

Engendering Agency, Mindfulness, and Critical Thinking in Online Education

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Abstract

Challenges remain in the conduct of graduate education even when Philippine society has already begun its so-called post pandemic recovery. Such challenges include but are not limited to shifting work arrangements, perturbations in personal and family priorities, and everyday socio-economic realities such as the traffic problem and the rising cost of living. Given this backdrop of hard realities and increasing pressure on the individual's mental space, in which learners attempt to negotiate the pursuit of graduate studies, I draw on my lived experience in teaching graduate students at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman and problematize the issues in engendering agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking as desired states of being in an empowered, student-centered learning setting. Utilizing phenomenography, the study probes the approaches that were effective in teaching and learning as well as their challenges and the attendant contexts. I hope to contribute to the academic discourse on rethinking graduate education pedagogy.

Keywords: *higher education pedagogy, online education, learning competencies*

Introduction

Even when the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman partially resumed in-person classes in the 2nd Semester of Academic Year 2022-2023, the conduct of graduate education was left to the determination of the academic units. While the general preference of undergraduates was a resumption of in-person classes, the seeming preference of students at the Asian Center (AC), UP Diliman, which offers graduate programs only, was the online modality. This holds notwithstanding learning challenges in using the platforms as experienced by both students and teachers. Since most AC graduate students are working professionals, continuing to learn online became a viable option that allowed them to manage their studies given increasing pressures from the workplace and the lack of improvement in the proverbial traffic situation in Manila, more responsibilities in the household, and shifting family employment. The conduct of classes at the AC, therefore, remained online-dominant. While the online modality presented opportunities, concerns on whether teaching and learning challenges that existed before would be exacerbated. Particularly, would effectuating agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking be more difficult

given the intertwining effects of the pandemic interacting with the introduction of the online modality?

The study seeks to (1) examine the motivations for change in the teaching and learning environment towards a student-centered pedagogy that emphasizes agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking; (2) elucidate the design of interventions in improving student engagement in online learning in the graduate level by inculcating agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking in class discussions; and (3) appraise the challenges in operationalizing such interventions given various individual and social dimensions.

Approach

Conceptualizing Agency, Mindfulness, and Critical Thinking

The framework I applied in this paper (which is likewise applied in my course packs) is three-pronged, which relates critical thinking with agency and mindfulness as a skill that is necessary in carrying out the course activities. As a subject matter, critical thinking is widely debated contingent on disciplinary orientation (Moore, 2011) and frameworks of learning outcomes (Liu et al., 2014). Progressive perspectives question why education institutions must even teach students how to think (Fahim & Masouleh, 2012). In this paper, critical thinking is framed as a competency that covers the latter three higher-order thinking skills in the 2001 version of Bloom's taxonomy: analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Krathwohl, 2002), with their corresponding cognitive processes. Agency relates with critical thinking as it refers to the student's exercise of choice and independent thinking, following Manyukhina and Wyse (2019). On the other hand, although it is widely associated in the literature with the context of clarity and focus in thinking (soliemanifar et al., 2022; Noone & Hogan, 2018), I framed mindfulness as the metacognition or the consciousness of one's learning choices. These competencies are explained to students as necessary states of being and elements in an ontology of learning as both precursors and results of the learning process.

Method and Scope

In this paper, I shed light on the motivation or need for teaching and learning interventions, the design and structuration of my interventions, and the experience of students with these interventions. In analyzing the interventions for student-led discussions and learner responses, my paper draws on the epistemological tradition of phenomenography, which is concerned with describing how individuals experience a phenomenon as opposed to having phenomenological descriptions of different facets of that phenomenon to elucidate its workings (Marton, 1981; Giorgi, 1999; Larsson and Holmström, 2007). While both traditions have lived experiences as sources of analysis, the conceptual bent is not synonymous. With the interpretivist and constructivist approach in this paper, I am narrator, researcher, and participant in describing and evaluating the experiences of both myself and my students based on observation and reflexive articulations in class. Student feedback is considered in light of narrative inquiry. These particular methods are adopted in aid of

unpacking the nature and process of knowledge creation while understanding the positionalities of participants (Gruppetta, 2004; Svensson, 1997; Marton, 1981).

The scope of analysis covers the interventions I introduced in my online teaching to engender agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking in graduate pedagogy at the AC, particularly in the course Asian Studies 230 Seminar on Northeast Asia during Academic Year (AY) 2020-2021 until 2021-2022. It was the only course I taught for four straight semesters during the pandemic, which also had the most students relative to other Northeast Asia courses, allowing for thicker observations. Enrollees are mostly Master students in the thesis and non-thesis tracks at the AC, taking Asian Studies with country specializations in Northeast Asia, i.e., China, Korea, and Japan. The cohort of 38 graduate students includes a few cross-enrollees from outside the Northeast Asia specialization who took the course as an elective or cognate. The student activity considered in the scope is the Discussion Program (DP), the structure of which will be elaborated later on. Taking stock of how students led discussions, the articulations and interactions by students and myself, I analyzed agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking by students in the DPs. In other words, the DPs during class meetings and in context of their larger social domains, were the sites of rumination. Applying anonymity, observations on student performance and learner feedback cannot be traced to any particular person.

Tension Points for Change

At the AC, the intended approach in courses is discursive and deliberative. While the dialogic nature of class meetings is expected, agency, mindfulness and critical thinking are not automatic outcomes. Graduate students are used to seminar-type discussions where course materials, which are primarily readings supplemented by audio and visual material, are assigned to students. They then report on the material, usually using presentation slides (e.g., done through PowerPoint or Canva), and an open discussion follows. Student presenters tend to share their ideas without the burden of whether others learned or not while non-presenters listen passively. These have become routinized and habitual. Meanwhile, life challenges were increasing such as workplace pressures and the difficulty of traveling from work to classes, making studying harder for graduate students. In this light, reconfiguring student-led discussions became one of my interventions in the classroom. I also started using online platforms such as Google Classroom and other applications that facilitated online class exchanges during inclement weather and other difficulties. In other words, a pedagogical shift already started before the pandemic, but the latter facilitated an acutely deeper shift.

Upon the lockdown in March 2020, an immediate adoption of online education was carried out. At the AC, this consisted of both synchronous and asynchronous aspects. The pandemic also spotlighted issues whose resolution were long overdue as well as opportunities to re-imagine higher education given global developments regarding the role of specialized knowledge (Guo et al., 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Marmolejo and Groccia, 2022). In many ways, the pandemic and online education were jolts against the inertia of routine, providing

opportunities as well as challenges in engendering agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking.

Reimagining Student-Led Discussions and Observed Outcomes

I have framed discussions through what I refer to as a Discussion Program (DP) with the vision of teaching students “in a deeply relational, reciprocal and educative practice” (Grice et al., 2023, p. 104). The significant departure of the DP from the usual/traditional student reporting of course materials is in operationalizing critical thinking and learner-centeredness with the objective of facilitating meaningful engagement by all students in the course, hewing closely to the corresponding learning resources.¹ Agency is encouraged because DP leaders need to make choices to not only demonstrate mastery of the subject as learners but also create an environment that is conducive for the learning of others. This puts an emphasis on the necessary sensitivity to participant reception and engagement which in turn demonstrates mindfulness. Active learning is expected (Coulter and Onufer, 2021).

Through an online learning management system and video conferencing applications in synchronous and asynchronous modes, they curate content visually through a variety of options including presentation slides, videos, photos, websites; provoke a critical analysis through modalities such as structured and moderated discussion boards with guide questions, break out groups, pre-class individual and group work, and games; and synthesize ideas after the discussion.

In the four semesters of online learning and teaching considered in this study, I observed that the “new” experience with the DP positively affected learning albeit in varying degrees. This held even when the parameters of the DP were adjusted according to the contexts of the students in every semester. For DP leaders, the most noteworthy outcome is that “learning by teaching” catalyzed mastery of the subject matter faster. Students were able to appreciate the basic principle that leading others in a discussion presupposes mastery. Other outcomes were more active engagement with the learning resources from both DP leaders and participants, deeper community-building as students had to relate with each other and give inputs in a *primus inter pares* setting where non-DP leaders were expected to offer meaningful contributions as equals. Where DPs were organized by groups of students, I observed group solidarity and friendly competition among groups. Students were challenged to be creative as they explored their own approach to the DP. Drawing on Vygotsky (2004), this indicates that when the framework of learning is made inherently creative, students are then prodded to “disturb” themselves and others in order to re-imagine problems, answers, and meanings.

Challenges in Operationalization

Discourses on difficulties in using the online modality in higher education are rife.

¹Students are encouraged to relate readings to popular discourses and current events and use other resources. However, I establish at the beginning that mastering the assigned resources is primary.

Student issues include the unequal access to devices and the internet, the lack of adequate physical learning space for distance education, the pedagogical implications on certain disciplines that require physical meetings, and psycho-emotional effects of not meeting together physically (Baticulon et al., 2021; Gocotano et al., 2021; Castro & Tumibay, 2021). These difficulties have already existed even without attempting to encourage agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking in the classroom. When they all interact, the predicament becomes more challenging. Despite the positive effects of the DP in general as discussed in the preceding section, it is still important to consider particular issues and varied learner experiences in aid of continuously improving the interventions.

Understanding the Framework

While students found course outcomes straightforward targets toward which they should strive, practicing agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking was intuitive in the notional level but harder to actualize consciously. This is due to strongly ingrained ontologies of learning that they had gotten used to. In general, uneven pre-pandemic exposure and experience with ICT affected but did not impede higher education students from participating per se in class using devices and the internet (Zarei and Mohammadi, 2022). However, learner control or the practice of agency in studying was another challenge altogether (Reyes et al., 2021). These issues can be minimized by spending more time at the beginning of the course in explaining the correspondence of the competencies with sample activities and the character of peer engagement. The challenge of students internalizing the framework applies to both face-to-face and online contexts but the latter adds another layer of challenge in the sense that the relational component of the framework seems to require more motivation in a distance education setting where one only sees small boxes of people on a laptop screen or none at all when students keep their video cameras turned off.

Leading Discussions and Engaging Peers

In some cases, DP leaders demonstrated mastery of the material through a dynamic presentation but participation by peers was only given a few minutes during an open forum at the end. A few DP leaders were sometimes fixated on peer participation per se, resulting in overemphasizing convivial and entertaining activities. Improving substantive peer engagement should then involve encouraging deeper appreciation of the framework and better preparation. The former cannot be underestimated as pedagogical change occurs in both the level of practice and belief (Antunes et al., 2021). On the other hand, students ascribe the lack of preparation to increased job responsibilities amid more multitasking and the lack of work-life boundaries in online work. Students also intimated that they had to negotiate study time with escalating responsibilities in the household and financial burdens as affected by the shifting structure in family employment caused by the pandemic. With fatigue to deal with, which they often expressed, reverting to traditional reporting (e.g., sharing the content of the learning resources through PowerPoint slides) seemed mentally easier than learning a new approach, which entailed managing the features of the Zoom application for the discussion, using the learning management system

for posts, and using online games and break out rooms. Nevertheless, students still exerted effort to raise questions and seek answers and participation from the rest of the class.

In a few other cases, perhaps due to normative beliefs on the exercise of authority owing to ingrained pedagogical leadership focused away from students (Grice et al., 2023), DP leaders appeared taciturn about calling on peers to provide inputs. This challenged discussion facilitation. Parallel to what was mentioned in the previous subsection, the distance aspect in online education also required more effort to overcome what seemed to be an inherent ease for disengagement. Finally, technology-related issues exacerbated the difficulties in leading. When the quality of devices and internet access was compromised, implementing a DP proved to be difficult. Videos and other visuals would not load well and a sluggish internet connection, especially during inclement weather, hampered activities and necessary interaction.

Participating Actively

Kahu (2013) looks at impediments to student engagement and points to a confluence of behavioral, institutional, psychological, political, societal factors. Having a specific pandemic context, Baticulon et al. (2021) categorize factors as related to technology, personal circumstances, and domestic, community, and institutional contexts. The reasons for students' lack of study time mentioned in the previous subsection also applied to the rest of the participants. Likewise, graduate student participation in my courses was influenced by a mix of all these.

Some students had to get used to a question-and-answer framework (Q&A) such that when questions were raised, some students could not respond immediately. A Q&A format is useful for training students to cover the material through questions in an "outcome-leading" approach in the fashion of the Socratic method (Golding, 2011, p. 366), but the Q&A can be designed to do even more and inculcate a "thinking-encouraging" approach (Golding, 2011, p. 365). The first approach trains students to reach pre-determined answers while the second approach leads students to delve into how they process the subject matter and how they arrive at answers by analyzing, appraising, and creating meanings. In both cases, some students took time to acclimatize to this structure. Again, these issues were further exacerbated by technology-related difficulties. Some students' internet connections kept getting cut off and some skipped the session and instead just posted their ideas on the learning management system. This affected the intended social epistemology effect of the discussions. When students only had access to mobile phones, they were unable to do certain things online that would have been easier if a laptop was used.

Student challenges in Q&A participation may also relate to individual reading time not being attuned to answering questions or problem solving. In this light, the introductory session can also be more attentive in explaining how critical discussion inputs begin with critical reading (Wallace & Wray, 2021). There were times when students could not read adequately, citing workplace

and household distractions. When reading is insufficient, it is exhibited in how inputs editorialize stock knowledge in lieu of the higher-order thinking skill of evaluating the assigned course materials. It must be emphasized that exercising higher-order thinking skills requires that one does not jump, for example, to evaluating, without reading and understanding the material first, which are basic competencies. While the time needed to manage graduate reading has always been present in both face-to-face and online modalities, and students are used to getting the set of readings through online folders, the pandemic made almost all activities online, heightening fatigue towards online tasks including reading, which mostly involved electronic material viz. print-outs. Many students expressed that they had to manage the disorientation of migrating to an online life while having to read critically in inadequate home spaces.

Conclusion

Online education in graduate pedagogy is here to stay—whether it pervades an entire course or is a component of a hybrid approach. The preceding sections provide a glimpse of the multifaceted challenges of designing an empowered pedagogy in online higher education. It is necessary for teachers to consider the evolving nuances and milieu in student engagement in aid of improving teaching and learning. Engendering agency, mindfulness, and critical thinking in the classroom should be approached with an iterative process of pedagogical design, reflections on learner responses, and ensuing adjustments. This interrogation is a first step in larger work that seeks to look at sustainable pedagogy, which includes the contexts of learners, teachers, and their environments. Finally, further work can consider the utility of phenomenography in qualitative research to improve learner-centered interventions in the graduate classroom.

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