

LEARNING WITH ART, PLAYING WITH THOUGHTS

Critical Pedagogy in
MA Art Education

Ayesha Ghanchi

What is a critical consciousness? How do the tutors at the Sandberg Instituut encourage a critical consciousness and why is it important – especially now? This essay attempts to unpack rather than answer these questions, through an examination of the teaching approaches of three tutors at the Sandberg: Flavia Dzodan and Jules Sturm, both of whom are tutors at the Critical Studies department, and Juha van 't Zelfde – tutor and course director of the temporary programmes Shadow Channel and Resolution.¹ How do these tutors approach *positionality* and *knowledge production*, both of which are key concepts that are inherent to a critical consciousness?

These concepts are particularly relevant to the art school, which foreground experimentation and exploration of positionality and knowledge production as part of an artistic process. Moreover, tutors at the Sandberg have the opportunity to design courses which favour process over creating an exhibit-ready product.

We currently find ourselves in a juncture in politics and society in which fascist ideologies are on the rise. And indeed, from my experience as a facilitator in art schools in the Netherlands, these ideologies are creeping into 'regular' discourses in the classroom, under the guise of irony and the misuse of now exhausted and overdetermined notions of 'freedom of speech' and 'freedom of expression'. Gaining a critical consciousness then, is important to challenge dangerous ideologies through a rigorous and continual examination of the genealogy of social crises, which is counter to the reactionary politics of blame. It is apt to remember Willem Sandberg resisted the Nazis at great personal risk to himself by forging documents to protect Jewish people from being sent to their deaths.² Once the Nazi's realised that forged documents were in circulation, Sandberg and his associates destroyed the original records by blowing up the Amsterdam Public Records Office in 1943. This act saved thousands of lives. In what ways does the Sandberg Instituut live up to the braveness of its namesake Willem Sandberg? In the context of the slow infiltration of fascist ideologies into mainstream culture, it is important that a pedagogical practice places itself as necessarily pro-humanity and anti-oppressive.

AGAINST 'THOUGHTS
OF FANCY'

I draw from the writings of John Dewey (1859-1952), Paulo Freire (1921-1997), bell hooks (1952), and Joe L. Kincheloe (1950-2008) as my critical frameworks.

1

Shadow Channel ran from 2017-2019, Resolution from 2019-2021. See: <https://sandberg.nl/current-temporary-programmes>.

2 Flavia Dzodan, presentation for Eindhoven Design Academy. Word document attached to email sent on 23 May 2019 from Flavia Dzodan, 2019.

3 John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910), New York: Prometheus Books, 2nd edition, 1991.

4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), trans. by M.B. Ramos, London: Penguin Books, 2nd edition, 1996.

My formulation of a critical consciousness emerges through Dewey's notion of *metacognition*,³ Freire's *conscientização*⁴ and hooks's persistent drive to dismantle heterosexist white supremacy.⁵

5 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Great Britain: Routledge, 1994.

For Dewey, the purpose of education was to create citizens who would actively participate and create democracy, and could also peacefully negotiate differences. Fundamentally, Dewey argued that a peaceful society is reached and maintained only by metacognitive citizens. That is, citizens who understand *how* they think, so as not to be swayed by – in his words – “thoughts of fancy”.⁶ Or rather, be swayed by received opinions without understanding how those opinions are positioned and/or can be challenged. Freire's *conscientização* (or critical consciousness) is similarly formulated, only here it is also about gaining an awareness of how oppressive political and cultural structures operate on an epistemological and societal level. *Conscientização* is twofold: it is a continuous examination of power structures, and an active engagement in dismantling them. Hooks consciously takes inspiration from Freire's work and places her pedagogical approach more specifically in the examination and dismantling of colonial frameworks that are reproduced through sexism, homophobia and racism. The salient theme shared between Dewey, Freire and hooks, is that their approach to pedagogy is to create an awareness of how structural power, capitalism and hegemony infiltrate the big decisions as well as the minutiae of our everyday reality. It is also an awareness of how colonial legacies are reproduced, or in Dzodan's words: “coloniality as an ongoing process that persists after the settler has left, because it's a system that remains in place.”⁷

6 Dewey (note 3).

A critical consciousness is an ongoing and constantly evolving process, in which we try to understand how our thoughts and ways of being are impacted by inherited hegemonic structures that serve the powerful. And how we as agentic beings can think, feel, act and take action to redistribute power to serve all.

7 Flavia Dzodan, interview with author on teaching approaches at the Sandberg, 22 May 2019.

POSITIONALITY

Positionality and critical knowledge production are implicit to a critical consciousness. It is an ongoing examination of one's relationship to power and privilege that includes nameable identity markers such as class, gender,

sexuality, race, size, as well as lived situations and realities that are not so easily referred to in discourse. Critical pedagogy demands that we situate our education practice within our specific political positioning. For Kincheloe, no education paradigm is neutral and it is the work of the pedagogue to *declare* their politics, frameworks and their perception of how their identity and life experiences have impacted their knowledge formation:

Education is a political activity [...] A district supervisor who writes a curriculum in social studies, for example, that demands the simple transference of a body of established facts about the great men and great events of American history is also teaching a political history which upholds the status quo.⁸

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Joe L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2nd edition, 2008, p. 9.

For Kincheloe, all education is positioned, arguing that pedagogues “have a responsibility to declare their interests” and make their biases and political positions known to their students.⁹

Similarly, Dzodan, Sturm and van ‘t Zelfde stated that their experiences and convictions are inherent to their course development. Importantly, an aspect of their positioning is necessarily anti-fascist and anti-oppressive. Dzodan states this most passionately: “Everything I do and everything I’ve been doing for the last ten years is against fascism. And about respecting human dignity and support[ing] life. Supporting life in the sense of making sure people don’t die because of ideologies.”¹⁰

9 Ibid.

10 Dzodan (note 7).

It is apt then that the tutors begin their courses with a critical reflection of coloniality and structural power, albeit in different ways. Although the similarity between all three of their practices is that they pose questions that aim to ultimately unravel coloniality. Critical pedagogues advocate the dismantling of structural power by asking questions about the personal. For example, hooks problematised her pedagogical approach based on her personal subjectivity as a black feminist in response to white patriarchal hegemony, and thus her relationship to the literature that she shared with her group as a queer black feminist. In particular, she would share a biographical paragraph with her group and ask them to do the same at the beginning of each course. Hooks revealed a part of her personal history to create an equivalence of status and foster an environment of mutual participation: “When we all take risks; we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community. We discover together that we can

11 bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, Great Britain: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2010, p. 21.

be vulnerable in the space of shared learning, that we can take risks."¹¹

Hooks argues that taking risks and being vulnerable encourages her students to do the same, and from this position of openness the learning happens through the 'movement of ideas' between how the students articulate their positionalities. Like hooks, Dzodan and Sturm share their personal *positionality* with the class so that their students are encouraged to do the same. For Dzodan: "I'm a punk with a keyboard. I have no academic background. My entire body of work is informed by my personal experience as an illegal immigrant in this country more than 20 years ago."¹²

12 Flavia Dzodan, presentation at *What is Research?* seminar at the Sandberg, 12 April 2019.

Indeed, Dzodan describes herself as unorthodox as she teaches primarily from her writing as opposed to that of others. Similarly, Sturm places her theory within her personal experience – positioning herself and the author in question:

So how do I structure my classes? I guess, I always try to kind of start with a sort of personal experience or anecdote or tell them why I find [the things we read] important [...]. Because I think it's actually very important to position the authors of texts in specific ways [...] they are in a very specific location historically and geographically and class wise and gender, et cetera.¹³

13 Jules Sturm, interview with author on teaching approaches at the Sandberg, 16 May 2019.

Similarly, van 't Zelfde designed a responsive course structure in which the tutors also took the opportunity to understand their students' positionalities. In the first semester of Resolution the curriculum is open and flexible and based on the tutors getting to know the students through dialogic and game-based exercises, which necessitates an exploration of opinions, biases and interests. After which, his team learns more about their students' interests and urgent concerns.

The tutors all engage in processes of understanding the students' backgrounds, biases and opinions. It appears that this is a foundation for asking more specific questions to get them to think more deeply or differently about their perspectives. It is also a means to connect the students' self-understanding within wider socio-cultural and political frameworks.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

A critical consciousness necessitates an active reflection of how knowledge is produced. It is an awareness of how traditional models of thinking and knowledge production are steeped in uninterrogated assumptions pertaining to colonial supremacy. Dzodan and Sturm address the problematics of knowledge production through dismantling theory with alternative narratives and texts that inculcate embodied, positioned and emotional contexts. Dzodan's

work and thinking is heavily informed by decolonial thinkers from Latin America¹⁴, and central to her work is the notion of epistemic justice:

¹⁴ The Latin American thinkers that Dzodan refers to are: Gloria Anzaldúa, Maria Lugones, Walter Mignolo and Anibal Quijano.

[E]pistemic justice refers to the notion of practices that seek to re-address the wrongs committed against knowledge produced by colonised subjects [...] So, for instance, knowledge produced by indigenous people [was not] deemed to be knowledge. A framework of epistemic justice seeks to re-situate this knowledge vis-à-vis the other forms of knowledge that are considered valid.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dzodan (note 7).

Dzodan attempts to redistribute value to previously under-valued, ignored or belittled modes of intellectual production. Sturm also problematises knowledge production from a different (yet parallel) angle, namely, arguing that the university setting is so immersive, and so deeply entrenched in historic modes of production, that it is difficult or even impossible to be truly cognisant of how these historic processes are reproduced in the present:

I feel that we can't even know if the knowledge that we produce is wrong, discriminating or going in the wrong direction, because we don't know about the processes through which we [arrive] there. We can't really even attack that knowledge in any productive way I think, because we don't know how we have we actually produced it.¹⁶

¹⁶ Sturm (note 13).

Both Dzodan and Sturm describe a vacillating relationship towards theories incumbent to the university. Sturm refers to, with the aim to 'leave behind', aspects of her former philosophical training, in favour of alternative modes of knowledge production that focus on an embodied approach. Dzodan similarly

doesn't throw out the Western canon but rather sees its limitations for the purpose of the liberating intention of her theory: "I tend to be quite assertive about the [limitations] of the white male western canon. Which paradoxically, I also use a lot. Because my own work hinges on this. So, it's not that I'm dismissing the western canon, but I'm saying that's not the end of it."¹⁷

17 Dzodan (note 7).

Like Dzodan, Sturm refers to traditional modes of discourse but attempts to depart and complicate her relation to this knowledge. Importantly, she states that she is more interested in exploring 'routes towards knowledge production', rather than concern herself with the value of established epistemologies. Sturm asserts that exploring 'pathways towards knowledge production' should include inventing alternative modes of thinking and practices that are applied outside of the university setting: "We should definitely not burn all the books. But we should develop new pathways or new context or new practices of getting towards new types of knowledge [I want] to invent other places where theory can be developed other than the university setting."¹⁸

18 Sturm (note 13).

Sturm's will to invent alternative spaces and modes of thinking outside of the university setting resonates with van 't Zelfde's practical and applied pedagogy. In his role as tutor and course director, he fervently insists on emphasising the agentic aspect of critical consciousness, by continually considering which pedagogical methods can encourage the students to apply their critical thinking to social realities in the here and now. "I try to engage people into a practical activity that will articulate and clarify their position, their ambition, and their impact on the environment and the community they operate in."¹⁹ Leaving the classroom and practically enacting theory is vitally important – as previously mentioned, conscientização is twofold. It is not just an awareness of one's critical positioning, conscientização is also gaining an agentic ability to take action in accordance with it. By this I mean, it's an application of an enhanced cognisance of positionality in relation to personal and collective power that can be applied to social realities. Hence, van 't Zelfde is continually concerned with the questions "how can art respond to society and what are artists' responsibility"? In reference to his previous work as a director of the art organisation *Lighthouse*, he stated that through art we can "try to look at the world in various ways and figure out what things mean and how we

19 Juha van 't Zelfde, interview with author on teaching approaches at the Sandberg, 15 May 2019.

20 Van 't Zelfde, quoted in: Matthew Caines, 'Arts head: Juha van't Zelfde, artistic director, Lighthouse Brighton', in: *The Guardian*, 5 August 2014. Accessed through: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2014/aug/05/juha-zelfde-lighthouse-brighton-arts>

might be able to amplify, solve or ask questions of them."²⁰ Van 't Zelfde's positioning of art as a tool for social investigation is aligned with Dewey's approach to learning as a collaborative investigation. Dewey's pedagogical methods includes a group investigation, where students and teachers initially define a question together, based on the urgencies or interests of the students. They then collaboratively deepen their understanding of what the question is and hypothesise possible solutions. Van 't Zelfde's programme also aims to establish concerns and questions pertinent to the students and its socio-political implications, in order to then devise content that can help them address these.

In his later writings, Dewey often referred to 'the environment' (be it physical, social, political or cultural) as a constitutive part of the collaborative enquiry. Similarly, both Dzodan and van 't Zelfde critically consider positionality and knowledge production through an exploration of locality. For van 't Zelfde, this means for his students to become familiar with the specific location of Amsterdam, its communities, its histories. This directly grounds knowledge production in the material reality of the students, most of whom are internationals new to Amsterdam. In particular, his students engage with groups who are marginalised and resist the neoliberal takeover of public space. One example he cites, is the support of the refugee collective *Wij Zijn Hier*, in order to provide documentation for them and offer support in resisting evictions. Van 't Zelfde's thinking centres on the agency and responsibility of art in opposing oppression through offering practical solidarity to groups in Amsterdam: "[I want] to make [students] aware of what's happening here, and that there are groups of people like them, to whom they want to show solidarity with, or with whom they can be useful for. So that they can share their privilege, or they can teach, or they can support"²¹

21 Van 't Zelfde (note 19).

Similarly, Dzodan argues for a knowledge production that necessarily positions the local: "I've got no interest in another place. I want to understand my own material conditions [in the Netherlands]."²²

Dzodan focusing on the local chimes with van 't Zelfde's intention for his students to investigate their

22 Dzodan (note 7).

locality as part of their conscientização, to critically understand themselves in relation to the multitudes of contexts emerging from Amsterdam. Exploring locality through active solidarity would inevitably draw up deeper questions,

considerations, and problems for the students. Focusing on the local may seem counter to the international outlook of most western art schools and cultural institutions invested in the 'global art bubble'. However, this form of engaged research builds a picture for how global capitalism manifests in the context of Amsterdam. In Dzodan's words: "That's why I think the local matters. Because we're never going to have that global picture if it wasn't for all the local people doing their own work on the ground."²³ Ibid.

Van 't Zelfde also concurs that grounding students in a local context is necessary to examine how the legacy of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism manifests specifically in the Netherlands. In this sense conscientização is not only applied to the student's locality, but also connected to a network of agents across the globe who share similar struggles and parallel structural concerns.

The tutors all aim to convey to their students that knowledge production isn't neutral, but a constructed process, deeply informed by their positionalities and expectations. It is unsurprising that Dzodan and van 't Zelfde's approach to knowledge production is to think through and participate in the local context, as this provides a direct way to address the material conditions of the students who have made Amsterdam their temporary or permanent home. Hence the local is a more immediate way to consider self-reflexive questions around power and privilege that directly relate to positionality. Both Sturm and van 't Zelfde are interested in knowledge production processes outside of the university setting as part of an embodied and applied curricula. Sturm expressed a desire to research alternative modes of knowledge production, in particular, modes of production that are outside of the academy. Whilst, van 't Zelfde already attempts to use solidarity and/or collaboration as sites for knowledge production. All their approaches to knowledge production emphasise thinking processes over product making. This drive to make the processes of knowledge production more apparent is integral to a critical consciousness.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The drive towards a self-reflexive and anti-oppressive pedagogy is more important than ever. Some of the gains of the 1968 moment (such as the attempt to humanise subaltern and colonised subjects) are being challenged by a wave of fascist counter narratives that generally claim that this attempt to redistribute

power victimises ‘native white people’ and censors free speech.²⁴ This current context is a far cry from the art school of the 1960s and 1970s, aspects of which were keyed into the 1968 moment, and was at times the

home of left-wing and anti-racist movements.²⁵ What was seen as anti-authoritarian and

counter cultural then, is now reconstituted in alt-right discourse as oppressive and authoritarian now.²⁶ Some of the hard-won battles against the use of racially

violent images and language in mainstream visual media are being articulated as the curtailment of freedom of speech, whilst peddling in racist and violent imagery is spun as provocative, counter-cultural or

‘ironic’.²⁷ While these ideas emanate from minority voices on the fringe, we have to safeguard against their rising popularity. In this sense, pedagogy must necessarily be rooted in anti-oppression. Dzodan and van t’

Zelfde are most vocal about this, as they directly position their pedagogy as anti-oppressive. Sturm also attempts to unpack how oppressive frameworks impact identity and positionality. In this sense, the tutors position themselves – their lives and their politics, within the design of their curricula. They also implore the students to begin the journey of developing a critical consciousness by considering their relationship to power and privilege, within an anti-oppressive framework. In this regard, positionality is taking a stand – of articulating a politics, with some self-reflexivity of how you came to that position. Yet it is also being open to the possibility of change and reconfiguring your sense of self or your politics with new information. This is counter to fascist identification,

which places an over emphasis on personal identity,²⁸ yet without self-critique or openness to change.

Overall the techniques the tutors use are explorative and process-driven, as well as remaining open to the diversions and fluctuations that the pedagogical journey might take. So, for instance whilst they are rooted in

dismantling colonial supremacy there is no predefined outcome of what this looks like or how this is articulated. The pedagogical journey is progressed by the specific conversations and activities that take place throughout the course. In this sense, the tutors take a flexible position, in which they respond to the students.

25 John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, London/New York: I B Tauris, 2002.

26 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2017.

24 Joe Mulhall, ‘A Post-Organisational Far Right?’, in: *State of Hate Report 2018*, pp. 10-11. Accessed through: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/state-of-hate-2018/online-radicalisation/post-organisational-far-right/>.

27 Morgan Quaintance, ‘Our Cultic Milieu’ lecture given at BAK (Basis voor Actuele Kunst), 17 March 2018. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGGHt-8tx8U>.

28 Thomas Fallace, ‘American Educators’ Confrontation With Fascism’ in: *Educational Researcher*, 2017. Accessed through: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0013189X17743726> on 27 June 2019.

Dzodan seeks to resituate knowledge produced by colonised subjects by placing its importance and relevance alongside or ahead of male western thinkers, thus questioning their centrality in the academy. Sturm also engages students in open and explorative processes, questioning how they come to the knowledge that they have produced. Art schools have the unique opportunity of experimenting with modes of knowledge production due to the expansive forms a critical inquiry can take. Importantly, tutors at the Sandberg have the opportunity to emphasise process over product, and therefore experiment with modes of knowledge production that can work towards addressing the pressing issues of our time together with their students. This is most evident in van 't Zelfde's pedagogical approach that offers solidarity and forms collaborations with groups across Amsterdam. This approach to knowledge production doesn't need to adhere to set frameworks, yet is open to the specificities of the experience. It also provides a way to connect the material concerns of the students and the groups they collaborate with, to wider structural issues. In this way developing a critical consciousness can be a radical force to create an art school culture that is at once anti-oppressive, yet open to questioning how knowledge is produced, and if necessary, shifting position.

Ayesha Ghanchi is an educator and researcher with a focus on critical pedagogy in arts practice. As a researcher, Ayesha has examined artist-led pedagogies in the museum and gallery sector in London. Her research focused on how artist pedagogies have been influenced by radical and critical philosophies stemming from the 1968 moment. More recently she has collaborated with BAK and the Side Room to teach and explore critical pedagogy. She is also part of the Unsettling programme at the Rietveld/Sandberg – exploring and thinking alongside tutors about how critical pedagogy relates to their teaching practices.

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