Designing for Critical Dialogue Online:
Challenges and Opportunities

Melissa Warr
Arizona State University
mcwarr@asu.edu

Carrie Sampson
Arizona State University
csampso4@asu.edu

Abstract: Critical dialogue is an epistemological tool that uses conflict, reflection, and authenticity to help students address sensitive social issues. The embodied, action-based, and community aspects of critical dialogue make it particularly difficult to execute in online contexts. Previous attempts have focused on promoting critical dialogue in text-based discussion boards. In this paper, we describe critical dialogue and its features and discuss the constraints and affordances for using this type of approach online. In particular, we suggest incorporating synchronous and asynchronous video discussion may address some of the constraints. We provide an example of an online course designed for critical dialogue and discuss plans for future research.

Over the past 30 years, online learning in higher education has grown significantly, both in the number of institutions that have adopted online learning programs and in the depth at which learning can occur online (Boyd, 2016). Online learning offers many benefits, including broader access, lower costs, and increased flexibility for students. Yet, the physical separation inherent in online learning also presents barriers, including a potential disconnect among students, teachers, and course content. In particular, the lack of face-to-face contact can make engaging in a critical dialogue, or dialogue about sensitive social issues, challenging and lead to "pattern of shallowness created by contemporary tendencies of computer-mediated communication" (Boyd, 2016, p. 179). We argue, however, that critical dialogue can be promoted online by careful selection and application of communication technologies.

In this paper, we explore the notion of critical dialogue within online learning, including how synchronous and asynchronous video influences online critical dialogue. Moreover, we discuss an ongoing research study of a doctoral-level online course designed to promote critical dialogue through asynchronous video, synchronous video, and text-based modalities.

What is Critical Dialogue?

In 1970, educational philosopher Paulo Freire published his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* advocating for a shift in teaching and learning. He critiqued teaching that occurs in a hierarchical manner in which the teacher delivers information that students are expected to memorize. He called this a "'banking' concept of education" (p. 72) and believed this type pedagogy maintains systemic inequities. Instead, he promoted a problem-posing education. Freire explains that in this type of pedagogy

> people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *within which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 83)

In this book, Freire laid a foundation for critical pedagogy, of which critical dialogue is a key component. Aligned with Freire's philosophy of a critical pedagogy, critical dialogue seeks learning through self-reflection, authenticity, and conflicting perspectives. Learning centers on social issues with the aim of disrupting oppressive systems (Hilton, 2013). Critical dialogue is an epistemological tool that embraces various ways of knowing (Rudick, 2016). Students and instructors share these ways of knowing through dialogue, and this dialogue includes a balance of conflict and caring. More specifically, on the one hand critical dialogue "entails a tension between the 'tough' side of critical engagement—the confrontation of thesis and antithesis, the knocking of ideas and heads, the

encouragement of dissent and scientific skepticism" (Hudson, 2002, p. 73). On the other hand, critical dialogue requires "the 'caring' side of the process through a spirit of collaborative exploration, active listening and open-mindedness, and appreciation of seeing things from another person's perspective" (Hudson, 2002, p. 73). Rather than suppress dissension, critical dialogue brings it out into the open while also providing a safe place to express oneself and understand others.

Seven Elements of Critical Dialogue and Opportunities for Online Learning

Through reviewing the literature, we identified seven core features of critical dialogue. Each piece is necessary for the method to be effective. Below we describe each feature and the corresponding challenges and opportunities for online learning.

Equitable access

In critical dialogue approaches, students must have equitable access to participate in dialogue (Hilton, 2013). Hierarchical dynamics can make it difficult for students with less power and opportunity to speak and be listened to. For example, students with more self-perceived power might interrupt other students, and those with less self-perceived power might withdraw from the dialogue out of exhaustion and frustration.

Equitable access means all students have equal access to content and participation. In some ways, online courses do not provide equal access. The digital divide separates those who do and do not have experience with technology, making it difficult for some students to participate or excel in an online course (Boyd, 2016). At the same time, online learning may give students more freedom in how, when, and where they engage in course discussions (Hilton, 2013). Students who are less comfortable participating in a class discussion might feel more welcome to participate online. Furthermore, students who are completing the course in a non-native language may appreciate the extra time for composing discussion posts, and text removes the stigma of vocal accents (Hilton, 2013). Online learning may provide a more flexible design that can respond to the variable needs of students (Hilton, 2013). Designers must carefully consider how to make the course equally accessible to all students.

Embodied

Rather than a focus on developing cognitive traits or skills (through a mind-body split), critical dialogue involves embodied learning that goes beyond simply talking by moving those involved towards action (Boyd, 2016; Rudick, 2016). Of this element, Freire (1988) stated, "we study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. We do all these things with feeling, with emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion and also with critical reasoning" (p. 3).

Creating embodied dialogue is difficult in online learning. Asynchronous online discussions usually occur only through text, and students are able to hide behind their computers and present whatever image they like. Students learn in the isolation of their home or workplace, and they can select which parts of their identity they wish to represent online (Hilton, 2013). Furthermore, text-only communication may lead to misunderstandings as students are not able to see gestures or hear voice inflections in their classmates' comments (Rudick, 2016).

Critical engagement, confrontation, and dissent

Critical dialogue entails confrontation and dissent. Students should be pushed to examine beliefs and understand others in ways that might even be "painful to achieve the kind of insights and breakthroughs that are the most valuable" (Hudson, p. 73). Hudson (2002) cautioned that "If the aim is primarily to avoid pain, then the dialogue too easily falls back on superficial politeness, number of attention, or paths of retreat" (p. 73). Without confrontation and dissent, critical dialogue is likely impossible.

Critical confrontation may be difficult to achieve online. Students have time to compose responses to posts and may edit or "white-wash" (Rudick, 2016, p. 13) initial writing to reduce group tension or confrontation. Additionally, the online discussion board format requires students to take turns, and the discussion plays out in a Western-centered rational conversation style (Rudick, 2016). On the other hand, students may be able to learn more from online conflict because they have time to reflect on and formulate new responses (Boyd, 2016; Hilton, 2013;

Hudson, 2002). They may also feel safer to voice their own views and perspectives, leading to a more authentic dialogue.

Challenge social and cultural contexts

Critical dialogue challenges students to reflect on their own social and cultural beliefs (Boyd, 2016) as well as the social, historical, and cultural contexts they reside in (Hilton, 2013). However, as discussed earlier, technology is created around dominant social and political systems. Learning Management Systems (LMS's) themselves are usually built for financial gain and are designed to enable post-positivist learning and assessment (Rudick, 2016). This may limit the possibility of truly challenging these contexts in an online course. Boyd (2016) emphasized the need to explicitly address this challenge with students and suggested such a discussion may lead to understanding.

Collaborative exploration and active listening of lived experiences

Students and instructors develop understanding with others as they share experiences of privilege, oppression, and power-differences. By acknowledging these experiences through active listening, open-mindedness, and balancing confrontation (Hudson, 2002), those in critical dialogue share in a deconstruction of identity and culture (Rudick, 2016).

Online courses may promote collaborative and active listening by giving students more time to reflect and compose responses (Hilton, 2013; Hudson, 2002). In a discussion board, students can review previous posts, see them from a new perspective, and quote them directly in a new post. This can create a deeply connected online community (Boyd, 2016; Hilton, 2013). Online discussions also enforce talking in sequence. Although Rudick (2016) noted this could inhibit productive confrontation, Hudson (2002) believed it facilitated better listening. Furthermore, Hudson (2002) noted that students may understand each other better when all communication is from text with extra signals from body language or vocal inflection.

Awareness of other perspectives

Through collaborative exploration and active listening, students become more aware of the perspectives of others. Participants may learn more about the perspectives of those within the class and be introduced to perspectives from outside the class (Hudson, 2002). Online discussions may facilitate understanding other perspectives. However, the lack of face-to-face contact may also limit the depth of the understanding.

Promote action

Critical dialogue leads to action that addresses the injustices identified through this dialogue. As participants of critical dialogue find unity within conversation, they promote social justice action as praxis based on this dialogue (Hilton, 2013; Rudick, 2016). Online learning may not create as fertile of an environment for collaborative online learning; students will not be in the same physical location, reducing the likelihood of casual communication and planning. However, they still may be able to translate their understandings into actions in their local communities.

Designing for Online Critical Dialogue

The elements above present two main challenges in promoting critical dialogue online: building a safe and connected community and facilitating authentic dialogue. Some students may feel safer online because of the physical distance between themselves and others as well as the ability to participate when, where, and how they choose. The increased feeling of safety may help students represent themselves more authentically and better tolerate distress from confrontation. If students do not feel safe or welcome in the community, they may not fully engage and thus never address the social and political imbalances critical dialogue is designed to address.

In addition to creating a safe community, designers must find ways to facilitate authentic dialogue. Students need to express their whole selves—their feelings and their experiences. Students also need to listen to the experiences of others and reflect on their personal responses to others' experiences. Structures for online critical dialogue need to promote this type of honest, open, and authentic discussion.

The research on online critical dialogue focuses on text-based discussion boards as the center of the dialogue. However, current technologies also enable asynchronous and synchronous video discussion tools. Video discussions can increase social presence in online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015). For example, Borup et al. (2012) found online asynchronous video lead to some improvement in students' open communication, emotional expression, and social cohesion. In particular, students in their study stated that in asynchronous video discussions, they saw their peers as "real people" and felt the communication was more natural than text discussions. On the other hand, students reported that they didn't believe their classmates watched all the video posts, potentially marginalizing some students' positions. Clark et al. (2015) used a mixed method study to compare text-based and video-based discussion formats. They also found adding video to the discussion increased social presence. In particular, students indicated seeing their peers visually helped increase trust and better identify with their discussion groups. They reported students valued each other's posts. According to these studies, video holds potential for facilitating authentic online critical dialogue. However, in critical dialogue it is vital that each student is heard; thus, instructors need to ensure that students feel their posts are viewed and valued.

Video may also enable more equitable access for all students. Borup, West, and Graham (2013) explored how asynchronous video discussions were experienced by four different types of students: an extravert, an introvert, a student with low self-regulation skills, and an English language learner. They found the extravert enjoyed making the videos but did not see value in viewing peers' posts. The introvert appreciated the opportunity to re-record videos but used a large amount of time doing so. The ELL student did not feel confident enough to fully participate in the discussion, and the student with low self-regulation skills seemed to benefit from the structure and instructor-created videos. To ensure equal access in critical dialogue, designers need to consider how to meet each student's unique needs.

In order to effectively design for online critical dialogue, designers need to carefully consider the affordances and constraints of each form of communication. Asynchronous text may give students more time to reflect on and compose posts, allowing students to move at their own pace, whereas synchronous video discussions proceed at the same pace for all students. On the other hand, Rudick (2016) argued students may suppress conflict when given time to edit posts, where as in live discussions (or synchronous video discussions), students cannot change what they say after they say it. Asynchronous video might provide a middle-ground: students can re-record posts if they wish, but the posts themselves may be more natural and authentic. In other words, rather than laboring over each word or phrase in a post, in videos students may focus on their overall message and thus may be less likely to edit out controversial dialogue.

Critical dialogue researchers have also disagreed on whether body language and vocal inflection enhance or inhibit understanding in critical dialogue. Video, both synchronous and asynchronous, enables body language and voice inflection in discussions. Furthermore, asynchronous video may provide more intimacy and fidelity than pure-text posts while still allowing students to return to review previous posts as they feel appropriate. Perhaps most importantly, bringing video tools into online discussion has been shown to increase social presence in the discussion, leading to a more closely-connected community (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015).

The affordances and constraints of each discussion medium is summarized in Table 1. Which tool is most effective for critical dialogue depends on resolving some of the issues highlighted here. Next, we will describe a course that incorporated each of these discussion tools and describe future steps for evaluating which tools were most efficacious for critical dialogue.

Asynchronous Text	Asynchronous Video	Synchronous Video
Student controls pace of reading/writing	Some control over pace	Pace set by speakers
Easily quote and refer back to posts	Can review posts, but more difficult to quote directly	May have record of past comments; have to watch whole discussion to find

Increased comfort for quiet students and students with a non-dominant native language	Some students might not like creating videos. Introverted students may spend a large amount of time re-recording posts.	Less participation from quiet students/those with a non-dominant native language.
Unique type of personal intimacy	Intimacy through richer media	Intimacy through richer media and shared space
No visual/aural cues	Visual/aural cues to enhance understanding	Visual/aural cues to enhance understanding
Might allow editing-out offensive statements, words, or differences	More difficult to self-edit, but can re-record posts	Less self-editing, more immediate conflict
Disembodied, cognitively focused	Increased social presence	Increased social presence

Table 1. Comparison of Discussion Media

Course Example

The authors of this paper are involved in an ongoing, mixed-methods research study of a doctoral-level course required in an Ed.D. online program at a large, public university. The learning objectives of course are the following:

- Gain an understanding of contemporary issues in education.
- Contextualize individual research projects within a broader area of scholarship, policy, and/or practice.
- Identify gaps within educational research that individual research projects might address.
- Place individual study in dialogue with scholarship in the field.
- Provide a critical analysis of existing scholarship.
- Develop peer-reviews of classmates' assessments and research.
- Re-examine/revise individual research projects' theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Among these objectives, the course is designed to push students to critique themselves as educators and evaluate their educational research as well as research of other educators. In the course, students are encouraged to engage in critical dialogue based on their reaction to a compilation of readings and videos through discussion boards, asynchronous video, and small group video conferencing. Students also write reactions to individual readings and critical analysis papers throughout the course.

As part of a research study associated with this course, the authors will analyze course discussion and survey data for features of critical dialogue. Specifically, we will code the data for the crucial features of critical dialogue outlined in this paper. We hope to understand how the discussion medium influenced the critical dialogue of our students, including which features of critical dialogue each type of discussion enabled. By understanding what design features facilitate online critical dialogue, we can design courses that better assist students in negotiating complex and controversial social issues.

Conclusion

Although online learning can enable rich and productive dialogue, promoting critical dialogue may be difficult to do online. Specifically, balancing authenticity, dissent, and support can be challenging when students are physically and/or temporally separated from their classmates. We argue that online learning has both constraints and affordances for critical dialogue. For example, asynchronous and synchronous video may enable authentic and reflective discussions while still allowing students freedom as to where, how, and (in asynchronous video and discussion boards) when they participate. Through careful design, we can maximize the affordances and ameliorate the constraints, providing an effective online environment for critical dialogue.

References

Borup, J., West, R. E., & Graham, C. R. (2012). Improving online social presence through asynchronous video. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *15*(3), 195–203. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2011.11.001

Borup, J., West, R. E., & Graham, C. R. (2013). The influence of asynchronous video communication on learner social presence: a narrative analysis of four cases. *Distance Education*, *34*(1), 48–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2013.770427

Boyd, D. (2016). What would Paulo Freire think of Blackboard: Critical pedagogy in an age of online learning. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *7*(1), 165–186.

Clark, C., Strudler, N., & Grove, K. (2015). Comparing asynchronous and synchronous video vs. text based discussions in an online teacher education course. *Online Learning*, *19*(3), 48–69.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1988). Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach. (D. Macedo, D. Koike, & A. Oliveira, Trans.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Hilton, J. T. (2013). Digital critical dialogue: A process for implementing transformative discussion practices within online courses in higher education. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, *9*(4), 602–614.

Hudson, B. (2002). Critical dialogue online. In Rudestam K. (Ed.), *Handbook of online learning: Innovations in higher education and corporate training* (pp. 53–90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rudick, K. C. (2016). Online only classes and critical dialogue: Toward a Faustian bargain ideal for virtual education. *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*, *1*(1).