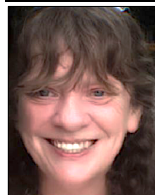




## Students' Critical Commentaries: Unfettered Voices

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### **Abstract**

*Changes to educational practices have been proposed, with some being adopted globally, on a continuous basis. However, student opinions have seldom been invited into discussions. This article was written following an invitation from the Dialogic Pedagogy Journal "to write a critical response to" Eugene Matusov's editorial "A student's right to freedom of education". The inclusion of student voices in educational forums is integral for a more complete understanding of the position of all participants and, whether one considers students to be representative of one of Gramsci's subaltern classes, students as an active group have historically been denied "the basic rights of participation" (El, H., 2012), with their absence from educational discussions having become the status quo. The following article introduces the critical commentaries from seven students who were members of a university level Discussion and Debate class in Seoul, South Korea. Their views were shaped from their previous schooling experiences and their hopes for positive changes. The students' commentaries are responded to by Eugene Matusov. It is the hope of this author that this classroom process may act as one potential model for further educators to invite student voices into academic discourse. In the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's 1998 essay (Spivak and Riach, 2012), it is time to let the subaltern speak.*

*Keywords: university students, critical commentaries, Facebook, education*

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The spring semester of 2020 brought about many changes to how classes were conducted at universities globally, because of the Covid-19 pandemic. My university in South Korea was no exception and my five classes, previously designed to be taught offline, had to be quickly adapted for an online forum. I used both Facebook as the place where students would meet, and Google Classroom as a virtual chalkboard where I could post information and videos related to what we would be doing. While I was in the process of doing this, I received an intriguing email.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 I received an email invitation from the Dialogic Pedagogy journal "to write a critical response to the upcoming editorial "A student's right to freedom of education" by Eugene Matusov. Among the guidelines, the third, "The response should be unique, drastically different from other responses", and the June 15<sup>th</sup> deadline played out in my thoughts. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> I requested a copy of the article and began to work out how I would best be able to carry out my developing plan; to have the 21 students in one class, Discussion and Debate, respond with their own critical commentaries, that would not be graded specifically,

but as the last video they produced in the semester be used a means to ascertain speaking and presentation improvements from the beginning of the semester. The students' first video had been a self-introduction, and from there the difficulty level and audience, for whom the videos were aimed at, increased in complexity. The critical commentary served to show my students that were fully capable of entering into academic dialogues. On June 14<sup>th</sup> I emailed 21 student videos, representing all members in the class who had been asked to respond to Eugene Matusov and began a dialogue with him about how best to present their viewpoints. This introduction is for those students who were invited to submit written scripts of their video commentaries. I will briefly introduce my teaching philosophy, describe the class that the students were taking and the platform that was used, and relate the process by which students created and submitted their critical commentaries.

My teaching theories and classroom practices were firmly established long before I came in contact with the writing of critical pedagogues, and my search was more for academic kinship connections in theory and practice than it was for teaching influence. Over time I found connections with such pedagogues as Vygotsky with his theories about the social dimension of learning, and the role of interlocutors; Bakhtin, with his ideas about the importance of acknowledging individual voices, including those from the students' cultural world, while drawing upon the carnivalesque; and Freire. When I first encountered Freire I immediately felt a connection with his teaching practice regarding literacy, wherein he noted that he believed it was his responsibility to provide his students with help to gain the tools they needed in order to fully participate in society. I related his thoughts to my Korean students who had studied English for upwards of 12 or more years, yet lacked the ability to express their thoughts, the confidence to try, or both. To fulfill my responsibilities required the students having the freedom to establish what they needed, and the place to make the knowledge their own, and it is here that I have found another connection with my teaching practice

This connection is with Eugene Matusov's teaching practice and is with respect to how our classes are first established. In his article he notes:

At the beginning of a semester, a Curricular Map involves a big list of topics that I have developed based on my own authorial judgments, on authorial judgments by colleagues teaching similar courses around the world (via their syllabi posted on the Internet), and my past students' interests. During the semester, my current students can and do amend the course's Curricular Map at any time. At the end of each class meeting, my students are engaged in selecting a topic for the next class.

Student engagement is also a major part of my classes. At the beginning of the semester I give students in all classes an intake survey to complete. Along with the usual general information: name, nationality, major, years studying English, and past satisfaction/dissatisfaction with previous English mode of instruction classes, and why, each class has specific sections that relate solely to them. Of my five classes this semester, the class who created their critical commentaries is Discussion and Debate. It is an elective class, unlike my other four that are mandatory. In this class the intake survey asked them about such areas as their past speaking experiences, problems they felt they had, strengths they believed they possessed, areas they wanted to work on, or learn, and subjects that they were interested in discussing, or debating. From their submission of the intake survey the dialogue began. I knew about their needs and desires, and I needed a place that would allow, as much as possible, a social platform where students would feel comfortable and able to bring change about.

My classes meet on Facebook, in a private room, where only people who are members of the room can see what has been posted. I have been using this setup for almost a decade now, and at the time of writing have over 2,000 students on my Facebook page. This semester I added an agreement form, to further stipulate the private nature of the room, and to note that any infringements by the students would result in that student being deleted from my personal Facebook account, and the group, and face negative grade outcomes. I did not actually believe students would behave badly, but I wanted everyone to know that I was serious about the room being only for them. Students feel comfortable knowing that what they say, or post, stays within the room. and over the semester each room has its own flavour, as everything that has been posted in the group all semester can be examined whenever the students wish to do so. The private room is where people post their videos and comments and meet to carry out all classroom processes, including the debates, the committees, and talking in groups. It also means that I do not invite anyone into the room, and they are free to express their thoughts without worrying that they will be viewed, or judged by "outsiders", as they can be with other online chat forums. They can talk to each other in small groups, and I can join in. They can come to the room any time they please and post comments, ask questions, or talk to other students in the class via a message, or Face-to-face call. Once the room is established all they need to do is be on Facebook to access it. It is their room. They own it. I do not use Zoom. I do not like it. Zoom is a digital panopticon, and I do not require, nor wish to have, and have the students know that I have, this type of observance, or taping, power. Zoom is also not private, and is subject to hacking, and data mining with no clear statement regarding what this data will be used for. (McMullan, 2015; Hodge, 2020; Nield, 2020; Stables, 2020). Zoom may very well be useful for meetings, both infrequent and scheduled, but it does not fit my requirements for a safe, social, online classroom. Facebook did for all my classes, including Discussion and Debate.

Discussion and Debate includes significant public speaking. From their first self-introduction video to the end of the class, they have taped their presentations, and sections of debates. Yes, some of the students have hated videotaping. They did not enroll in a class where this would become the main way they presented their ideas. However, most came to accept, because of necessity with the pandemic, and even like what we do. A few have just accepted that I could not figure out any other way, and this too is okay. It was the only way that I could work out that the conditions all of us needed were met. This is primarily a speaking, not writing class. I tested their understanding of debate formats, in an essay, and the script for their news broadcast, to give them help with language usage and structure. That is the only direct corrective feedback they received with respect to their writing. As to their speaking, or comments on issues that were not submissions, and were posted to the group wall, they have received continuous direct feedback throughout the semester.

I constructed the class, and new classroom processes most often on a weekly basis, so that it reflected students' wishes, and also provided them with numerous opportunities to develop the skills that they noted they wanted, or needed, to improve upon. The students are from different countries: Korea, Uzbekistan, Guatemala, Russia, Hong Kong, Italy, China, Germany and Ecuador. They range in ages from late teens to mid-twenties and in university year from freshman to senior. With respect to university majors they were: Business, Hospitality, Biology, International Trade, Geography, Sociology, Tourism, English Language and Translation, Korean Language and Literature, International Communication and Media, and International Relations. This class was all about them. I provided the platform. They provided their voices.

From the first issue where they were invited to share their written opinions on the Facebook group page, to the creation of the critical commentaries, it has always been about students having the freedom to express their thoughts, or opinions, and as time passed to do so with confidence. This semester each student has discussed three issues in writing, discussed all issues in groups that they have made, had

several committee processes, created four videos that represented different styles of speaking from semi-formal to formal, debated twice and acted as “questioners” and judges to all the debates four times, and other processes. Ironically, I was actually able to give each student more individual attention with this online format, including the number of times they would be speaking, and the feedback they received. For example, in one class I had five debates occurring simultaneously, and everything went incredibly smoothly. I would only have been able to hold one debate per class in an offline classroom. Students have received feedback for each and every area. They have also had the freedom to ask, and for me to accept and set up classes, for different subjects, or issues to be discussed as they were revealed in such areas as the news.

The first issue that was discussed this semester was with respect to online education, and I believed it was thus fitting that their last area to discuss would be an educational practice that the students were unfamiliar with; “A student’s right to freedom of education”. Education has been an especially hot topic in the class this semester with all students voicing their opinions about what they believed was wrong, and what they wanted changed, numerous times.

Students were provided with a brief relation of what a critical commentary entails, the article with a few areas highlighted so as to assuage any initial panic some students might and did feel, and directions to make their video and to try to keep the length down to around three minutes. Students were not required to read the entire paper; some do not possess the ability to do this. The students could also refuse to read it, but no students did. The time restriction was necessary as if left open there were some students in the class who would have produced a full length movie and while interesting, it would have also caused them to experience significant distress as they have shown me this semester that their desire to be “perfect” tortures them. Three minutes was in line with the other videos they have been asked to produce this semester. It is a known; a safe norm. Aside from one student asking me to look at a script, I had no precise idea about what the students would post. Almost everything this semester has been carried out with videos. Many students wanted to do more. No students noted that they did not want to do it. Some students did not reply in significant depth. That was their choice. All students received feedback on whether their video was a critical commentary, and related areas on the day they were received, but no grades were assigned. Rather, the video was used to assess overall increases in confidence from their earlier videos, and attention paid to details. There were no two videos that were alike.

Now, without further ado, these are my students’ unfettered critical commentaries.

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Hi, Professor Matusov. My name's Alina, and I'm Russian, and I'm student at University, and my major is Business Administration.

The first thing I want to say is that I really enjoyed reading this article. However, I don't think that freedom in education is a good idea for Russian students. When I was in school, all my classmates didn't know what they wanted to do, and they didn't know what major they wanted to choose. Therefore, I agree with a statement that was mentioned in the article that it would be like "a blind leads the blind." I graduated from a school in Russia. When I entered Kyung University, I was in shock there because I have to choose what kind of class I want to explore. And this scared me because I don't want to make a big mistake and choose a wrong class or poor class.

In conclusion, I want to say that maybe not all students want freedom in education, what if some student wants a system like in a Russian University or in a Russian school. **This is my opinion.** Thank you for watching. Bye. Alina Nedykhalova

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Dear Eugene,

As a student at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, I am very impressed with your work and the way you view the omnipresent education system. In the article you argue the main thesis why students must have the exclusive right to freely define their own education.

In the following I will discuss participatory academic freedom and your attitude towards the question whether people will engage in education on their own desire, without being foisted.

The first point I want to talk about is participatory academic freedom, which you describe as the right of students to move freely within and outside, to and from learning activities and educational communities. I agree with you that this right gives students more room for a process of self-correction in which they can vote with their feet when, for example, educational practice becomes meaningless to them. However, I think it is important to bear in mind that each student has individual reasons for his or her absence and that the reason is not necessarily related to the teaching method or the teaching material. **According to Brigitte Ziehlke, students who show a higher level of exam anxiety and more general anxiety symptoms show more absences from class than other students** (Ziehlke, 1993). In such cases, close supervision and mental support of the students is required and not just the mere acceptance of their absences. Furthermore, I believe that not every student is helped or is able to cope with this degree of autonomy and freedom, which in the long run can lead to academic failure.

The second point I would like to address is related to the point I have just mentioned. On page 20, you say that the evidence and experience gathered from democratic schools has shown that, in fact, when given the choice, a large majority of young children of primary school age prefer to play rather than attend classes voluntarily. The problem I see with this fact in relation to participatory academic freedom, as you also mention in your article, is that it can lead to late education. The question I then have is whether it is responsible to grant them autonomy to decide for themselves whether they want to attend classes, and thus risk that they will receive proper education too late or perhaps not at all, because we assume that this might not have any consequences for society.

All in all, I find your article very interesting and agree with you that students need more autonomy to reach their full potential. Thank you very much for your thought-provoking work.

(Source: Brigitte Z. (1993). *Deviante Jugendliche – Individualisierung, Geschlecht und soziale Kontrolle*. Opladen: Leske+Budrich.)

Kind regards,

Helin Ag

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Hello, Professor Matusov,

My name is Kim Hyun Jung and I am majoring in geography at Kyung Hee University. In this video, I would like to share my thoughts after reading your paper called 'A student's right to freedom of education'.

As I am in the teacher training course in Korea, it was really memorable thesis. It made me think about my educational experiences.

Many Korean students suffer from their student life. Here, most of the high school students go to school to 7 am and come home at 10 pm. At the weekend they go to private school to study. Korean students are definitely the victims of foisted education. Our goal here for education is to go to a good university. And that's it. Our question is always 'Is this related to our exam?'. And we never want to learn anything that is not for the test. It makes us really painful, but there is no other way here. It's sad. So, it was really new and great experience reading your article. I want my freedom of education too.

"Fire Watch" is a science fiction novelette by writer Connie Willis. The story involves a time-traveling historian who goes back to London, to participate in the fire lookout at St. Paul's Cathedral. He has a deep emotional attachment to the Cathedral and is highly devoted to his role in defending it. After finishing his experience there, he was called straight to the professor's office to take a test. The question was, 'How many of the bombs fell on St. Paul's?', 'How do we get rid of the mines?', 'How many people were injured or killed in 1940?' He felt the anger inside and asked the professor. 'Isn't there any question about what happened to people?' answers Professor Dunwoody. "Mr. Bartholomew, you're the one who answers the question, not the one asking questions."

"In foisted education, the student is positioned as an object, other than a subject, of education." "The problem is that educators are trying to make students want what they want them to want." These sentences evoked in me a lot of educational experiences. From now on, I want to share some of my experiences and feelings.

We all know that Professor Dunwoody's problem is not appropriate. He asked the questions in a multiple-choice format, asking for simple figures, statistics and use of memorization skills, and he also asked questions with fixed answers. Unfortunately, Dunwoody's exam questions are directly linked to the problem of Korean education, in which students have to learn only what teachers want them to learn. Thus, Professor Dunwoody's problem was actually very familiar to me. I'm the one who only answered questions, but whom never asked any. I'm still much more comfortable in being taught, being tested, and being the object of my education. I've never been the subject of education.

To me, school and education are places showing the exact structure of the Panopticon<sup>1</sup>. The concept of Panopticon's design is to allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single security guard, without the inmates being able to tell whether they are being watched. What's important in the Panopticon is that this structure leads to a process of 'internalization of gaze' for the inmates. Prisoners do not know whether they are being watched, but the eyes of surveillance are internalized in the inmates' consciousness. I thought Panopticon's power structure is very closely related to the structure of knowledge and power that appears in schools. Schools and education today play a role in spreading and settling normal and abnormal norms. Many ordinary students are forced to be exemplary and social-set normal students regardless of their intentions, and this is the power. In other words, the most liberal educational space has become a venue for the power. I watched an impressive lecture about 'What is justice?' in a large auditorium at Harvard University. There was only one role for the lecturer. To ask a question. The speaker sets up just one or two situations and hands the microphone to the students. Students share their own perspective and give their opinions. No one gave the wrong answer in this lecture. They all came up with different answers.

No one in the world has the same personality. We're all different. However, the school does not allow us any other answers. We only have to say the 'right' answers. Korean students are completely ignored for their own uniqueness and individuality. There is no student opinion reflected in the curriculum. However, education is for students. Students should be the subjects of their learning. In order for a student to be the subject, he or she could start with "questioning." Let's all ask questions. There is no trivial question. In the small question, and from that very question, our active education begins. **Thank you for listening.**

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Hello everyone.

My name is Juan Francisco Poveda, I am 22 years old and I come from Ecuador. I am studying my fourth semester in my major on International Relations at the Karlshochschule International University in Karlsruhe, Germany. I have an interest in foreign policy, development and diplomacy. I am currently an exchange student for this semester at the Kyung Hee University in Seoul, South Korea.

I have gone through Prof. Matusov paper, called: "A student's right to freedom of education." I have observed that the thesis was oriented towards the benefits of giving the students the freedom to define their education. Under this premise, I have seen that you mentioned practices like closed and open socialization or methods like the Bakhtinian dialogic pedagogy, which I found very interesting when I read your paper.

Under my perspective, I found valuable point in your paper, however, I consider that education per-se could not be very individually defined. I believe that part of the goals of education is to serve as a guide to live within a community.

On this regard, I have seen that you strongly agree with the self-determination of education, mainly when you mention that Education is primarily the business of the student, not from the state, the public, the taxpayers or even not the business of teachers and schools. Wouldn't you consider that this extent of self-construction of the concept of education could affect the goal of constructing individuals able to live in a community?

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<sup>1</sup> This is an apparent reference to French sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault who introduced this term for social sciences.



Your article has very good argument that prove that the current perspective of ideal education has failures. Nevertheless, the individual approach of defining can order my perspective affect some goals of education that are also important such as building social norms to live in community.

Thank you very much for your time and the opportunity.

Juan Francisco Poveda

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Good morning, professor Matusov,

My name is Ki Jung Hwang, studying biology at Kyung Hee University in South Korea.

I read your Student's right to freedom of education, which interested me very much. As a student who experienced foisted education for 12 years, focused on commonality, depersonalization, I think the freedom of education with 8 principles is highly admirable form expected to autonomy-oriented society. If I'm not mistaken, the main thesis is: Education requires freedom and students who define their own education, because, compared to the foisted education which imposes obligations to the students, education ensuring freedom can encourage spontaneous participation of learner. I'd like to share my thoughts related to your arguments with two questions.

First, I'd like to ask the age-specific approach of freedom of education. For young children, for instance, under the elementary level, I think different methods should be needed because of the tendency to play over education, as mentioned, but also the cognitive limitation. A student should recognize their interest, attractions, and indifference before deciding the meta-direction of learning. What if a student doesn't know what they don't know? Thus, establishing a standard to reflect the world would be the priority for young children.

Second, in the paragraph about instructional academic freedom, you wrote "Classes, guidance, and learning activities cannot be imposed on the student but only offered and suggested by teachers". In another paragraph, you wrote, "Meaningful guidance by the teacher starts with the student's question." Then, should every guidance or suggestion coming from a teacher that student didn't demand be called intervention? If a student with an evil personality grows up without proper guidance just because they didn't ask for, who is responsible for the potential immoral, antisocial activities they might commit? I think it is a teacher's responsibility to guide non-educational characteristics from external factors such as domestic violence. If used properly, I believe a teacher can act as a positive provider, not a suppressor of freedom or injector of social justice.

To summarize, I have two questions. Do you feel the need for a different approach in developing values and determining a direction for young children? And, if it is deemed to be necessary, can guidance coming from a teacher affect positively even if it's not demanded?

I would be grateful if you give your feedback. Thank you.

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Not everyone has equal abilities, but everyone should have equal opportunity for education. – John F. Kennedy

Greetings Professor Matusov,

My name is Seung-Woo Han and I am a student at Kyung Hee University in South Korea. I major in Hotel Management and currently I am a student of Professor Smith Price-Jones in the class of Discussion and Debate. First off, it was a pleasure reading your academic article on “A Student’s Right to Freedom of Education.” I could understand the philosophy and arguments you stated about why education needs freedom. On this video I will be doing a critical commentary about some of the points mentioned that I truly thought they were remarkable.

First, you mentioned about the concept of closed socialization. I also agree to the argument that student’s freedom to define their own goals being **impede by teachers, make those students spiritless and more likely a zombie**. For example, in case of my early years of education, during my elementary, middle, high school, teachers would give out full credit in exam questions even though the answers were not exactly textbook definitions. I believe that this was possible due to the fact that teachers understood that everyone has different ways on remembering and describing the concepts.

Second, Albert Einstein once said “A student is not a container you have to fill but a torch you have to light up.” I definitely agree with what you wrote about curricular academic freedom. Students have the right to pursue his/her own academic interests. Nonetheless, **educators should help student’s passion or academic desires, they should not intervene or imposed them**. However, here in Korea, there are case in which some teachers in high school, tend to do the opposite and neglect student’s dream and desire.

In conclusion, reading this academic article I couldn’t agree more that students have the right to freedom of education. I thought you gave strong points on your arguments and it made me feel that South Korea needs a change in the education system given the fact that the majority of high school students go to specific universities and majors depending on their Sunung (College Scholastic Ability Test) a.k.a the Korean version of SAT.

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I am Soo-Hyeon Park, a student from the Department of Applied English Linguistics and Translation Studies, South Korea.

Though I agree with the importance of freedom of education, I believe that this is not always the absolute right way. What will happen if we allow all the types of freedom of education that exists? Will the society operate well even in such radical changes? At school, students learn the way to become a member of the society. Social norms. Rules. Disciplines. If we give all the freedom from a young age, will they be able to learn “the importance of following rules”? For example, if a child continues to come to class only when he/she “feels” like it, will the child be able to adapt in the working environment where in many cases there are certain office hours that you must follow? We should think about this. One of the life lessons that we learn throughout our life is the fact that we can’t do everything as we prefer. There are certain times when we must do things that we dislike. How are we going to teach this if we let all the freedom to the students?

In the statement, “A societal calculation of education is much more wasteful than a personal desire of learning.” I doubt whether there is no value in forced learning. If we call this as a “forced learning”, this could draw objections, but we can name this differently as “compulsory learning”. At school we learn diverse subjects; even subjects that we dislike. However, by experiencing diverse subjects, a disliked subject can

actually become one your favorites. Compulsory learning can be a way for students to experience diverse fields and expand their thoughts and views. We can't deny the fact that there are advantages of compulsory/forced learning. Then, what is the standard of comparing the values between compulsory learning and learning of personal desire?

We should consider the fact that children have different kinds of personalities and characteristics. Some might say that because everybody has different personalities, we should let them choose their own education curriculums. However, what about students who don't really want that freedom? There are indeed students who are independent, know what they like and enjoy the freedom. On the other hand, there are also students who don't actually know what they want to learn and want a curriculum that is already given out. Letting students have freedom of choosing their own subjects can rather cause confusion, especially in a young age. Furthermore, there are certain information, knowledge that everybody should learn throughout their childhood. If we give freedom to choose their own curriculums, how will we going to teach students these essential information? Yes, we can teach students both compulsory classes and several classes that they want to learn. However, is this really giving freedom to students?



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