Chapter 12

How should black students be empowered to learn in order that they may engage in personal and social transformation?

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the application of the critical educative approach to teaching and learning with black social work students. I am advocating ways of working with black students so that their experiences can be more positive and empowering. In my discussions, I have included data from students who have been part of the action research into my practice and who shared their experiences, of teaching, learning and writing of academic essays in class discussions. I have also included feedback from students who have read drafts of this chapter and a chapter on writing which is not included in this thesis.

I want to suggest an approach to learning which is holistic in nature and which has a political perspective which could lead to individual empowerment that has the capacity for social change and transformation. A holistic approach that should involve developing a critical understanding of key concepts of 'oppression', 'racism and anti-racism', anti-oppression and a black perspective in social work education. It also calls the teacher to engage with the student at all three levels of learning, cognitive, affective and effective, and calls on the student to develop critical thinking.

Such an approach challenges teachers and learners alike to create a climate conducive to empowerment of black students in social work education. I have adapted Shor's idea of empowering education, which is: "A critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change…The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality and change…empowering education invites students to become skilled workers and thinking citizens who are also change agents and social critics (Shor, 1992, pp. 15, 16).

Another challenge for teachers might be to work from a perspective that would be, in effect, black because the central task would be "... to confront the students' (black and white) previous socialisation and learning (which, having been brought up in a racist society, has been based on both the essentialisation and racialisation of such notions as 'normal', 'deviant', 'commonsense' and 'human nature'), not by some abstract concept but through the positive celebration of difference" (Singh 1996, p.41).

However, before getting to a position of celebrating difference, there are dynamics to be understood and managed in terms of the tensions, dilemmas and potential conflicts that sometimes arise as people engage in the process of acknowledging and accepting difference. Some teachers and students may not want to engage with the tensions and conflicts that working with difference sometimes brings because this may be too challenging.

A further challenge for teachers and students might be to understand the socio-political context of the students in terms of institutional racism in higher education and its impact on their learning. This would challenge teachers and students to examine their behaviours and practices and, for some, this might be a painful process. However, it would be a necessary requirement for working with the approach I am advocating.

An additional challenge would be to understand and rethink the ways students are socialised in learning and the impact of the traditional model of teaching and learning on black students. What models of socialisation have black students been socialised into? What are the socio-political factors that need to be understood in order to work with this holistic approach. I shall consider, below, some answers to these questions and then outline what the holistic approach would involve.

Socio-political considerations – black students position in the classroom

Black students enter higher education institutions in Britain and their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed in these institutions. A traditional role of the university is pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information; however, the prevalence of racism has distorted truth and the sharing of knowledge so that university education is no longer about the practice of liberation. The politics of race and gender within white, educational establishments grant white male teachers “authority” without their having to express the desire for it. Their belief is that they are intellectually superiority being white and male, and their experiences are more important than those of any other group; this gives them their right to their authority.

Such systems of domination in the classroom silence the voices of black students. Although some teachers actively seek to create a learning environment in which students from marginal groups are given a voice, most black students are not comfortable in exercising this right particularly if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas,

feelings which go against the grain and are unpopular. In discussions with black students, during my action research into my practice, when I was challenging students to use their voices one student said, referring to her general experience of higher education, **"I don't dare use my voice because I am worried about the feedback from some white lecturers. I know there will be a powerful 'comeback from them. I am frightened that what I have to say will not be accepted and that I would be rejected especially if I talk about racism. You can see from their reactions that it is a problem for them, I become a problem and they don't want to hear what I have to say or believe me when I speak of racist experience".**

This censoring process is only one way in which white middle-class values of institutional learning over-determine social behaviour in the classroom and undermine democratic exchanges of ideas. hooks (1994) argues that black students in the university setting, who are unwilling to accept without question the assumptions and values held by privileged classes of teachers, tend to be silenced and deemed troublemakers. Such students often express to me their frustration, anger and sadness about the tensions and stress they experience when trying to conform to acceptable, white, middle-class, behaviours in university settings. They often take on being "objects" and assume a position of passivity. They behave as victims, as though they can be only acted upon. Some end up feeling they can only reject or accept the norms imposed on them. This often sets them up for failure because they feel that their ways of knowing are seldom either acknowledged or allowed to co-exist, in a non-hierarchical way, with other ways of knowing.

Propositional knowledge (Heron 1992) is often the dominant use of knowledge and can be used to silence. Many white male teachers bring into their classroom an insistence on the authority of propositional knowledge, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion. Some black students do not usually feel the need to compete because the concept of a white, privileged voice of authority predominates over the voices of black students wanting to tell their stories and share their experiences. Some of this silencing may also occur because of the internalisation of an ideology, in white racist educational institutions, which devalues black intelligence.

Devaluing Black Intelligence

Some of the beliefs and possible myths in the educational world about black people and our relationship to teaching, learning, writing, knowledge and intelligence are: *'we are not conceptually able', 'we can't analyse or theorise'; 'we come from an oral tradition so we are better at telling stories orally'; 'we do not speak and write well in standard English''; 'we have grammatical problems with syntax and we mix up our tenses'.*

Black students whose mother tongue is not English bear the brunt of the stereotypes of not being able to write or to conceptualise. In such cases what is ignored is that these students are able to think in their own language and dialect; instead they are judged as being intelligent thinkers according to the criterion of their ability to master the English language. His or her own language is viewed as inferior whilst English is viewed as powerful and superior. In some cases, black students are viewed as inferior human beings. Is it any wonder, therefore, that these students go to any length to master English. "Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (Fanon 1967,p18). So they might want to speak English because it is the key that can open doors.

Where did such myths about our intelligence come from? Some of these myths have been generated from an experience of everyday racism in Britain, as a way of dealing with perceived differences in educational abilities and performance between white and black people. A simplistic explanation for the writing ability black people, is then offered which lumps together the ability to conceptualise, intelligence, writing skills and linguistic problems in order to assist that black people are inferior to white people in their ability to write, conceptualise and make knowledge. If we differentiate and explore these different abilities them, we may well be able to see ways in which black people can conceptualise and have the ability to make knowledge, but have problems with writing; each requires different skills. A person's ability to write is not synonymous with their ability to conceptualise, for example. Writing skills can be learnt, and the ability to write requires practice.

Traditional academic education has constructed the notion of conceptualisation as ability to think, reflect, and make connections, having the mental faculty to generalise and originate new ideas. There is no proven evidence that black people do not have the mental capacity to do this, despite the fact that there is a plethora of research seeking to prove that; on average, black people score lower on l.Q tests than white people. From this researche, conclusions are drawn that black people are inferior to white people in terms of intelligence scores. Cornel West addresses this conflict and the dilemmas that some black students face as a result. He states, "There is always the need to assert and defend the humanity of black people, including their ability and capacity to reason logically, think coherently, and write lucidly. The weight of this

inescapable burden for black students in the white academy has often determined the content and character of black intellectual activity" (West 1991, p.157). However, there is evidence of other contributory factors. Black people's socio-political and economic position in society may offer some explanations for possible gaps in our abilities

Socio-economic Factors

Black people are marginalised, considered culturally problematic, and impeded in social mobility (Essed 1991). Class oppression limits the economic resources and educational opportunities available to the majority of black people in Britain. Racial discrimination in the labour market 'undercuts the middle class benefits of education' (Essed 1991, p.34). These factors impede some black peoples' chances of high achievement in schools and of entering higher education. Those who have had the opportunity to enter higher education, in some cases through Access Courses, are again entering a process of unequal competition. They face a number of structural problems in higher education and in obtaining and keeping jobs. First, the lack of role models puts them in disadvantaged position compared with white students. Black people attending predominantly white universities, feel isolated from other black people because there are few black people in academic institutions in a position to support them. Black students are underestimated and people in authority have low expectations of them. The solution, of course, is to have better educational opportunities. However, many black people may not have had educational opportunities, or an equal opportunity to be educated.

Lack of equal opportunities in Education

The lack of 'good' education together with poor economic conditions have meant that some black people have been disadvantaged educationally. This notion of being disadvantaged means that some did hot have access to opportunities for learning, did not know how and where to find out information, or have access to good public libraries and resources for specialist information; or for acquiring study skills. Some may not have been able to afford to buy books in large quantities, and may not have been able to afford to travel extensively so as to broaden their horizons and knowledge. Some, owing to poor housing conditions, may not have had the physical space to study comfortably.

A black student, in her feedback to me on the first draft of this Chapter, commented in writing about her experience:

"When you write of socio-economic factors and inequalities in educational opportunities as explanations for why black students chances of high achievement within schools is impeded, I can agree with this point. I also feel that I have experienced some of these

difficulties, poor resources within school, lack of finance to buy study materials etc., but I am still managing to achieve. I have begun to feel that it is possible to achieve despite not having these resources. What is clear is that there is a price to pay for this success in that I have had to achieve against these odds".

I am not arguing that some black people do not experience difficulties with conceptualising, writing and linguistic skills. The direct impact of lack of educational opportunities has meant that some black people have not been able to develop the necessary range of skills to communicate, in writing, their thinking and experiences. However, it is another matter, to generalise and say that black people, in general, have these problems; that if we cannot write then we cannot think. We can write, although some of us may have language problems and in some cases our writing suffers from grammatical problems. Furthermore, some of us may not have had opportunities for learning and developing the skills for writing for the academic world. But as one student so eloquently states in her response to the draft of this chapter:

"Black people can think, can generalise, can make theory, but we would like to see some recognition of the fact that we can, some recognition of our knowledge and our achievements. We don't need external validation as a rubber stamp of approval, but as a recognition that we can and do have something to offer".

The myth that black people cannot conceptualise, cannot theorise in writing, has been generated partly out of the experience of everyday racism in white societies. These messages are introjected and remain deep in the black psyche. These values and beliefs create a barrier in the classroom, blocking the possibility of confrontation and conflict. hooks (1994) argues that black students are often silenced by means of their acceptance of learning values which teach them to maintain order at all costs. Even though students enter the "democratic" classroom believing they have the right to "free speech", most black students are not comfortable exercising this right to "free speech". One student told me during my inquiry into my practice, **"I am frightened to take the risk and voice my own ideas about things because I believe they won't be accepted as good enough, or as important enough as my white fellow students ideas, so I stifle my own ideas".**

There is a need, therefore, to recognise cultural diversity, to rethink ways of knowing, and deconstruct the old epistemology, to rethink what we teach and how we teach so that there can be more freedom in the classroom (hooks, 1994).

How have black students been socialised into teaching and learning?

Black students, like many other students, have been socialised in a model of learning that pervades our educational system and practices both in our schools and universities and in all forms of training and development for adults. Vaill (1996) calls this "institutional learning which is as much a system for indoctrination and control as it is a system of learning". It is about learning pre-defined material which is often abstract generalisation and concrete application; It is about learning from someone, in an authoritative position relative to the learner, about something that is already known. So it assumes that the teacher had access to the material and the student did not.

The task of the teacher is to transfer the material into the minds of students via lectures, books and cases and the task of the student is to absorb the material. Success is judged by teachers' ability to transfer and students ability to absorb. Consequently, students learn that knowledge is something to be consumed. This resembles what Freire (1972) refers to as the banking concept of education where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p.46).

This mode "negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (Freire, 1972, p.46). Within the banking model the reading of texts is done without any critical comprehension of the social context to which they refer. "The learners are never called to think critically about the conditioning of their own thought process; to reflect on the reason for their own present situation; to make a new "reading" of the reality that is presented to them simply as something to which they should adapt themselves" (Freire, 1978, p.23). Learning under these conditions can be painful and breeds resentment, in some learners, of the regimentation and oppression that is built into it.

Within this culture of learning the mode of teaching used is very often authoritarian and oppressive and proceeds from people who deny their basic humanity and seek to over-control in trying to educate others. Some teachers use manipulative powers to dominate. Traditional teaching confuses the three kinds of authority Heron (1993) refers to as tutelary, political and charismatic. Basically, "tutelary authority" refers to the body of skills and knowledge, which the teacher has and communicates to the student through the written and spoken word. "Political authority" refers to the decisions that the teacher takes with regard to the content and process of learning. "Charismatic authority" refers to the style, manner and presence of the teacher as she exercises the other two types of authority. Traditional teaching assumes that because teachers are repositories of knowledge and cognitive authority they should exercise total political authority in hierarchical or directive ways, making all educational decisions for their students.

Traditional teachers make decisions about what students shall learn, when and how they shall learn it and whether they have learnt it in ways that are abusive of their power. Students' autonomy is relegated to following of long lectures, answering questions and asking them, doing homework on prescribed reading, writing or practical tasks (Heron, 1989). Such teachers rarely rely on an experiential methodology. It is also assumed that they should exercise their charismatic authority in controlling ways, using their power to discipline, judge, mete out punishments and judge the learner's performance by acts of unilateral assessment.

I do not want to present too narrow a picture of the traditional educational culture or to polarise the argument. If we were to examine the theoretical tradition of adult education a great deal of variety can be seen, for example, the liberal tradition, progressive tradition, humanistic tradition, technological tradition, radical tradition and experiential tradition. However, lack of space in this thesis does not permit me to explore these different traditions. What I do want to go on to explore in relation to black students, however, is how they can socialised differently and how they should be empowered in the classroom.

Empowerment in the classroom

Many writers, such as Freire (1972), have argued for the need to see the education process as one of liberation, involving students and lecturers alike in moving towards mutual learning. It is crucial that every student learns to be an active participant not a passive consumer. Teaching and learning should be viewed as practice for freedom which encourages strategies for what Freire calls "conscientization" in the classroom. This term could be translated to mean critical awareness and engagement.

Rogers (1983) also advocated the development of learner-centered models maximising choice, self-direction and self-actualisation. Knowles (1978), despite being criticised for androcentric and ethnocentric approaches, has promoted the mutual diagnosis of core competencies, learning contracts, joint curriculum planning and building upon the learner's strengths, which has led to further movement towards empowering student learning (Humphries, 1998; Coulshed, 1993). Hence, more attention has been given to the student's self esteem, experience and needs, readiness to learn and orientation to learning, alongside a general move to an emphasis on learning from an emphasis on the teaching process.

Thus, recent developments have been accompanied by attempts to shift the balance of power in learning from the lecturer to the student. Such approaches have characterised much of social work education, where emphasis has been given to "setting clear objectives, validating life experience, appreciating people's strengths, promoting confidence and autonomy, encouraging self-direction and using a person-centred, problem sharing orientation" (Coulshed, 1993, p.3). Student-centred, problem-solving learning has been most clearly exemplified by curriculum design which focuses upon 'inquiry and action' in relation to 'case' material drawn from social work practice (Burgess and Jackson, 1990; Burgess, 1992; Taylor, 1994). Students undertake much of their work in collaborative collectives, with lecturers acting as facilitators rather than 'experts' attempting to provide answers. However, such efforts have not been explicitly or directly built upon an empowerment base. The links between empowerment and the education of social work students have not been explored in terms of inquiry and action, learning and empowerment in specific and detailed ways.

I am advocating the need for specificity and detail so that empowerment conveys a sense of politics, which has a capacity for social change and transformation. I am advocating that teaching and learning with black students should include an emphasis on, what Freire refers to as "praxis" action and reflection upon the world in order to change it. Freire argues that the oppressed should be engage in reflection on their concrete situation because reflection can lead to action and that "action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. In this sense, the praxis is the *raison d'etre* of the oppressed; and the revolution….is not viable apart from their concomitant conscious involvement. Otherwise, action is pure activism. To achieve this praxis, however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason" (Freire, 1972, p.41). Freire advocates dialogue as the correct method for doing this to achieving conscientisation.

Engaging in dialogue, which might lead to conscientisation, would require paying attention to aspects other than the rational side in the classroom where emphasis is placed on being smart in book knowledge, which is not necessarily relevant for social interaction or political action. Indeed, rationalism in the classroom means that the idea of the intellectual, as someone who seeks to be whole and well grounded, is out of place in a context where there is little emphasis on spiritual well being, for example. The objectification of the teacher in universities seems to denigrate concern with and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, an idea that promotes compartmentalization. This means

that the only important identity is our minds functioning – an objective mind, free of experience and biases.

This notion also reinforces the dualistic separation of public and private, encouraging teachers and students to see no connection between life practices and learning as a way of being, that is learning by a whole person, which means feeling the learning as well as possessing it intellectually. It means a way of being in the world, a way of framing and interpreting all experience as a learning opportunity and learning process. So our experiences and biases are also important and learning should be encouraged about the non-rational side and also the political side of the classroom.

Applying the Critical Educative approach with black students

The critical educative approach requires a view of learning that is not only experiential but is also a) holistic; b) one in which students feel empowered in the classroom; and c) one in which their experiences are valued as a legitimate form of knowledge. I shall discuss each of these.

Holistic Learning

Heron's (1993) idea of learning how to be a whole person includes personal development in the intra-personal sphere, the interpersonal sphere, within the cultural realm of social institutions and also has a spiritual dimension. It also includes educational development, which requires the use of holistic methods to enhance the learning and teaching of different disciplines and an acceptance that personal development and educational development are not mutually exclusive.

Teachers engaging in holistic learning would need to see and treat students as whole human beings, with complex lives and experiences**,** rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge. This process of learning requires systemic thinking (Vaill, 1996). Vaill argues that 'systems' thinking requires the teacher to embrace complexity, contingency, and dynamism. This mode of thinking might take the teacher outside of her/his comfort zone and might exacerbate turbulence because it asks teachers simultaneously to hold the whole in mind, to investigate the interactions of the component elements of the whole and to investigate the relation of the whole to its larger environment. In systems thinking, the subject matter is a system, the learners are a

system, the teacher and a group of learners are a social system, the teacher is systemically connected to other teachers and to the organisation and the learning process through which all these systems combine and interact is a system. Everything is connected to everything else and the more connections that are admitted to be of importance the more challenging it is for teachers. In systems thinking we cannot be sure of what we are learning and what we have to talk about until all the propositions about systems are brought to bear on some real thing in the real world.

I believe that experiential learning, which takes at its starting point holistic learning which adopts systemic thinking, can go a long way to empowering black students, because students become aware that they can tap much greater potential in themselves which they might have been blocking by negative expectations and beliefs. This can lead to the creation of knowledge, which may bring about profound changes of consciousness, as a result of new patterns of responses, which can transform experience and social life, being adopted.

In order for this process to take place, teachers will have to be willing to reject the "banking" concept of education (Freire, 1972) and acknowledge a connection between ideas learned in university settings and those learned in life practices. They will also need to acknowledge a connection between the personal and the political. This does not mean allowing students to abuse that freedom in the classroom by wanting only to dwell on personal life-experiences. Different strategies should be created to give students opportunities to experience education as the practice of freedom. Strategies, which might entail the posing of problems of, black students in their relation with the world. Freire advocates a direct connection between 'problem-posing' education and the essence of consciousness. The practice of "problem posing" education takes place through dialogue through which the teacher and student become jointly responsible for a process. This happens within a medium of critical reflection by both teacher and students on the world.

Critical Thinking – process of ongoing Inquiry

Critical thinking would involve taking an approach of healthy questioning approach as part of an inquiry method. Inquiry begins with the situations that are problematic – those that are confusing, uncertain or conflicted and block the free flow of action. I am suggesting a form of inquiry that builds on and feeds back to modify what we already know about the problematic situation. This methodology can, with its impact of questions, demonstrate an

appreciation of the potential of challenging and questioning for catalysing breakthrough in learning and transformation.

The spirit of learning inquiry is willingness and courage to practice 'not knowing' which is the key to breakthrough thinking. By assisting black students to adopt the principle of inquiry, students would be helped to become disciplined in adopting the practice of questioning assumptions about learning, about content and process, including all the processes that shape the learning environment, for example, the educational institutions' structures, cultures and operations.

Black students need to appreciate that asking questions is essential for opening up new possibilities because questions provoke thinking. They generate new openings for action and can lead to more effective strategies for change, than statements and opinions do. For example, questions help students to learn how to learn, how to make sense of their experiences adopt a balanced approach to their learning in terms of positive and negative experiences, how to learn and develop as a person and make un-predicted things happen. Questioning is also vital when exploring students' experiences of racism and when challenging their thinking about and sensemaking of racist events. Asking questions is fundamental to resolving breakdowns in communication and relationships, particularly inter-racial and intercultural relationships.

A goal of the critical educative approach with black students, therefore, is to encourage the spirit of inquiry and the discipline of strategic questioning as a teaching and learning norm. It is important to consider here the factors that may work against this goal. Aside from the actual content of teaching, race and gender issues continue to affect what happens within the classroom. Social class, educational background, previous experience of social work are also important factors, alongside race and gender, in determining not just the contributions which students make but their willingness to question existing beliefs, express their beliefs and argue particular positions.

Moreover, it is common for many black students to fear not having the right answers and therefore fear 'not looking good' or 'looking stupid'. Black students are particularly sensitive to "looking stupid" is for as one of the racist stereotypes they have been socialised into is that black people are stupid because they are lower in intelligence. They may also fear asking questions for fear they won't like the answers they get, or for fear of what they may need to change. Furthermore, they may not ask because some of

them may not be adept at *how* to ask. Students would need to be encouraged to develop the skills of asking questions.

While answers are important, many learners miss critical and pivotal questions by looking only for answers. Perhaps many of us as *black learners* are reluctant to challenge the *status quo* and are uncomfortable when faced with questions especially if we assume that we need to provide the right answers. In answer driven classrooms and institutions (those more committed to avoiding risk than pioneering new solutions), curiosity, creativity, risk taking, challenging the status quo and even the willingness to be wrong would need to take a back seat. The prevailing cultures in such institutions, either implicitly or explicitly, call for rigidity, risk avoidance, protectiveness, defensiveness, and automatic routines and habits. Without the intentional discipline of questioning, a learner is reactive rather than proactive, surviving rather than thriving.

Transforming a classroom or learning environment into one devoted to the discipline of teaching and learning inquiry requires appreciating that questions as usually the most influential and creative aspect of speaking, listening, and thinking. Therefore, to be optimally effective in making inquiries of others and ourselves, we need to be able to 'question our questions'. This means developing the attitudes and skills to notice, analyse and revise our questions. It also allows for choosing the right kinds of questions and knowing how and when to ask them. It is not enough to rely on intuitive questioning abilities. Rather we need to include in our appreciation of inquiry an understanding of the practical importance of distinguishing between those questions that lead to success and change and those that can prevent it. This skill should be used to help students to critically reflect, on their experiences and knowledge and ask questions about ways in which black students experiences and ways of knowing are recognised and valued or, indeed, not recognised or not valued.

Valuing black students' experience as a legitimate form of knowledge

Some black students, particularly women, may feel that they have developed their skills and have some experience of education and training but that they do not always receive formal recognition for this learning. Some feel that there is a cultural devaluation of their experiences, practical skills and achievements, which contributes to them lacking confidence. The devaluing of experience is synonymous with devaluing the self because experience is the person rather than something that happens to the person (Knowles,

1990). During my action inquiry, some students cited the writing of academic essays, for assessment purposes, as a main source of lack of confidence in using their experience adding that essays were where they felt their experience was most devalued. At this point I would like to offer my journal reflections on how I have tried to build black students' confidence to use experience when writing academic essays.

Journal extract:

I am reminded of the times black students come to me as a black teacher, with essay plans and drafts, feeling embarrassed to display their scribbling and jottings but at the same time presenting them to me for help with grammar, form and structure and integration their experience. I try to help by first asking them to tell me their stories of the experiences, practice as well as life experiences, that they want to include not only what they think the assessor requires of them. I encourage the telling in a presentational form of their own choosing and in language that they feel is not restricting. Often, as we go about in our everyday life we show ourselves to be knowing-knowledgeable in a special way. Some of us often, cannot say what we know when we try to describe it, we find ourselves at a loss or we provide descriptions that are inappropriate. Some black students knowing might be tacit, implicit in their stories in their 'feel' for the experiences with which they are dealing and in their patterns of action. During the telling I assist them to appreciate that they are agents of knowledge by encouraging the expression of feelings and descriptions of their actions and valuing what they have to say, as important, validating their experience and encouraging them to write in the moment. Their internal and external judges are encouraged to be kept out. At this stage the linguistic skills are not commented on nor the quality and style of writing. I then ask them to read out what they have written and I offer supportive challenge to assist them to reflect with a critical eye and ear on the content of their stories as well as their experience of the process of their telling. So they arrive at their own sensemaking through acts of awareness, recognition of patterns, making connections and judgements. From my experience, it is the validation of their comprehension and their kinds of knowing that the students usually appreciate, at that stage. I then encourage them to write in those experiences into the essay. My approach is to provide encouragement for the integration between the oral with the written, to value both, and later offer help with grammar and structure where necessary.

The use of stories is very important in my approach as most black people use stories as a method of relating their experiences. These stories are the closest we can come to telling our experience. Historically, black people have had an oral tradition of sharing our experiences through stories. Such stories were used as a way of educating ourselves', and others who were new to our communities. In that sense our experience was the

stories we lived and in the telling of them we modified them and created new ones which passed on from generation to generation. A community of experience was then generated which had individual and social qualities. It is important, therefore, that black students are assisted to make use of their experiences in presentational forms and other forms that are less constricting to them.

Some students appreciate being advised and supported to use their personal stories. Others, however, do not feel secure in my advice to them, which is to write 'from' themselves and their experiences using their own form. In one student's feedback to me on the first draft of this chapter she said:

"You also say that when you teach black students and they approach you for assistance with grammar and structure, that you encourage and validate their experience, what they have to say from their base. As a black student I have experienced this advice of writing from my base, my experience, in my own way as problematic. I worry that I will not get the grade I feel I truly deserve if I use my personal experiences, because of the way in which my work may be interpreted. I question, will it be viewed as 'good enough', and if it isn't, what then? What will happen to me? The bottom line for me is that I cannot afford to fail. That is why it becomes a necessity to conform, to speak a particular academic language, to use words in particular ways; write in particular ways which at times is different from how I experience myself in my own environment".

Contained in this student's statement are issues, concerns and worries that are of an epistemological nature.

Epistemological issues

Some of what makes a black student writing about their personal experiences 'appropriate', has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface issue of form. That is to say the underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge will affect the meaning given to 'structure', 'argument' 'grammar' and 'clarity', "use of self" and the pronoun 'I' for example, which are often the areas commented on in black student's essays.

Some successful university lecturers are likely to have spent many years developing acceptable ways of constructing their own knowledge through their own writing practices and what they consider as relevant experience to be included. These practices, then, are integrally related to the ways in which lecturers, constitute their own academic world-view and their own academic knowledge. Faced with writing that includes personal experiences, which does not appear to make sense within their own academic framework, they are most likely to have recourse to what feel like familiar, descriptive

categories such as ‘structure’ ‘argument’ ‘clarity’ ‘grammar’ analysis’ in order to give feedback on their students’ writing and say little about the use and value of experience. In reality, their own understanding of these categories may be less meaningful outside of this framework and is therefore, not readily understood by students unversed in this particular orientation or in writing academic essays in higher education.

Some black students have internalised the language of feedback. They know that it is important to present an argument and they know that structure, academic language and grammar play an important part but some have difficulties in understanding when they have achieved this successfully in a piece of writing. Some black students come to me complaining that they do not understand why they have been given a low grade and fairly negative feedback. They often feel confused about what they have done wrong and some conclude that it is because they included their subjective experience.

Although students on our social work course in Brunel have guidelines as a departmental document on essay writing, and are encouraged to make use of experience, some find that this does not always help them to integrate their personal experiences in their assignments. Some understand the technical approach to writing academic essays but have difficulty grasping, for example, how to link specific subjective knowledge to course-based knowledge for practice. Encouraging and valuing the use of different representational forms would be helpful, in such cases, as how we are expected to write affects what we can write about.

Writing conventions hold symbolic power over students, as they constitute knowledge. In the wake of feminist, black theorists, post modernist critiques of traditional writing and qualitative writing practices, works have been appearing in new forms and with different representations. This writing transgresses the boundaries of the conventions in social science writing. Working within this ideology, questions are raised about how the author positions the ‘self’ as a knower and teller. This lead to issues of subjectivity, authority, authorship, reflexivity on the one hand, and representational form, on the other.

Post modernism claims that writing is always partial, local and situational and that our self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it; but it isonly partially present for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves too. Working from this premise, we are freed to write material in a variety of ways, to tell and retell. There is less of a struggle to ‘get it right’. Experimentation with form allows the student to learn about the

topic and about themselves, about what is unknowable, unimaginable. Even if students choose to write an essay in a conventional form, experimenting with format is a practical and powerful way to expand interpretive skills and make old material new.

Experimenting with form would allow for evocative experiences in the student and reader. The student might relate differently to her/his material and come to know it differently. The student could then attend to feelings, ambiguities, and blurred experiences. She/he could struggle to find a place for themselves, including their doubts and uncertainties. Narratives of self could be produced revealing text in which the student tells stories about their own lived experiences. The student could plot events without interpretation, asking the reader to 'relive' the events, emotionally with the student. Writing these frankly subjective narratives would allow black students to be relieved of the problem of speaking for the 'other', or about themselves as 'other' because they are the 'other' in their text. They could then reclaim themselves subjectively and not objectify themselves.

This of course, raises issues about the privacy and ownership of learning. It is important to recognise, therefore, that the onus is always on the learner to disclose and make decisions about what will eventually go into the assignment, essay, or portfolio, for example. Often I see black students demonstrate good quality pieces of learning which readily match the criteria for the assignment, but they are reluctant to include their learning for fear of making themselves vulnerable, for fear of how it might be used or how they might be viewed. As implied earlier, some students do not have the confidence in placing the 'I', the personal, in academic pieces. Receiving conflicting advice from academic staff adds to the confusion. Different conventions are to be found around the use of the first person pronoun in student writing. Individual tutors have different opinions about when, or if, it is appropriate to use this. Such conventions are often presented as self-evidently the correct way in which things should be done.

Some students find this dis-empowering and have shared with me their experience of being disem-powered when they have attempted writing from the 'I' and from 'self'. One student said that she was scared to write, **"I think"** in an essay. She continued. **"Its scary to put the 'I' in the center because I have always been told never to say 'I' in an essay so I have had to rely on what the book says. But I find that white people write a lot of the books and they are not saying what resembles what I am thinking or feeling, as a black person. I know though that if I write what I think and feel it won't be seen as important as what a white person said in 'the' book".**

Another said: **"Being subjective, using my personal experience and talking from the 'I' is how I feel good about my essays. But I know that the powers that be won't accept it so instead I write in such a way that it comes across as being neutral, then where is my 'self'? I am lost. Its like I am writing my 'self' out as if I don't exist, I don't matter".**

From these statements, it is evident that these students want to be empowered to use the personal and are seeking to find a way of having their personal experiences validated. This is captured in this student's statement: **"I want to move 'to' instead of getting 'out' of my personal space".**

In such cases, I believe that it is important that the student own his or her learning and makes decisions on what can or cannot be included in her or his writing, as through evocative writing about their subjectivity it is possible for students to experience self-reflexive and transformational processes. Freire (1972) places stress on the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world.

So learning methods and strategies would need to be developed to engage more fully the ideas and issues which seem to have a direct relation to black students' experience. Students would need to be assisted to explore ways in which they acquire knowledge about the experience they have lived. A supportive stance should be taken of affirming the specialness of those ways of knowing which are rooted in experience. Experience can be a way knowing and can inform how we know what we know. Combining the analytical and experiential is a richer way of knowing and we should not, therefore, relinquish the power of experience to help with the formulation of theory. However, experience is criticised for not providing appropriate theoretical data by those who support the frame of reference that defines acceptable knowledge and inquiry.

Use Of Experience – A Critical Standpoint

One criticism stems from the epistemological notion that meaning is contained in 'texts' and that the study of texts is the primary force for education. To examine experience however, may start a process of excavating suppressed and subjugated knowledge.

To give priority to privilege experience as a way into understanding black students' oppression can also hinder discussion and debate. So we need to be careful not to be too insistent on the reliance on experience lest that experience becomes privileged, and thus makes a claim to being an unchanging truth. Subjectivity should not be constructed

in opposition to objectivity. Challenging objectivity with an emphasis on experience, however, questions the possibility of a value-free knowledge. The different ways in which different forms of knowledge are framed is an ideological issue rather than a matter of objective analysis. Personal experience is no more important than 'objective' knowledge; each can inform the development and commitment of the other. An understanding of the relationship between experience and objectivity is important so that one form of knowledge is not privileged over another. Therefore, the processes that create hierarchies of knowledge need to be subverted.

It is important that we do not institute another form of essentialism, that is, essentialist practices that construct experience as absolute truths in a monolithic, excluding way so as to dominate and to assert subjectivity as a way of controlling. According to Said (1978) and Fuss (1990), it can be dangerous to base identity politics and essentialism on rigid theories of exclusion. However it is fair to say that it is not only black groups or women's groups who have employed this strategy. White male students often bring into the classroom an insistence on the authority of their experience, which they present in a way that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing and that their ideas and experience should be the central focus of discussion. Such excluding behaviour may be supported by institutional structures of domination which do not criticise it.

It is worth noting that excluding tactics, used by marginal groups of students, are sometimes used as a survival strategy, in response to domination and oppression (hooks 1994). As a teacher, I have to remember this. I also have to remember that in many institutions and, in particular in educational institutions black students' voices are not heard or welcomed, whether they are discussing facts or experience. My experience as a black person going through the British education system has shaped my response to this reality and I encourage these students to use the "authority of experience" as a means of asserting a voice.

The use of experience in the classroom has also been criticised for not advancing discussion which provokes confusion that the injection of experiential truths kills debates and leads discussions to dead ends. Imbedded in this criticism, is disbelief that use of personal experience can be a meaningful addition to classroom discussions. I have witnessed ways in which essentialist standpoints have been used to silence and kill debates. However, speaking as a marginalised 'other', my experience in the classroom

and my inquiry into my practice has shown me how the incorporation of experience in classroom discussion has deepened discussions and has led to more abstract constructs being linked to concrete reality.

Some black students need personal, experiential references to understand what is happening. However, engaging in the generation of this type of discourse, which focuses on experience, can sometimes lead to messy complexities as interests, events and stories are revealed. Consequently, some students may feel that they do not know what they are talking about or tell themselves that what they are telling is not relevant. Some preparation is necessary, therefore, when embarking on this type of practice. Working with personal experience as a method of learning, teachers and students will have to be prepared to be open to a rich and sometimes to a seemingly endless range of possible events and stories, to be prepared to follow leads in many directions and to hold them loosely. Working with experience in this way might also pose some dilemmas of an ethical and political nature for some teachers.

Some dilemmas for Teachers

Some teachers face the dilemma of encouraging students, who want to share personal experience in the classroom, without promoting essentialist standpoints which exclude, and this requires them to have an awareness of the multiple ways in which essentialist standpoints can be used to shut down discussions. Some teachers may feel that they do not have this awareness or ability to create a learning process in the classroom which engages everyone nor do they have the ability to find ways of intervening critically before one group attempts to silence another.

The dimension of teacher/student relationship also poses some ethical dilemmas. In particular, the black teacher/black student relationship is highlighted here because this relationship can be very intensive and can require serious consideration of who we are, as black teachers/facilitators, in the stories of black students' when we become characters in their stories we change their stories. The generation of shared stories between black teachers and black students can often change the relationship and power dynamics so that the relationship is akin to friendship. As teachers we owe care and have responsibility to the students for how our teaching shapes their lives. When we are exposed to such rich stories about others' lives we cannot stop there, because our task is to discover and construct meaning from those stories and life events. We should assist students to learn how to ask questions of meaning and social significance. Very often the

stories created in my classroom by black students, from their experience, tend to be descriptive and are shaped around particular events. Some black students, and other students from disadvantaged groups finds it a novelty to have often find the opportunity to talk about their life experiences and, more importantly, to be listened to they do not readily give this up. So, in the early stages, as they describe past experiences they can be reluctant to move from simply describing their experience to the more difficult task of analysing where significant learning has occurred.

Many black students have come to me for help with essays and other written assignments when teachers have commented on the lack of critical analysis of their experiences related in the essay. At times, some students have found it difficult to understand fully what is required and although they have sought help from the marker they have still remained unclear as to what is required to move to the next stage. In some cases, it can be because the teacher does not possess the skill to be able to assist the student to the next stage, the stage of reflection.

So a key skill for the teacher is to be able to encourage students to move through the various stages from description to reflection and meaning making. Reflection on knowing can lead to action and reflection-on-action as well as reflection-in-action could give rise to theory and new forms of knowledge which could be generalised to other situations and create change. Therefore the teacher needs to assist black students to make sense of these events by looking for patterns, narrative threads, tensions and themes within individual personal experiences or across their experiences. The search for patterns, themes, tensions should be made by the students and not by teachers placing their interpretations on the written material. This requires a lot of patience and a commitment to working with experience, including personal experience, as will skills in reflecting. Writing can be a useful tool and an aid to deeper critical reflection.

Writing as an aid to reflection and Learning:

An important contribution of writing is that it provides objectivity in relation to the initial learning experience. It can clarify the initial experience by removing it from the clouds of subjective feelings that can obscure it. It is a way of distancing the subject from the experience, which has the effect of clarifying it and fostering the ability to work with it, so that the learner can draw out potential learning. It can focus the student's attention on what actually happened in the initial learning experience. It helps distinguish what happened, or experience what actually happened. The use of writing also captures the

initial event in a way that enables this to be the basis of continuing and more developed reflection.

I have found that the use of writing in the learning situation helps students recognise and take account of affective aspects of the learning process. It not only helps students to appreciate the role of feeling and clarify the feelings involved, it also helps them to name and own their feelings by expressing them in their own words. Therefore, whatever feelings are observed can be the basis of reflection which can lead to a deeper appreciation of the learning process and the student's way of experiencing. Sometimes, however, the feelings which emerge in the initial learning experience actually obstruct further working with it. Until these feelings have been addressed, the student is not able to go on to become involved in reflection. Sometimes the recognition of obstructing emotions is sufficient to enable the student to deal with them the emotions can be taken into account as the reflection process begins and the student is sufficiently in control not to let them distort or obstruct learning. Sometimes what emerges in terms of 'self' knowledge is such that it takes great courage for the student to go on. The difficulty often lies not in working with such a knowledge, but rather in the student acknowledging it, appropriating it, owning it, and being willing to accept that this is the 'real me'. This stage often exposes the false images that students have of themselves and only when such falseness is acknowledged can the student really enter into the work of reflection and further writing.

Writing can also highlight gaps in a person's knowledge and help them to be in touch with the fact that they may not 'know' something. They may come to the realisation that they 'don't know' and to identify what they 'don't know'. This creates anxieties for some students. Such anxieties have to be acknowledged and worked with via containment and reassurances, that it is 'O.K.' to 'not know', that part of 'not knowing' is 'knowing' and that new knowledge (not knowing) is incorporated and integrated within.

Asking people to reflect in depth on their prior experiences and share these with others is challenging for all concerned. From the teacher's point of view it is important to know the limits of the exercise as well as its potential. Some students, reflecting on their experiences especially past ones, frequently disclose deeply emotional experiences, which have also been major learning experiences. Occasionally teaching exercises, group discussions or even reading for an essay may lead a student to confront an experience that has not been confronted before. In this respect, teachers or institutions

should give the most serious consideration to what other support such as black informal networks and counselling, is available either within the institution or proximate to it.

From the students' point of view, being given opportunities to 'voice' and reflect on their experiences and engage in discussions that offer political clarity of what to produce, how to produce it and what its purpose is can and should be a liberating process. Here is education at its best, valuing rather than devaluing what the student brings to the learning process; having control over that process rather than being just its subject; and taking responsibility for learning rather than the much softer option of allowing others to make decisions about what constitutes real learning.

Concluding Comments

I have argued for a critical pedagogy that is based on my understanding of Freire's work on critical consciousness, interwoven with a black perspective, which has the potential for providing black students with opportunities to nurture their consciousness in ways that allow them true liberation of the mind, body and spirit. It is arguably only through such processes that black students can begin to develop practices that go beyond the narrow confines of a Eurocentric praxis, but involve the construction of new and different methods and models of knowledge centred on the uniqueness of black people's lives. This task requires the teacher to engage with the student at all levels of learning and, in this regard, I have suggested a holistic, pedagogical approach which pays particular attention to context, the institutions and societal processes within which black students learning happens.

Within this critical pedagogy, I have argued for efforts to be made to respect and honour the social reality and experiences of black students and to view these as a valid contribution to theorising and creating of knowledge. I have also considered some implications for students and teachers, particularly the changes teachers will need to make if their style of teaching and learning and their beliefs about writing academic work reflects a single norm of thought and experience which is believed to be 'white' and universal. No education is politically neutral and our political perspectives play a major role in shaping education. Values, beliefs, biases, issues of control, authority and power to control, including power and control to make changes in terms of paradigm shift, have to be examined.

Teachers will require help from the organisation to support any effort at education for critical consciousness, support in terms of seminars focusing on transformative

classrooms and liberating education. Workshops and support structures for teachers to deal with their fears, disturbances, and for constructive confrontation and critical interrogation will also be necessary. Students will also need to be supported and given opportunities to engage in political discussions about a shift in paradigm so that everyone can contribute to the goal of creating more liberating settings and creating democratic processes within these settings so that the 'voices' of all students are heard. Transforming these settings is a great challenge for all those working in the world of academia and black academics are not exempted.

In the next chapter I shall examine the role of black academics with regard to their positions as change agents.