Embodied Pedagogy as Transformative Learning: A Critical Reflection

Roxana Ng
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) University of Toronto

This paper asks a central question: ‘How is it that the oppressor and oppressed co-participate in acts of oppression?’ (See Fanon, 1963, 1967). The question arose from my participation in feminist, anti-racist and socialist movements in the last thirty years. While feminist, anti-racist and Marxist theories have given me a different way of understanding my experience as a minority and racialized woman living in a capitalist and colonial society, I also became aware of the inadequacy of any kind of progressive ideology and politic that takes up issues only intellectually without attention to emotion, body and spirit. The question I posed above opened up a whole new field of thinking, practice, teaching and learning, which is what I want to share here. This paper outlines how I came to incorporate embodiment as a pedagogical approach within the transformative learning tradition in adult education, and discusses the theoretical foundation, major tenets and elements of this approach.

Experience as the basis of critique

In 1988, I returned, as a teaching staff, to the institution in which I obtained my doctorate. Whereas I felt intellectually stimulated and morally supported as a graduate student, as a faculty member my experience was dramatically different. As the first women of colour faculty specializing in gender and race with an activist record, I became the lightening rod for everything having to do with the politics of racism, anti-racism, sexism, and feminism in the institution. My performance in teaching, research, outreach activities were measured against expectations (some entirely undisclosed to me) and standards which an ordinary human being could never meet. This experience was similar to that of a Chinese daughter: I was given a lot of responsibilities and no authority to make anything happen. What was most painful was that the attacks did not only come from the conservative elements of the institution, but from faculty and students who claimed to be critical and progressive. I became sick, and went through a period of contemplation and soul searching that led to a profound shift in my thinking, teaching, and practice. This shift included a critique of the foundation of critical education as it is taught in the academy.

I argue that contemporary western liberal and critical education is built on a profound division: the privileging of the mind-intellect over the body-spirit. I include in critical education critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, anti-racist education in Canada (Ng et al. 1995), and critical, emancipatory or revolutionary multicultural education in the US (McCarthy 1995). Although they have different roots and traditions, they do share a common goal: to expose existing inequalities and instil critical consciousness in students. By and large, educators, including critical educators, have focused their educational efforts on developing students’ intellect and ability for critical reasoning. The body is relevant only as a vessel that houses the brain, which is seen to be the organ...
responsible for the mind/intellect. Although there have been attempts to rescue the body and restore its agency in social theory (e.g., Shilling 1993) and in cultural theory (e.g., McLaren 1995), most of the writings focus on how the body is represented and what is being done to the body in post-modernity (what I call the outside-in approach). This attempt to incorporate the body into social and cultural theories, however, does not include the spirit, which is relegated to the domain of religion. The spirit ‘belongs’ to theology and religious studies, not in other disciplines; this indicates the depth to which our thinking is circumscribed by existing disciplinary boundaries. Much of critical teaching is implicated in the mind-intellect versus body-spirit divide.

This divide has led to a bifurcation of our consciousness: a disjuncture between our way of thinking and way of being in the world; what we think is not necessarily how we act. That is, although we have learned to think critically, dominant ways of being are so normalized that we are ‘programmed’ to act in ways that reproduce and sustain oppression – we are locked into fixed patterns of behaviour. For an ordinary yet profound example, I turn to my babysitter for insight: My ‘babysitter’, who looks after my animals when I am away, is 83 going on 84. She doesn’t cook, so I cook for her. She gulps down her food as soon as I put it in front of her, frequently finishing a whole dinner before I have a chance to sit down. When I asked her to eat slower, she would say: ‘I’ve always had to eat fast when I worked at the hospital, we were only given half an hour for lunch.’ When I reminded her that she had retired since she was 65, her rebuttal is, inevitably: ‘I can’t help it.’ It is the belief that ‘I can’t help it’ that locks us into fixed pattern of behaviour.

In fact, change is constant and inevitable even though many people have a tremendous fear of it. So, conscious, deliberate change is only possible if we develop the tools and capacity to look at our patterns, without attachment and judgement, in order to decide what needs to alter and what should stay the same. This sounds simple, but isn’t because so much of our way of being in the world is conditioned, reactive and automatic – we do not think; we react based on our ‘programming’ developed through socialization. Once certain patterns are developed, they are taken for granted. We simply respond out of the repertoire of reactions in our memory bank (Kabat-Zinn 1990). I will return to this point later.

The classroom, especially the university classroom, is not a neutral place. It is a site where knowledge is constructed and contested. It is here that a complex of power relations based on class, gender, race, age, social position, and so on is animated, struggled over, inscribed and reinscribed. Thus, intellectual encounters are never neutral; they do not reside only in people’s minds. They are exercised through confrontations of bodies, which are differently inscribed. Power play is enacted and absorbed by people physically as they assert or challenge authority, and therefore the marks of such confrontations are stored in the body. Each time I stand in front of a classroom I embody the historical sexualization and racialization of an oriental female, even as my class privilege, formal authority and qualification ameliorate some of the effects of this signification. My presence is a moment in the crystallization of the historical and contemporary contestation of ideas and practices that are constantly changing. That is, my physical presence in the academy in turn challenges the sexist and racist construction
of the stereotype of an oriental female. It is indeed the encounters of bodies, not only of
intellect, that give dynamism to the process of teaching and learning. As we engage in
critical education, this dynamism is what excites us at the same time that it makes us sick
when we go against the grain (see Ng 1998: 2).

Whereas critical education treats power relations, especially unequal power
relations, as a central problematic, it does not encourage an examination of what this
form of teaching has done to our bodies in the academy. This oversight is what I attempt
to address in embodied pedagogy or embodied learning.

**What is embodied learning?**

To develop my work I rely on Franz Fanon’s (1963, 1967) analysis of the
psychology of the colonized, and Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notions of hegemony and
common sense. Fanon’s work is groundbreaking because he was one of the first social
scientists to try to understand how colonization works, not only as a direct oppressive
force. More profoundly, it is internalized by the colonized, so that she adopts the ideas
and behaviour of the colonizer, acts and regulates herself according to the norms of
colonial society. Similarly, Gramsci uses the term ‘hegemony’ to understand how ruling
ideas are shared by the dominant and working classes. He asserts that once a ruling idea
becomes hegemonic, it becomes common sense. Common sense thinking is uncritical,
episodic, and disjointed, but it is also powerful because it is taken for granted (Gramsci
1971: 321-343). Applying Gramsci’s historical discussion to racism in contemporary
British society, Stuart Hall notes:

> [Ideologies] work most effectively when we are not aware that how we
formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by
ideological premisses; when our formulations seem to be simply
descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we
can ‘take-for-granted’ (Hall quoted in Lawrence 1982: 47).

But ideology is not only a set of ideas; it is a practice in that it shapes not only how we
think, but how we act. Once hegemonic ideas become common sense, therefore, they are
*condensed* in our emotional and physical beings, for example in how we relate to women
and minority groups, and in how see and relate to ourselves. This corresponds to
Foucault’s notion of self-regulation (Foucault 1978). In short, ideas become patterns of
behaviour. So it is that my babysitter has developed a ‘habit’ of eating fast because of
years of working in a place where she had to hurry, or her pay would be docked, or she
would be reprimanded. Gulping down her dinner is ‘natural’ for her, taken for granted,
not to be questioned.

Using insights from Fanon, Gramsci and Foucault, we can see how dominant and
subordinate power relations are played out interactionally in ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ ways.
Feminists have drawn attention to how patriarchy works in practice: men are listened to
when they speak; women and minorities are not heard. My notion of an embodied
pedagogy, which I am now calling an ‘embodied integrative anti-racist feminist
approach,’ seeks to help us develop the capacity, not only for critical reasoning, but to see
dispassionately and to alter actions that contribute to the reproduction of dominant-
subordinate relations. It is an attempt to close the gap between progressive theory and
practice, and entails at least three elements.

First, it acknowledges explicitly that we are all gendered, racialized and
differently constructed subjects who do not participate as equals in interactional settings,
and that unequal power relations permeate all social interactions. It recognizes that
racism as well as sexism and other forms of oppression are systemic in the society we
live in, so we cannot cleanse ourselves of them just by good will. When I say that sexism,
racism and other forms of oppression are systemic, I refer to the fact that certain ways of
thinking and doing things have become normalized or naturalized so that they become
common sense; they are taken for granted and therefore not open to interrogation. An
example is the racial profiling of Muslims as criminals and terrorists after 9/11, which is
being inscribed in North America’s legal systems and in the media.

I make a distinction between non-racism or sexism, and anti-racism and anti-
sexism (see Briskin 1990). Non-sexism/racism is an approach that suggests that sexism
and racism can be made irrelevant, that is, the notion that we are all people or that we
should all be treated equally. It is an individualistic approach that attempts to rid
individuals of sexism and racism without attending to the systemic operation of
oppression in our lives. Here’s a quote from Terri Wolverton, when she discovered the
difference between non-racism and anti-racism in one of her consciousness-raising
groups:

I had confused the act of trying to appear not to be racist with actively
working to eliminate racism. Trying to appear not racist had made me
deny my racism and therefore exclude the possibility of change

Secondly, in addition to developing critical analysis intellectually, we need to
disrupt common sense ideas and practices, and reflect on how we ourselves participate in
social encounters by adopting the dominant and normalized ways of being. How are we
‘programmed’ to not question those in authority, or treat only white male subjects as
authoritative, for instance? Joanne Wong, a student in one of my courses, wrote:

Although I deemed an Asian professor to be a symbol of society’s final
acceptance of minorities as worthy of integration with the West, I, at the
same time, found it difficult to accept her as a Chinese feminist with
influence. ... Isn’t it strange how we embrace the very ideals that we at the
same time reject? (Ng et al. 2003, unpaged.)

In developing an embodied way of learning, I found it useful to reach back into
my history and incorporate Taoist philosophy and the practice of Qi Gong to facilitate our
reflection. Qi Gong is a form of breathing and meditative exercise, based in Toaist
philosophy, developed in ancient China over 2,000 years ago. Its medical and martial arts
application in contemporary China has been legendary. For me, what is interesting about
Taoism as theory and practice (in Chinese medical theory and in martial arts, for instance) is that mind, body and spirit are not bifurcated as in western scientific traditions (see Ng 2000). Introducing this philosophical tradition and its accompanying exercise form into the classroom serves to disrupt normalized practices in education, including adult education in a university setting, by raising questions, not to mention eye brows, about how we come to treat learning merely as an intellectual exercise when in fact learning involves our mind, emotion, body and spirit. Another reason for practicing Qi Gong and meditation is that these are forms of physical and mental discipline that enable the practitioner to develop an attitude of non-attachment, so that she can, with will and practice over time, develop the capacity to see her actions with clarity and without judgement, in order to decide whether and how to change. Non-attachment is distinct from detachment in that the latter is characterized by the absence of emotional involvement when presented or confronted with something. Non-attachment, on the other hand, is to not pass judgement on something in the first instance. It enables one to consider, objectively, how to interpret or act on something, and to do so with understanding and compassion.

Thirdly, what is important to stress is that eliminating sexism, racism and other forms of oppression requires that we reflect on how we unwittingly participate in courses of action that implicate us in the perpetuation of acts of oppression. By courses of action I mean that sexism and racism are not only individual acts, but are institutionalized modes of action. Thus, we can participate in actions with sexist and racist outcomes quite unwittingly, without meaning to do so, by following rules or conducting business as usual. Our reflection must be situated in a larger collective vision of an alternative social arrangement to the one we have at present. Thus, an embodied integrative anti-racist feminism goes beyond simple reflection. It is a praxis – the complete integration of theory and practice; it is a project of change and hope. It goes beyond inserting ourselves into existing social and institutional arrangements and securing our positions within these arrangements. Ultimately, it is a transformative project – it requires that we envision a society free of oppression and that we change ourselves and society to achieve this vision. Thus, the intent of embodied pedagogy is similar to different formulations of transformative learning, whose aim is to shift the learner’s frame of reference (Mezirow et al. 1990) so that s/he questions taken for granted ideas and practice (Cunningham 1998), and moves toward a consciousness that makes connections between self and the cosmos (O’Sullivan 1999).

What do I do as part of an embodied pedagogy?

I now incorporate embodied learning into two of my courses: ‘Embodied Learning and Qi Gong,’ and ‘Toward an Integrated Equity Approach in Higher Education.’ While the contents of these courses are different, they consist of at least three major components, the first of which is, needless to say, writings and other materials (such as films and videos). Since this is the core and standard part of all university curriculum, I will not discuss it here.

The second component of embodied pedagogy is the cultivation of mindfulness and reflection through Qi Gong. The insistence of incorporating Qi Gong as part of the
curriculum reinforces the fact that we are embodied learners, that learning does not only involve the mind. It draws our attention to how the body, emotion and spirit are involved in the learning process: what we embrace and resist, and why. The second reason for doing Qi Gong is that it is at once a physical exercise and a form of meditation. In many eastern traditions, meditation is used as a discipline that focuses the mind, enhancing our capacity to reflect on our thought and action without judgement – what Buddhism refers to as non-attachment as mentioned earlier.

While initially I took up Qi Gong practice as a way of reducing stress and promoting health, with time and practice, I came to understand and appreciate how it is that Qi Gong and other forms of meditation are spiritual, as distinct from merely religious, practices. These practices enable one to develop the capacity to be mindful of one’s thought and action, so that one does not go about one’s daily business thoughtlessly and automatically because it is a matter of habit. They enable one to see how one’s action affect others, and whether and how one should change. They are therefore means, albeit not the only ones, to interrogate how our consciousness is developed and changed. The assumption here is that consciousness has both a mind-intellect as well as a body-spirit dimension. It is tangible because it is embodied. Understanding and analyzing the development of consciousness thus necessitates an interrogation of our being as sensuous living individuals, the material conditions that enable and limit our bodily existence, and hence knowledge construction itself, which is accomplished by embodied subjects (Bai 2001). Thus, similar to the call for starting with people’s lived experience proposed by critical and feminist pedagogy, embodied and mindfulness pedagogy is a mode of learning that grounds the knower in time and space, and provides an anchor for seeing that thought processes are inevitably historically and spatially specific. This allows us to see that indeed consciousness can be changed, as we confront it and understand how it comes about.

The third component is journalling as an accompaniment to mindfulness exercises, with two purposes. First, I asked students to summarize the major argument(s) of a piece to develop their comprehension and summary skills. When I review this part of the journal I get a sense of whether students understand the materials, and if not, what remedial action I and they should take. Secondly, journalling is another tool for reflect and analysis. Once we commit our reactions, feelings and emotions to words on paper, we can see more precisely and honestly areas where changes may be needed. Thus, journalling is a simple yet effective way of examining our consciousness and working toward change.

**Final comments**

Acknowledging that we are embodied subjects and incorporating the body into the learning process is uncomfortable and risky, because we do not only become aware of others’ imperfections, but our own as well. However, my experience teaching and practicing embodiment in education also convinces me that it is a powerful transformative practice. This is because it allows us to examine simultaneously our bodily sensations, emotions, desires and intellect without guilt and judgement so common
in some forms of critical education. Because it is a mindfulness practice, embodied pedagogy is by definition a work in progress: it begins but never ends.

References