Elusive Validation: A Transcultural Currere

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Abstract

If what Margaret Atwood said, "In the end, we'll all become stories" is true then we must apply Nodding's (1991) idea of stories directing and changing our lives through collaborative dialogue (entering in and out of one's environment, gathering data, and reflecting) and use collaborative autobiographies and reflexive narratives to provide opportunities to theorize a particular moment, dialogue with it, and examine possibilities for change. What is at stake for the amateur transformative intellectual? It is teaching as phronesis within the paradox created by knowledge economies. If one can take the disequilibrium with a pinch of salt and look at the bigger picture (envisioning an alternative future or what is possible rather than merely accepting what is probable), then fixed ritualistic beings like myself can willingly undergo the transformation process (thinking of old situations in new ways resulting in new lines of action) in order to fully and holistically understand who we are as individuals and teachers and what is controlling what we do and to what effect. Through this autobiographical method of *currere,* I explore, analyze, and dialogue with my personal professional knowledge in the hopes of experiencing liberation through Pinar's ideas of "the regressive" (data collected from the past through reflection and free association), and "the progressive" (looking forward to what may be a possible future).

Keywords: Currere, Autobiography, Personal Professional Knowledge, Transformative Intellectual

It is a blessing to be the color of Earth. Do you know how often flowers confuse me for home?

-Rupi Kaur

"In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (2002) made a variety of references to the material conditions of estrangement that shape the lived histories of oppressed students, workers, and their communities are made visible and are profoundly expressed through their bodies. This can be witnessed in their skin, their teeth, their hair, their gestures, their speech, and movement of their arms and legs. As such, student bodies provide meaningful maps of identity and powerful insights into the tensions, struggles, and needs that students from oppressed communities express in the classroom and out in the world" (Darder, 2017, p. 84). I never really fully understood this concept of lived histories of oppressed students being expressed through their bodies till I began these complicated conversations with Self and then struggled with the idea of disseminating them. Why? The anger I felt at myself for not being able to coherently articulate my thoughts in English which would somehow not betray my intellect, the discomfort I experienced during long pauses in between sentences while I got lost in the maze of translation between Urdu to English to Eng-du (a mixture of English and Urdu resulting in the language of an amorphous being), my desperate attempt to use big fancy English words, my colonized exoskeleton at war with my lost soul. While recording my response, I realized I had anger living inside my body in parts where it shouldn't be living.

ACT 1: East or West, West is the BEST!

I attended an English medium school in Pakistan. My earliest memory of the language English is when in grade 1, we were told by our class teacher that whoever is "caught" speaking Urdu in school will be fined (I am imagining Freire's facial expressions to this). That is my first memory of when I started shedding my identity, my sense of

belonging. It was almost as if I was living two separate lives, one at home and one at school (giving birth to multiple alter egos which would never co-exist in alignment). There was no congruency between these two disparate lives (lived experiences and background knowledge vs. foreign curriculum with no social and cultural relevance). The curriculum at school (for example, literature by white authors for white audiences) further caused confusion, alienation, and fragmentation (couldn't relate to the content).

As I grew older, the narrative continued and intensified. My lived experiences and the school curriculum were never in tandem. At home, I was a Pakistani, but at school I couldn't dare embody that or else I had to pay a "fine." To embody Western "taste, habits, dress, opinions, morals and intellect" (Macaulay, 1835/1995), p. 249) meant respect, desirability, and acceptance. But what is at stake? To assimilate meant subordination to the European way of being and despising my own culture (my own body which carries the history, the lives, the lived experiences, the knowledges of my ancestors). I was desperate to belong but the disconnect between my home and my school wouldn't let me. At home, my grandmother would tell me Indigenous stories in my mother tongue, and I felt beguiled. I wanted to stay there, in the comfort of my being. I could taste the sweetness of wholeness in that moment. "*No! I can't. I have to assimilate! I have to wear Western clothes, I have to apply fairness creams, I have to speak English, I have to eat Western food, appreciate Western art (movies, music, literature), I have to despise my Pakistani (barbaric/uncivilized) identity, I have to keep living this façade till I am able to convince myself that I belong/I am worthy. I want to be desirabl*e." It is only recently that I have started questioning myself: Who/Whose am I? Who is it that I really want to be desirable for? Who do I want to desire me? What is at stake? Is it worth it?

The truth is you make my tongue so weak, it forgets what language to speak in. -Rupi Kaur

The British left Pakistan in 1947, but the remnants of colonization linger/ed. I became another lost soul shedding layers of my identity everywhere like eyelashes. The foreign curriculum at school where the only time we were allowed to speak Urdu was while translating it into English (in our Urdu Language course/subject) and the hidden curriculum were desperately at work to assimilate us into beings with English middle-class values and behaviors (Kanu, 2006). Rote learning was the predominant pedagogical approach which meant creativity was looked down upon as a form of rebellion. The teacher, the supreme knowing subject in an undemocratic classroom, had undisputed authority over the docile passive objects. Those who followed the "regimen" and regurgitated the teachers' words without question (or even understanding) succeeded (or did they?). Those who struggled to leave their cultural ways of knowing and being suffered repercussions in the form of punishments. The message was loud and clear: keep your head down, your mouth shut, memorize, and repeat. The colonization agenda of the subservient mentality was successful: the destruction of people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment [and], in their capacities, and ultimately themselves (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). I started considering Urdu, the language of the inferior, as redundant. This discord between English and Urdu (and the improper way of befriending them) impacted my thinking, articulation, imagination, and expression (of thoughts). The distance between me and my "Self" grew to a point where I forgot how to "be" in my mother tongue. This translated into tensions/estrangement in my personal relationships with family and friends. I'd rather listen to English music than my grandmother's stories. I took pride in no longer understanding Urdu words. I felt "cool" not knowing that I was a victim of what Ogunnaike (2018) calls "necrolinguisics" (due to the demonization of Urdu, my mother tongue, I was not fluent in any particular language).

I would like to stress again that the worst form of colonialism (deepest and least visible) is the occupation of an official language in place of living languages, whose meanings stem from people's actions, interactions, reflections, and efforts to make sense. The occupying language is that of textbooks, vertical evaluation, and words with positive connotations but no denotations, such as the "right to education', 'excellence', 'critical-thinking', 'creativity', 'quality education', 'multiple intelligences' (Sukarieh, 2019, p. 188).

In grade 9, I enrolled in the British equivalent of high school called "O" Levels. In my O Level's curriculum, I was nowhere to be found once again. It was as if the British had never left. The glorification of Western curricula and colonial pedagogy meant furthering the colonization of my mind, my imagination, and the way I saw the world and myself. The enslavement of colonial education was such that I knew more about British history and culture than Pakistan's. I began looking at myself from the lens/perspective of the oppressor which ultimately resulted

in what Du Bois (1903/1994) refers to as "double consciousness," which is a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 5). The thing about looking at one's own self through the eyes of the other is that you are never good enough which then manifests as self-hate and unsurmountable damage which perhaps never really leaves you fully (want to insert an image of "Insecurity" growing a pair of legs and walking everywhere in search of her best friend "Elusive Validation" who seems to be present momentarily in the eyes of others but then vanishes into thin air and so the relentless search continues). To somehow make sense of years of bafflement, I decided to come to OISE in search for answers. How to make the Pakistani curricula meet the existential needs of Pakistani students (to cater to their relational and affective needs)? How to make the curricula inclusive of Indigenous knowledge (stories, idioms, oral traditions, folktales and proverbs)? How to make teachers competent enough to teach Freire's pedagogical practices (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*)? How to transform the structure of oppression which situates the oppressed as "beings for others" (Freire, 1993, p. 3). How to make schooling more culturally, socially, personally, and spiritually meaningful to the students? How to decolonize the students' minds (and bodies) such that they can be freed from "double consciousness" and Western epistemological hegemony? Last semester, a girl from India came up to me and said, "I love how you mention you are from Pakistan in class discussions. That's really brave of you." How to live in a world where telling where you are from is not considered an act of bravery?

ACT 2: East or West, West is the BEST?

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. - Rainer Maria Rilke (Rilke, 2000, p. 25)

Currere requires one to reflect on the past, imagine the future, and "then slowly…analyze one's experience of the past and fantasies of the future in order to understand more fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one's submergence in the present" (Pinar, 2004, p. 4). In this analytical phase (of currere), I will critically examine the relationship between my past and imagined future in order to holistically have a "complicated conversation….as a "private" intellectual (Pinar, 2004, p. 37) with my present. Currently at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) I'm living through a myriad of questions (submerged in the complex present/disequilibrium). Every week my mind expands (strives to break free from the psychological insubordination) and new branches grow out of it, carrying questions, anger, anguish, and sometimes tears. The first time I read Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it felt like a love letter Freire had written to me. He had engaged with several complicated emotions (which resulted from my troubled schooling experiences) of mine and theorized them in a way where I was better able to make sense/understand/deconstruct them. I got acquainted with the privilege of un-learning (as well as critical thinking as opposed to rote- learning) and understanding the dangers of mis-learning (miseducation) which were previously a blasphemy for me as a student. He made me understand the nuanced difference between education for liberation and education for indoctrination/enslavement (banking concept of education).

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them……Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them ([1]), for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated (Freire. 1993, p. 2).

In the present, I continue to be engaged in "complicated conversations" with myself (my past, present, future temporal transient selves), my courses (what kinds of courses am I choosing and why?), my colleagues, and the project of disengagement from colonial pedagogy/curricula (am I freeing myself from Western epistemological hegemonic practices?). These complicated conversations have enabled me to understand and identify a multitude of

[1] Simone de Beauvoir. La Pensee de Droite, Aujord'hui (Paris); ST, El Pensamiento politico de la Derecha (Buenos Aires, 1963), p. 34.

external forces at play which impacted my educational trajectory (culture, politics, society, hidden agendas, etc.). The pedagogy my teachers adopted was not compatible with my socio-cultural realities (lived experiences). That pedagogy uprooted me from my own being and demolished the authentic self through external and internal colonization. I am also questioning my own assumptions, values, beliefs, and biases. How did they come into being? Who is controlling them and to what effect? Are they serving the interests of Western epistemology and ontology? If they are, what is at stake? How important is the "disequilibrium" for alternative futures? (Kanu & Glor, 2006, p.108).

What is the Meaning of the Present?

What is this temporal complexity that presents itself to me as the present moment? In the synthetical step-etymologically syn means 'together' tithenal means 'to place'-- one re-enters the lived present. Conscious of one's breathing, indeed, of one's embodied otherness, one asks 'who is that?' Listening carefully to one's own inner voice in the historical and natural world, one asks: 'what is the meaning of the present?' (Pinar, 2004, p. 37*).*

Where should we go from here? What should we do to envision what is possible rather than merely accepting what is probable? Engaging in this reflexive currere has allowed me to theorize particular moments, to dialogue with them, and to examine possibilities for change (Stenberg as cited in Kanu & Glor, 2006, p.112). Curriculum needs to be reimagined where students are able to examine stories of the self in the context of education (curriculum is not divorced from the worldviews of the students) and relationships with others as opposed to memorizing disembodied texts resulting in fragmented learning (Morris, 2015).

Ultimately for Pinar academic work should "liberate" and make one more free, more open to questions, and open to more meaningful ways of living life. For Pinar living a more full and meaningful life begins with looking at one's interiority and examining the self in relation to academic knowledge and psychic well-being (Morris, 2015, p. 104).

According to De Lissovoy (2014), a decolonized curriculum should be "anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-classist [and] against the ubiquitous and parasitic action of power itself" (p. 81) and must decenter Western epistemology by considering it as one (as opposed to the only) of the global family of knowledges. "We need to realize that universals are contrary to both humanity and nature" (Sukarieh, 2019, p. 193). A decolonized curriculum should eliminate disciplinary knowledge (and practices) that restrict critical thinking and creativity and should cease producing submissive students. "In a nutshell, decolonized education must fundamentally address the "coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being" (Sentime as cited in Sibanda, 2020, p. 17).

Universalism and fragmentation go hand in hand: every universal claim shatters the inner world within each person and tears apart the social fabric in communities… The belief in a single undifferentiated universal path for progress is in contradiction with pluralism… Similarly with cultures and communities: we need to start with the strengths and what is healthy in them. What a culture needs in order to flourish is a space where people live in accordance with their ways, in free associations with each other. As the Zapatistas say: changing traditions in traditional ways, without tearing apart the social fabric in community. No culture is universal; and cultures cannot be fully under-stood via words and concepts (Sukarieh, 2019, p.193).

A decolonized curriculum should aim to expose students to epistemological pluriversality which includes not only making the curriculum culturally relevant but also responsive to different histories, Indigenous knowledges including land as pedagogy/curriculum ("Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots" --Rumi), ways of being, learning and teaching (emancipation from the hegemony of Western knowledge and ontology). This would result in the redundancy of universality (dominance of Western knowledge) and allow the marginalized peoples to become "beings for themselves."

"The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not 'marginals,' are not living "outside' society. They have always been 'inside' the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to 'integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'"(Freire, 1993, p. 3).

Decolonized education in Pakistan should aim to reclaim the Pakistani identity, epistemology, ontology, and "emancipation from a colonized mind, self-denial and denigration, epistemological racism, and cultural

devaluation and degradation. Fundamentally, the people it is supposed to serve must define it for themselves" (Sibanda, 2020, p.18). *Starting with what is beautiful and inspiring would help cultures flourish freely, and change from within, and support diverse ways of learning (*Sukarieh, 2019, p. 193*)*

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Sunnya Khan is a 4th year doctoral student at the University of Toronto/OISE specializing in Curriculum and Pedagogy. Her areas of interest are expressive writing and holistic education. She seeks to explore the possibilities when our academic experiences are given a personal tongue? Knowledge, to her, is not always supposed to be some elusive entity "over there", external from us. Guy Allen (professor at OISE) explains, "An unfortunate side effect of the split between the personal and the academic is that students fail to see that their own lives can be sources of knowledge. Their work with personal narrative brings them to recognize their lives as places where meaning may be found". Sunnya's research seeks to unravel the magic which may transpire when we begin to trust our words, our intuitions, to lead us to meaning/knowledge?