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Online Only Classes and Critical Dialogue: Toward a Faustian Bargain Ideal for Virtual Education¹

C. Kyle Rudick²

As distance learning and Online Only Classes (OOCs) become more prevalent in higher education, it becomes increasingly urgent that critical-democratic educators continue to work toward a better understanding of liberatory praxis through technology. The goals of this essay are to explain why critical dialogue cannot be realized in OOCs, describe how blended brick-and-mortar/virtual classes may be advantageous for a critical agenda, and help orient future scholarship concerning critical pedagogy and technology toward a “Faustian bargain” ideal argued by Neil Postman. In order to reach these goals, I outline two types of educators that I believe have the most at stake in the use of the Internet in educational spaces, conceptualize how I understand critical dialogue, and use two different metaphors about technology to further understandings of the implications of technology in education.

As technology becomes more integrated into education, educators are becoming increasingly aware of its uses and limitations as a pedagogical tool. As a means to access large amounts of information, proponents of using technology in education stress that internet-based classes are key to creating and

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sustaining an informed, democratic society (Pegrum, 2009). However, as Postman (1993) explains, technology is a Faustian bargain in that advances in technology are neither wholly beneficial nor detrimental, but a mixture of both. I believe that Postman's argument speaks to how *distance learning* (i.e., online only classes, hybrid/blended online, or other distance education courses) may eliminate the possibility of critical dialogue. Specifically, I argue that *online only classes* (OOCs), although beneficial in terms of access, cannot be spaces where critical dialogue takes place.

The increasing ubiquity of OOCs makes the debate about the (im)possibility for critical dialogue an important conversation. The National Center for Education Statistics (Radford, 2012) reports that the number of universities offering distance learning has risen eight percent in 2000 to nearly twenty percent in 2008. Furthermore, approximately 90% of 2- and 4-year institutions surveyed plan to offer "Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction as a primary mode of instructional delivery" (Tabs, 2003, p. 11). If classrooms are a place where critical-democratic ideals can and should be fostered (see Giroux, 2008), it is imperative that educators espousing these ideals create spaces where critical dialogue can best be fostered while resisting technocratic impositions that may inhibit its realization.

But why is critical dialogue so important? Critical dialogue is a central component of the larger agenda of educational and philosophical research of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2006; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008) and critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Critical (communication) pedagogy is based on the premise that we live in a world where "men and women are essentially unfree and...[that is]...rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege" (McLaren, 2002, p. 193). One way that these asymmetries of power and privilege are built and maintained is through the use of normalizing discourses that marginalize some (whether economically, socially, or sexually, or by other means) while privileging others. Critical pedagogues work with students to resist oppressive conditions by promoting social justice through critical interrogations of class, race, sex, and gender (among others) (Kincheloe, 2008).

To understand critical dialogue in relation to OOCs, I have three overarching goals in this essay. The first goal is to show how OOCs may inhibit critical dialogue and thus could be a barrier to critical-democratic education. The second goal is to offer that blended brick and mortar (i.e., traditional, face-to-face classes) with online instruction may provide benefits for a critical-democratic agenda. The final goal of this essay is to offer a rationale for critical-democratic educators to move past questions of whether online instruction is wholly beneficial or detrimental. If technology is always a Faustian bargain then it is of paramount importance to understand which parts of a critical agenda are best served by new mediums, which parts are not, and thus strategize effectively.

To fulfill these goals, I offer three areas of analysis about distance learning in general and OOCs in particular. First, I will examine the two parties that have an interest in the future of distance learning and OOCs (i.e., neoliberal and critical-democratic educators). Second, I will draw upon critical pedagogy (Freire, 2006), critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007), and critical performance pedagogy (Pineau, 2002) as theoretical lenses to analyze what constitutes critical dialogue. Finally, I will show how OOCs enact a *technology as a tool* metaphor and that critical-democratic educators and students are better served by *technology as a foundation* metaphor.

Neoliberal vs. Critical-Democratic Distance Education

I believe that the increased amount of distance learning over the last decade can be attributed to two groups. The first group is neoliberal educators,³ who contend that online classes are a low-cost way to educate a large amount of students. These educators are attracted to OOCs for primarily economic, rather than pedagogical, reasons. For example, they cite the fact that OOCs often require a lower investment in instructor pay and structural overhead than their brick and mortar counterparts. For example, the University

³ I use the term “neoliberal educator” as a way to differentiate those who promote (knowingly or not) a neoliberal agenda when teaching from critical-democratic educators, who actively seek to undermine that agenda. I realize that this distinction is arbitrary and, in many ways, facile as there is no easy dichotomy between neoliberal and critical-democratic educators.

of Phoenix (one of the largest for-profit online universities) typically pays instructors as little as \$1,250 to teach one three-hour course (Collier, 2014). The second group is critical-democratic educators, who contend distance learning is a way to educate students who would normally not have access to engage in a traditional higher education, thus mitigating the structural barriers that create an inequitable society. Using Labaree's (1997) delineations between differing educators' pedagogical aims in America, I argue that neoliberal educators are more likely to value *social mobility*, based upon the notion of *individual status attainment*, whereas democratic educators value *democratic equality*, which is based upon the notions of *citizenship training*, *equal treatment*, and *equal access*. The control of distance learning by neoliberal or critical-democratic educators has important consequences for education in general as well as for critical dialogue.

Higher education within the U.S. is increasingly pressured into the social mobility pedagogical aim due, in large part, to the increasing pervasiveness of neoliberalism. Giroux (2008) states:

Under neoliberal rationality and its pedagogical practices not only are the state and the public sector reduced to the phantom of market choices, but the citizen subjects of such an order navigate the relationship between themselves and others around the calculating logics of competition, individual risks, self-interest, and a winner-take-all survivalist ethic reminiscent of the social Darwinian script played out daily on "reality television." (p. 591)

In other words, educators under the banner of neoliberalism, and its pedagogical equivalent social mobility, are characterized by their insistence on the two philosophical tenets of (1) rugged individualism, where success or failure in education (and in life) is placed on the shoulders of each student (denying the influence of social-historical factors, such as systemic racism) and (2) competitiveness, that the "profit" (e.g., grades) of each student is a zero-sum game that students must engage in as they try to rise to the top of the capitalist system. Critical-democratic educators argue that these two tenets are inherently anti-dialogic as they position solidarity and collaboration among students as traits of the weak (Giroux, 2008).

Students are led to believe that individual attainment is based solely on the merits of their own efforts and that failure in education is an individual's problem (e.g., pull yourself up by your bootstraps).

As neoliberals and their concurrent pedagogical aim, social mobility, become increasingly pervasive in education, the implications for distance learning become clear. Due to their penchant for valuing streamlined business models, neoliberal educators often focus on new (i.e., more efficient) ways of managing students and promote OOCs as the primary way for distance learning. Neoliberal educators deny students critical faculties by over-focusing on how to make OOCs faster, more streamlined, and more efficient in information transfer, which they confuse with authentic teaching and learning. Neoliberal educators reinforce a technocratic (and technophilic) paradigm: a mechanical, streamlined business-society organized through antidialogical practices such as the over-emphasis on content memorization. The result of these educative practices is a student subject who, at best, is a rote memorizer of disembodied facts that characterize the standardized approach that neoliberal education is predicated upon (e.g., back to basics approaches, see Kumashiro, 2008).

Speaking out against the corporations and governments who benefit from neoliberal educators, Pegrum (2009) states that online classes are uniquely situated to become vehicles of constructivist pedagogy and democratic politics. He argues that educators who teach/use technology in education should teach students about technology through *technological* (i.e., hardware/software), *pedagogical* (i.e., educative uses), *social* (i.e., effect on relationships), *sociopolitical* (i.e., effect on macro-structures), and *ecological* (i.e., real/virtual environment impact) lenses to prepare students more adequately for democracy through technology. In other words, educators should not just teach using technology, but about technology.

Echoing Freire's (2006) argument that there is no neutral form of education, Pegrum states, "Education has always been political. At its best, it walks a tightrope between reproducing the status quo and providing open democratic spaces for challenging it" (p. 12). If education is inherently political, then it

falls upon critical-democratic educators to ensure that students are able to use their education to be a part of the continual democratic process (Dewey, 1916). I believe that to do this critical dialogue is a necessary component of the critical-democratic agenda.

An Interdisciplinary View of Critical Dialogue

Although Pegrum (2009) states that the Internet is one of the most important vehicles for individuals to use to create a more democratic society, I argue that democracy (as an ongoing process or realization; see Dewey, 1916) must be built upon relationships that affirm the oppressed identities of marginalized individuals while deconstructing oppressive structures and discourses (Freire, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008). This section is an overview of how critical dialogue has been conceptualized in education and communication literature. I then use the different bodies of research to identify what I term “faux-dialogue” as opposed to critical dialogue and explain the implications of both for distance learning and OOCs.

Educational Theory and Dialogue

Critical dialogue is the means by which individuals come to realize the systems of oppression that constrain their ability to live freely and engage in liberatory practices for social justice through solidarity with others. In the words of Freire and Macedo (1995 as cited in Freire, 2006), “Dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task” (p. 17). For Freire, dialogue creates a relationship between individuals at the most fundamental level and challenges the hierarchy between the students and educators. Critical-democratic educators foster a classroom environment where students and instructors engage in critical dialogue in the hope that individuals can come to realize their full potential as humans in the world.

The flattening of the hierarchy between students and educators is not to imply that they are the same. Freire (1992) is adamant that:

Dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally; but it does mark the democratic position between them....Dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together. (p. 101)

Critical-democratic educators such as Freire (2006) and Dewey (1916) believe that dialogue is a way for students and educators to engage in conversations that are rooted in the educative space, that is, a space where students and educators have a difference of knowledge and power. However, instead of educators dictatorially using their power to engage in educative banking with students (i.e., forcing students to memorize and (re)produce hegemonic ideologies), they should engage in critical dialogue as a way to transform the world (Freire, 2006). In other words, when students and educators engage in critical dialogue they are able to use their lived experiences as a means to discover systems of oppression and work to deconstruct them.

Since Freire's first articulation of critical dialogue, it has been a topic of a high amount of academic scrutiny. In her critique of critical pedagogy, Ellsworth (1989) articulates the rational, Western assumptions that frame traditional notions of dialogue. She states:

Conventional notions of dialogue and democracy assume rationalized, individualized subjects capable of agreeing on universalizable "fundamental moral principles" and "quality of human life" that become self-evident when subjects cease to be self-interested and particularistic about group rights. (p. 108)

Ellsworth (1989) points to three different key areas of analysis in her critique. First, critical dialogue cannot be reduced to a calm, cool conversation between two individuals. To do so inherently privileges the oppressor as the rules for civility are written by and for those in power (Mayo, 2002). Critical dialogue is more than just a good or nice conversation; it is an intentional communicative process where the means and ends are to open critical-democratic possibilities. Second, critical dialogue cannot be founded upon a

hyper-rational denial of self in topics that obviously have real-world implications. Individuals engaged in critical dialogue do so to identify and work against hunger, deprivation, and alienation, all of which impact their daily lived experience. In other words, when the oppressed speak out against their dehumanization, it does not (and should not) have to appeal to some universal “human” experience to be affirmed as legitimate. Finally, critical dialogue is not a means of attaining rationalized, objective knowledge. Critical dialogue cannot be used only as a way to obtain consensus on ideas to approach some kind of overarching objective Truth.

Building upon Ellsworth’s (1989) critique, Glass (2005) points out that critical dialogue cannot be based solely on knowledge, language, or speech, but must also be linked to the “concrete struggle to transform given situations” (p. 17). In this way, critical dialogue is the act of individuals identifying oppressive structures and discourses in their lives and working toward transformative change by not passively accepting reality as “given” (Freire, 2006). Glass (2005) argues that because of the predilection of many critical pedagogues to conceptualize critical dialogue as a method of conversation only, it has domesticated critical dialogue into formulas of turn-taking and instructors’ avoidance of direct instruction. In other words, the very critiques leveled by scholars such as Ellsworth (1989) and Mayo (2002) are realized when critical dialogue becomes just another rote activity in instructors’ arsenals. Critical dialogue, as with critical pedagogy, is an ontological commitment, not a method to be employed, and thus it demands high levels of commitment from all parties to speak, act, and transform society in and out of the classroom (Freire, 2006).

Because critical dialogue is not wholly confined to a communicative act, it is no surprise that critical dialogue must be linked to the body. McLaren (1991) argues for a “politics of enfleshment” (p. 153) which is “the dialectical relationship between the material organization of interiority and the cultural forms and modes of material production we inhabit subjectively” (p. 154). McLaren argues that neoliberal education denies this dialectical aspect of critical knowledge building (i.e., that education is not just about the mind,

but about the body as well), which serves to undermine a critical politic that recognizes the importance of the body-within-discourse. Thus, critical-democratic educators who wish to foster critical dialogue cannot focus exclusively on its verbal communicative aspects to the detriment of the body. The idea that critical dialogue is best understood as both linguistic and embodied is also found in communication literature, specifically communication pedagogy literature.

A Communication View of Dialogue

Although education scholars have theorized about dialogue from an educational philosophy background, scholars of critical communication pedagogy (e.g., Fassett & Warren, 2007) have added to the ongoing conversation of what defines critical dialogue. Fassett and Warren (2007), drawing from Freire (2006) and Buber (1958) define dialogue as “characterized by open acknowledgement of each person’s naming of the world, though that acknowledgment need not imply acceptance” (p. 54). They claim that dialogue is “a process of sensitive and thorough inquiry, inquiry we undertake together to (de)construct ideologies, identities, and cultures” (p. 55). From the two statements it is apparent that they, like Glass, view dialogue as more than just a conversation. Also, like Ellsworth (1989) and Mayo (2002), they realize that dialogue, though characterized by sensitivity, is not bound in rational ideologies of civility. Instead, dialogue is an active engagement between students and educators to attempt to make the world more just through the process of naming and deconstructing the structures that bind individuals.

Using critical communication pedagogy and performance methodology as the theoretical foundations for further articulation of critical dialogue, scholars such as Pineau (2002) and Alexander (2005) note how the body is a central site of contest in the struggle between neoliberal and critical-democratic education. Alexander (2005) argues that “performance is not exclusively the active body doing as much as a focus on the dynamic nature of culture and society reifying and defining itself based on social constructions of its own reality” (p. 320). Like McLaren (1991), Alexander realizes the importance of the body as a constitutive part of language that carries with/on it the historicized baggage of power dynamics.

As Pineau (2002) articulates “[A] critical performative pedagogy must acknowledge that inequities in power and privilege have a physical impact on our bodies...” (p. 53). Calling for an “embodied engagement,” Alexander (2005) argues that only through recognizing bodies in the creation of spaces of social justice can educators hope to intervene in systems that would otherwise oppress individuals. Drawing upon these scholars, I believe the denial of the body when trying to work toward liberatory practices in education is more characteristic of faux-dialogue than critical dialogue.

Faux-Dialogue vs. Critical Dialogue

Drawing upon the ways that education and communication scholars write about dialogue, I delineate between two types of dialogue and their implication for OOC instruction. The first conceptualization is the faux-dialogue that is articulated by Ellsworth and others. Those who engage in faux-dialogue, whether consciously or not, engage in practices that deny the body by enacting a mind-body split. This type of dialogue (1) centers exclusively on rational conversation and Western ways of knowing, (2) erases the body either as a place of resistance, oppression, or privilege, and (3) places a higher priority on civility in conversation than identifying limit-situations (see Freire, 2006) as sites of transformative change. Faux-dialogue inevitably (re)produces oppressive logics within and beyond the classroom as dialogue is bleached of its transformative power.

The second conceptualization of dialogue is critical dialogue argued for first by Freire (2006). Critical dialogue is characterized by adherents’ willingness to (1) unite conversation with action thus creating praxis, (2) acknowledge the body as political, and (3) understand that dialogue cannot be constrained by rationality or civility because it can be messy, emotional, and seductive.⁴ Critical dialogue is

⁴ By messy, I mean that critical dialogue does not need to unfold in a linear way. By emotional, I mean that critical dialogue is not only realized when two (or more) subjects engage in a cool, calm, or civil way of speaking with one another. By seductive, I mean that critical dialogue is something that is sought after in each moment of conversation because of its power to humanize.

the dynamic and ongoing realization of new possibilities through humanizing praxis that enables individuals are able to identify, meet, and change their limit-situations.

The two types of dialogue I have outlined are a part of any classroom whether traditional or online. However, I believe that OOCs are unique in that they are a space that can be more easily co-opted by neoliberal educators for faux-dialogue as the social mobility aim and its attending implications (e.g., competitiveness and individualism) become more prominent (O'Sullivan & Palaskas, 2006). Additionally, the very substance of the medium itself may hinder the ability of critical dialogue to materialize in OOCs. Distance learning provides a theoretical and pedagogical battleground with the hearts and minds of future students as the stakes. If critical-democratic educators wish to engage in distance learning then I believe it must be with the realization that critical dialogue cannot be realized with OOCs. Instead, I argue for a blended distance learning that incorporates both physical and virtual spaces to ensure that critical dialogue is realized for the greatest possible audience. To delineate between how OOCs foster faux-dialogue whereas physical/virtual distance learning can be used to promote critical dialogue I use two different metaphors: *technology as a tool*, which fosters faux-dialogue and *technology as a foundation*, which fosters critical dialogue.

Critical Dialogue in Distance Learning

After examining the reasons why distance learning and OOCs have become more prevalent in higher education and what constitutes dialogue, I will now argue why OOCs are not able to be spaces for critical dialogue and why I believe a blend of physical/virtual learning is optimal for a critical-democratic project. By mapping out the implications of the metaphors of *technology as a tool* and *technology as a foundation*, I delineate why I think educators in OOCs privilege rational, neoliberal notions and that educators in physical/virtual distance learning can escape that same end. Finally, I conclude with implications for distance learning pedagogies and their use of critical dialogue as a means of liberatory educative practices.

Why OOCs Cannot be Spaces of Critical Dialogue

When interviewed by Pallab Ghosh of the BBC, Sir Tim Berners-Lee (2008), credited as the inventor of the Internet, asked rhetorically, “Has [the web] been designed by the West for the West?” Although his question is directed at the corporatization of the Internet, I believe his question also has philosophical implications for OOCs. Do OOCs, as currently utilized by educators, carry an implicit Western bias of knowledge? Are there implicit assumptions about the construction and dissemination of knowledge in OOCs that make them inherently rationalized, disembodied spaces for education? And if so, what can critical pedagogues do, if anything, to remedy these problems to ensure that OOCs can be spaces for transformative critical dialogue?

With the previous questions in mind, I argue that neoliberal educators, the dominant force in U.S. education, view OOCs as a tool and thus privilege a Western tradition of rationalized knowledge. And, as the stethoscope replaced doctors’ act of putting their ear to an individual’s chest, thus replacing a shared sense of oneness with the cold logic of rationality, the Internet as a tool interposes itself between human relations and takes away from an embodied relationality that characterizes critical dialogue (Postman, 1993). Consequently, when educators view OOCs as tools, it becomes easier to mistake faux-dialogue for critical dialogue and, as a result, hamstring the process of critical transformation within the classroom.

OOCs, because they are based in the *technology as a tool* metaphor, become spaces where critical dialogue is impossible due to four interrelated reasons. That is, OOCs are viewed as (1) traditionally text-based with discussions that are inherently linear, rational, and civil; (2) embedded with the implicit focus of the mind to the exclusion of the body; (3) spaces where students learn, whether virtually or in the real world, in isolation; and (4) places where educators impose a Western rational culture that is marked by the utilization of anti-dialogic forms of assessment and instruction (i.e., banking).

OOCs, as a tool, are inherently linear, rational, and civil.

Despite the promises of new technologies, it seems that anti-dialogical practices remain inherent in

most iterations of OOCs. In their analysis of learning management systems (e.g., WebCT and Blackboard), Coates, James, and Baldwin (2005) argue that “the textual nature of the internet may reinforce conceptions of teaching as the transmission of decontextualized and discrete pieces of information” (p. 27). Due to blogs, posts, readings, or assignments being text driven, they assume a level of rational, linear thought. Although this argument could be levied against non-internet forms of writing (e.g., textbooks or essays), the fact that students never come into physical contact with one another to engage in critical dialogue means that the rational, linear assumptions are never challenged. Instead, they are implicitly affirmed with each class. Also, when OOCs are primarily text based, students are forced to take turns when speaking (i.e., writing essays or posts in reference to an earlier comment by an instructor/student). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with turn taking, I believe that educators view students’ conversations as dialogic because they seem to be cooler and more civil than classroom discussions (i.e., faux-dialogue).

Additionally, students are able to write and reflect back on their part of conversations before submitting them, which may lead students from dominant positions to white-wash their work. On this point, Delpit (1988) offers that those with power are usually the least likely or willing to acknowledge they have it and as a result reaffirm their own power as the unnamed cultural center. In practice, this may mean that instead of engaging with other students in critical dialogue in a dynamic, fluid process of understanding, students from dominant positions are able to go back over their submissions and take out the discourses (e.g., racist, classist, or sexist) that they may act upon in the real world. By creating a medium where students are able to hide their power and privilege, educators in OOCs are thus a part of the very problem they hope to critique.

OOCs, as a tool, implicitly privilege the mind to the exclusion of the body.

Due to the implicit linear rationalism of OOCs, students and educators focus on the ideas that are communicated in class. In this way, OOCs are not a space for engaging the body or recognizing it as a site of political force, but instead force it to disappear as the “real” substance of the classroom is discursively

driven. As Pineau (2002) argues, “critical performance pedagogy must put bodies into action in the classroom because it believes that this is the surest way to help those bodies become active in the social sphere (p. 53). In other words, the denial of the body as a site for critical transformation undermines students’ agency.

Glass (2005) and others explicitly demand that action is necessary for critical dialogue. Of course, his admonition is not to say that after critical dialogue takes place that instructors/students immediately need to engage in some type of activism. Instead, it means that after critical dialogue takes place, transformation of a limit-situation must occur. When technology has interposed itself between two subjects attempting critical dialogue, it becomes impossible to reach the epistemological relationship that critical dialogue fosters and requires for transformative change. Critical dialogue does not take place when two subjects are able to transfer information in a cold, civil manner, but when they recognize each other’s subjective experience and act upon it (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Action demands the body; students and educators cannot sit in the proverbial scholar’s armchair and be transformative.

OOCs, as a tool, become spaces where students learn in isolation.

Students in OOCs are forced to learn in isolation. In the virtual world, students in OOCs do not meet each other as a part of the class and, as a result, the implicit individualism that is characteristic of neoliberal pedagogy is affirmed. As neoliberal educators increasingly adopt the student-as-consumer model, they argue that education can be tailored to individual wants much like the Burger King advertisement to “let us serve it your way.” Although individualized instruction is necessary to ensure all learners have equitable treatment in education, I argue that this discourse has been co-opted by a neoliberal agenda that masks rugged individualism with the discourse of individualized instruction.

Postman (1993) argues that schools, as collaborative spaces for learning, are undermined when students are expected to use computers in the name of individualized instruction. I agree with Postman and argue that not only are OOCs detrimental to collaborative learning, but that the push for more computers for

individualized instruction benefits neoliberalism. Between each student with their own computer, at their own desk, focused on the computer screen, is an insurmountable gulf of distance even when students sit next to one another. When students are cut off from one another, bodily and emotionally, then critical dialogue cannot take place.

Although I argue that individualized instruction always implicitly affirms individualism, this is not to say that all individual instruction is bad pedagogy. Some types of learning demand individual instruction and some types of projects demand individual work. However, when individual instruction is viewed by educators as the preferred method of instruction because it is the most cost effective way of utilizing resources, then the specific problems I have outlined above become more salient.

OOCs, as a tool, are characterized by the imposition of a Western rational culture.

As Kumashiro (2008) notes for real world schools, and Pegrum (2009) cautions against in OOCs, educators increasingly enact a back-to-basics, standards-, and assessment-driven approach to instruction due to the dominant frame of neoliberal corporatism. As a result educators are pressured to increasingly engage in a banking model of education that treats students as mere receptacles of the previous generation's logics and values (Freire, 2006). The need for educators to teach to the test, whether at the national (e.g., ACT, SAT, GRE) or a classroom level, pressures educators to deposit knowledge in their students.

How is instruction in the real world different from the virtual world, then? I believe that OOCs, because their current iteration does not allow for dynamic, embodied communication, are easily transformed into places of monologic banking. As Lockard (2006) argues, "there are not teachers on the Internet, only data streams" (p. 293). And, of course, streams only flow one way. When education is viewed only as bits and bytes of knowledge that can be used, stored, and reused, then there is no space for critical dialogue.

When the medium of education becomes more monologic, then it is no surprise when assessment

and standards become more totalitarian. Although theorists such as Pegrum (2009) point to excellent alternatives to traditional assessment online (e.g., student-created Youtube performances), many point out that the current structure of OOCs remains firmly entrenched in post-positivist forms of assessment (i.e., multiple choice tests) (Coates, James, and Baldwin, 2005). These forms of assessment privilege certain types of knowing (e.g., linear, rational) over others (e.g., inductive, embodied) and thus reinforce the dominant neoliberal paradigm.

I want to note that I am not against post-positive assessment or standards *per se*. There are times when a multiple choice test may be an appropriate way to assess knowledge. What I argue is that current assessment and standards privilege certain types of knowledge and learning when conducted without reflection and so have become the means and the ends of education. When assessment and standards are used to privilege some ways of knowing while marginalizing others, they become what Kincheloe (2008) calls *epistoweaponry*, or ways of knowing that are used to oppress others. The current standards and assessments model of OOCs undermine students' critical ability to make meaning in/of the world.

Blended Distance Learning and Critical Dialogue

When technology is viewed by educators as a tool, educators begin to enact the four problems outlined above and engage in the faux-dialogue of rationalized, civilized, disembodied, "verbalism" (Freire, 2006, p. 87). Truly transformative critical dialogue is impossible in such a setting. Although students and educators can meet, discuss, and plan in online classes, a truly critical-democratic class cannot be wholly online. As Lockard (2006) argues, "Use online learning and hybrid pedagogies as empowering complements to in-class learning, not as substitutes" (p. 291). When critical dialogue is missing from education, students and educators suffer because they are no longer able to access a form of praxis. By eliminating the realization of praxis, students and educators lose the affirming experience of critical dialogue that is used to challenge hegemonic forces that demand silence in the face of oppression. However, education through online mediums is an increasing trend in higher education and so it is

imperative that critical dialogue be theorized for some types of online spaces.

If critical dialogue is characterized as adherents' willingness to (1) unite conversation with action against limit-situations thus creating praxis, (2) acknowledge the body as a political force, and (3) understand that dialogue cannot be sanitized through rationality, but can be messy, emotional, and seductive, then how can critical dialogue exist in mediated spaces? The first step, I believe, is to stop viewing technology as a tool and begin viewing it as a foundation. Technology as a tool implies a neutrality of the medium—that virtual or brick and mortar classes are just different ways of achieving the same goals. The technology as a foundation metaphor helps to orient critical-democratic educators in their understanding that the online medium produces some types of knowledge better than others. Technology, as a foundation, echoes the statement made by McLuhan (1964) that the “medium is the message” (p. 7). In other words, the way that individuals convey information is just as important as the content of that information. By engaging in the foundation metaphor, critical-democratic educators are able to differentiate what types of learning need to occur whether online or in-person. A blend of the two types of education therefore may be the best way to ensure increased access while still undermining the neoliberal discourse that markets online education to administrators and faculty.

Critical-democratic educators in blended physical/virtual distance education, when they view technology as a foundation, understand that the Internet, by its very substance as a medium, changes the way that communication takes place. As communication is central to education (Biesta, 2006; Dewey, 1916), critical-democratic educators in distance learning must realize that to build toward a critical dialogue different stones, mortar, and plans are necessary. Although critical-democratic educators build toward critical dialogue, it is with the understanding that, unlike a building, the work is never complete and building plans change often.

The Internet cannot be a place where ideas and theories are discussed but never acted upon. It is only when students and educators aid each other to overcome their limit-situations that critical dialogue can

exist. Learning content by rote, even critical (communication) pedagogical content, cannot substitute for the embodied aspect of critical dialogue. As Freire (2006) explains, critical dialogue presupposes action; it necessitates that the individuals involved in the dialogue transform themselves and society through their praxis.

Critical-democratic educators in OOCs must acknowledge the body as a political force. To acknowledge the body is not just to talk about it, but to act with/on it. This act cannot be done solely in mediated settings; students must have access to each other outside of the virtual world as a way to engage in this bodily knowledge. Lockard (2006) explains:

“Virtual space” is pseudo-space and a delusory claim: it does not exist as three-dimensional space and cannot translate into place. A “virtual classroom” participates in this false illusion of space and place, providing an imitative substitute that equates immateriality with materiality. (p. 289)

Although critical dialogue can begin in online settings as a way to share knowledge or delineate the boundaries of a limit situation, it cannot be confined only to the virtual world. Oppression marks individuals linguistically and bodily and the use of a wholly mediated form of communication lacks the ability, because of its very medium, to realize a liberatory space for students. If the classroom is confined only to online settings then students will most likely never develop the means to recognize the political and liberatory functions of the body or dialogue.

Finally, these critical ideologies, and the bodies that bear the marks of the dominant discourses at play, cannot be separated. Instead, it is when critical-democratic educators in OOCs understand that just because critical dialogue is sometimes uncomfortable, it does not mean that critical dialogue is not taking place. Critical-democratic educators must engage with their students and with their lived experiences to be able to work towards continuing liberatory practices. To domesticate critical dialogue by letting the hyper-rationality of the status quo infect it is to allow the dominant to continue to marginalize while seducing us to

believe that we are somehow escaping the system.

Concluding Remarks: Theorizing the Digital Frontier

In my three areas of analysis, I (1) examined the two parties that have an interest in the future of distance learning in general and OOCs in particular (i.e., neoliberal and critical-democratic educators) (2) drew upon critical pedagogy, critical communication pedagogy, and critical performance pedagogy to analyze what constitutes critical dialogue, and (3) used the two metaphors of technology as a tool and technology as a foundation to delineate how OOCs cannot be spaces for critical dialogue whereas blending physical/virtual spaces may be optimal for a critical-democratic agenda. Through my analysis, I argued that (at best) virtual education exemplifies the Faustian Bargain described by Postman (1993). That is to say, the positives of OOCs in terms of access when opposed to brick and mortar education are outweighed by the medium's inability to provide a foundation for critical dialogue. As such, critical-democratic scholars and educators should focus attention on how to best utilize a blended course format to galvanize a critical movement against neoliberal education and culture.

As OOCs continue to change with the advent of new pedagogies and technologies, I urge future scholarship be devoted to theorizing critical dialogue in mediated spaces. Such scholarship should go beyond the "which medium is the most efficient way of teaching" that characterizes so much of the hand-writing about OOCs from technophilic neoliberal educators and instead work to articulate a vision of critical-democratic education about and through online technologies that affirms the humanizing potential of education (Pegrum, 2009). As these conversations unfold, critical-democratic scholars and educators should reflexively challenge the deterministic mindset that online instruction is an inevitable, if not inherently preferable, mode of instruction. Such scholarship would, I believe, encourage critical-democratic educators to theorize how to be at the forefront of conversations about technological innovations to ensure that they do not serve only the means and ends of the powerful, elite, and wealthy.

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