



# Critical pedagogy and teacher professional development for online and blended learning: the equity imperative in the shift to digital

Florence R. Sullivan<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 27 October 2020 / Published online: 9 November 2020  
© Association for Educational Communications and Technology 2020

## Abstract

This paper provides a response to the work of Philipsen et al. (*Educ Technol Res Dev* 67:1145–1174, Philipsen et al., *Educational Technology, Research and Development* 67:1145–1174, 2019), from a critical pedagogy perspective. Here, critical pedagogy is defined from a post-colonial framework focused on liberation. From this perspective, the value of Philipsen et al.’s paper is in its implicit alignment with critical methodologies, including how liberatory ideas are embedded in the TPD for OBL framework. In a response to Philipsen et al.’s work, this paper provides advice on practical actions teachers can take to develop their ability to engage in critical pedagogy, both from the TPD for OBL lens and from an equity lens. This paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the meta-aggregative review, including the lack of an explicitly critical framework, and it provides suggestions for how the work could be improved, especially as regards a discussion of equity for teachers and students. Future research in this area should focus on methods for disrupting educational inequity regarding online and blended learning.

## A critical pedagogy perspective

This article takes a critical pedagogy lens to considering the work presented in “Improving teacher professional development for online and blended learning: a systematic meta-aggregative review” by Philipsen et al. (2019). Critical pedagogy has roots in mid-twentieth century, anti-colonial liberation movements, most emblematically embodied in the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2002). For the purposes of this review, critical pedagogy is defined broadly to include attention to power as it circulates through theoretical frameworks (Leonardo and Manning 2017), the educational zeitgeist (Rose 2014), and practical impacts on teachers and learners (Alim and Paris 2017). This focus stems from the distinct possibility that our collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic may result in an exacerbation and expansion of existing educational inequities (Buras 2020). As we move online in response

---

✉ Florence R. Sullivan  
florence@umass.edu

<sup>1</sup> University of Massachusetts, Amherst, W244 Furcolo Hall, 813 N. Pleasant St., Amherst, MA 01003, USA

to COVID-19, it is imperative that administrators and teachers attend to the potential for this exacerbation and work to mitigate it at both the levels of policy and practice.

## Value of the comprehensive framework

With the critical pedagogy perspective in mind, there are several aspects of the comprehensive framework for teacher professional development (TPD) for online and blended learning (OBL) presented in this meta-aggregative review that are of value. First and foremost is the flexibility inherent in the framework as conceived by the authors. The framework, derived from synthesized findings of reviewed research, is presented as "...an overview of important components of TPD for OBL..." (p. 1165) and "...does not represent a linear process or a TPD process..." (p. 1165). This distinction is worth noting as it aligns with a critical pedagogy perspective—the authors are not presenting a techno-rational approach that locates the power of the process in structural procedures or technological innovations, but rather highlights important ideas for agentic actors to consider as they work to develop supports for teachers. Indeed, there are elements throughout this work that similarly situate it within a critical frame including the inclusion of qualitative research only and of an inductive approach to data analysis which can support a critical framing (Carlton Parsons 2017).

## Application of the comprehensive framework

Several of the ideas in the framework are noteworthy and can be taken up by others as they work to help teachers shift to digital teaching. One of these ideas concerns the need for teachers to re-think their identity, including reflection on their teaching role and the students learning role. From a critical pedagogy perspective, reflection on one's own role, and in particular how one's position in society affects one's epistemological beliefs and one's view of the role of education in society is important work to undertake (Vossoughi and Gutiérrez 2017). While this work is, necessarily lifelong, practical action on examining one's own positionality and bias can begin by visiting Harvard University's Project Implicit (2011) web site (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). This web site will help teachers begin to identify unconscious biases they currently hold. This is a starting point from which further study can proceed. Philipsen et al.'s review paper does not advocate for this specific type of critical reflection, but it is certainly a possible approach that could be taken up by those providing TPD for OBL to teachers. Another important idea implied in this section is that the learner role may become more independent and autonomous, and so the teacher would need to re-think their role in this scenario—a critical pedagogy approach might support a move to a less hierarchical power relationship in the virtual classroom such that teachers learn alongside students (Sullivan and Moriarty 2009; Freeman and Jurow 2017).

Another idea that can be taken up and applied by others is the notion of the importance of the local context and the relevance of TPD for OBL to the teachers' practice. The local context and relevance to those involved in the teaching and learning endeavor is extremely important to a critical approach (Ladson-Billings 1995). Not all learning situations are the same, not all students have the same backgrounds, the same needs, the same interests. Paying attention to and honoring the local context is a very important element of the

framework. However, it should also be noted that relevance is not enough (Alim and Paris 2017)—relevance must be coupled with reflection and analysis of the existence of inequitable practices that reproduce inequitable conditions, such that they can be addressed or mitigated in the shift to digital. The framework also highlights the need for teachers to have the opportunity to collaborate while engaged in TPD for OBL. The notion of collaboration is an idea that also aligns with a critical approach, particularly if the collaborative learning occurs within a community of learners devoted to creating a more equitable educational system (Bruce and Easley 2000).

## Limitations and constraints

While the researcher stance in the paper lends itself to a critical framing, Philipsen et al. actually note that they chose not to critically review the papers aggregated in the report. This lack of critique on the part of the authors limits the utility of the review. Without critique we do not have the authors' insight on how the reviewed work could be improved, what is missing from the research focus, and where the field should go next and why. Meanwhile, the data reported in the meta-aggregative review points to power imbalances and seem to suggest that in some cases, TPD for OBL may be an imposition on teachers—a top down response to real pressures rooted in neoliberal views of education as a project of market capitalism (Giroux 2005), as opposed to a foundational democratic institution (Dewey 1916/1997). The neoliberal educational view that appears to underlie some of the research reviewed, is connected to unresolved tensions in the framework created by the authors, including power dynamics that are evident but unexamined, for example teacher concerns about workload, the financial cost of going online, and teachers' lack of motivation to engage in TPD for OBL.

## Future suggestions

It is vitally important that research on TPD for OBL attend to inequities in education. The TPD for OBL framework does not explicitly address this question; however, educational equity is, arguably, a worldwide issue. Therefore, any framework for supporting teacher professional development must attend to issues of equity. Questions should focus on addressing the development of culturally sustaining pedagogies for marginalized and minoritized communities, including people of color, girls and women (in STEM subjects), people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ community and other vulnerable populations. Moreover, teachers' voices should become more prominent in the development of TPD for OBL, such that their rights and expertise are respected. And while teachers' autonomy has become increasingly circumscribed in the classroom due to neoliberal reform movements (Ravitch 2010), they are still highly influential actors in the lives of children. TPD for OBL should assist teachers in critically analyzing the new medium, and how it can be used to either support equity or reproduce the status quo.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The author has no conflicts of interest with the work presented here.

**Informed consent** This is not a research paper, but a response paper; there are no participants and informed consent is not relevant.

## References

- Alim, H. S., & Paris, D. (2017). What is culturally sustaining pedagogy and why does it matter? In D. Paris & H. S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 1–21). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bruce, B. C., & Easley, J. A. (2000). Emerging communities of practice: collaboration and communication in action research. *Educational Action Research*, 8(2), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079000200118>
- Buras, K.L. (2020). *From katrina to covid-19: how disaster, federal neglect, and the market compound racial inequities*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved August 6, 2020 from <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/katrina-covid>.
- Carlton Parsons, E. R. (2017). Interfaces between critical race theory and sociocultural perspectives. In I. Esmonde & A. N. Booker (Eds.), *Power and privilege in the learning sciences: critical and sociocultural theories of learning* (pp. 28–49). UK: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1916/1997). *Experience and education*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Freeman, Q., & Jurow, S. (2017). Becoming a more disruptive teacher by engaging in side-by-side learning with children rather than avoiding discomfort. In E. Mendoza, Kirshner, B., & Gutiérrez, K.D., (Eds.), *Power, equity, and (re)design: bridging learning and critical theories in learning ecologies for youth* (pp. 35–52). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1970/2002). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Giroux, H. A. (2005). The terror of neoliberalism: rethinking the significance of cultural politics. *College Literature*, 32(1), 1–19.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Towards a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- Leonardo, Z., & Manning, L. (2017). White historical activity theory: toward a critical understanding of white zones of proximal development. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1100988>
- Philipsen, B., Tondeur, J., Roblin, N. P., Vanslambrouck, S., & Zhu, C. (2019). Improving teacher professional development for online and blended learning: a systematic meta-aggregative review. *Educational Technology, Research and Development*, 67, 1145–1174. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09645-8>
- Project Implicit (2011). Available online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>.
- Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system: how testing and choice are undermining education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rose, M. (2014). *Why school? Reclaiming education for all of us*. New York: The New Press .
- Sullivan, F. R., & Moriarty, M. A. (2009). Robotics and discovery learning: Pedagogical beliefs, teacher practice and technology integration. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 17(1), 81–114.
- Vossoughi, S., & Gutiérrez, K. D. (2017). Critical pedagogy and sociocultural theory. In I. Esmonde & A. N. Booker (Eds.), *Power and privilege in the learning sciences: critical and sociocultural theories of learning* (pp. 139–161). UK: Routledge.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Florence R. Sullivan** is a professor of learning technology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research focuses on student collaborative learning with computational media, teacher and student learning of computational thinking and computer science concepts, and issues of equity in teaching and learning with technology. She is the author of the book “Creativity, Technology and Learning: Theory for Classroom Practices” published in 2017 by Routledge.