Teaching Social Science Research and Writing in the Neocolonial and Neoliberal Context: Pedagogical Approaches for Equitable Democratic Participation and Organic Intellectual Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces findings from an ethnographic study of multicultural social science classrooms in a Liberal Arts College in Brooklyn, New York, where students are introduced to methods in social science research and writing. Findings from analysis of students' narrative reflections and online discussion spaces reveal how adopting more participatory and communal approaches to teaching and learning social science research methods and writing can influence how students see themselves and others in the process of intellectual work. This shift in awareness leads to more rigorous academic work and more equitable engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. Through the development of communities of practice that employ autoethnography and reflection alongside other forms of social science research, students learn to grapple with hegemonic approaches to knowledge production and educational participation. Further, data analysis reveals how critical pedagogy, autoethnography, and learning community principles enable more equitable spaces to engage in social science research and writing that is more rigorously transparent, relevant, and accessible to students than traditional intellectual work. Through rich description of classroom interactions and analysis of written work and interviews, this paper illuminates how traditional social science research and writing methodologies, epistemological assumptions, and pedagogical practices are inter-connected and how students experience these traditions as exclusionary and alienating. These findings contribute to an understanding of the praxis of engaged pedagogy and equitable intellectual engagement in diverse scholarly spaces. The findings help educators' understanding of approaches for dismantling neocolonial and neoliberal hegemony in social science education and higher education teaching and learning more broadly. It also offers insights into the use of online teaching and learning methods that produce more equitable and democratic engagement among students.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the construction of equitable and democratic intellectual space for learning social science writing and research in online and hybrid classrooms. In a diverse community of liberal arts students, all digital natives who inherit political and economic contexts in dire need of engaged citizenship, and in the shared global context of rising economic, environmental, and political crises, concerns about how ed-tech and Artificial Intelligence might bolster a decline in democratic practices and institutions call for urgent

attention in educational research. Based on data analysis from three semesters of my own and students' autoethnographic writing and reflections, I argue that creating online discussion and study spaces for equitable inquiry and participation creates the conditions not only for more rigorous social science writing and research but also contributes to the development of new intellectual practices in the social sciences that respond to the need for study and knowledge production to be more accessible and inclusive, as well as more relevant to students' lives and concerns.

A key assumption driving this research is an idea of intellectual work that is aligned with the Marxist theorists Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire: intellectual work is a natural capacity for us as human beings, and within the context of this capacity, we can come to evaluate and understand various methods for intellectual work. As an educator, I work to facilitate students' use of their intellectual agency and to practice methods in the social sciences that support their intellectual development. Key to the development of these methods of research and writing is the issue of equity: students must each see themselves as, in Gramsci's words, organic intellectuals who have the capacity and curiosity to come to critically examine the world around them. Further, they must eschew the existing social hierarchies that inform the social space of the classroom and their identity and feel empowered to engage equally with their peers. In classrooms that included students of diverse economic, national, linguistic, ethnic and racial backgrounds, this is of critical importance to creating learning spaces that educate students to become engaged in participatory democracy (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2005).

I have worked for years to apply these assumptions to my teaching and research. However, moving classes online in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, I felt I was back to square one, with little understanding of how to support students' equitable engagement in the classroom space. I felt rude invoking the name or requiring the voice of someone behind a black square. I really had no idea how to use the technology at all to create the kind of community space I thought necessary for teaching and learning. However, through a process of reflective inquiry, research, and learning from students, I found new possibilities for engagement in the classroom space, and findings from ethnographic research conducted from September 2021-December 2023 reveal that students came to engage with each other and reimagine their relationship to intellectual practice through their online experiences. As I will share in these findings, students describe the use of their own intellectual voice that is transparently their own but also engaged in teaching and learning in a community with diverse other voices.

The data collected are from courses that are part of the students' core liberal arts requirements and which teach interdisciplinary fundamentals of qualitative research methods and social science writing. Following autoethnographic methods, I wrote descriptions of my experiences and observations and asked my students to periodically reflect on their experiences in the class (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). I collected data in this way for three semesters. This study followed methods in Critical Autoethnography, seeking to examine and

understand our decision making related to critical pedagogy, and specifically in an interest to understand how to create spaces that undo the intersecting oppressive hierarchies of race, class, language, and gender (Beattie, 2017; Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Through reflecting on our social identities and incorporating those reflections into the study of social science research traditions, we sought to bring an authentic and considered voice to intellectual practice and understand how the practices of everyday life relate to the politics of knowledge (Beattie, 2017; Butz & Besio, 2009). As Amanda Russel Beattie explains in her analysis of slowing pedagogical time through narrative, "Both the students and the lecturer are understood to be co-producers of knowledge… They are responsible for the creation of the learning community established through shared autobiographical experiences and enhanced by reflexive practices" (2017, 13). Thus, the reflexive potential is shared by both the professor and students. For all participants, reflection is an opportunity to become more authentic to ourselves and one another, enabling a greater awareness and ability to learn from our multiple and intersectional perspectives and identities (Jones et al., 2016).

The following questions underlie both the pedagogical approaches I employ and the ethnographic data analysis for this study:

- What are the democratic possibilities of online classroom space?
- How can liberal arts educators understand and act upon (grapple with) classroom discourse in the epistemologies we teach and in the pedagogical practices with which we engage when working to transform oppressive structures that influence students' subjectivity and relationship to intellectual work/democratic engagement?
- How can this be done in a learning community with diverse linguistic, nationed, racial, and gendered subjectivities?

Analysis of my own teaching practices and reflections, as well as observations of "classroom" interactions, led me to observe a paradox about learning in online space. On the one hand, "live" online meetings on the Zoom platform seemed to exacerbate existing power and discursive dynamics, which relate to the neo-colonial and neoliberal context in which the classroom is situated; for example, native English-speaking students and male students spoke much more frequently than minoritized students. On the other hand, small "breakout" groups and one-on-one online meeting spaces, as well as asynchronous written online discussion spaces, created opportunities for connection, intimacy, and, most importantly, equitable engagement between students.

In the first part of this article, I draw from critical education literature to explore the ethnographic context of the study: writing intensive courses that fulfill the general education requirement in social science research and writing methods at a liberal arts college based in Brooklyn, New York, which went fully online in 2020 and then returned to in-person teaching after two years. In order to contextualize my findings about the problems and

possibilities of contemporary liberal arts educational spaces and of online educational space, I draw from students' auto-ethnographic writing and written reflections about their experiences across classroom spaces and relate this ethnographic data to secondary literature to explore the contemporary effects of neoliberal and neocolonial discourses and pedagogies on social science teaching and learning. Through this analysis, I will operationalize the terms "neoliberal" and "neocolonial" in the data itself (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), but I will also draw from the literature on these two terms in relation to education. Regarding "neoliberal," I refer to the cultural values and practices that relate to actors' understanding of themselves as competitors in free-market capitalism and, for these students, as competitors in a global knowledge economy, with the purpose of education being an individualistic endeavor predominately attached to credits and grades. Regarding "neocolonial," I refer to the continuation of the social and cultural hierarchies related to current and historical white supremacy, eurocentrism, and patriarchy. In the second part of the article, I will present data from student reflections that show how online space can produce new possibilities for participatory democratic space, equity, and engaged pedagogy, as well as enhance students' relationship to intellectual practice.

PART ONE: PEDAGOGY, SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCOURSE, AND STUDENT SUBJECTIVITY

In the Fall 2021 semester, seven months into the pandemic in the US, I still didn't know how to, or even whether to, generate a sense of collegiality or initiate dialogue in the strange and uncanny space of the Zoom classroom. At the start of a second class meeting that semester, I briefly greeted my students, who appeared as a grid on my screen of mostly black squares with a few decorated with memes or cartoon figures, drawings, or other backgrounds and three with the faces of students who had their camera on. I decided to step off screen for a moment before commencing class to gather my thoughts and strategize as to how I might facilitate the use of this space "productively," or at least humanely. I told my students I would return in just a moment and, muting my microphone, turned my own box on the screen to black.

As I gathered my thoughts, the most present one was an awareness that our required presence in the space implied that we must continue to "work" amidst crisis. Institutional responses that we "carry on" via technology platforms felt in direct conflict with my sense of what the moment required, although what the moment required was unknowable to anyone. For example, I wrestled with how to engage with one student who was assiduously logging on from their family home in Myanmar amidst the increasing shutdown of any internet service as the newly emboldened military leadership increased violence against protesters day by day. In individual Zoom meetings with this student, it was impossible to ascertain whether their concern about their schoolwork was something they wanted in their lives or something they felt the need to show their utmost dedication to in order to gain credit for their work in order to "carry on" amid a crisis. Another student was quarantined

in Istanbul with her sick family members in the house, logging on to my class from 11pm-2am local time, even when she tested positive for COVID herself. She insisted she could still complete the work for the semester, and I couldn't ascertain if this was out of fear, duty, or desire. The power dynamic inherent in our student-professor relationship made it impossible to know for certain which it might be. Many others, like me, were in the malaise of lockdowns, isolation, loss, uncertainty, and fear, as so much of normal life stopped but also, in some way, continued via technology.

My own professional life shrank to a portal to which I had little time to attend, with two small children at home and in my care. As I closed the door behind me to enter my converted "office", pushing my older child's first grade remote schooling supplies to the side, I encountered my students, all similarly marooned, all with unknowable relationships to their lockdown pod or environments. My heart sank in a sense of my own incompetency but also lifted in the hope that this space might produce a sense of lifting out and up beyond our respective confinements, that we might connect and experience some emotional, intellectual, or existential respite. In reflecting on these emotions, I really wondered what the purpose of this class is in this specific context of the current crises. What constitutes crisis in the first place (for didn't the crises I saw around me—the rise of populist nationalism and fascism, environmental disaster, economic cruelty—extend well beyond the issues of the pandemic)? What might the purpose of this space be as a space to support citizenship, community, and intellectual solidarity? I felt saddened that surely, for many of my students, the need to be here in this space was primarily due to the need for academic credit and progress toward a (costly) degree. As someone deeply invested in teaching research and writing in the social sciences as a method for increasing liberatory democratic and intellectual practice, I felt that the rationalization of the neoliberal moment was taking hold on the culture of the space. I felt most strongly at that time the sense that "the university will either die through market logics and econometrics, measurable outcomes, or will become a site for possible futures" (Sturm & Turner 2020).

As I had stepped "out" of the room for a moment, Ivan, an affable, friendly face, one of three on camera, flanked in his Ohio home by several guitars mounted on the wall behind him, wearing headphones and clearly working from multiple screens, said, "How's everybody doing today?" He was met first with silence, but then another male voice, of similar accent and timbre to his own, from behind a blank square replied, "pretty good man. Those guitars are dope." The two commenced a discussion on where and how to restring guitars and why it's a good thing to learn to do. I came back on camera a moment later and interrupted their banter, filling the space with my own voice for a time and then setting students to a writing task in the chat feature.

As the students set to the writing task, I was able to see many voices pop up in text through the Zoom chat feature, and I was both relieved and distressed by the discrepancy: although I might see diverse voices in students' written comments, I might never actually hear another student voice in this Zoom class, besides these two young men, and if I wanted

to hear any others it would feel coercive or forced, hardly liberatory or participatory or engaged. I thought of what a student had once said to me when reflecting on her experience as an international student and native Vietnamese speaker in US college classrooms where just a few voices—usually male, native English-speaking voices—dominate the room. She said, “By the second or third class, it’s too late—they are already the only ones who can talk, and I would be too nervous to try.”

At that moment on the Zoom call, I had a sense that moving to the online classroom had turned up the intensity on a pattern of inequality in the classroom space that is at the forefront of so much educational research: the problem of student agency, and the problem of equity in discursive space, equity in subjective experience. The distribution of discursive agency and power in the room relates quite directly to the larger economic and political structures in which the classroom exists. As Giroux writes, “social relations… keep privilege and oppression alive as active constituting forces of daily life within the centers and margins of power” (2005, 12).

How do we create space that is both free and open but also doesn’t just reproduce the existing inequalities? The classroom space, without careful pedagogic intervention, reproduces the power inequalities of dominant culture. Without a concerted effort by educators to create a welcoming environment that encourages a sense of agency and excitement across differences, including gender, ethnicity, race, and language, students with racial, linguistic, or gender privilege are more likely to chime in and feel comfortable doing so. In the space of the Zoom classroom, I felt that these processes were even more acute. I understood that much of this had to do with the emotional experience of students and their subjectivity in the space—how they saw themselves in relationship to others and what they imagined to be possible for themselves.

In surprising contrast, the part of the class that I assumed was most “dead” because it was asynchronous—the discussion boards on the educational platform Canvas—was a space of possibility for equitable and meaningful democratic engagement. This was the semester that I learned to do what these students, all digital natives with more than a decade of experience online, all felt most familiar with doing.

For Ivan, who had so earnestly and warmly asked, “How is everyone doing?” but was met with silence and then just one voice, the one that sounded the most like his own and who invariably spoke the most on Zoom, the asynchronous online space had been the most meaningful part of the class. He shared in his final reflection that “being online has been the first time that I’ve really been able to hear from a lot of my classmates” via their posts on discussion boards. The requirement of these posts and the shared space of the discussion board suddenly enabled a leveling of the airtime, at least in the asynchronous portion of the class. He said he was so grateful to hear so often from the perspectives of his classmates, from whom he had always been curious to hear more, and that it was their participation in the online discussions that were, for him, the most valuable aspect of the class. This student’s comments in his end-of-semester reflections created an important empirical puzzle for me

and called into question my own assumptions about online space. I discovered that the changes in the course's assignments had an important influence on students' experiences and practices, and in their reflections, it also affected their subjectivities.

Learning from the diverse perspectives of his peers was not a stated learning objective for the course, but the course learning objectives had been recently revised as part of an accreditation process designed for the faculty to transparently state and assess their shared general education learning requirements for the liberal arts core. Specifically, social science faculty created a set of objectives related to "ways of thinking, knowing, and doing" in the social sciences. The stated learning objectives for the writing intensive classes I teach are:

- Communicate ideas clearly using oral or written forms.
- Demonstrate the ability to identify and test assumptions, develop an inquiry and support it with careful description of relevant evidence in writing and speaking as a student, writer, and educator.
- Apply a variety of reading practices, e.g., close reading, interpretation, skepticism, critique, and demonstrate evidence of these practices in written work.
- Gather, evaluate, read, interpret and synthesize primary and secondary sources related to a specific inquiry in the field of education.
- Apply the methods of inquiry and analysis to address problems and answer questions.
- Address awareness of reader or audience for written work
- Apply pedagogical practices to writing.

Prior to moving online, I had always sought a pedagogical approach that was grounded in the critical frameworks of Freire and hooks for teaching these skills and practices. I also drew on contemporary researchers such as Maryann Winkelmes et al. (2016), whose extensive empirical research shows that maximizing transparency about the purpose and process of academic assignments supports equitable student outcomes and that transparency about how to do the assigned work is really a social justice issue. Lack of transparency ensures social reproduction along race and class axes. Smith et al. similarly assert that learning communities and lateral structures for pedagogy create mutual support, which is especially important for equitable learning outcomes (2004). Engagement in learning communities demystifies the processes and skills necessary and supports positive self-esteem through mutual support.

Theories in emancipatory pedagogical practices are often focused on student identity and subjectivity—how each person sees and imagines themselves and how each person imagines what is possible through action or speech in the particular spaces we occupy. This is because the discourses and practices to which we are subjected relate to larger hegemonic structures in which spaces are embedded, and we can observe "subjects as 'made' and as 'making themselves' in and through discourse and practices of governmentality" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 23). These discourses and practices are the social relations that maintain

systems of privilege and oppression "as active constituting forces of daily life within the centers and margins of power" (Giroux, 2005, 12).

These ideas are reflected in students' autoethnographic writing in the asynchronous online space, where they described the differences in their subjective experiences across educational spaces. One student reflected on her experience in classrooms, first in China and then in Annapolis, Maryland. In her narrative, she highlights her experience of the governing structures for what a "good student" is in each context and the accompanying systems of privilege and domination in each:

> In the traditional Chinese school system, teachers play the most crucial role and the most divine role. Therefore, students and parents rarely challenge the teachers although they remain doubtful about the order delivered by the teachers. I have never questioned the authority of teachers until I started to study abroad. I remember the first literature class I took when I started high school in Annapolis, Maryland. Panic arose from my heart. This is the first time that my teacher told the students to lead the discussion in a class. I had been taught for the entirety of my life to obey my teachers and believe everything they say. Teachers have been treated as a holy bible for students in my home country. I never dared to challenge their commands. However, that day I needs (sic) to challenge myself to adapt to this new system of receiving knowledge. Attempting several times, I still couldn't make my throat deliver my thoughts in my mind. I would rather keep them as my own secret than break my comfort zone or my used habit of obeying. Nonetheless, I was told that I would receive a grade based on my contribution to the class discussion.

The discomfort of speech is in direct competition with her discomfort in disobeying the authority figure. Her acute discomfort arises from the awareness that "I would receive a grade based on my contribution to the class." In her story, we hear her primary attention to the governing structures that limit her consideration of her own agency as a learner. This commentary offers us a window into different experiences of subjection across different cultural contexts. As Gibson-Graham explains, "the concept of subjection allows us to see subjects as 'made' and as 'making themselves' in and through discourse and practices of governmentality" (2006, 23).

In their writing, students offered narratives that empirically illuminate key critiques of neoliberal values in education: compressing time to maximize output (Beattie 2017); compliance and acute attention to credit in interactions (Patrick 2013); and fear of poor outcomes. In addition to these discourses and practices, students also described their ambivalence about social science research and writing in ways that reveal the lasting impact of colonial discourse in these disciplines and epistemologies. In the following two sub-sections, I take each of these critical contexts for student subjectivity—the cultural impacts of neoliberalism and (neo)colonialism on the educational space and its discourses—and

connect findings from this research to contemporary scholarship exploring these problems.

Neoliberal Subjectivity

In their critique of the university, Harney and Moten (2013) make a distinction between "credit" and "debt" as two distinguishing orientations toward sociality, identifying debt as that which is offered into social space with an understanding of shared, permanent indebtedness toward one another—social spaces and interactions outside of or adjacent to market logics and systems of "credit"—actions or practices that are meant as something which earns or achieves within a marketplace. They further distinguish between knowledge production as the production of credit in contrast with "study"—an ongoing stance of reciprocity in the social space.

Peters and Reveley (2014) term the domain of credit and its hold over our interactions in institutional spaces of scholarship as "cognitive capitalism", where the intellect of each knowledge worker has become the most productive resource they have, and that as individuals carry this mode of production with them, their identities become entangled with the notion of themselves as human capital—this is the creation of the knowledge worker. Cribb and Gerwitz (2009) argue further that this removes ethics and joy, and knowledge becomes objectified, measurable, and transferable— a commodity in a system of extraction. Ellsworth (2005) echoes these ideas when she describes the modern educational culture as "learning as compliance"—an acute emphasis on measurable outcomes and "deliverable" products that meet rigid criteria.

In addition to the development of the self as product, scholars have detailed the way that neoliberalism constructs the student as consumer. In her article "Student Identity and the Marketization of Higher Education," Stefanie Sonnenberg (2017) explains students' positioning as both 'customers' and 'consumers' in the wake of the current global trend towards the marketisation of higher education provision. As such, they are what Fiona Patrick calls the "commodified self," which has an impact on students' mental health and sense of self. When students are constantly preoccupied with their performance for credit, they are both customer and product, engaged in "entrepreneurship of the self" (2013). This focus erodes democratic engagement, as well as interest in dialogue and community. This emerged from the data in this study as well. Reflecting on the sense of their own education as a risky investment, one student wrote,

> As kids we see the same cycles with our own eyes that people tend to end up right back where they were, stuck forever a member of the working class. In some way, it feels fully possible in my mind that I will end up right where my dad is in an Amazon warehouse…. I am barely able to even be here, and without my generous scholarships, I would never have even contemplated coming here in the first place. Already I take out a suffocating number of loans…. I think students like myself also feel this need to work harder since it has been preached to us by our parents and

> society at large that this is the way for us to overcome our disadvantages. That by sacrificing and offering more of our labors that we can somehow move "up" within society and the larger contexts.

This student's comments highlight the ways that the pressure to "perform" outwardly, to do better in order to "make it" in even more extreme measure than their economically privileged counterparts. When the individual is the sole site of investment, there is a loss to intellectual solidarity and possibility for democratic space (Magill and Rodriguez, 2021). The additional variable of extreme financial risk makes the possibility for meaningful intellectual engagement (rather than simply a need to "achieve" or "perform") a more distant priority. By relying on systems of measure for evaluating what is of value in the classroom, we inherently de-value authentic human relationships and community. Further, these cultural trends coincide with a mental health crisis. Another student described and analyzed the culture of the knowledge economy "creative" education:

> It is the school's belief that if they installed washing machines in the fashion department, the fashion students, already known for spending days on end in the fashion hall, would never go home. This belief is proudly shared with fashion freshmen by professors and upperclassmen alike. They share this not as a critique of a life consuming program that would compel students to act in such a way, but simply to inform incoming students that this is the reality of a program. Students who survive the program, even for just a few months, take pride in their way of life, collecting overnight building passes in their notebooks. Professors who have grown accustomed to, and often grown to expect, their students staying overnight in the hall barely notice when half their 9 am class shows up in the same clothes they were wearing when class ended at 4 pm the day before.

Perisic writes, "neoliberal education reform has intensified overwork and exhaustion, as students have internalized the logic that they are human capital, constantly needing to compete and increase their value on the market" (2021, 1). Meanwhile, the students wrote about their own relationships and subjective experiences in this economic context of competition and precarity.

The in-person classrooms we returned to in 2022 contained the same crumbling infrastructure: messy, disorganized desks crowded into a small space intended for far less furniture than it currently contains—a reflection of the need to maximize the population in the room for maximum profit. These desks were designed in a different era, made for a small frame, made for individual work, so that when I try to collaborate with a student on their work, one of us must reach past our own L-shaped folding desk toward the other, as if we are in polyurethane and plywood harnesses. In the room, the technological equipment is not up to date; several panels have been removed due to plumbing leaks and many more

are stained with the evidence of continual infrastructural decay; there is a general sense of neglect to the physical environment. The campus, like so many in the present economic landscape, is primarily staffed by employees who cannot join the union and whose pay and lack of benefits contribute to economic insecurity. For example, prohibitively expensive health insurance is available to only a fraction of the faculty and staff. All of us who enter the space of the classroom, whether online or in person, are there in spite of the tremendous economic burden, as well as the psychological burden of institutionalized social space, of ambivalent performances of participation: we all pine for something else, which is what Moten and Harney identify as the open, communal spaces of the undercommons: "what the beyond of teaching is really about is not finishing oneself, not passing, not completing… one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood" (2013, 28). The authors contrast these open spaces against the "deadening labor for the university, and beyond that, the negligence of professionalization, and the professionalization of the critical academic" (Ibid). Tantamount to the transcendent experience of the undercommons is a way of being authentic, spontaneous, and mutual, of holding onto a sense of our own organic intellectual agency—an antithesis of the qualities and values associated with neoliberal culture.

Colonial Discourses and Epistemology in Social Science Writing

It is well documented that social science epistemologies and discourses have helped to construct and reproduce systems of inequality along the intersecting and overlapping lines of class, gender, race, and nationalities and have worked to sustain colonial and capitalist hegemony (Collins, 1998; Connell, 2020; Freire, 2000; Said, 1979). Further, these epistemologies and discourses have an influence on how we come to understand our position in relation to power and knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Gramsci, 2011; hooks, 2014; Fanon, 2008). If we look to the teaching and learning of social science research and writing, we can see numerous ways in which the pedagogical traditions are those of the "traditional intellectual" who is associated with the worldview of the groups that hold access to capital and control the means of production. Key among these are the discourses of objectivity and universality that arise from the cultural traditions of colonial power (Connell 2020).

In their reflections, students considered the emphasis in traditional social science discourses as they had learned them, where the discourse and voice were given the most credit when it was the objective 'professional' voice of the traditional research paper. One student wrote, "In the past, my papers have been rigorously formatted and graded, and structured in a way that felt disingenuous- only finding evidence that supported my argument, arguing something I knew very little about, and speaking in a voice that is very detached from my own."

Critical pedagogy scholars directly align these kinds of cultural practices with the reproduction of social inequality. Giroux writes, "By interrupting representational practices that make a claim to objectivity, universality and consensus, critical educators can develop

pedagogical conditions in which students can read and write within and against existing cultural codes while simultaneously having the opportunity to make new spaces for producing new forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and identity" (2005, 23).

The subjectivity of the students is tantamount here, as it is the site of the alienation or connection with intellectual work as either an externally constructed, foreign, traditional practice or an expression of an innate and organic capacity already available in the individual. In my courses, I ask students to write a letter to anyone in their lives, drawing from and explaining something they have learned in the class readings. One student, who had always stayed quiet in class and who kept her hood up and mask on as she slouched in the furthest corner of the room, wrote a letter that reflected a great deal of study, offering careful assertions and descriptions. When I asked her about her process of writing the letter, which was to her own father, she said,

> I could never actually talk to my dad about this stuff because he would just act like I didn't know what I was talking about, because he has more education and experience than me, so I pretended I was a different person when I wrote it. Like I was another older guy, like one of his friends or something.

In a sense, she suggests that the process of scholarly writing requires her to eschew her own identity—specifically her gender and her age—in order to engage in intellectual work. In light of observations like hers, I followed the pedagogical approaches that sought to work counter to these forces, such as Giroux's notion of border pedagogy (2005). He describes border pedagogy as a pedagogical process that "offers the opportunity for students to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages" (2005, 21). This approach emphasizes meaning making as historically situated and influenced by socio-historical factors, our own personal histories included.

Pedagogical Implications for Educators

Attention to the problems I describe above had been a focus of my research and pedagogical practice for more than a decade, but moving online created a totally new set of problems to consider, as well as pedagogical spaces in which to work. I attempted to develop communities of practice, and I adjusted much of the assignment structure and approach to interactions with students. Some of the redesigns were based on the ideas in the book Writing Together by Scott Warnock and Diana Gasiewski (2018), which offers practical advice for teaching in asynchronous online space and, in particular, producing space that generates deep engagement in a learning community. Based on these assumptions, I changed my course structure in the following ways:

1. *Writing for each other*. Whereas prior to the pandemic, I had asked students to hand in a written response to the assigned reading. I would write back to them on

the same piece of paper and return it the following week, and that was the end of the interaction. Online, rather than handing in these assignments to me, I asked that all reading responses be posted as discussion posts—a shared interactive space and archive for everyone in the class. This meant that students were able to see lots of examples of how to write about the text from one another and were given a chance to respond to each other's posts. I was able to provide private feedback but generally used the public forum to respond in order to support everyone's learning from my comments.

2. After seeing the radical development and sense of excitement about writing in the forums for the reading responses, I began to add more autoethnographic writing assignments and reflections, leading up to the development of their independent research and writing. Also, after a few semesters, I began adding my own posts, writing from the prompts myself, thus joining the space more laterally, with a similar set of tasks to the students.
3. I decided to also require students to post about their research projects, both as researchers in reflection about the process, and as scholars writing about their research findings. Through their interactions online, they sought support on how they developed their inquiry and writing and also shared their learning and analysis from primary and secondary research sources. This way, their process became a collective space for study and learning. Research papers were written incrementally, in shared digital documents students could all access and comment on.
4. I met briefly and regularly in private Zoom rooms for one-on-one meetings to offer support and feedback on their writing. This was sometimes in lieu of written feedback from me. These conversations created a sense of intimacy and privacy and enabled me to better understand the context of each student. It offered support and clarity in the process.

In the second part of the paper, I will explore how students described their learning experiences in the context of these interventions and methods for using online space.

PART TWO: NEW PEDAGOGICAL LESSONS IN ONLINE SPACE

In the following section, I present findings from qualitative analysis of students' online writing and reflections from 2021-2022, and in particular, the reflections they wrote about their own learning experiences in the class. These findings show how the cultural space of the online "classroom" community improved students' sense of themselves as writers and thinkers. The findings from this analysis reveal the ways that online space can produce the conditions for a learning experience that counter the discourses and arrangements of power that underpin neoliberal as well as neocolonial educational spaces that rely on universal, objective discourse and the discourse of expertise. Student comments highlight how creating online communities of practice helps to shift student subjectivity to see themselves as organic intellectuals, or as Patrick (2013) puts it, "agentic selves." This had

important implications in terms of how students self-identified as intellectuals and how they understood the meaning of intellectual work—reading, writing, and thinking.

Freedom from Neoliberal Pedagogies and Colonial Discourse

One of the most repeated themes in the data was freedom, especially as writers. To "write more freely" influenced their emotional and subjective relationship to writing and research. This freedom, in their descriptions, related to themes of authenticity and transparency in intellectual work. Their descriptions were also highly related to affect—the freedom they describe is not only connected to authenticity or transparency, but also to joy, excitement, and curiosity. One student reflected,

> This was the first time I fully enjoyed writing a research paper. In the past, my papers have been rigorously formatted and graded, and structured in a way that felt disingenuous- only finding evidence that supported my argument, arguing something I knew very little about, and speaking in a voice that is very detached from my own. This paper I felt excited to write, complete, and research, and I felt my voice shone through more in this paper than in any other academic paper I've written so far. So that will definitely stick with me.

Her notion that previous scholarly writing had been "disingenuous" and, in fact, lacking in any real rigor intellectually (since she only included evidence that supported her argument) is contrasted with a less governed structure but with a greater attention to study and reflection rather than demonstrating authority. She describes transparency as something that helps her become more directly and meaningfully involved in scholarship. This transparency felt exciting, captured her curiosity, and made her more invested in the process. Her comments offer us a sense of what bell hooks means by "engaged pedagogy" as something that must approach a sense of excitement or transgression (2014).

Another student connects their enjoyment to the more open-ended and iterative nature of the assignments which built up to the final paper. She references traditional forms of legitimacy in academic writing, saying that she appreciated the chance to:

> … breakaway from habit or what I've been taught. And to allow myself to write freely, without the constraint of needing to have a perfect or clear conclusion. I enjoyed writing this paper, because I was able to write what I wanted (about what I wanted, for one) and not have to worry about the system (I mean, the system I was taught where it was indefinitely (sic) one introduction paragraph, at least three body paragraphs, and a conclusion -- which always made it harder for me to write quickly because I was caught up in that).

The reference of time at the end of this comment is telling—fitting in a coherent project

into extreme time constraints and in regard to a clear "finished" process leads not only to a failure in engaging a careful intellectual process but also a level of stress that makes engaged learning impossible (hooks, 2014).

Another student wrote about transparency as an avenue to gain a deeper understanding as a scholar of others' work and as a writer seeking to maximize accessibility and connection with readers. She describes an awareness of greater intellectual rigor as a result, not only in her own research but in relationship to readers:

> I can't per say speak for every human on Earth, but there are certainly times where I find my own thoughts to make a whole lot more sense in my head than if I were to describe them aloud. There's a lot of gathering of information, evaluating of ideas, and connecting of different thoughts that must develop clearly to be able to formulate a concise level of communication upon a topic. With that being said, I feel that I was able to develop this skill through learning that transparency must be established to create a level of understanding—whether that be for the reader or the listener. This also connects back to the idea (above) of the author being present. Speaking from my own perception of knowledge, I find that I understand more, I'm intrigued more, by writings that make the author present. So, with that in mind, as I develop my writing skills further, I am making sure that I interconnect my thoughts with a level of transparency that will hopefully make the communication of ideas more clear to my readers/listeners.

Her comments bring together the themes of authenticity and the slowing of time as practices that lead to more meaningful and fulfilling intellectual engagement. Identity, and transparency about identity, are in direct relationship to more liberatory, joyful, and rigorous intellectual practice.

Discursive Equity and Communities of Practice: A Shift in Student Voices

The findings from analysis of student reflections revealed a desire and awareness of the value of community in intellectual engagement. In the online class, students responded to one another's auto-ethnographic reflections and scholarly writing. The comments were offered as an audience for each writer's research and as fellow research practitioners in a community of practice. In this way, students were able to comment both on the content of what others were studying and on the processes and methodologies their classmates employed. Whereas in pre-pandemic classroom space, where students had mostly just handed in their work directly to me, here I was also commenting on everyone's work publicly on the same forums so that my voice and guidance might be directed toward one person's work but was in fact for the benefit of all the students.

Students' comments in this space were sometimes more technical, with students writing comments like, "I really appreciate how you organized your paper and presented your

primary source. It helped me think about rearranging my own paper." Or, they were those of a reader who also encounters similar issues in their experience: "I am really fascinated by your research on the Red Pill movement because there is something similar going on in South Korea right now, as a backlash to feminism." These different comments reflected the open dialogue and sense of solidarity and equity in the discussion spaces. In her reflection on this process, one student wrote:

> Engaging more directly with the reader was something new for me. To an extent we are normally engaging the reader in some fashion but I think that it was in this class that I began addressing the reader more intentionally… I think the most important thing I have learnt from this class is to write and speak with multiple perspectives in mind. I have been taught very strictly that there is usually only one right answer. This has led me to generalize experiences in order to force out that answer. However, this class has taught me to understand that every individual has different perspectives and will form different opinions based on their experiences.

This quote highlights a connection between the horizontal structure of the class and an awareness of multiple perspectives, as well as writing as a process of perspective taking in relationship to others. Prior to the pandemic, I had been students' only imagined reader, which reproduced a dynamic of performing for credit rather than writing for the purpose of study, taking away my centrality as their reader and offering my perspectives in the same space as everyone else, the class culture becomes a community of practice.

Another student highlighted how the iterative and open-ended assignment structure and the engagement in a learning community enabled a greater pedagogical concern for her readers and in relation to that, a concern about the intent of intellectual work in the first place:

> I think I've improved in the area of writing for my reader. Writing to teach. A lot of this was feedback-based learning, and when you would ask for more clarity, and I would realize I was writing as if the reader knew everything I was talking about. I think as I move forward… this sort of contextualized writing will become even more important, but even in the everyday, it has helped me be more conscious of my intent. Am I writing simply to sound smart? Or am I writing to convey something in the clearest way possible to people on various levels of knowledge?

Moving from a performative to a pedagogical approach to scholarly writing shifted the discourse she used as well as her sense of the purpose of her writing. She signals increased critical consciousness and a willingness to look critically at her own thinking and writing, which also relates to what Fiona Patrick calls an "agentic self." As the above examples also show, an awareness of the self as a writer and as a reader of the world

emerged through the practice of the writing space, but also students' sense of themselves as what Paolo Freire calls "unfinished" political subjects—in a continuous process of learning and discovery, both beyond what they have learned but also in critical relationship to their own conditioning and political subjectivity. One student wrote,

> I feel like this course has gotten me to think a lot of questions. A lot of times I tend to take course material for what it is but for this course I feel like the material led me to questions I wouldn't have otherwise considered. I also like that the course helped me come up with questions that drove my research and got me to ask more questions. I think the readings and topics we learned about helped drive these questions and sort of get myself thinking a lot more. In terms of writing I liked that this course allowed me to be more informal and personal, and make my writing more meaningful to both myself and readers.

The spirit of unfinishedness and the permission to remain in a state of unfinishedness as an intellectual practice in and of itself is the epistemological and ontological component of Freire's notion of a pedagogy that works to undo the structures of oppression that reproduce inequality. In becoming more actively engaged as a person who thinks and a person with readers, these students develop and find greater meaning.

CONCLUSION

In February of 2023, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* released a report titled "Building Student Resilience: strategies to support their mental health" which offers sections such as "Find out why counselors are burned out and the obstacles to recruiting new ones" and "Help your faculty members understand the impact of the pandemic on student attention spans, and how to support their academic success" (Kafka). Reading this, I am reminded of Gramsci's theory of hegemony: the status quo is held together through consent to a system and set of beliefs that help to maintain the economic structure. The word "resilience" might be understood within this framework of consent. It is an example of discourse that seeks to enclose the range of possibilities for dealing with contemporary crises within a capitalist framework and within a notion of fortifying ourselves for business as usual. So, too, with responses to artificial intelligence: rather than consider what of humanity and intellectual work matters to students, the focus is on ensuring that students still do the work to gain the credit, when that work could just as easily be done by a robot.

This paper has shown how hegemonic neoliberal values that focus on outcomes, investment, and the self as both consumer and as product affect students' experiences and sense of self in intellectual work. Their narratives also help us understand how colonial and neocolonial discourse subjects them to a sense of their own ambivalent place in intellectual work; to be evaluated favorably, they feel the need to adopt a voice and a discourse that is not their own, and that is alienated from their everyday experience. Beyond simply asking

questions about how to better "engage" students, we ought to view these findings as a crisis of traditional intellectual work and the ways in which our educational practices support a hegemony that many social scientists seek to undo in the content of their courses. These findings show us that we need to go beyond curriculum and focus on the practices and discourses we use and invite our students to use in higher education classrooms. Rather than seeking to detect AI, we might seek to detect the basic humanity and organic intellectual agency of our students, who attend class not only to gain credit but also to gain greater fulfillment and meaning.

For Paulo Freire, whose work is primarily invested in liberatory relationships that work counter to oppressive cultural systems such as colonialism and capitalism, our relationships with one another are the foundation of social change, and the work of this transformation should happen in the classroom (2000). The fundamental problem for those of us applying Freire's work to our teaching practice is the importance of emotional engagement in achieving this arrangement of community and mutual intellectual agency. Diverse ethical democracy is only possible through a transformation of the everyday (hooks, 2014; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2005). Pedagogy matters because it is the construction and arrangement of the social spaces where intellectual engagement might develop. These spaces are formative to our identities as intellectuals or formative to our sense that we could never see ourselves as such. Our picture of intellectual work and our relationship to it is formed here.

Based on the findings in this study, we might think of the production of this kind of space simply as permission. If we allow permission to, in hooks' word, "transgress" accepted boundaries of intellectual work, we become more intimately engaged with that work. This requires the recognition that the agendas for teaching need to be flexible and that students need to be seen in their particularity as individuals (hooks, 2014). Rather than eschewing intellectual rigor, these processes demand that we strengthen it through a transparent investigation of the process of constructing knowledge.

Magill and Rodriguez write of teaching as a process of intellectual solidarity, which they call "a requisite for supportive relationships that lead to transformational schooling experiences. The essence of intellectual solidarity is unification among individuals" (2021, 13). In describing the experience of students and teachers within these dynamics, they write, "Intellectual solidarity attends to fear by supporting a perpetual and shared epistemological and ontological becoming" (14). Here, we see a praxis orientation for Freire's principle of becoming: openness of both the process and openness to the scholarly voice. The dual pillars of authenticity and open-ended structures for study allow for praxis toward democratic multicultural space for intellectual work. In this study, through analyzing students' reflections on their learning experience in online discussion spaces and in an open-ended and shared process for writing and study, I found that the democratic values of *transparency and accessibility* must be at the forefront of teaching intellectual skills that aim to create opportunities for participatory democracy. Relying on traditional methods or modes of discourse interrupts this more urgent focus.

To conclude, I return to this question, which is at the foundation of this research: *What are the democratic possibilities of online classroom space*? In this research, I have found three key themes regarding the democratic possibilities of online pedagogical space. They are that working on open-ended assignments in a lateral structure and an emphasis on "study" rather than "production" of knowledge supports joy and excitement in the classroom. While the students in these classes do submit a final paper, which must be in a coherent, cohesive, and well-thought-out structure, they are not expected to provide a thesis. Rather, their final papers look much more like traditional research proposals—ironically, the very format that traditionally guides doctoral work, with its extensive focus on the dissertation proposal, and less akin to the traditional undergraduate level argumentative essay or thesis-centered essay, a genre which I rarely practiced in doctoral training. They appreciate this space where scholarly inquiry can be the purpose of writing, where their own curiosity can guide that inquiry, and where they are on a continuous, shared, and supported process of inquiry.

Another key finding is that students want to be in *communities of practice* and that it is in these communities of practice that they can experience the importance and value of collective inquiry, as well as the value of their own voice as both teachers and learners. So much so that sometimes, when I enter the space of their online discussion, I sense my own voice has the ring of an interloper—the potentially evaluative voice of the teacher, who might tilt the equilibrium in the space. Meanwhile, the differences among students' perspectives create opportunities for "hearing from those people I don't usually get to hear from," to paraphrase the student at the start of the article. The experience of valuing a diversity of opinions and engaging in learning and study, as well as the vulnerability of writing together, helps students in a variety of ways that are not only academic or intellectual but also existential. Biesta (2016) writes,

> Education that enables coming into presence is about valuing diversity of opinions while questioning and exploring these opinions, it is about listening as well as contributing, it is about asking difficult questions that may have no conclusive answers, and it is about valuing other selves as much as we value our own… In supporting students to develop their own emergent selves, "it becomes clear that the first responsibility of the teacher is a responsibility for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique, singular being (16).

The role of the liberal arts educator, then, is to produce the space where these practices are possible and to create a culture of care and curiosity as the principal norms. Spaces for narrative pedagogy and dialogic interactions help us to follow a praxis orientation to critical democratic pedagogy and engaged pedagogy. The research here helps us to understand how to ground those practices in online and hybrid learning cultures in a way that can ameliorate the effects of current economic and social pressures in the classroom space, which have exacerbated social inequality.

Another key finding is that transparency in intellectual work needs to be brought into the classroom interactions and intellectual work in the classroom. Biesta argues:

> While learning as acquisition is only about getting more and more, learning as responding is about showing who you are and where you stand… If education is indeed concerned with subjectivity and agency, then we should think of education as the situation or process which provides opportunity for individuals to come into presence, that is, to show who they are and where they stand (16).

At the core of this research is a question of intellectual and political agency, and I find it helpful to look through the lens adopted by J.K. Gibson-Graham in their book *A Postcapitalist Politics*, where they write,

> The slogan 'the personal is political' authorized women to speak of their intimate concerns in legitimate tones, enabling them to connect the private and the public, the domestic and national, shattering forever the rigid boundaries of established political discourse. The practice of feminism as 'organizational horizontalism' fostered alternative ways of being (powerful) (2006, xxiii).

Conceptualizations of ed-tech as a tool of neoliberalism/disaster capitalism have placed it categorically as a threat to democratic or liberatory engagement, but I know from my students that online space often creates new conditions for belonging and becoming, of agency that cannot be found in the classroom space. Other scholars have described how online space supports accessibility and greater user freedom/engagement with material (because it's asynchronous, for example, and they can go over it numerous times), but this study helps build our understanding of the ways that online space can engage communities of practice. It can also help to support the pedagogical principles from critical traditions, including equitable engagement (Meyers, 2008).

In shifting back to the classroom, I have come to rely even more intently on the online spaces—open, interactive digital platforms for student writing. In the physical classroom, I mostly lecture. This is hardly the flipped classroom that has been touted by ed-tech experts, where the lectures are online, and the interactions are in the classroom. Rather, this is a new framework that responds to the needs, desires, and joy of the students as engaged critical intellectual subjects in search of communities of practice through which they might make meaning of their worlds.

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