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# Mobilizing Practitioner Action Research to Foster Critical Pedagogy in a Large Online Undergrad University Course

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Paper Presentation

**MOBILIZING PRACTITIONER ACTION RESEARCH TO  
FOSTER CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN A LARGE ONLINE  
UNDERGRAD UNIVERSITY COURSE**

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**Abstract**

*This article reports aspects of a practitioner action research project conducted by the teachers of a large online English grammar course. The project was mobilized to create possibilities for developing online critical pedagogy. The online educators involved in this inquiry took measures to modify the syllabus they were working with in response to moments of dissonance while they were trying to comprehend students' online identities as valuable resources to enrich the process of teaching and learning. The preliminary outcomes of the project, which is still in progress, suggest that critical pedagogy would be more accurately conceptualized by complexifying the traditional notions of (a) literacy as a sociocultural and political phenomenon, (b) power relations, (c) student identity, and (d) transformation. Imagining how digital technology can multiply instances of the above notions through online posting, reposting, linking, sharing, networking, collaging and multimodality will clear the way for the emergence of different forms of online critical pedagogy.*

**Keywords:** action research, online critical pedagogy, online identity, online education

## **Introduction**

Despite their rapidly growing presence, credit-granting large online classes offered by established universities on a par with traditional in-person courses are relatively new; as a result, effective critical pedagogies that can inform instructors in survival mode in the frontline of this trend have not developed abundantly (Vander Valk, 2008). This article, a brief report of our research in progress at the University of Toronto, is written by the instructor (Michelle) and one of the teaching assistants (Amir) of a large introductory English grammar course, which hosts up to 700 undergraduate students. On average, 50% of the students in our course are international and of the latter, most are non-native speakers of English. Drawing upon practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and critical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 2009), we—as the teachers of the course with *insider* knowledge (Gitlin, Peck, Aposhian, Hadley, & Porter, 2002)—have been documenting and reflecting upon our frustrations with how the online format of the course and its size rendered critical and transformational pedagogies almost entirely absent from the course. On the other hand, we also share how we planned to take rounds of action in order to create space in the course for more meaningful pedagogical practices that could connect with students' online identities, embrace their backgrounds, and encourage them to engage with more socially conscious activities in cyberspace. This article relates the said reflections and actions as a work in progress that explores practitioner-mobilized critical action research to challenge the sense of alienation prevalent in large online courses (Rovai & Wighting, 2005) among both students and teachers.

Most research projects about online teaching and learning focus on course environment, learners' outcomes in comparison with face-to-face instruction, online practices associated with more effective learning, and administrative factors (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). In these research trends—which mainly address the infrastructure needed for rapidly emerging online models of education—there has been little attention to the importance of developing critical pedagogical practices online. “As virtual learning environments proliferate it is prudent, if not imperative, to engage the perspective of critical pedagogy” (Vander Valk, 2008, p.205). Amidst our speedy migration to online classes, our project aims to address this gap in online education research.

## **Guiding Questions**

Situated within a department of languages and linguistics, our course—entitled English Grammar I—is an introductory course for undergrad students and serves as a gateway course to a minor program in English Language Linguistics. English Grammar I focuses on parts of speech, word formation, and the logical structure of basic sentences. The course prepares the students for a more advanced course that examines the structure of complex sentences. One of the goals of these courses is to equip students with analytic skills that they can apply to academic writing. The course is offered through the learning management system Blackboard. In order to effectively keep track of the activities of the large number of students enrolled in the course (almost 700), the content delivery and assessment regime have been tightly organized with strict weekly deadlines. The lessons are delivered through video lectures over 12 weeks. The students are required to take six low-stakes online quizzes and to complete six more substantial assignments (with multiple

choice and short answer questions). The students have the opportunity to interact with their TAs (as many as eight TAs are involved in the delivery of the course) via email, on online forums called the Discussion Board, and in bi-weekly webinars. At the end of the semester the students take an in-person written examination. 50% of our student enrolment is international, and most of these students are non-native speakers of English. Moreover, there are also less visible non-native speakers; these are our numerous domestic students in whose homes and communities (cultural and/or peer-based) English is rarely spoken. The student make-up of the course thus creates pedagogical and cultural challenges recorded in detail in multilingual education research (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2012; Cummins, 2009; Ivkovic, D. & Lotherington, 2009; Pennycook, 2001).

The complexities of students' online identities (Vander Valk, 2008) and their online literate practices made us realize that in order to invite the students to partake in more critical textual events, we needed to systematically reflect upon our teaching practices and to constantly modify the way we were running the course. We were particularly anxious to inform our interactions with the students with critical pedagogy/literacy (Freire, 1970; Freire, 1987; Janks, 1993; Janks, 2010; Janks, 2013) mainly because of our professional legacies (Lytle, 2000) as social justice oriented educators (Bell, Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997) and also because of our belief that effective pedagogy should somehow be built upon students' identities and backgrounds, which were often ignored in our course because of its online format: "When students' developing sense of self is affirmed and extended through their interactions with teachers, they are more likely to apply themselves to academic effort and participate actively in instruction" (Cummins, 2001, p. 2).

Thus, our research project was organically initiated out of our everyday interactions as we (a) identified moments of doubt and dissonance (Ballenger, 2009; Pincus, 2001) that reflected our frustrations with the online format of the course; (b) took an inquiry stance and adopted a systematic approach to collecting data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009); and (c) took action to create space for critical pedagogy (Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Morrell, 2006). Our positionality as the teachers of the course, rather than researchers deployed by academic hierarchy or motivated by grant opportunities, gave us an epistemic privilege (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992), which we discuss further in the Inquiry Approach section. Accordingly, the research questions which guided our inquiry were as follows:

1- In what ways can an inquiry community—in our case, the TAs and the instructor—create room for an online critical pedagogy despite structural and administrative limitations typical of a large online introductory undergrad course?

2- How can we reconstruct the syllabus in order to engage with critical pedagogical practices that tap into students' online identities, and invite students to connect language with their everyday social, cultural, and political lives?

The above questions would be better comprehended with an explanation of the theoretical frameworks that informed our inquiry.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Looking for space for online critical pedagogy in our course, we found ourselves working within the paradigms of *critical pedagogy*, on the one hand, and *online learner identity* on the other. Critical pedagogy in literacy (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire, 1987) could be defined in different ways according to the educational and activist agendas different practitioners pursue. Our community, broadly speaking, regarded critical pedagogy as a framework with at least four important layers. First, critical pedagogy—and more conveniently connected to our grammar course: critical literacy (Janks, 1993; Janks, 2010; Janks, 2013; Janks, 2000)—redefines text as more than signs on paper (or letters on webpages); instead, critical pedagogy regards literacy as sets of practices informed by society, culture and politics, and thus famously advocates reading the wor(l)d. Second, if literacy is a sociocultural and sociopolitical practice, teaching and learning should attempt to challenge power relations in curricula, schools, and society. Third, in order to undermine dominance, advantage, and privilege (reinforced by current power relations), education should underline student identity in order to create more democratic relations between students and teachers, and also students and society. Fourth, the above process ideally should lead to some form of educational, power relational, and social transformation. We were, hence, interested to see how we could learn more about our online students in order to create space for online forms of dialogism (Matusov, 2009) and praxis.

Undergraduate students, even in traditional physical settings undergo complicated forms of *identity negotiation* (Cummins, 2001). “[S]tudents in the initial transition to university experience feelings of loss of continuity as they leave behind familiar learning contexts and make the transition to university” (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007, p.237). Online learning has also added to this complexity (Freeman & Bamford, 2004). Vander Valk (2008) wrote about some of the ramifications of current technological changes for learner identity, building upon Turkle’s work (1995; 2005):

One of the dominant themes in discussions of virtual environments concerns their ability to provide venues for the creation of new identities and new forms of identity. One of the influential early scholars of virtual identities, Sherry Turkle, argued that “our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code” (1995, p. 21). For Turkle, when individuals in virtual environments interact “they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (1995, p.12). ... Turkle (2005) has described the computer itself as a “second self”, and a range of commentators see virtual environments as described above, that is, as laboratories of “identity recombination.” (p. 206)

Any form of engagement with online critical pedagogy requires a reasonable understating of students’ online identity negotiation. On the other hand, critical pedagogy could also inform students’ identity formations online, their surfing practices, their sharing habits, and the online discourses they are exposed to. Online critical pedagogy also exposes students to online practices that create possibilities for transformation.

## **Inquiry Approach**

We approached the project inspired by the traditions of practitioner inquiry (Ballenger, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Lytle, 2000; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992) and critical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Davis, 2008; Morrell, 2006). Before we provide descriptions of our data collection, data analysis, and action cycles, we would like to clarify why we adopted practitioner inquiry methods while we were engaging with action research and also how we interpreted “critical action” in critical action research in regard to our project.

We started our project by mobilizing practitioner inquiry methods rather than classical action research models (McTaggart & Kemmis, 1988) because of its epistemological view of teachers as knowledge generators (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). “[M]ost versions of practitioner inquiry share a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent of educational and social change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37). This project was not planned by university administration; in contrast, it was organically developed as a necessity in our everyday interactions as instructor (Michelle) and TA (Amir) to share concerns and exchange thoughts. We found that in practitioner inquiry the issue of positionality of teacher-researchers was addressed in more depth than the mainstream action research literature.

Inspired by critical action research, on the other hand, we took action in order to address instances of dissonance we faced in the absence of critical pedagogy in our everyday online practices as teachers. We gradually realized that our meetings were haunted by questions whose answers required reforming the syllabus: Who are these students? Why are they in Canada? What are their perceptions of Canada? What are their ideas about English? What do we know about their backgrounds? What can we learn from their native cultures and knowledges? How can we use their mother tongues in the learning process? We felt the online format of the course had minimized critical interactions and socioculturally meaningful textual practices, and we felt we needed to address this problem by collective reflection and critical action. Hence, we soon found ourselves involved in two cycles of actions about which we write below.

### **Cycle 1.**

The first cycle of actions, in brief, included a number of measures working with the current syllabus and within the course structure that was in place. The course content and its online format, as is usually the case with undergrad courses, was partly constructed by the instructor (Michelle), but mainly inherited from the department. The measures implemented in the first cycle were micro reforms within the system, which did not form a considerable structural transformation but were helpful with our pedagogical exploration and dialectic interaction with the course.

The first cycle of actions did not include a single action but a number of small measures in a variety of different areas. The measures were not planned before hand; instead, they followed teacher-student interactions that indicated a need for critical considerations such

as: (a) creating space for the students' identity negotiation; (b) letting the students' mother tongues and native cultures surface more often (given the large proportion of non-native speakers of English); (c) approaching the English language (the content of the course) as a sociocultural and sociopolitical construct while still maintaining a formal approach to grammar; (d) encouraging critical collaborations among the students; and (e) humanizing our online communication with the students in order to challenge the power relations that could easily favour the teachers in the absence of traditional modes of communication such as face-to-face expression of concerns and frustrations.

In practical terms, for instance, meetings were specified for teachers to discuss emailing and commenting practices. The teachers exchanged thoughts about the language of communication, its frequency, and the quality of their online writing. As another example, we activated the discussion boards and webinars to generate more dialogue, despite structural limitations such as hours allotted to TAs, which mainly targeted grading (the role the institution envisaged for TAs). We also—time permitting—modified the quiz questions and enhanced the content of the larger assignments to provoke thought and to generate critical conversation.

The above steps created more room within the current syllabus for teacher-student and student-student interactions. They, also, gave us a sense of possible directions for engagement with more critical interaction through more meaningful quiz questions and more online dialogue. Nevertheless, we felt that these measures would not bloom into a wholesome critical pedagogy. Despite our modifications, because of our assessment design, the students were still rewarded for content re-delivery rather than critical engagement with language. Also, a lot of our questions about the students' online identities, belief systems, literate lives, online literacy practices, and potential online activism remained unanswered. We, hence, deemed a next cycle of actions necessary.

## **Cycle 2.**

As indicated before, in this article we are reporting a project in progress. The actions discussed in Cycle 2 have not been fully implemented and are shared here as projected future directions. The first series of actions were impactful and energizing; nevertheless, after reflecting on the data from the aforesaid procedures, we decided that in order to invite more from the students into our online space—both in terms of their backgrounds and more transformational engagement with language—we need to overhaul the assessment design. At present, the students are mainly assessed according to their performance in the online quizzes/assignments (54%) and the paper final examination (38%). Active participation (engaging with peers and teachers), on the other hand, is rewarded minimally (8%) mainly because of structural and financial constraints. Increased participation and its assessment (involving hundreds of students) has been typically seen by administrators as generating serious issues regarding time and human resources. With these considerations in mind, we feel that we need a second cycle of actions including:

1- Exploring more sociocultural approaches to language (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) as a way of complementing the generative grammar approach (Chomsky, 1965), which focuses on a

formal analysis of language and which is emphasized in the department's Linguistics programs as a whole.

2- Increasing reward for active participation as opposed to our current test-oriented approach. We are thinking of activities that foster critical collaborations between the students, create space for clearer manifestations of students' online identities, and encourage forms of surfing, posting, copy-pasting, text-generating, and text-remixing that can open horizons for online sociocultural and intellectual transformation.

3- Developing assessment methods that offer online opportunities to the students for making their multimodal abilities, multiliteracies, and linguistic repertoires more visible.

4- Reforming assignments to embrace more of the students' actual academic lives. In particular, we should think about ways our course could improve students' linguistic performance in other courses they take.

Not all of the above suggestions are particularly revolutionary for online courses. However, we see the possibility of implementing these measures much more challenging for a high-enrolment (about 700 students) introductory class than for smaller online classes with more teacher autonomy. The sheer size of our course has taught us that our action research is not merely about pedagogical change; it, also, takes much ideological and structural transformation because of the way institutions regard these courses: mainly, it seems, as cheap but profitable products. Implicating Cycle 2, we are aware, will require complicated forms of policy reform, power negotiation, and probably philosophical debate about the place of education in our current neoliberal structures.

### **Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

The action research phases prescribed by more traditional designs are (1) planning, (2) action, (3) observation, and (4) reflection (in preparation for the next cycle(s)) (McTaggart & Kemmis, 1988). We felt that this model—adopted also in business and management research (see for instance: Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014)—was slightly crude and unrealistic to cover the complexities of everyday teaching and learning, especially for a large online class with a sizable teaching team. In accordance with the methodological considerations described in the previous section, we developed a more nuanced model, which—as summarized in Figure 1 below—differed from the traditional model at least in 3 regards. First, we find “planning” a rather vague concept as far as everyday realities of teaching are concerned. We consider the initiation of our project as rooted in reoccurrences of moments of dissonance we experienced while teaching as practitioners as opposed to a grand plan constructed by a researcher/manager for a grand action. Second, we have not been thinking of our cycles as including one action but a series of measures. Third, we would like to highlight the significance of the involvement of a community of teachers in our project.

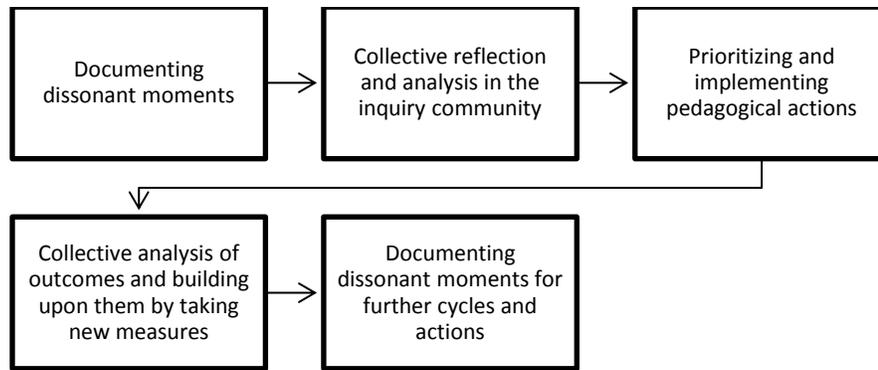


Figure 1

The research team had two components: first, a teacher inquiry community, including all the TAs and the instructor; second, Michelle (instructor) and Amir (TA), who implemented measures suggested by the teaching team and studied the outcomes systematically (which were later shared with the other TAs and discussed as modifications that could be adopted by all TAs). Accordingly, there were two categories of data collected: data from the teachers' reflections and exchanges, and also data from students' online activities and comments in Amir's tutorials over four semesters (about 300 students).

Our pool of data hosted the website with all online activities (by students and TAs) including blog posts, quizzes, assignments, grades, and student profiles; all online correspondence with the students; descriptions of webinars; informal interviews with the students (often during the webinars); online observations of students' behavioural patterns and interactions with one another; notes of the teachers' conversations in meetings; and detailed documentations of actions and outcomes.

With the massive size of the data pool, our data analysis was too fluid to be reduced to a formula. However, there was a guiding pattern that inspired our creative selection and interpretation of the data at the service of new rounds of actions. Briefly speaking, the data were collected until themes indicating problems, concerns, inconsistencies, anxieties, and frustrations emerged. At that point, data that facilitated conversations about solutions and possible actions were coded and later discussed in meetings. The content of meetings, of course, could have changed based on local circumstances, students' histories and teachers' legacies; we thus do not wish to generalize the decisions, understandings, and interpretations of our inquiry community. Figure 2 is a sketch of the process of the data collection and analysis.

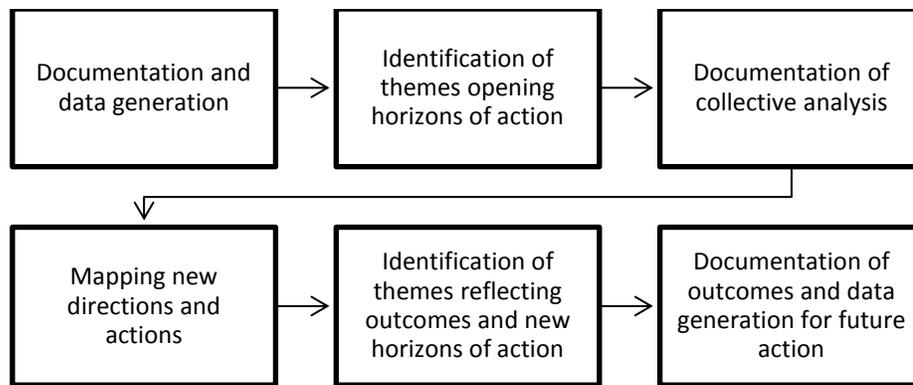


Figure 2

### **Ethics.**

We obtained institutional ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Toronto in order to gather two types of data. The first type of data that we were permitted to gather was for quantitative analysis. Once an iteration of the course had finished and final grades were submitted, we matched student biographical information (personal demographics along with admission, registration, and course activity information obtained from the Office of the Registrar) with student performance data on on-line assessments (quizzes and assignments), the final exam, and student activity reports from the LMS Blackboard. We have used the *anonymised* matched performance data and biographical information to identify correlations between student performance and biographical variables. The students were able to read about our study once they had enrolled in the course, but we did not require their consent to follow through with it.

A second (and separate) ethics approval permitted us to gather and study qualitative data from student interactions in Amir's tutorials. Amir's students were asked for their consent to document and study their online activities and comments on the condition that the data remained anonymous and void of any personal identifiers. Participation in this aspect of the study was thus voluntary, and the students could choose to cease to participate at any time during the course.

### **Preliminary Findings and Discussion**

Our project is still in progress, but what we have learnt so far from this empirical study corroborates the theoretical speculations offered by Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel (1996) about critical pedagogy in cyberspace as a *postmodern* space (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1996):

[P]racticing critical pedagogy in cyberspace must build upon sophisticated notions of multiplicity. Critical educators must recognize that there are multiple paths for reading and writing, and possibilities for multiple and nonlinear forms of learning and teaching interactions. (p.160)

The further our project develops, the more we realize that the main four dimensions of classical critical pedagogy (the social, power, identity, and transformation, discussed in the Theoretical Frameworks) can still inform online classes; however, all these concepts should be revisited by the vision that cyberspace multiplies students' online existences, behaviours, and practices. In what follows, we briefly discuss some specific dimensions of critical online approaches we engaged with. In each section, we introduce the *dissonant moments* which motivated our measures and share the resultant *resolutions*.

### **The social.**

When thinking about language and literacy learning as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, educators should imagine what this notion could mean in cyberspace. We should ask how much we know about students' online social lives. How has digital technology changed online manifestations of culture? How has the political stretched from real to virtual in our age? And how does online over-textuality connect to the above questions?

As one of the measures in the course of this project, we tried to link the students to available online text in original web formats from the video lectures and from the quizzes. We also connected the assignments with current political affairs as much as possible and emphasized the grammatical logic of non-standard dialects and register variation, arenas where power differentials play out in linguistically significant ways. The topic of English grammar also lends itself well to examining language innovation in cyberspace, and we have accordingly begun to ask students to consider the formal and sociocultural properties of virtual language use characteristic of texting and tweeting, among many others. Here we provide an example of how we explored contextualizing grammatical functions in order to connect our syllabus to current sociopolitical developments.

### ***Dissonant moment.***

While in Week 7 and 8 of the course we were busy teaching "pronouns, determiners, and qualifiers," our southern neighbours in the US were engaging in the 2016 presidential primaries, which eventually led to the election of President Donald Trump. Although the election campaigns generated massive amounts of language in the press, cable news, and social media, our textbook material felt indifferently detached from that social and political exchange. If we had been teaching in person and met the students in a physical classroom, we could have gauged their interest in the issue and found ways to connect them with the conversations about the elections, which were prevalent on the campus. The strictly structured online syllabus, however, did not provide this opportunity. Still we felt anxious to connect the grammar points we were teaching to the elections and decided the only place to do so was the assignment that followed the Week 7 and 8 lessons.

**Assignment#4: Required Reading and Listening** ▾

Build Content ▾   Assessments ▾   Tools ▾   Partner Content ▾

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 **The I's Have It**  
 Enabled: Statistics Tracking  
 Attached Files:  The I's Have It.pdf ▾ (100.876 KB)

From the *New York Times*, Feb 24, 2009  
 Written by Patricia T. O'Connor and Stewart Kellerman

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 **Obama smells self for sulphur**  
 Enabled: Statistics Tracking

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 **Trump: Victory speech in New Hampshire**  
 Enabled: Statistics Tracking

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 **Singular Generic "They"**  
 Enabled: Statistics Tracking  
 Attached Files:  Singular Generic THEY Reading.pdf ▾ (50.116 KB)

Data Sample 1: Required Reading and Listening

**Resolution.**

As reflected in Data Sample 1 above, we built opportunities into the assignments where the students were invited to watch videos of public speeches made by Donald Trump and then President Barak Obama. The assignment questions addressed grammatical issues within the politicians' audio texts: see for instance Data Sample 2, which targets Trump's repetitive use of "so" for exaggerated modifications of adjectives and adverbs and Data Sample 3, which asks students to reflect on Barak Obama's calculated use of informal registers. The online format of the course, which we felt typically hindered meaningful conversation with the students, had us, on the other hand, broaden our usual perception of "required readings" to include authentic audio texts in tests, quizzes, and assignments, often a challenging task in traditional classrooms for want of equipment and set-up time.

**QUESTION 18** 2 points [Save Answer](#)

Listen carefully to the video-clip of Donald Trump giving his victory speech in New Hampshire.

Trump uses the word "so" several times in the clip.

a) What is the category/function of this word?

b) Provide one piece of evidence that supports your answer in (a).

[2 points]

Paragraph ▼ Arial ▼ 3 (12pt) ▼

Mashups

### Data Sample 2: Assignment Question 18

**QUESTION 17** 4 points [Save Answer](#)

You have now listened to the video-clip of President Obama speaking entitled "Obama smells self for sulphur".

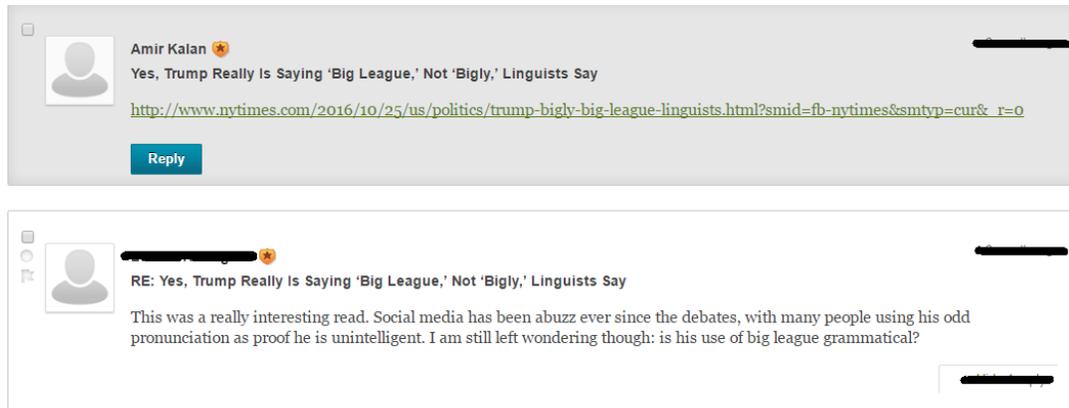
You will have noticed that his speech is full of non-standard usage, including "ain't". Offer an explanation as to why Obama uses so many non-standard forms. Your answer should *at least* take into account his educational background (Please check to see if he went to university and if so, where. Can we assume that he is well-versed in standard English?) and the context of this video-clip (He is speaking at a public rally in Greensboro, North Carolina).

[2 points for a well-reasoned answer + 2 points for grammar]

Paragraph ▼ Arial ▼ 3 (12pt) ▼

### Data Sample 3: Assignment Question 17

Following the focus on the elections in the United States, other online venues also were created for the students to explore connections between language, politics, and media—in Data Sample 4, read, for instance, a student’s comment on the New York Times’ “Yes, Trump Really Is Saying ‘Big League,’ Not ‘Bigly,’ Linguists Say,” shared by Amir in his online tutorial.



#### Data Sample 4: New York Times Article about Trump's Language Use

In the same vein, we also realized that our lesson on pronouns would lend itself very well to the topic of gender identity. Accordingly, we integrated a reading about the use of singular generic “they” in English, still a concern in prescriptive circles, but a necessary innovation that must be championed and supported, given the binary “he/she” distinction for humans made at the grammatical level that leaves no room for persons with a non-binary gender identity. In fact, as this lesson was being taught, a faculty member at the University of Toronto was embroiled in a controversy over his refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns. As a team, we decided that even though this topic would make some of our students uncomfortable—not to mention some of the TAs—we would nonetheless encourage voluntary discussion of the specific issue in the media and the use of gender-neutral pronouns more broadly.

#### **Critical collaborations online.**

Online educators must also think about multiple new forms of online collaboration both with third parties and among the students. One strategy we discussed in our meetings was multiplying virtual student communities beyond Blackboard to increase student connectability in the course through more “linking” and “networking” possibilities (Lankshear et al., 1996, p. 160). Our students already engaged in virtual communities in our Blackboard space, but the purpose of such forums is chiefly grade oriented and the sharing of ideas does not often involve critical discussion. The challenge is therefore to cultivate virtual spaces in which critical discussion and creative collaboration result in better overall performance in the course and we thought one solution would be interacting with students in multiple online venues. This purpose, we thought could better be achieved if the teaching and learning occurred on the students’ social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumbler. Nevertheless, the policies of our institution prevented us from stepping beyond Blackboard, which generated conversations in our inquiry community about online supervision, online student visibility, and accountability.

In another example of critical online collaborations, in response to students’ questions on our online discussion boards, we purposefully used videos posted by YouTube English teachers with fewer views hoping to create online partnerships with other language

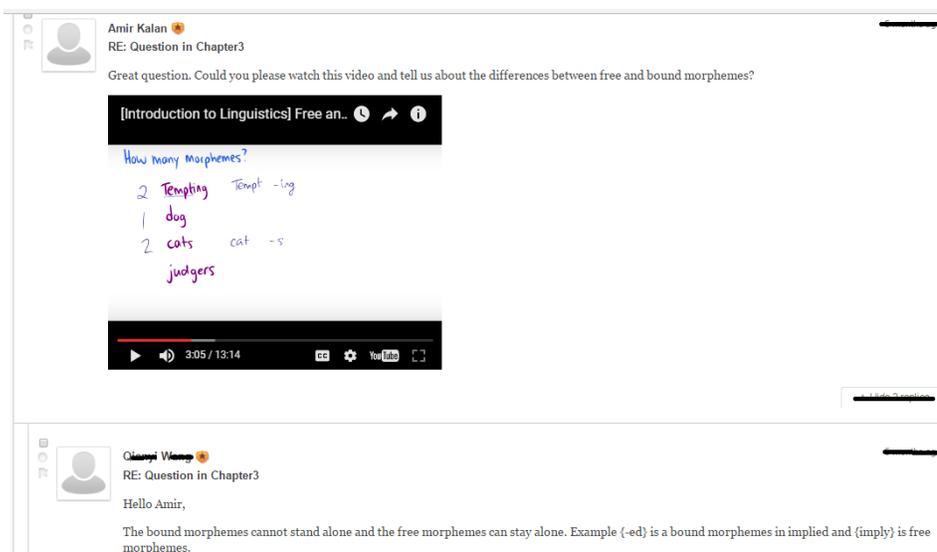
teachers (particularly feeling that some of these videos might be a source of income through online advertisements). Here we break down this example to “dissonant moment” and “resolution” for a clearer demonstration.

### ***Dissonant moment.***

Throughout the course we felt frustrated because the class size and legal restrictions prevented us from exploring Blackboard-external online possibilities that could foster different forms of online collaboration through a multiplicity of linking possibilities. As stated above, we for instance could not employ students’ social media presence to encourage posting, reposting, and remixing of the course content. As a result, we felt an urge to initiate creative (but sometimes very small-scale) forms of online collaborations within the limits of the frame we worked in. The following is one example of our measures.

### ***Resolution.***

In his tutorials, Amir developed a strategy to answer students’ questions with links to online content shared by teachers who were posting free educational materials. This approach was taken to lead the students’ sizable online traffic to quality videos generated by other teachers as a form of online collaboration among teachers. Data Sample 5 below is an example of such an attempt. The picture shows Amir’s link in response to a student’s question: “I am not very clear about the bound morphemes and free morphemes. All affixes are bound morphemes, but why some is free morphemes?”



Data Sample 5: Link to Online Material by Third Party

### **Transformation.**

The same type of questions we posed for socio-politically connected language and critical online collaborations are also valid for social and personal transformation. If “reading the world ... precedes reading the word and writing a new text must be seen as one means of transforming the world” (Freire, 1987, p.5), what do empowerment and social justice mean in an online age? In our course, we explored possibilities for different forms of online activism and debated how the course content could translate into meaningful social action. Here is one example.

### **Dissonant moment.**

A question in one of our assignments focusing on the concept of non-standard English asked the students to provide examples of non-standard grammatical constructions in pop culture. We were shocked to receive waves of misogynistic lyrics, much of whose meaning may have escaped the international students, who are typically more familiar with academic English than conversational English. Data Sample 6 below shows an example of such lyrics shared by a student.

QUESTION 12: SHORT ANSWER 0 out of 2 points

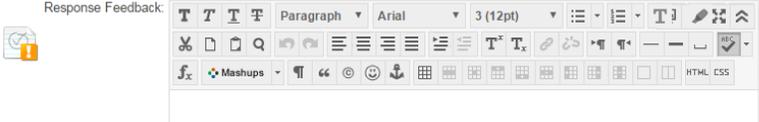
Listen to a few of your favourite songs (in English). Can you spot a SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION? You ought to hear more than one!

1. Identify a line/sentence that contains a subordinating conjunction. Type it out in context, underlining the whole subordinate (dependent) clause and then type out the subordinating conjunction in ALL CAPITALS or in bold. [2 points] Be sure to let us know the title of the song and the singer/group who sings it.

Given Answer: The lyrics are from "Animals" by Maroon 5.  
"But we get along **WHEN I'm inside you.**"

Correct Answer: [None]

Response Feedback:



Data Sample 6: Example of Non-Standard English in Pop Music

### **Resolution.**

After a meeting about this problematic outcome, we decided to change the question to invite the students to look for non-standard English in pop music that addressed environmental and/or social justice issues. We hoped this modification would lead some online traffic towards websites discussing environmental issues and also independent singers and musicians. Although we were not able to track students’ surfing patterns, the lyrics we received after the revised assignment met our expectations and suggested a significant amount of socially responsible surfing. See Data Sample 7 below for an example:

[4 points in total]

Given Answer: 1.) "Keep Ya Head Up" - Tupac Shakur (2Pac)

This song is written with regard to feminism and equality towards women in the 90's. (social injustice)

- "And when he tells you you ain't nothin', don't believe him. And if he can't learn to love you you should leave him. And I ain't tryna gas ya up, I just call em' like I see em'"
- Alternative: And when he tells you, you are not worth anything, don't believe him. And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him. And I'm not trying to flatter you, I'm just telling the truth.

2.) "Where Is The Love" - The Black Eyed Peas

This song is written with regards to ongoing injustice both environmental and social.

- "Chemical gases fillin' lungs of little ones, With ongoin' sufferin' as the youth die young, So ask yourself is the lovin' really gone?"
- Alternative: Chemical gases filling the lungs of little ones, with ongoing suffering as the youth die young, so ask yourself is all the humanity really gone?

3.) "Words of Wisdom" - 2Pac

This is a song written as a letter of outrage regarding racism in America. (social injustice)

- "This is for the masses the lower classes, The ones you left out, jobs were givin', better livin' But we were kept out."
- Alternative: This is for the masses and lower classes. The ones you left out. Jobs were given, for better lives, but we were kept out.

4.) "Get Up Stand Up" - Bob Marley

This song refers to standing up for human rights of all kinds. (social injustice)

- "We sick an' tired of your ism-skism game, dyin' n goin' to heaven in Jesus' name"
- Alternative: We are sick and tired of your imposed sub-systems and classifications, dying and going to heaven in Jesus' name.

## Data Sample 7: Example of Socially Committed Lyrics

### **Power.**

Online educators should recognize the multilayered nuances of power relations in online social spheres including online undergraduate courses. It is imperative we think how power relations between students and teachers and also students and society would complexify as a result of our digital language use. The new online textuality we are living in seriously challenges our perceptions about issues such as scientific authority, ownership of knowledge, textual originality, and plagiarism (Goldsmith, 2011). In our class, for instance, screen-capturing and copy-pasting frequently blurred the border between collaboration and what is often called "cheating"—which unfortunately at times led to our collective panic and resulted in tightening measures of assessment further and giving more weight to the final paper examination. Tightly defined assessment only drives us away from problem-posing pedagogy with its emphasis on a democratic power sharing between students and teachers. Hence, in what ways can we reform our practices to include students' emerging multidimensional textual practices for a co-construction of curriculum and assessment design in order to combat our fears of the convergence and multiplication of students' textual products?

Following the pattern we established above, we share Amir's memo of one of our meetings as the dissonant moment when the teaching team was debating whether we should define the students' screen-capturing and copy-pasting practices as collaboration or cheating.

### **Dissonant moment.**

Amir's memo:

The TAs are done with grading Assignment #5. They are shocked to have seen many instances of copied responses. Some of the TAs see the issue as cheating. Others challenge this view. Assignments are required to be done within a

certain time frame, a measure put in place to prevent plagiarism. A conversation starts about how the students could have communicated the correct answers so quickly, which is indicative of a digital agility we seemingly failed to consider when designing the online dynamics. The question is: how do we approach this problem? Should we punish the students?

### **Resolution.**

Since the students were encouraged to collaborate with peers when doing the assignments, we found our ethical grounds too muddy to lead to judging the students' performance as plagiarism. We instead used this opportunity to pose questions to deepen our understanding of the students' online behaviours. We, in particular, discussed how the structure of the assignment and the generic nature of the questions motivated irresponsible copy-pasting. Also, we asked, what were some ways to employ the students' digital agility in more constructive forms?

### **Online identity.**

Online learner identity, also, is a central question in any form of online critical pedagogy (Turkle, 1995; Turkle, 2005; Vander Valk, 2008). Any change in power relations in dominant social, cultural, political status quo happens only when students' identities—class, culture, language, gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, literate live—are embraced in the process. However, how do these aspects of identity converge, combine, collage, and multiply in digital textual manifestations? As far as literacy is concerned, how do students' literacy discourses and practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee, & et al, 1996; Gee, 2012) change online? While teaching the course we often felt that we needed to learn more about students' online reading and writing, which we now had started to regard more broadly as posting, reposing, copy-pasting, surfing, and linking practices.

In our analyses and actions, we did not treat "online identity" as a point of focus separated from the students' online performances; and thus we cannot provide a token question or solution here, as we did with the other categories. As is also the case with teaching in traditional physical classrooms, more than specifying students' online identities, we were interested in creating space for students' identities for them to claim agency and to have an active and meaningful role in societal and power relational interactions around them. This attempt we hope is discernable in the examples we provided above.

### **Conclusion**

Very little has been published about critical pedagogy in online courses. When educators who have invested their careers in developing alternative, transformational, and critical teaching practices migrate to online courses, they not only have to acquire the technological know-how to run their classes but must also cope with challenges regarding the online application of most of the pedagogical practices they have developed in physical classrooms. This article reports aspects of a practitioner action research mobilized by the teachers (instructor and TAs) of a large online English grammar course. The project was initiated to explore possible online critical pedagogical practices. The online educators

involved in this inquiry took measures to modify the syllabus in response to moments of dissonance while they were trying to comprehend students' online identities as valuable resources to enrich the process of teaching and learning. The preliminary outcomes of the project, which is still in progress, suggest that critical pedagogy would be more accurately conceptualized by complexifying the traditional notions of (a) literacy as a sociocultural and political phenomenon, (b) power relations, (c) student identity, and (d) transformation. Imagining how digital technology can multiply instances of the above notions through online posting, reposting, linking, networking, collaging and multimodality will clear the way for the emergence of different forms of online critical pedagogy. ■■

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