A Working-Class Academic Pedagogy

Fig. 6.1 'Pedagogy'

INTRODUCTION

While universities are expected to be theatres of intellectual enquiry, they are now largely institutions that provide the skills, and credentials, for the neoliberal economy. Paulo Freire (1921–1997) whose pedagogy has influenced people working in fields such as sociology, politics and community development (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) instead viewed "education not as a means to prepare students for the world of subordinated labour but as 'preparation for a self-managed life'" (cited in Giroux 2010: ix). Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), a major social and political theorist of the twentieth century, has similarly been influential in a variety of fields, including social sciences, cultural studies and education. Gramsci (1971) perceived there to be two types of intellectuals—the traditional intellectual being a function of the state, serving the principles of a neo-liberal society (cited in Merli 2013), for example, local and national government. And the organic intellectuals who, on the other hand, emerged from their own culture and could act as change agents.

> *Personally, I feel I'm an organic intellectual, but by being in a middle-class space I think our very existence means we are transformative intellectuals whether we want to be or not.* [Melanie]

Class Solidarity

Discussions with a small number of respondents added to a theme I had observed throughout the research process, that of class solidarity. John, a head of a department in English at a traditional institution, saw Gramsci and Girouz's categories as "*attractive*", but belonging to an ideal world.

As you may remember from Chap. 1, straddlers are blue-collar workers who have become upwardly mobile, someone with a duality of consciousness that means they can navigate both worlds, but do not easily inhabit either. While this respondent may not immediately see himself as an example of class solidarity, his interview revealed an academic who has supported a number of working-class women in academia, including myself. Others referred to their own deep connection with fellow working-class academics:

If you find other working-class academics … you are drawn to each other.
[Katherine]

I … bond the most immediately and most affectionately (sentimentally … you might say) with people from commensurate backgrounds … I do feel immediate deep affinity with other working-class people—especially those now in "intellectual" life. I grab onto them for dear life—to help keep me sane—to give me someone to share alienation with! [John]

For some, this connection with working-class peers led to acts of institutional solidarity. For instance, Pat and Saira talked of working towards ending the reimbursement culture that made academia difficult for their current ECRs. Saira reported an incident when PhD student came to her office as her supervisor was insisting that she attend a conference.

She was crying not just because she had no money, but also because she was waiting to be paid for some teaching she had done for her supervisor. I gave her money for the teaching myself, I can wait for it, and then sent an email to a number of Heads of Departments telling them that expecting our PhD students to pay upfront is impossibly unfair. After meetings a new system was set up where conference costs (fee, hotels, travel etc.) are all booked via the school credit card. I had to do this as we will lose more disadvantaged ECRs.

My first change was to ensure conference fees and travel are paid upfront alongside an advance of £100 for any other costs.

This 'advocating for need', and challenging obvious inequities in the 'system' are examples of what Yosso (2005) describes as resistance capital. A further way my respondents attempted to enact change was through their pedagogy.

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Zandy (1995), in her introduction to her text on working-class studies considers: "Let us imagine what it would be like if the history and culture of working-class people were at the centre of educational practices. What would students learn?" In Paulo Freire's highly influential book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' he argued that traditional methods of education meant that students were being 'dehumanized', and asked to memorize and repeat ideas, phrases and formulas without understanding

the meaning behind them (p. 71). Freire (1970) sees this process as oppressive, equating teachers (who consider themselves knowledgeable) with bank clerks, 'depositing' information into students, who are supposed to know nothing. Otherwise known as the "banking of education" (ibid). Freire (1970) was critical of this model arguing that the more students work at storing deposits, the less they [the teachers] develop critical consciousness. Instead Freire (2008) argued that teachers should reject the 'banking' approach and replace it with one of 'problem-posing' (pp. 61–62). The more students discuss social problems, the more they will feel challenged 'and obliged to respond to that challenge' (ibid. 62). Girouz (2014), examining the issue from the point of view of academic staff, argued that academics "must avoid the drive to become gated intellectuals … as they become walled off from growing impoverished populations….cut loose from any ethical mooring or sense of social responsibility" (p. 89; cited in Speirs 2019: 6).

Two academic texts in particular have addressed the impact class heritage has on one's pedagogy. 'Teaching Working Class', edited by Sherry Lee Linkon, explores the possibilities and problems that arise from teaching working-class students. The volume brings together 19 essays from several fields, including English, history, labour studies, literature, and American studies which offer guidance, encouragement and insight for those wishing to incorporate class into their courses. Greenwald and Grant (1999) draw upon an area particular to working class academics, the bridging between 'educated' middle-class life to the 'real' world of our social backgrounds (p. 28). While Pari (1999), on the intersection of immigration and language, discusses the experience of learning the correct academic discourse (p. 124). A chapter by Bruno and Jordan (1999) discusses teaching historical content by referring to working class labour history (p. 145). 'Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers' by Shepard et al. (1998) presents twenty-one original essays on the relationship of pedagogical practice to instructors' social class histories. The academics, who were economically disadvantaged students themselves, reflect on how their social class shapes their pedagogical practice. For instance, Daniels (1998) talks about making poetry acessible to working class students as he notes that it has traditionally been a medium for the leisure classes (p. 3). Faulkner (1998) uses her English classes to "connect reading and writing with political participation

and power" (p. 39). A chapter by Moss on 'Intersections of Race and Class in the Academy' aims to make space for others who are not the norm in academia (p. 157).

The question of a working-class pedagogy has been raised before. Russo and Linkon (2005) cite the Freire inspired organisation 'Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed' whose aim was/is to challenge oppressive systems. The organisations include educators, activists, artists to link academic work with political organising by working-class communities and groups. But Tate (1998) argues that just as there is not one feminist pedagogy, there is no single working-class pedagogy (cited in cited Shepard et al. 1998). Tate reminds us that working-class lives intersect with gender, race, religion and age (and other intersections) so much that there cannot be a single working-class approach to teaching (ibid.). I agree. But Zandy (1995) remarks that most working-class educators 'bring … their students pedagogical gifts forged from lived experience' (p. 592). Around 80 per cent of my respondents agreed that their social biography brings pedagogical advantages. However, before I discuss these in further detail, I should note that interviewees from STEM subjects were much less likely, in comparison to academics in the Arts and Humanities, to give examples of how their class background influenced their teaching. This was somewhat expected as there are subject differences between these two very broad approaches. Arts and humanities have no single, defined, method of inquiry, whereas the 'hard' sciences typically investigate phenomena by means of hypotheses and experiments. Less than 10 per cent of life science professionals and 6 per cent of doctors are from working-class backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission 2017). These low numbers might be a further indicator that personal characteristics such as social class (a complex concept even for a social scientist), is less likely to be incorporated into teaching. As such, the majority of STEM respondents tended not to give examples of ways that they brought their class background into either their teaching or research. But two STEM working class academics mentioned how class influenced their teaching. For instance, Ben, a graduate teaching assistant in Biological Sciences at a Russell Group institution and Paul, a Teaching Fellow, in Engineering, also in a Russell Group institution, felt that their class backgrounds led them to give clearer explanations when teaching. In later sections I mention how other respondents from Maths and Health Care Sciences also drew upon their class heritage

in their teaching. But overall, it was much easier for academic from the Arts and Humanities to draw upon their class heritage in more overt ways when teaching. Interview data revealed the following key elements that formed a working-class academic pedagogy.

Engaging with Students from a Strength's Perspective

For many years a deficit perspective has persisted in shaping how educators interact with students from marginalized backgrounds (Volk and Long 2005). Svoboda (2012), a faculty member, who was a former non-traditional student (NTS), talked of how on a daily basis, she would notice colleagues making assumptions about students like her. Deb echoed this when discussing non-traditional students:

> *The presumption was they would be hard work because they didn't have an academic background.*

A cohort with an imprecise definition, NTS tend to have at least one of the following identifying criteria: are at least 25 years old and above, attend university part-time, work full-time, have children (Macdonald 2018), are first-generation attendees from working-class or minority backgrounds (Holton 2018), have a disability, and are predominantly female (Wong and Chiu 2019). Research on NTS suggest they are less likely to access or possess academic resources, knowledge, and dispositions (Wong 2018). While there are elements of truth to this, respondents commented on the excellence of some NTS:

> *Many of my best students are from disadvantaged communities, just like mine!* [Jeremy]

> *Contrary to popular portrayals of working-class students, if I need someone to contribute in my class its always them.* [Sophie]

There is evidence that supports this. Lehmann (2009) for instance, found that approximately 75 per cent of his working-class participants performed at or above average in their first year (p. 639). While Wong (2018), who interviewed 30 final-year high-achieving NTS, found it family support and the desire to prove oneself that were key ingredients in academic success.

When I analysed the data, half of my cohort (including n.1 STEM academic) gave examples of 'teaching from a strengths-based perspective'. This perspective links well with 'funds of knowledge' (FoK), an anthropological term originally coined by Wolf (1966) and expanded on by Moll et al. (1992) to define the resources and knowledge gained through cultural interactions that are essential for individuals to function appropriately in his/her community (Hogg 2011: 667). FoK include household skills such as sewing and cooking and social skills such as helping neighbours, the telling of stories related to one's culture (Stone-MacDonald 2012). FoK are an underappreciated resource in academia as the deficit status of some students is so entrenched. Households (not just universities) can be "repositories of knowledge" (Gonzalez 2005: 26). Velez-Ibanez's (1988) ethnographic study of economically vulnerable Mexican communities had FoK, which included: "information and formulas containing the mathematics, architecture and engineering for the construction homes, being able to repair most mechanical devices as well as cultural methods for planting and gardening, cooking, and of 'making things' in general" (p. 38). While 'poor' in monetary resources, their FoK meant they were self-sufficient. Teachers can use FoK to engage with students based on their resources rather than their deficits (Upadhyay 2005: 96). Mark a lecturer in Engineering found that some of the working-class students he encountered had an innate understanding of how objects worked. Similar to Velez-Ibanez (1988) his students were well versed in repairing old washing machines, or upgrading motorcycles using cheap parts.

A skillset that is useful on an engineering degree.

Brandon a lecturer in Political and Policy Studies found that by recognising FoK, he was able to discuss welfare benefits with students more effectively.

I used monopoly money to demonstrate the amounts given for various welfare benefits. Mature students help move the seminar from the theoretical to the applied, reminding me that while you may have x amount of £'s, unexpected bills scupper you.

Zipin (2009) refers to the dark' or hidden FoK that students would not 'normally' share (p. 321) e.g. domestic violence, mental illness, and drug

addiction. Zipin argues that these 'dark funds of knowledge' are not deficit attributes to be avoided in the curriculum, but instead be seen as rich assets for learning (ibid.: 325). Amy, a Teaching Fellow in English at a Russell Group institution, discussed how her students submitted a journal as part of the assessment to reflect the dark themes they had discussed in fiction covered that year.

> *The students have produced some wonderful pieces of writing that touch upon their personal experiences of poverty and mental health.* [Lucy]

Ann, a lecturer in Health Science from a post 1992 institution asks her students to write an anonymous journal to record aspects of their health, and to link it with health policies.

> *The students, love this type of assessment as it links theory with the practice but recognises them.*

These assignments tapped into students' skills and experiences just as the funds of knowledge literature recommends.

Shared Lived Experiences

Learning doesn't occur in a vacuum. Our prior experiences shape our interactions with new knowledge (Stuart et al. 2011). For students this may influence their choice of course, but for my interviewees, lived experience permeated their course content and methodology.

> *Teaching is a performance. You bring the texts alive, drawing upon your own experience.* [Finn: Reader in Literature at an Oxbridge institution]

> *When I'm explaining concepts to people … I can strip it down to very simple understanding which is helpful for students, I can explain concepts in much more simpler terms.* [Samantha: PhD student in Geography at a Post 1992 institution]

There is research that connect the themes of teaching material with students' everyday life. Nash and Walker (2018) conducted a piece of ethnographic research on the experience of international students living in the private rented sector. The results provided recommendations to support students to meet the challenges that international students face when

renting. This was similar to the approach taken by Theo, a Politics research fellow talked of how he introduced the 'Windrush generation' to his module a few years ago, not just because he had relatives that this had directly affected, but because he was aware that two students had personal experience of the scandal:

I gave students the assignment of keeping a diary of the experiences of a fictional character from travelling over to England on Empire Windrush, to the first few months settling down. Due their own experiences of this issue, the writing was nuanced, with understandings of class and racism.

This approach was used by other lecturers. For instance:

My family would talk about the Battle of Orgreave, so I worked with second year undergraduate class, alongside their local historical society to discuss this historical event. The wealth of information was a two-way process as students had family members who had been involved. [Jamie]

Luke expanded on the theme of shared experiences:

What you tend to find particularly in history and I'm guessing it's similar in sociology, is people from working classes tend to do research on related areas. Their whole experiences and what they're really driven by in terms of politics and … intellectual endeavour … gives a richness to the curriculum … it's hard enough anyway to get … content in the curriculum that reflects a kind of broader variety of human experience than what there is in elite institutions.

While not connected with teaching, Ian, a researcher at an elite institution mentioned that the first research project he worked on for the university was one that helped disadvantaged communities get internet access. His research focus, like many I interviewed for this book was to help the 'underdog'.

Brandon, a working-class academic with a disability, who teaches an introductory humanities module, talks of how he addresses the intersection of class and disability. The classed/disabled body is one of the last frontiers to be addressed in education (Anderson 2006). Ann Firor Scott asks "How do we make the historically invisible, visible?" (1984, 19 cited in ibid.: 376). Brandon used the industrial revolution as an example because as Snyder and Mitchell (2006) notes that period of rapid economic and societal change, meant that disabled people from poorer

backgrounds were commonly sent away to asylums and poor houses. Returning to Brandon:

> *I illustrate that I, as a person with disabilities, would have lived a very different life if I had lived in another era. I use pictures to demonstrate my current life and contrast it with the evidence we have on Disabled people during this time period. It's a session that gets the most complimentary feedback.*

I mentioned this pedagogical approach to another respondent with disabilities, Tina who is blind:

> *Yeah, same here, I do this when talking to PGCE students. Its important they remember that we are not all starting from a level playing field. This sparks a discussion on what elements of their own lived experience they should consider in their teaching.*

This shared lived experience (students and working-class academics) goes beyond pedagogy, it is also about understanding what it is like to start university as the first in your family. My respondents understood the journey these students were on:

> *We've been there. Not understanding the lecturer. In awe of students who seemingly did.* [Elaine]

My respondents remembered the intensity of keeping up with their classes, of the complexity of the reading (and having no one to discuss them with), and their worries about asking lecturers questions.

Co-creators of Knowledge

Traditional pedagogy focuses on knowledge and understanding (what teachers know) (Husbands and Pearce 2012: 5). Freire (1970), critical of such approaches, argued that knowledge must be 'co-created' as students were not blank slates. When students contribute to a learning experience, the teacher is not "the one who teaches" but someone who learns with and from the students (p. 80). Teachers and students as learners in joint

inquiry (Freire 1993), where "nobody is superior to anyone else" (Freire 1998: 108). Respondents agreed:

> *'We' know our subject areas but co-creating with students shows respect for their knowledge.* [Unity]

Co-creation can take a variety of forms: evaluating and redesigning course content; redesigning course content; designing essay questions or choosing between different assessment methods; and grading their own and others' work (Bovill et al. 2016). My interview data demonstrated examples of respondents utilising students for course redesign and choosing between different assessment methods.

Course Redesign

Willis and Gregory (2016) found that co-creation was perceived by students as being an innovative pedagogical approach, commenting that 'it didn't feel like the usual chalk and talk'. Research by Hubbard and Dunbar (2017) is a further example of co-production. The researchers set up a student partnership initiative entitled 'Bridging the Gap', a project to improve first-year biology practical class teaching at the University of Cambridge. The aim being to give students an alternative perspective on their theoretical knowledge as well as to develop technical skills (p. 59). The project lead to benefits for both academics and students. The academics gained an insight into student needs, while the students enrolled in the courses received new materials that consolidate understanding in the practical sessions (ibid: 75). Ten of my own respondents talked of using co-design for their modules. For instance, Amy was involved in a project that used student 'consultants' to re-design a module so that it had employability embedded throughout. While Jack co-designed an academic module so that it had an accompanying website with guides to specific maths problems that students had struggled with over the course of the module. Every August Catrin and the student representatives get together in one room to redesign the module.

> *Its an open, collaborative, creative atmosphere where everyone contributes to course content.*

Choosing Between Different Assessment Methods

Giving student choices regarding their assignments can help with student engagement but also equity. Patall et al. (2008) found that by allowing a student to have choice in an assignment, the student can affirm his/her sense of autonomy and is thus more willing to partake in the assignment (p. 25). Hudd (2003) designed an exercise where students developed assignments to test their sociology skills. Students commented that this enhanced their understanding of the course. Six respondents discussed various ways they worked with students over their assignments. Deb gave students an assignment to design an essay question that matched the learning outcomes.

> *This worked very well as it made students take ownership of their learning.*

Co-production was also used by Jeremy to incorporate the views of local people regarding a new housing development.

Embedding Social Justice

A concern typically cited by respondents working in the Arts and Humanities, social justice is an important feature of the working-class academic pedagogy. This form of education encourages teachers to create empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments" (Hackman 2005: 103). In 'Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope', bell hooks (1994) states that the educator needs to be critically self-reflective. Respondents discussed a number of ways that they did this. For instance, James used reflective writing and debating the opposing opinion, while Tina asked students to keep weekly journals focusing on their privilege. As all teaching is political (Roberts 2016), respondents aimed to increase student consciousness and capacity for addressing social justice issues. Lecourt (2006) suggests that central to any social justice approach is to help students reflect and understand the inequalities in their lives. Although she reflects that it's important to avoid communicating that there is a "static identity", something that can only be "lost" or "replaced." (p. 33). The main way that respondents referred to social justice in their teaching was through their attempts to decolonise the classroom.

Calls to decolonise education, the curriculum, and universities system have grown louder in recent years. Rhodes must fall in Oxford (RMFiO),

a movement with aim of decolonising the space, the curriculum, and the institutional memory at, and to fight intersectional oppression. Joy said her aim to decolonize her classroom was "*not a tickbox exercise, but a long-term approach*". RMFiO's aims to tackle the plague of colonial iconography, reform the euro-centric curriculum and to address the underrepresentation of BME academics and students (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford n.d.), set a clear standard for other institutions to emulate. Respondents described three ways of embedding social justice: curriculum, pedagogy, and social action.

Curriculum

Similar to that reported by Hytten and Bettez (2011), a number of Black academics reported being expected to bear the brunt of efforts to ensure their academic programme is diverse:

> *I'm expected to organise Black History Month but everyone should be considering the lack of black writers as standard on the curriculum.* [Theo]

Ann took the radical decision to ensure that her reading list was reflective of only two 'groups'—working class writers and writers from ethnic minorities. While the head of her school was supportive, citing academic freedom, Ann faced resistance she faced from higher management.

> *I was called in front of what appeared to be a Teaching and Learning meeting, but what was like a disciplinary meeting. In the end, I kept my reading list as I intended, only because I identified a number of colleagues who had 'all white' reading lists.*

Tina took a similar approach and reviewed her teaching resources, and lecture subjects to ensure that multiple viewpoints and perspectives were represented. Ashley focused on creating spaces whereby students could bring their own culture into an inclusive sociological space. She held weekly student presentations where students would discuss a 'problem' from their own culture or tradition.

> *This has been the most interesting year that this module has ran. We heard from international students and the expectations they face; a presentation on being disabled, the presentation was held in the reception area to demonstrate that she could go no further. A twin presentation from someone who chose to wear the burka and from someone who has chosen not too.*

Interviewees reported a satisfaction in interrogating the structures that had produced and reproduced some of the inequalities that they had also faced.

Pedagogy

Bell (2016) suggests that 'the process of social justice should involve dialogue, enabled by opportunities to critically examine institutional, cultural and individual oppression. Goals for social justice include empowerment, equal distribution of resources, and social responsibility'. Social justice education means to be attentive to social norms and the ways in which these norms sustain oppression and marginalization (Hart 2016). Asking simple questions such as "What is taught?" "How is it taught?" and "What is left out?" are some preliminary questions that will help develop one's social justice approach to teaching (Breunig 2019). An example assessment for students on Emma's module is the '5 day challenge to live on £1 per day'. Joy, at the time of the interview, was working on a project considering how her institution had benefitted from slavery.

Social Action

Teaching based on social justice prepares students for social action engagement. Nelson Laird et al. (2005) refer to the need for students' willingness to "take actions in their communities in order to end social injustice" (p. 468). The academics I interviewed did this with a local partner, based on the issue that they were focusing on e.g. working with MIND if focusing on mental health etc. Theo and Jeremy used activist strategies such as raising money for the organisation, social media campaigns to raise awareness of an issue as well as connecting their assignments with the aim for social change. In its entirely, a working-class academic pedagogy becomes more than teaching exercises, but a political statement against a neo-liberal institution that some may feel is long overdue. The next chapter summarises the findings of the book, before asking, where next for working class intellectuals?

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