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Teaching Note

I *Critically* Think, Therefore I Am: A Note on My Bittersweet Teaching Experience

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CONFRONTATION AT THE BRIDGE, 1975, JACOB LAWRENCE. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

From September 2022, many Iranian school and university teachers who supported the Women-Life-Freedom movement were fired. Others, including myself, chose to quit universities in solidarity with these teachers. In response, universities were filled with conservative teachers, some of whom even lacked expertise in their employed fields. After more than three years of severe economic, political, racial, and sexual oppression, although the movement remains alive, it has lost some of its initial strength, and the fight for freedom has taken new forms.

Before the start of the 2025 academic year, the head of the English translation department called me and asked if I wished to come back to the university and teach a new course titled "Familiarity with the Translation Market," recently added to the curriculum. As an adjunct university teacher, when I heard the word 'market' in the title, my anti-neoliberal perspective compelled me to accept the invitation, especially since the course was only one-term old. What motivated me further was the freedom to choose the course materials. This gave me the opportunity to practice what I have theorized in my research on neoliberalism in (higher) education, which treats knowledge as a saleable commodity (Levidow, 2001) and focuses on "the provision of marketable skills and research outputs to the 'knowledge economy'" (Radice, 2013, p. 408).

Excited and enthusiastic, I planned the first session mainly to decide together with my students what we would focus on in the course. I aimed to base the course on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (CP), which emphasizes a radical educational politics aimed at winning "the battle for a democracy that could stand up to the power and virulence of the Right" (Freire, 1994, p. 44). CP is strongly critical of neoliberalism because it depoliticizes education by promoting a mechanistic approach to it that largely denies students' critical agency in learning.

Since even a Persian equivalent of the word 'neoliberalism' is not commonly used in academia, I had to tailor the class to suit students' needs. Also, I knew the students would use artificial intelligence (AI) even if I asked them not to do so! For the beginning, thus, we decided to give AI prompts about what neoliberalism is and ask it to explain it in accessible language. Instead of working on how to make money through English translation, we decided to find and discuss the economic issues that have given rise to the current situation where English translators have trouble making ends meet. This was the result of our first discussion: one main reason for including this new course is our ailing economy and the increasing difficulty of making a living through education in general and English translation in particular.

In the next three sessions, we explored concepts such as *socialism*, *Freire's banking model of education*, *scientism*, and similar topics for classroom discussion. Our aim was to understand how these concepts relate to the life and work of an English translator. I continued these conversations enthusiastically in our Telegram channel, where I sent voice messages and asked students to gather more detailed information about the topics. I was so encouraged by their responses that I even shared some of them on my Instagram account to proudly show my friends and followers that we were doing meaningful, alternative work amid the current oppressive circumstances.

When Oppression Reared Its Ugly Head

In one session, I asked my students to give feedback on the teaching approach and the topic. All my enthusiasm and pride quickly evaporated when, after a moment of silence, one student finally broke the ice and said, "The topic is rather philosophical!" The others smiled, relieved that someone had voiced what they were all thinking. Some others voiced the same complaint in more implicit ways. It was already near the end of the class, and I felt so frustrated that I couldn't bring myself to go home right away. Instead, I took the nearly thirty-minute walk back, reflecting on what had happened.

First, psychologically speaking, I realized that my students had been influenced by my own excitement. I admit that this was partly my fault; people often tend to agree with what an authority figure proposes, especially when that proposal is delivered with excessive enthusiasm. I had assumed that by sitting next to my students, giving them the freedom to choose materials, and consistently inviting them to participate in decision-making, they would gradually free themselves from the herd mentality that has shaped public life in my country for more than a century. But this moment showed me that the influence of authority can persist even in spaces designed to be democratic.

Second, I asked myself why that student had described the topic as "philosophical," despite the simple explanations provided by AI and my own elaborations. In the next session, when we revisited the material, I asked her to clarify what she meant. She admitted that she was simply uninterested in socio-political issues related to education, and she did not see how such issues were connected to English translation. I explored this further by asking the whole class to describe their envisioned future as English translators. Unsurprisingly, none of their descriptions included any reference to the social, political, or cultural responsibilities of a translator.

At that moment, after more than three years absence in academia, I realized that I had held unrealistic expectations—expecting depoliticized students to immediately embrace the critical teaching approach I had introduced. My teaching experience and academic observations in Iran indicate a sharp contrast between previous generations of students, with whom I am still in touch on social media, and the new generation who, although immersed in an environment where information is always available at their fingertips, often rely on micro-content shared on social platforms as their primary source of knowledge. Given this context, it is not surprising that the topics we chose sounded "philosophical" and difficult for them to decipher.

We all agreed to return to the material the students had worked on in the previous term— a market-oriented booklet on the publication process and the criteria publishing companies use to select translators. However, my socialist perspective does not allow me to remain docile or accept the

status quo. I frequently ask my students to relate what the book describes to their lived realities. I also question the taken-for-granted Western assumptions embedded in the text about publication and translator selection. In particular, I draw attention to the neoliberal fantasy depicted in the booklet, where equal opportunities supposedly exist for translators to secure contracts. As Freire (1994) encourages radical, socialist, and progressive educators, I openly share my own vision of a world in which political consciousness is an integral part of everyday life.

In our contemporary society, I believe in a revised version of Descartes' statement: *"I critically think, therefore I am."* Students' thinking is shaped, in part, by the historical conditions of their context—a context in which tradition and modernity are deeply intertwined. As mentioned earlier, many Iranian students have internalized the "sheep-shepherd," or in Freire's terms, "paternalistic," mentality embedded in Iran's history, including its family structures, education system, literature, and marriage norms. Consequently, many of them cannot easily imagine what a democratic classroom looks like and tend to revert to herd-like patterns of behavior. To my dismay, I realized that some even felt uncomfortable when I invited them to participate in educational decision-making and become active contributors to both teaching and learning.

How beneficial it would be if teachers shared their experiences in contexts where oppression manifests itself in ways visible only to critical eyes. By doing so, we could better understand how teaching in democratic societies differs from teaching in oppressive ones and, in turn, avoid making sweeping generalizations about teaching approaches and strategies. In other words, we always need to consider the cultural and socio-political peculiarities of every educational context when discussing research findings and offering suggestions for critical, democratic teaching activities.

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