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USING THE CRISIS: MEDIA STUDIES PEDAGOGY AND THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic threw into sharp relief – and in some ways sharpened – existing structural inequalities, both within academia, and in the broader social systems within which it operates. However, the pandemic, and the ensuing disruption of university operations, offer opportunities for embracing a fresh vision of the role of media studies, and for reorganising how we do our work. Critical scholars have previously explored the tensions inherent within our current model of media education, including the ideological space inhabited by media studies. This paper offers a political economic analysis of some of the ways in which we can use this moment of reshape media studies education in a positive manner.

Keywords: COVID-19 ▪ critical pedagogy ▪ crisis ▪ media studies

1. INTRODUCTION

McChesney notes (2013), in the context of media systems, the existence of ‘critical junctures’ when old certainties break down and there is – for a time – a possibility for radical restructuring. A critical juncture in media requires – in McChesney’s model – at least two of three factors: a new technology that challenges the existing system; a major political crisis; and challenges to the legitimacy of the existing system (p. 67). While McChesney is, of course, focused on the media system itself, the COVID-19 pandemic (along with other systemic pressures) contribute to opening up such a moment for media education. This juncture, then, offers opportunities for embracing a fresh vision of the role of media studies, and for reorganising how we do our work.

Critical scholars have previously explored the tensions inherent within our current model of media education, including the ideological space inhabited by media studies as part of ‘Humanities II’ as Miller terms those emerging fields that have found favour within the neoliberal university, often being placed in tension (for resources and recognition) and contradistinction with ‘traditional’ humanities (2012). Critical media and communication studies have rich legacies (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018) but

have often been marginalised within the communications field. One leading political economist of media (Mosco, 2009) identifies three broad themes of interest to critical political economists of media: commodification, structuration, and spatialisation. Mosco's work is helpful here, given his interest in the manner, in which structural factors, including institutional power and ideology, shape the impact of digitisation. In this paper I briefly sketch out the opportunities (and some of the challenges) the current situation presents for undergraduate media studies education in each of the thematic areas he identifies, drawing in particular on my own experiences and previous research in the media studies sector, largely in the United States and Ireland, and more generally across the region identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as associated with the Liberal North Atlantic or Liberal model of media. The paper thus offers a framework for undertaking analysis and review of our pedagogical systems during this critical juncture.

2. A MOMENT OF CRISIS

As institutions, universities are good at replicating process, but poor at pivoting quickly. This seems to be exacerbated by the managerialism that now dominates the contemporary university, with each fragmented unit subject to near-constant assessment of short-term quantified metrics of 'success' (Schuetze, 2012, p. 63), frequently high-stakes, as access to funding (and in some cases, actual continued employment) dependent on narrow measures of success or failure.

In the early stages of the pandemic, as universities moved to shut campuses mid-way through semester, many instructors were directed that the 'pivot' online should consist of synchronous delivery of traditional lectures, using online video conferencing tools. This represented something of a fetishisation of the trappings of university instruction, rather than a consideration of the actual learning process. Large-scale lectures, and the associated practice of student note-taking, emerge out of particular exigencies political economic circumstances: the need to provide content at scale (and under budget), where students were already co-located, and at a time when asynchronous interactive tools (such as books) were limited. As Duch, Groh & Allen note, "lecturing is still efficient and has persisted as the traditional teaching method largely because it is familiar, easy, and how we learned. It does little, however, to foster the development of process skills to complement content knowledge" (2001, p. 5). All too often, the manner in which the learning process is discussed is grounded in what Freire (1967) termed the 'banking model' of education, which encourages students to see their core 'work' as being attending lectures and taking notes, rather than engaging actively with more complex tasks, such as application or synthesising. This seems interrelated with the increasing pressure on universities, and instructors, to act as service providers within a commercial marketplace. It is often easier – if misleading – to articulate the 'service' received by customer-students from X hours

of content than it is to communicate the transformational nature of a participatory learning activity.

Quite soon, however, we could see evidence of ‘Zoom fatigue’ (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020), as the limits of transposing instruction from one mode to another became clear. The inefficiencies of synchronous monological instruction – acceptable when weighed against its advantages for in-person instruction – were intensified online, with students complaining of overwork, while instructors bemoaned the lack of interaction and the non-verbal cues that shape our performance of a lecture. Merely replicating the structure of in-person teaching online was clearly not sufficient, and the disadvantages of over-reliance on live video for transmission of information – and the potentially discriminatory impacts – are becoming clear. But the broader developmental value of university education also suffered. This included, of course, various co-curricular activities – study abroad, service learning, off-campus work placements and the other forms of pedagogical projects that rely on presence in particular spaces – with both students and the groups with which they had planned to work suffering. It had a particular impact on the opportunistic activities that sit on the margins of the university system, lacking official imprimatur or administrative champions – the community member auditing a class (or, indeed, simply sitting in on a lecture informally); collaborations and informal links between student organisations and members of the local community.

The pandemic also threw into sharp relief – and in some ways sharpened – existing structural inequalities, both within academia, and in the broader social systems within which it operates. Internet-based remote learning – particularly synchronous video – presumes access not only to equipment (computer) and services (broadband), but also to appropriate workspaces. Some of those issues are relatively easily fixed – the Irish government has launched a scheme (DFHERIS, 2020) to provide thousands of laptops to students – but others are more complicated. In consequence, we have more recently seen criticisms of the privacy violations (and presumptions) inherent in classroom policies requiring that students keep their cameras on during synchronous online sessions. There are also complicated issues of power, privilege, and economics involved in the very decisions of students whether to return to their study for the current academic year, or instead to defer completion of studies for a year (or potentially more). For academics, there is evidence of institutions engaging in “a new flood of academic governance violations since the pandemic began” (Bailey, 2020).

The funding shortfall faced by Irish universities – exacerbated by a longstanding neo-liberal ideology that has encouraged a reliance on funding from (presumed) well-heeled international students and ancillary sources – has resulted in my own institution (in Ireland) developing a new policy that requires many post-graduate research students to provide unpaid teaching labour of up to 150 hours per year (Furey, 2020). Such tactics predate the current crisis, of course, but illustrate the manner in which economic uncertainty at an institutional level can have particularly onerous impact on the already precarious, and contribute to increases in

inequality. Kuehn (2013) and others (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018) have drawn attention to the dynamics of ‘hope labour’ that operate in media work, and also in academia, where those hoping to secure employment in the sector are under pressure (external and internal) to provide unpaid labour, in the hope that it functions as an investment, rewarded by potential paid future employment. The reliance on revenue from ancillary sources – from accommodation, from campus dining, and (in the US) from student athletics – along with fears regarding recruitment put pressure on administrators to return to on-campus instruction in the new academic year, despite public health concerns.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL EDUCATION IN THE ‘NEW HUMANITIES’

In multiple higher education systems we are seeing a hollowing out of the middle ranks of faculty, with larger administrative ranks, the emergence of a relatively highly paid ‘star’ caste, and the work of instruction increasingly delegated to contingent – adjunct, sessional, precarious – labour. Concerns over the increasing reliance on contingent labour partner debates about the appropriate role of internships, and critiques such as those of Toby Miller (2012), who acknowledges both the “legitimate aspects” of the systems of accountability that quantify and evaluate, for example, research proposals, or ‘value add’, and the need to maintain autonomy as a field. How, Miller wonders, can the humanities in the United States – which have seen significant reductions in enrolments and shares of resources in recent decades – demonstrate its relevance to issues of public policy; respond to the political economic imperatives of changing funding, demographics, and social contexts; and sustain an integrated approach to the field’s identity. How can we, he wonders, overcome “a radical disarticulation between professors, prophets, and practitioners”?

The position of media studies and journalism education within these debates is an interesting one. Miller notes, in the US context, that the changing demographics of the undergrad population – with growth in numbers occurring primarily in the lower socioeconomic sections of the population – is prompting an increasing interest in vocational education, and courses with a clear professional path. Media production courses, more than others, have long relied on practitioners for content delivery, so our relationship with issues of contingent labour differs from many other areas of the academy, particularly within the humanities. With an established history of internships, and work placements, coupled with a strong thread of critical analysis and radical critique, there are significant constitutive tensions within the field (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018).

Given the longstanding linkages between media education and industry, the case for focusing on developing critical student capacities is arguably particularly compelling. As Brockbank and McGill argue, “the prospect of encouraging autonomous yet interdependent critically reflective learners [...] can be realised where those responsible for policy and action at institutional levels are prepared to support

facilitative methods” (2007, 336). That is, fostering critical learning depends on institutional support and engagement. A significant challenge of course is that, as Miller and others have explored, the trend in universities – driven by economic and other pressures – has been towards media education in service of (primarily commercial) industry. Brockbank and McGill also identify a cultural resistance within universities – linked to an older elitism and a romanticisation of the role of the professor – “to teaching as professional practice” (2007, 112) and a resulting “unexamined and unreflected practice of teachers in higher education” (2007, 113).

A critical pedagogy that seeks to imbue students with a Freirian critical consciousness must first grapple with this tension – an ideology of exceptionalism within university education, which understand the protection of central values of intellectual freedom as being grounded, and intrinsically bound to, a vocational vision of ‘the scholar’ that not only is increasingly at odds with the conditions within which most (if not all) scholars work, but constitutes a false consciousness that militates against both effective action to shape the political economy of academic labour and also to position the academy as an effective agent of social change. There is appropriate suspicion among academics that process changes in higher education emanate from a drive towards corporatisation that commodifies the learning process, devalues learning, and is agnostic at best (and antagonistic at worst) towards the development of a critical social consciousness among students. However, we must not allow reasonable suspicion to drive us towards a wholesale – and reactionary – rejection of the utility and potential of pedagogical tools. It is from this perspective that we can draw on Brockbank and McGill’s advocacy for a critical and reflective approach to the work of teaching, one that assists us in what Burbules and Callister have termed “the process of rethinking the meaning and ends of education” (2000, 17) that “maintains a critical distance from our tools, even when – especially when – we find them most useful” (2000, 179).

Alongside a need for reflective practice on the part of critical teacher-scholars, inculcating critical engagement in our students can fruitfully draw on the tools of reflective learning, as a means to bridge practice-based training and critical theory-led learning. Reflective learning, as a practice, can encompass a range of activities, from ‘reflection-in-action’, through dialogue about practice, to reflection on the practice of learning through reflection itself (Brockbank & McGill, 2007, 88–97). Some critiques of reflective practice note that the concept of ‘reflection’ can be trivially synonymous with ‘thinking’, or simply reduced to an instrumental approach to learning, and that the quality of engagement matters (Brockbank & McGill, 2007, 100–103). There is also a risk that reflection can be focused on the responsibility of the individual, to the exclusion of attention to systemic analysis of power and practice. For critical scholars and teachers of media, a pedagogy that includes reflective practice can operate, then, on a number of levels: we should encourage students to critically assess the media systems within which they operate; we can foster an understanding of individual agency (and its limits) as learners and media professionals; and through

encouraging a reflective approach to the process of learning in and about the media, we can assist students to uncover parallels between systems of media and education which will support a critical consciousness that can be generalised and applied to other domains of action (Dolber & Ó Baoill, 2018). That is, a reflective media studies pedagogy can contribute to (indeed, be constitutive of) a reflective citizenry.

In tandem with concerns about the nature of the entanglement between the university and capitalist systems, some scholars have engaged in reflection on what is sometimes termed the ‘third mission’ of universities, with Schuetze (2012) claiming that the understanding of this responsibility, often characterised using the concept of ‘community service’, is both overly broad, and often treated as an optional extra, lacking “easy measurement by quantifiable indicators” (71). In contrast, he argues for an “active embrace of engagement with the community” (72) that is adequately supported and positioned at the core of university missions. For critical scholars, the praxis of engagement with communities – variously defined – can constitute an important avenue for linking the work of research and theory with affecting positive social impact. Peters & Avila, for example, argue that “teaching and research tend to be pursued by academics in ways that are disconnected from ecologies of place, and out of relationship with external publics” (2014, 134) and advocate for a (careful) blurring of the roles of academic and community practitioners.

3. OPPORTUNITY EMBEDDED IN CRISIS

If pandemic restrictions constrain us in many ways, they also – as Ong and Negra (2020) have noted – open up “opportunities for rich intellectual inquiry”, something that can offer solace to those seeking to develop spaces for critical thinking and active pedagogy in the (virtual) classroom. On a practical level, we can cautiously embrace the modes of instruction forced upon us, by considering the differing affordances of these technologies. A first consideration will be how we can use the newly central modalities to tackle the challenges thrown up by the pandemic – countering atomisation and isolation; fostering dialogue and empathy; providing space for reflection and active learning. Further, though, we can look to ways in which we can tackle longer-standing challenges. How can we not just repair, but build up? Of course, there are some responses that operate on an individual basis, but there are also interventions that can have a wider impact, impacting on issues of structure and process within the academy, and in some cases beyond. Overlapping with this distinction is a typology that distinguishes between issues of content – what we teach about – and issues of structure – how we teach.

One multi-faceted example that illustrates the many ways in which we can encounter, and respond to, an issue arises in the case of broadband provision. This is, of course, an issue of longstanding activism and academic attention as a relatively concrete marker of the intersection of political economic factors with issues of access and inclusion. As individual instructors, we can design our teaching approaches to

take account of the differing levels of broadband provision available to our students. Keeping synchronous sessions to low-bandwidth modes, such as text channels, and maintaining an awareness of the possible challenges of downloading multimedia content, constitute a form of universal design. Re-examining the rationale for requiring students to progress in a particular staged manner through material (such as by releasing materials in tandem with an existing ‘lecture slot’ schedule), or what forms student collaboration and team exercises can and should take, allow us to re-engage with our instructional material, confirm our pedagogical goals, and build new teaching frameworks that support those goals. Of course, such exercises of self-reflection take time and energy – and are generally uncompensated, most explicitly (and glaringly) for those working in precarious and contingent positions.

Beyond course design, the material conditions within which students operate can offer an opportunity to engage them in critical exploration of how those conditions are shaped by political economic forces. While the imprint of 19th century colonial empires on the routes followed by contemporary broadband cable can feel abstracted for students (particularly those situated broadly within the global North), the students’ own access to broadband (and similar technologies such as mobile phone networks) results from a confluence of urbanisation, public policy, economic forces, and technological innovation. The students’ own material conditions – and the manner in which they are shaped by policy decisions, from the macro to the very local – provide, therefore, a visceral example of the structural forces shaping our relationships with communication systems. The jarring changes experienced over the past few months facilitate conversations about agency, options, and limits, facilitating broader conversations about the operation of such factors. In a Freirian sense, the lived experiences of students offer the potential for an active process of meaning-making by the students, and the development of a critical engagement with social conditions.

Beyond our individual teaching, though, the fact that there are such critical structural forces at play means that our responsibilities as scholars and teachers cannot be limited to our work in the classroom. Questions of broadband access – and public policies that affect patterns of access – become intrinsically linked to questions of educational access and equity (Darmody, Smyth & Russell, 2020). In other words, broadband policy must be recognised as a matter of third level educational policy in a way that it has rarely been framed as previously (due to the manner in which on-campus access, or other modalities, were presumed to compensate for any shortcomings in this area).

4. COMMODIFICATION

One of the ways in which the neo-liberal model of education is being challenged is through the mainstreaming of open science and similar models, which seek to ensure that publicly-funded research activities result in outputs that are publicly available (Armeni et al, 2020). Similarly, Open Educational Resources (OERs) offer a means

to formalise and expand the collegial culture whereby academics share course plans with each other. Notably, unlike the MOOC (Massive Open Online Open) model, this model distinguishes between the resources that are available to instructors, and the act of instruction itself. As The San Jose State Philosophy Department put it, MOOCs produce “the educational equivalent of a monoculture, in which only a few voices will ever be heard. [...] Now, only a few star professors are part of the conversation” (2017, 263). Where the MOOC centralises instruction, elevates a singular instructional voice, undercuts demand for instructors, and merely leaves accreditation as a potentially decentralised process, OERs build a decentralised heterogeneous network of providers and resources, facilitating myriad approaches to implementing the tools developed, and supporting goals of accessibility through the availability of open-access resources that can replace high-cost textbooks.

The difference in model is mirrored in how these approaches are propagated. While MOOCs require significant centralised resources, and operate within a circuit of reproduction and reinforcement of hierarchies of prestige and resources within the educational sector, OERs operate more clearly as a public good, with benefits dissipated across the educational sector (including, potentially, beyond the formal educational sector). The fact that rewards accrue to the broader sector, rather than to those who develop and deploy OERs, means that there are fewer direct market-based incentives for any individual institution to invest in their development – we encounter a form of free-rider paradox (Hampton, 1987). However, the pandemic affords an opportunity to prompt engagement in this sector – the twin pressures of a mass (if possibly temporary) movement towards asynchronous remote delivery, and a sudden economic shock for students, exerts pressure on institutions to respond (and be seen to respond) in innovative ways. At my own institution, this has resulted in funding for the development of an OER platform, and a project to pilot the development of OER resources. This will benefit our own students in the short-term, through the availability of low-cost instructional resources, but the most significant benefits come from the network effects of making these resources available for adoption or adaptation by others. The pandemic has, in this case, resulted in an opportunity to articulate the role of the university as an agent of social benefit – a creator of public goods – beyond transactional or market-based models. There was, certainly, an energy for such developments previously, but the circumstances of the pandemic – in opening up a critical juncture for higher education – provided the opportunity to act on those impulses. As we shall see below, this opportunity for challenging commodified models of educational provision expands the spaces available for other forms of innovative course provision.

5. STRUCTURATION

In shifting our focus from the instructional acts of the classroom to our broader role as educators, it becomes clear that the issue of broadband provision – referenced

earlier in the context of critical engagement by students – becomes, also, a matter of concern for educators. Just as classroom technologies are intrinsic to our success in the physical classroom, so too is access, by ourselves and our students, to residential broadband, an essential tool in our effective operation as instructors in an online context. The politics of broadband provision are, thus, entwined with our work as educators, and must form part of the policy demands of our unions and our professional associations. While questions of the evolving nature of the digital divide continue to be investigated by media scholars, the issue has not in recent years formed part of the public policy agenda of our scholarly organisations (as evinced by a review of public policy interventions by groups such as the IAMCR, and the National Communication Association in the United States). As the issue increasingly impinges on the teaching work of scholars across the board – and not just those working with non-traditional student cohorts, such as adult and part-time learners – we may hopefully see this issue more clearly taken up as a policy concern for those focused on education policy.

On an intermediate level between matters of public policy, and specifics of lesson content, we have the question of course design. Here, instructors grappling with the challenges in unequal access to broadband provision and computer resources can usefully learn from the principles of ‘Universal Design for Learning’ (UDL) (Rose & Meyer, 2002; King-Sears, 2009). While UDL is typically understood as a response to differing innate learning approaches of individual students, its core principle of engaging with students in multiple ways not only ensures equal access for students with disabilities, but also provides a framework for designing courses in a way that does not unnecessarily disadvantage those who lack, for example, high-speed broadband. Again, this critical juncture has prompted attention to pedagogy and process that offers opportunities to re-centre these concerns in the instructional process.

6. SPATIALISATION

If the shift to largely online learning exacerbates certain inequalities between and among students – arising both from individual economic status and the spatial geography of broadband provision – it can also flatten the differences between core and peripheries and foster opportunities for new collaborations and innovative models of instruction. Collaborations across institutions were, of course, already possible, and there was some institutional support for such efforts (notably programmes like the EU’s Erasmus Mundus joint MA framework) – but the prevalence of blended and online learning across all levels broadens opportunities for considering such structures.

Institutions based in metropolitan hubs, with their physical proximity to industry, policy groups, and other universities, offer advantages to students in terms of ease of access to guest speakers and to work experience opportunities. For putative guest speakers, the travel time involved was previously a concern that limited acceptance of invitations, while such institutions had the burden of greater costs associated with hosting visiting speakers. Those advantages are not wholly nullified by recent

events, but the necessary swing towards – and acceptance of – guest appearances via video conferencing tools means not only that more geographically remote institutions have access to speakers comparable to their metropolitan counterparts, but also that new opportunities for hosting guest speakers become feasible. As just one example, I would point here to a series of seminars, hosted by the UNESCO Chair in Community Media, based at the University of Hyderabad (UNESCO Chair). Utilising Zoom and Facebook, each episode in the series focused on a different geographic region, with the series spanning the globe in terms of both speakers and audience. Such efforts were, of course, technically feasible prior to the pandemic, but the social context, and audience expectations, have changed, and consideration of remote participation options (for speakers and audiences) has very quickly become central to event planning.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has not just disrupted short-term course delivery for universities. This is not just a moment of crisis. It is also a critical juncture that can, if we as scholars seize the opportunity, embed new practices that support educational access and equality. We have an obligation, as ethically engaged critical scholars and instructors, to seize on the potential embedded in this moment.

The path dependency model suggests that it is only at times of critical junctures that opportunities open up to shift the overall trajectory of our social systems. For the university systems explored here, that trajectory has in recent decades (as Miller and others have noted) included a neo-liberal retrenchment of university mission, steering away from the so-called ‘third mission’ of social engagement, increasingly reliant on market-driven sources of funding. The early response to the pandemic highlighted the reliance on synchronous large-group teaching as part of this model, and the pandemic has more broadly exacerbated the budgeting and funding pressures faced by universities, as some of the revenue streams cultivated by universities – such as significant increases in numbers of international students – have been hard-hit by pandemic-related constraints.

The concept of critical junctures does, though, offer some hope: at times of systemic crisis, opportunities open up to reshape systems, and to re-route the paths we travel. McChesney suggests that such a crisis occurs when two of three conditions are met: technological change; political crisis; and challenges to the legitimacy of the political order. The sudden adoption of online learning technologies, together with the wide ranging political and economic implications of the pandemic, provide the conditions for such a critical juncture.

The fact that a critical juncture exists does not in itself ensure that radical changes will result – nor that any changes will be, necessarily, positive from our perspective. Naomi Klein (2007), amongst others, has noted the manner in which so-called ‘disaster capitalism’ has been leveraged by those advocating for neo-liberal capitalism,

from Pinochet's Chile onwards. We have already seen the crisis used to weaken worker protections – including, for example, the targeted laying-off of large numbers of critical scholars at the UK's University of Leicester. However, using Mosco's tri-fold model, above, we can identify a set of areas in which progressive scholars, and policy makers, might focus efforts to leverage this moment for social benefit:

- We can use learning technologies, together with changed expectations regarding mediated communication, to break down the core/periphery divide, rather than to exacerbate it, mainstreaming remote guest speakers and asynchronous models of blended learning within our teaching.
- We can foster new modes of learning, including the expanded use of critical reflective practice – our students have experienced first-hand the upending of everyday expectations, and seen in real time the impacts of radical policy decisions. Rather than seeking return to business as usual, a form of erasure of these experiences, we can draw on those experiences and insights, replacing Thatcher's neo-liberal mantra that 'there is no alternative' with an understanding that 'another world is possible'. Reflective practice encourages holistic and active engagement by students, building on both their own experiences and academic resources, and can foster active citizenship.
- We can re-articulate the connections between education and broader social and economic policy, including a focus on issues of inclusion and equality. Shifts in teaching modalities provide opportunities to advocate for, and to implement, use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), which are grounded in conceptions of education as a public good, and which offer the potential for greater inclusion and equity.

There is, finally, an opportunity to reinvigorate the 'third mission' of universities, as societies grapple with how to rebuild social and economic infrastructure. Neo-liberal imperatives have driven the university systems in recent decades to embrace their roles as 'partners' of commercial entities, and agents of economic development. There is an opportunity now to advocate for universities as also agents of social inclusion and integration. To support civic engagement by the broader public, to integrate service learning, and to advocate for an expansion of the role of universities as incubators and institutional homes for social enterprises. All of these have, of course, existed, but often marginalised within their universities. As we are now confronted with this critical juncture, we should ensure not just that we counter those who would leverage it to accelerate the neo-liberal project, but also that we take positive steps to imagine how we can use this crisis to build back better.

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