge to contribute, supports co-creation of understanding, raises critical awareness and, perhaps most importantly, gives opportunity to practise democratic citizenship within a university context. This is not an easy task within the restrictions of the current higher education context but taking small steps to, for example, invite discussion on a partnership basis with students who feel that a particular inclusivity step could be taken is one way of providing opportunities to experience democratic inclusivity.

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