To Exist Is to Resist

A Reflective Account of Developing a Paradigm Shift in Palestinian Teaching and Learning Practice

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Critical pedagogy is a theoretical position adapted by educators to humanize the learning process. It has a political dimension that seeks, among other things, to dignify and emancipate students by invoking their lifeworlds, critical voices, and outlooks. It also has a pedagogical dimension that sees autonomy, increased choice, and active participation as keys to student empowerment and social participation.

We reflect in this chapter on TEFL-ePal, an Erasmus+-funded project between European staff at the University of Wolverhampton (UK) and Palestinian higher education institutes, where the aim is to innovate local teaching and learning through technologies to "develop flexible curricula, with face-to-face and online courses to be accessible to all learners, with no restrictions" (TEFL-ePal, 2020). Its specific aims are for education to bridge socio-political gaps and give Palestinians a greater voice on the international stage and to develop the use of digital technologies to improve access to and the experience of education. TEFL is Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and the ePal project seeks to enculturate digital tools in Palestinian higher education, but we are mindful that the use of technologies alone is not the way to transform systems.

Our role in the project is to share technological and pedagogical knowledge; however, as we have become immersed in the stories of our partners' lives, it is apparent that transforming traditional methods of teaching is less about practice or teacher knowledge and more about realizing a dignified culture of teaching and learning. As a team rooted in teacher education, we explore in this chapter how digital technologies, aligned with pedagogical strategies, can combine to integrate critical approaches to the professional development of teachers and the dignity of students.

The British partners involved here recognized from the outset the paradoxes and challenges in approaching such a project, and we outline them here.

- We seek not to lead but to learn. In this chapter, we illuminate what we have learned about the context and need for change in Palestinian teaching.
- From the outset, we have understood the potential problems of our presence and have communicated caution to our local colleagues that we do not necessarily hold answers or solutions to complex contexts in which we are outsiders. However, the theme of "outsider" is also imperative to understanding a colonized terrain, and we draw reflections from this theme throughout.
- Furthermore, we understand the cultural limitations involved in transferable concepts and methods as well as the pitfalls in taking an approach that reproduces Global Northern or Western inequalities (e.g., through theoretical reference points or technologies that are monopolistic).
- We acknowledge that technology provides only potential opportunities and affordances.
- We adopt a social constructivist view that this is a multi-voiced project, though its aspirations will be most meaningful where defined by the local partners. However, we believe that participatory dialogue, cooperation, experience, and shared knowledge are keys to multi-stakeholder success.
- We are realistic about what we can achieve but ambitious nonetheless.

We see educational transformation as situated in values that need to be front and centre. In initial sessions with our Palestinian partners, we drew these values out and agreed that focusing education along these lines helps to make a mindset and an ecology possible for critical pedagogy. These shared values favour an educational system that is

- truth seeking;
- forward thinking and nurtures youth as the future and develops leadership capacity;
- implicitly in support of national and local identities while developing a global outlook;
- supportive of an authentic, personalized curriculum that is culturally diverse and open;
- able to utilize flexible, adaptable materials;
- able to foster creative and critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, employability, and life skills as well as developing character;
- found in an inclusive, safe environment in which student input is (more) active, celebrated, and valued;
- focused on developing mobile and technological capacity in staff members and students in order to support capabilities for autonomous and independent lifelong learning; and
- friendly, facilitating, fair, fun, and firm (plus familiar).

Context

The rationale and the potential for teaching with digital tools to help transform a curriculum that can no longer effectively fit the context are evident when we look at current teaching practice in Palestinian higher education institutions. Educational services are prone to disruption caused by the unique geopolitical context in the region, whether this is the separation wall (which can add up to an hour to a daily commute), checkpoints, and sudden road closures or security restrictions that see institutions close unexpectedly, with timetables, events, and meetings vulnerable to such unpredictability. In extreme circumstances, schools have been demolished

or bombed, and soldiers have entered students' family homes at night. Meanwhile, teachers have reported that the regular sight of tanks parked outside schools becomes a common and disturbing distraction (Traxler et al., 2019).

The violence of this external world cannot be left at the threshold of an educational institution for staff members and students. There are frequent gas attacks in Palestinian streets. When students enter classrooms, they commemorate the deaths of peers by leaving their chairs empty but for a photograph: objects become symbols of martyrdom, and the memory is imprinted onto the physical environment and deeper consciousness.

Yet teachers report that "10 minutes a day is wasted talking about the students' stories" (Traxler et al., 2019, p. 10), as if these experiences have no bearing on what takes place within the classroom. This is the power of a critical digital pedagogy—the complex interplay between authentic lived experiences and the affordances of digital tools to communicate such experiences. How can any teaching or learning in such a context as Palestine not confront those realities?

It has long been understood that mobile technologies can bring the outside world inside as well as continue the learning outside the classroom. Technologies can aid a validation of the student's *lebenswelt* (lifeworld), which for Habermas is defined as how our separate realities are shared and communicated in common. In other words, though our social experiences might seem to be private, they are unified through practices and attitudes that inform our perceptions of a shared reality. We are aware as we write that we are toying with the use of *outside* as a signifier of the diminished status that formal education gives to the outside world and the role of outsider—those for whom education does not enable inclusion into the wider world and where the contents of textbooks bear little relevance to it. There is a place within a critical pedagogy framework for realization of the intersubjective through digital activity and its inherently social features—a common convergence of what it is to be outside or peripheral in the world. This has parlance with Palestine's "fragmented existence" (Chomsky & Pappé, 2015, p. 80). At the heart of the occupied Palestinian state is a crisis in sovereignty, which means that a curriculum

that promotes self-determination, recognizes national heritage, and preserves Palestinian cultural identity becomes crucial.

Across the TEFL-ePal project, we see the digital as precipitating a dynamic shift in curricular form. This goes beyond the use of tools to access learning to enable a curriculum whose content dignifies its subjects and reifies their world, potentially as co-designed learning in which students and teachers can use participatory tools to "write themselves into being" (boyd, 2008, p. 120) as the authors of their own existence. This is felt particularly in settler-colonialist environments, in which hallmarks of sovereignty such as flags and currencies are oppressed and can vanish at the hands of another. It is perhaps no surprise, but a poignant indictment of the context, that Google Maps has recently removed reference to Palestine from the territory. As a direct challenge, Palestinian educators and students might counter such a move with geotagging themselves, their lives, and their communities onto digital maps so that they enact their existence and integrate themselves into global consciousness. The digital has been said to facilitate a shift toward social constructivist epistemologies (Dede, 2010), for instance through the construction and distribution of knowledge, the blurring of formal and informal learning, and the impact of social network sites to locate identity and to anchor relationships and social activities (Merchant, 2012). As British teacher educators, we want the local partners to talk aloud to the world by connecting and sharing their stories, participating in discourse identities (Gee, 2001), in which communities and individual lives that otherwise would be peripheral are constructed and made visible to the world. This can be enacted in a curriculum that is sovereign and preserves the threatened Palestinian identity.

As stated in our commitments, we recognize from the start that there are limitations to what we can achieve, that there are difficulties in transferring modes from Global Northern and Western contexts, and that the digital only carries the potential for transformation—whether that is practice, curriculum, or both. Traxler at al. (2019, p. 1) argue that a digital literacy curriculum for the Palestinian community is needed, not informed by "dominant conceptions of digital literacy spring[ing] from a largely European context," as we see in traditional practice. In TEFL

classroom practice that we observed in Palestinian universities, the native cultures are outside the curriculum. Students studied dilapidated texts from the 1950s, isolating archaic jargon from British literary theory for further discussion in Arabic (rather than the taught language of English). Students sat in a horseshoe layout, which only consolidated the potential for lecturers to direct them, standing front and centre and commanding students' attention from the board to the book and back to themselves, all the while focused on obscure reference points to prosaic English literary texts from the past and checking on memorization with the repetition of pronunciations of words rarely used in modern dialogue. Although it is always unrealistic to generalize, the transformative endeavours of former Minister of Education Dr. Sabri Saidam reveal inherent issues with shifting practice from traditional bases of teaching and learning, in which the learner is the passive recipient of knowledge from an authority to a more progressive perspective.

Attempting to inject modern teaching methodologies into a system reliant on traditional teaching pedagogies, Saidam introduced changes to the schooling system by incorporating technology and making e-school implicit in delivery. E-school is a locally used online portal that gives students access to their grades and what is called qualitative assessment, which usually includes student grades for participation, projects, and presentations. These changes were accompanied by changes in the curriculum to make it more student centred, with portfolios a mandatory part of the assessment of each school subject (up to 30%), thus shifting the assessment paradigm toward alternative, project-based methods.

Unfortunately, the changes were sudden and not well planned and did not take into consideration the different variables that would make an exact transfer of the Western experience unsuitable in the context of Palestine, especially given the huge disparities in class size, availability of supplies, and teacher training. The pilot project proved to be a failure, and the complaints from already overwhelmed teachers and students made it impossible to carry on with it. Therefore, Palestinian TEFL educators have reverted to traditional teaching methodologies, which are still inefficient in helping students reach the expected level of English proficiency that they should have reached for higher education. This situation has led

many scholars in the area to research it and address the reasons behind it. It was also reported locally that students were concerned more with buildings being heated properly than with investments in labyrinthine software such as Moodle (a course management system), rarely a decent fit for promoting student-centred learning and too often cast at systemic issues with few nuanced considerations. Moreover, such course management systems are used increasingly by institutions with a surveillance approach, based upon crude learning analytics of how *engaged* students are in top-down teaching methods.

Within higher education, the same mistakes of the Palestinian schooling system recur as teachers replicate the same teaching strategies: rote memorization of vocabulary lists, classic reading texts, prescriptive grammar exercises and exams. Moreover, the testing system functions only to solidify traditional teaching methods since institutions resort to written exams and assign little importance to students' creative and critical thinking skills. There might be occasional in-class presentations, but other than that no modern pedagogical strategies are implemented with technology. Student motivation to learn is low. Once students are in the higher education system, it is extremely hard for university teachers to initiate change since the students have been immersed in a traditional learning environment, and any change is often frowned upon not only by students but also by more traditional instructors, who believe that educators should go with the flow and stop attempting to fix a broken system. It is clear from these reflections that, to transform a traditional system, staff readiness and competence are required to change attitudes toward teaching and learning—to place less significance on what content is acquired and more significance on the process of education. This is the opportunity: to marry pedagogy and technology and to show teachers how technology can be used directly to implement critical pedagogy into cultures of learning.

An increasingly significant dilemma can be added to this binary argument of product and process—that of the *purpose of education*. Along with such didactic and archaic pedagogical constraints are restraints within the geopolitical context of Palestine. Travel, study, and work abroad are inhibited for many Palestinian students, so language learning—though

potentially representing a degree of emancipation—can be perceived as contributing to an erosion of national identity and culture that—bound in an environment of geopolitical, economic, and militaristic oppression and isolation—offers little space for agency. This leads us to question reasonably the purpose of an educational system based upon the *banking concept* (Freire, 2014) if its students are unable to be liberated. Such a system, denying emancipation for its participants, can be perceived as offering only the promise to dehumanize them. In critical pedagogy, a rationale can be located—that of empowering students to talk back against outdated and impersonal systems.

Project-Based Learning: A Critical Digital Approach

As British partners on the TEFL-ePal project, we are formally responsible for training local staff by sharing our pedagogical and technological knowledge and skills. Endorsing tools and methods from our own context is problematic, as Traxler (2018, p. 2) observes: "Digital technology that provides challenges and opportunities does however embody language, values, gestures and culture [that] is overwhelmingly Anglophone American and is largely under the control of global corporations and thus alien to many of the world's cultures and communities."

Our approach has been to scale up a project-based learning (PBL), individualized curriculum for two main reasons. First, this approach enables modalities well complemented by digital tools. For instance, portfolios, posters, presentations, videos, or other artifacts can all be designed and disseminated through the use of cameras and free apps on a smartphone. Our approach to PBL enables creativity and collaboration, either curating existing content (via open educational resources) or constructing new material to give much agency and ownership to disenfranchised and potentially passive students. Second, our approach to PBL is personalized and allows students to investigate and represent their own lifeworlds, creating distance between our recommendations and how they are actioned. We ask our partner teachers to engage their students as if they were showcasing their world to an outsider. Through the publication of their world to a wider audience, individuals shape narrative and meaning. Just as Farah

Baker, the Palestinian teenager, managed when tweeting live drones and bomb attacks from her home in Gaza in 2014, so too students can engage in educational acts of resistance where the local population is oppressed (for more on the oppression of Indigenous peoples, see Chapters 1 and 8 of this volume).

The alignment of PBL with critical pedagogy can be drawn from Delpit (2006), who cites Joseph Suina's schematic of three concentric circles of identity associated with different communities: the inner circle is *home/local community*, the second is *national*, and the third is *global*. PBL is an educational practice that enables an amplification of the local to the outer circles disseminated through digital communication channels—what are described as *codes of linguistic diversity* that enable widespread connections. Using social media, students' stories of local life in peripheral communities can be exchanged globally with other marginalized communities, where acts of resistance to authority have become norms—from Ferguson to Hong Kong via Cairo. Such digital stories have been harnessed widely in citizen journalism that contributed to the Arab Spring or documented abuses that led to Black Lives Matter protests. Although it might be unclear how such literacies are inculcated formally into language learning, a change in what constitutes learning material and educational experience is needed for teachers to conceive that such practices can be applied to learning contexts. It does represent, however, an authentically situated cognition negotiated with and through the real world—a *convergence culture*, as Jenkins (2007) has it, through transmedia storytelling, in which students document their lives across social media. Below is an example of the choices of brief for PBL in the local context to demonstrate how theory is operationalized into activities.

> *Brief 1*: By the end of week 4, you should create a 30-minute "Travel and Tourism" podcast with an accompanying script that describes aspects of local culture for foreign visitors to your home region. The podcast should describe some of the special things that can be found in your locality, from local cuisine to particular music, drama, art, or literature (contemporary or historical). An accompanying Instagram page should be created that links to the podcast

and features images and original descriptions of the content featured in the podcast.

Technology required: Instagram, podcast hosting software, Microsoft applications.

Brief 2: By the end of week 4, you should create a YouTube channel with five short (maximum 10-minute) filmed segments included. The contents of the films are your choice but must describe local places and local people, for instance an exploration of a local issue, a report on local social life, an interview with members of the local community (e.g., exploring how life has changed in the area or offering significant stories), or an interesting geographical feature with local historical significance. An accompanying Wikipedia page should also be created that links to the places described in the YouTube videos.

Technology required: green screen, mobile phone, free video editing software (e.g., Splice), Wikipedia.

A personal curriculum is necessary to express and validate the life-world of the student in such circumstances—for, as the Palestinians say, "هويتنا كرامتنا" (our identity is our dignity), and to pretend otherwise is emasculating. We perceive how our own pedagogical knowledge can support the values of the project in practice, and they can be borne out with a critical pedagogical lens. In PBL, there is scope for the personal and the cultural, whether by using themes to determine learning content or promoting choice, bricolage in creativity, or exploration of worlds. PBL, alongside other methods of social constructivism (experiential, discovery, problem based) in which interaction, discourse, and mediated meaning drive the process, is an educational paradigm of the possible reified through human agency. Moreover, PBL finds synthesis in digital technologies with socially situated approaches as supporting meaning making, while being highly personalized, as shown by Sung (2007, p. 171) in *glocalized* English as a Second Language classes in South Korea:

Even though there were designated texts to read, the class moved along with student-chosen topics of inquiry throughout the course.

The topics were important political and sociocultural issues, such as the possibility of [the] reunification of North and South Korea, the popularity of Pokemon characters, the environmental issue of saving the Dong River in the East of Korea, the influence of Japanese media in Korea. . . . [S]tudents were guided to use diverse texts, using multimedia to represent the results of their inquiries. . . . [T]hese students attested that they learned not only English, but also how to use technology in order to construct their understandings of the phenomena.

Reflections on Our Aspirations and Collaboration

Although language learning is the ultimate objective, project-based curriculum sessions are the process vehicle with multi-modal artifacts (e.g., poems, films, discourses, dramas, photographs, stories), an outcome facilitated by a blend of digital tools. In the foreground, critical pedagogy needs to have hope, idealism, and inspiration at its heart—the power of the possible. Dewey's recognition of the power of community to orchestrate cooperation has an implicit place in the modern classroom, and digital tools can facilitate mutual engagement and joint endeavour by methods that encourage "networking practices, information sharing, distributed learning and content creation" (McLoughlin, 2011, p. 850). The nature of digital literacies and the social pedagogies that complement them are inherently collaborative rather than competitive and require assessment that reflects this. At best, student-generated content can reflect an understanding of the world and students' interactions with it—a far cry from examinations that test memorization. To this end, we used the values drawn from our partners at the outset as a kind of philosophical counterweight always to ask in discussions *how does this meet the elements of this framework of values, which are what you and your students expect?* For our part in training and leading elements of the project, this involved

- continually focusing on the Palestinian position in thinking, deciding, and acting;

- making our digital technology workshops cooperative, active, and collaborative (e.g., exploring problem-based learning or colleagues setting a group task using YouTube to upload videos as the site for student-generated artifacts);
- drawing especially from participants' experiences and previous knowledge to inform discussion and activity, particularly by relating every activity to the partners' local contexts (e.g., by asking *how does this work with your students and staff? What are the barriers and constraints? How do you potentially circumvent them?*);
- creating a multi-voiced environment with all views represented, explored, and considered; and
- treating our workshops as social learning opportunities in which we practise what we value (listening, sharing, communicative dialogue, problem solving, respect).

In all of our training sessions, we aimed to inculcate the values outlined by participants in a power-sharing dialogue, seeking to be as inclusive as possible by invoking contributions and reflections rather than presupposing conditions or requirements. We also made an explicit point that this is the way in which we typically teach—with small-group discussions following a task or inquiry, drawing from prior knowledge, building consensus, recognizing different perceptions, and validating those contributions as the basis of a curriculum (though in this instance the *curriculum* became the project's shared philosophical values). Therein, the curriculum is directly representative of the community and its ideas, its values, and contributions help to shape the immediate discourse.

From the initial meeting to launch the project, we recognized some technical constraints and different views. The local partners were keen to invest in computer labs, whereas we perceived this as expensive and unnecessary infrastructure since mobile phones suffice. This is a cultural divergence: whereas smartphones are prevalent in Palestine, coverage is uneven and often unreliable, so hardware becomes a (more) stable resource but diminishes the remote connectivity aspect so valuable to mobile learning practices.

A common need and problem for our partners is finding opportunities to practise spoken language, particularly with native speakers, an issue that might easily be circumvented by technologies that connect remote participants (where available). Digital technology enables the marriage of multi-modal literacies, evoked as a do-it-yourself culture that "incorporates whatever materials and resources are available. . . . [S]poken language, print and other media are integrated; literacy is integrated with other symbolic systems, such as numeracy and visual semiotics. Different topics and activities can occur together, making it hard to identify the boundaries of a single literacy event or practice" (Hamilton, 2002, p. 5).

A partner teacher based in Bethlehem had a unique approach to language teaching, supported by the social network Edmodo. Students prepared short interviews in English about visitors' experiences and perspectives of the environment and city, filmed the interviews, and uploaded them. This was a great example of socially situating mobile learning tools and ideas and the teacher's repurposing of the network as a broadcast channel, utilizing video uploads by students, and providing feedback that became a means of formal assessment.

As partners, we have only minimal influence on such a project, and the needs and desires of local partners are far greater than our powers. As the project progressed, it became clear how much importance the partners placed on the production of course textbooks, the design of which has taken on a traditional and familiar mantle. A textbook can reinforce pre-existing classroom-based power dynamics, a static resource in which information flows one way, an authority figure reading from the front with repetition embedded, content dictating process and assessment. This dependence on textbooks as the main source of learning reflects a lack of synergy with the values that the Palestinian teachers shared from the outset in developing culturally situated pedagogical practices. The Eurocentric learning content, produced by local partners, contained images derived from Western contexts, and cultural activities described in tasks bore little familiarity to Palestinian life or culturally specific notions used for discussion (e.g., in sections that describe how body language carries connotations). The content can be said to signify a level of mimicry of Western norms and potentially dovetails with Suina's schemata

of identity, mentioned above, of concentric circles. Such content might have relevance in language textbooks, but it omits notions of social justice and opportunities for students to voice their own realities located in critical theory.

We were interested to note that, as in the United Kingdom, students in Palestine form their own concentric informal learning communities, for example using Whatsapp to practise English, probably accrued in the classroom. This represents an authentic, personalized, social, and repurposed application of classroom-learned content, but informally situating these practices socially among students does nothing to transform the dynamic of the institution as one in which critical pedagogy is manifest in a teacher's mindset, which seeks to challenge the status quo.

Ultimately, we recognize that we have minimal influence on who a teacher is or becomes while training. Available in critical digital pedagogy is the opportunity for teachers to become *change agents*—those who organize situations in which change is possible and active agency can be realized from changes in epistemic perspective and lifeworld ontology. As much as an aesthetic or scientific act, teaching is an inherently political act, wherever it occurs in the world. For disruption to occur, we can either wait for external circumstances to force our reaction or prepare for and enact it.

Key Takeaways

- Digital technologies can operationalize theory that aligns with critical pedagogical principles that enable students to share their lifeworlds.
- Teachers work together to develop a paradigm shift that enables more progressive and active pedagogical practices and an alternative curriculum.
- Integral to this shift is a project-based learning approach, outlined here.
- Working in collaboration with partners on international projects allowed us to identify the values of those partners, based upon their diverse contexts. These values helped to guide our work.

Acknowledgements

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