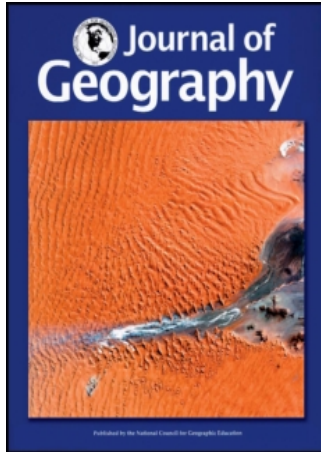


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### Virtual Egalitarianism, Critical Pedagogy, and Geographic Education

Chris Lukinbeal <sup>a</sup>; Casey D. Allen <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

<sup>b</sup> Arizona State University's School of Geographical Sciences, Tempe, Arizona, USA

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# Virtual Egalitarianism, Critical Pedagogy, and Geographic Education

Chris Lukinbeal and Casey D. Allen

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the implementation of critical pedagogic practices into a graduate level landscape seminar Web site. Critical pedagogy seeks to reconfigure student-teacher relationships and disrupt embedded power regimes within academia and society. Critical pedagogic practices create a dialogue amongst learners, where everyone has a stake in the learning process. By turning all students into instructors on the course Web site, a virtual community was created that allowed for theories and identities to be openly explored and contested. In the seminar, the inherent hierarchies of power between teacher-students were removed, allowing for the formation of a critical moral consciousness that permitted deep learning.

**Key Words:** *critical pedagogy, graduate education, e-learning, Blackboard, graduate seminar*

*Dr. Chris Lukinbeal is an assistant professor of geography at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, USA. He is a cultural geographer with research and teaching interests in cinema and media geography, cultural-urban landscapes, geographic education, and applications of GIScience to cultural geographies.*

*Casey D. Allen is a Ph.D. candidate (ABD) at Arizona State University's School of Geographical Sciences in Tempe, Arizona, USA. Trained as a geographer and educator, he is using rock art as an interface to assess the deep learning of environmental processes by undergraduates. His research interests include biogeomorphology, geographic education, and humanistic geography.*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the cornerstones of geography graduate education is the seminar. A seminar, in theory, uses a dialogical method where there is open communication between students and teacher. Dialogic education “means to transform social relations in the classroom and to raise awareness about relations in society at large. In a problem-posing participatory format, the teacher and students transform learning into a collaborative process to illuminate and act on reality” (Shor and Freire 1987b, 1–12). The dialogical method, which is central to critical pedagogy (Kellner 2000; Shor 1996, 1992, 1987, 1983; Shor and Freire 1987a; Freire 1973), favors an open communication format where everyone teaches and everyone learns. It also values student-to-student interaction as much as student-teacher interaction. Dialogical methods may help empower students by constructing a dialogue amongst learners rather than a monologue of lectures, but it does little to change the inherent power structures between teacher-student.

While some power structures are institutionalized (i.e., grading), others can be modified and changed. Traditional seminar pedagogic strategies that disrupt the inherent teacher/student power relations include having students choose topics for weekly readings, having students lead discussion sessions, and moderating formalized debates between student groups. This article explores a new method of employing critical pedagogy into a seminar, one in which the students and teachers are granted equal rights within a virtual environment. While this is a limited engagement with disrupting power relations, it is important to show ways to resist and transform the hierarchies programmed into the new monopolies of e-learning, specifically Blackboard and WebCT. Empowerment comes through two processes: (1) a virtual democratization of all participants in a class and (2) through learner-centered information technology education. In this article basic concepts of critical pedagogy are explored and then applied to e-learning platforms in higher education. Then, the geography seminar in which this pedagogy was applied is addressed. Finally, processes and interactions that occurred in that seminar from a teacher's (Chris Lukinbeal) and a student's (Casey Allen) perspective are discussed, noting strengths and weaknesses of the experience.

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

At its broadest, critical pedagogy facilitates student efforts in defying and testing the limits of social dominance. In the case of a geography-based graduate seminar students begin as part of a group. As awareness of domineering social behaviors arise in the group, students are expected to deal with these power relations and mediate between dominate and subordinate epistemological and ontological views (whether they are from students or faculty). Critical pedagogy strives to challenge and transform dominant values and structures in culture and society by revealing and engaging values and structures embedded in educational environments (Sullivan 1987).

Leistyna and Woodrum (1996, 2–3) assert that critical pedagogy focuses on the types of pedagogic theories and practices that challenge us to “recognize, engage, and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations.” Critical pedagogy, therefore, centers on individual freedom by increasing a critical moral consciousness as a way of being and as a path towards human development (Mustakova-Possardt 2004). Developing critical moral consciousness in a classroom is an essential first step

in group dynamics and challenges the group to change the norm and create a social order where learning is shared equally. By manipulating the e-learning environment and granting all students the same authority as the teacher, a virtual classroom becomes a straightforward medium in which a virtual egalitarianism of the learning process takes place.

In a virtual learning environment, our example of critical pedagogy is a distinct medium that promotes “classroom” equality. Current research on critical pedagogy bypasses the virtual, e-learning realm, with recent studies centering on cultural studies and race (Gordon and Albrecht-Crane 2005; Gordon 2005; Wood 2005; Smith 2005; Duncan-Andrade 2005), English language and literature (Kornfeld and Prothro 2005; Ainley and Canaan 2005; Thelin 2005; Burch 2005), and area studies-related endeavors (Forbes 2005; Crookes 2004; Mains 2004). Still other arenas of research include museum and library exhibitions and curating (Robins 2005; Reece 2005), media (Buckingham 2003; Dalton 2003), and second language acquisition/learning (Williams 2004; Leeman 2005; Morgan 2004). While each of these research agendas enhances practices in critical pedagogy, none of them focus specifically on e-learning as a medium to enhance critical pedagogy.

#### E-LEARNING AND BLACKBOARD

Although e-learning is growing rapidly in higher education, it is often used as a depository of digital files for students to access rather than an interactive learning community. When learning communities—even virtual learning communities—are created, the result is often increased student collaboration (Gokhale 1995; Bradshaw *et al.* 2002; Francescato *et al.* 2006; Frederickson *et al.* 2005), increased critical thinking (Deloach and Greenlaw 2005; Francescato *et al.* 2006), and increased deep learning (Chapman *et al.* 2005, Hardwick 2000). Deep learning, based on constructivist theory, enhances the virtual learning community by promoting active learning (Chapman *et al.* 2005)—a vital component of critical pedagogy. Bloom’s (1956) well-known “taxonomy” for example, notes that most assessments usually focus on students’ abilities to recall information—purely “surface” learning. Only when students are required to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information does learning become “deep.” In short, when students collaborate, learning communities form, and those communities then breed deep learning. This behavior was apparent in the seminar studied for this article, as students began to openly discuss the topics and assignments not only in class, but in the halls, in their offices, at lunch, and even during extracurricular activities. The learning moved beyond the classroom and, unexpectedly, beyond the Internet. Allowing students freedom in the learning process was more readily accomplished via the virtual world than through traditional in-class methods. While traditional approaches are still the norm, virtual pedagogy

is becoming increasingly popular, and therefore should be examined in more detail as a functional and effective critical pedagogy medium.

In geography the Internet has been used as an educational tool for enhancing fieldwork via virtual tours (McMorrow 2005) and for examining the differences between real and virtual experiential education using electronic simulation models and games (Hirsch and Lloyd 2005). It also has led to the development of educational tools in GIS (Carver *et al.* 2004), demography (See *et al.* 2004), coastal zone management (Green and King 2004), thematic and regional geography (Steinberg *et al.* 2002), and critical thinking (Bednarz 2002). Many instructors employ course Web sites and Internet resources simply as supplements to direct interaction and dialogical pedagogies, and most geography textbooks now have companion Web sites. Further, many universities now employ e-learning platforms (e.g., Blackboard; WebCT) that allow teachers and students to interact beyond the classroom. These platforms, however, program in a hierarchal power relationship where teachers are active agents and students are passive vessels. Normative practices and time constraints reinforce this hierarchy where Web sites become repositories for course information, readings, assignments, and information. This system reinforces what Paulo Freire (1970, 58) calls the “banking” concept of education, “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” These programmed e-systems reinforce the notion that a student’s scope of action is only extended to receiving, storing, and filing the deposited knowledge.

E-learning software in higher education is readily available. With the acquisition of WebCT (merger in progress), Blackboard’s vision will expand even more, stretching into higher education markets and niches previously fulfilled by other e-learning vendors. As an e-learning platform, Blackboard already boasts over five hundred international learning institutions in fifty-nine countries. In the United States clients include Princeton, Duke, Seton Hall, Durham, Vermont State Colleges, Arizona State University, the University of Oregon, and others. With its impending acquisition of WebCT, Blackboard will overtake contracts at Ohio State University, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, University of Maryland, Connecticut State University System, and several other national and international universities. The merger of Blackboard and WebCT will create a monopoly in higher education e-learning platforms. In short, virtual learning communities are becoming standardized around a single platform effectively *naturalizing* the banking concept of education as well as the hierarchal power relationship of active teacher agents and passive student vessels. We use the term *naturalizing* to refer to the process by which social orders and power relations are made to appear normal or natural (Mitchell 2000; Duncan and Ley 1993).

Blackboard's e-learning platform provides instructors with an easy-to-use interface, which partially accounts for widespread use in higher education. Costello *et al.* (2004) evaluated the learning value of Blackboard and discovered that an extremely high percentage of students—especially “net generation” students—found Blackboard very helpful. They argued that Blackboard promoted learning because it facilitated “student research by lessening the amount of Web surfing and database trial-and-error searching necessary to complete course assignments” (Costello *et al.* 2004: 455). Their study revealed that an overwhelming percentage of students noted that usage of Blackboard in other courses would be valuable, especially in regards to conducting research.

### LANDSCAPE SEMINAR

In the fall of 2005 a seminar entitled Landscape was offered in our department. The purpose of the seminar was to explore theories associated with the term landscape, paying particular attention to traditional and new approaches. The seminar met once a week in-person and included a Blackboard Web site where the teacher posted readings, announcements, and other information. In the third week of class that all changed. Attempting to disrupt the normative practice of embedded power relations between teacher and student within Blackboard's interface, the professor reprogrammed the site granting all students ‘instructor’ status.<sup>1</sup> This simple change allowed all students full access to modify any aspect of the Web site, including any item that the professor had originally posted. In a final declaration of hierarchal power, the professor sent out the following message to the students:

In an effort to remove the inherent hierarchies and power relations embedded in teacher-student relations, I've manipulated Blackboard's interface so that everyone enrolled in the seminar is now considered an instructor. While only a virtual environmental change, the goal is to promote an egalitarian system in which we all learn from one another. My only request is this: please go to “control panels” and click on “staff information.” Make a “profile” for yourself, including a picture. Please do this before our next class meeting. Feel free to change this Web site as you, the instructor, see fit. I do ask that you do not modify each others pictures, nor remove any documentation from the site. Other than that, enjoy!

The staff information section, where “profile information” can be inputted, further reinforces the power relations because it requests that the first bit of information inputted be a “title.” Students took the opportunity to grant themselves titles such as “Esquire of Grenada” and “Exalted Master of the Known Universe,”

which sounds much more important than “Ms,” “Dr.,” or “professor.” In regard to pictures of the student-turned-instructors, some chose a picture from childhood; others a picture of themselves “in the field”; still others a basic head shot. With pictures uploaded and titles secured, all participants were now classified “instructor” in the virtual environment. In the next two sections we document perceptions and outcomes of this pedagogic experiment from the professor's perspective and a student-turned-teacher perspective.

### PROFESSOR'S PERSPECTIVE

The use of the Internet has provided a platform for supporting information for my courses for the past seven years. The Web has proven to be a useful storage device, a location to post course documents so that students could access information anytime, even if they lost course handouts. Over the years I have experimented with online exercises offered by textbooks, corporations (especially ESRI and the National Geographic), virtual field trips, and research exercises. Initially, I was hesitant to use Blackboard and WebCT when they were first unveiled primarily because their early interface seemed to limit, rather than enhance, pedagogic activity. Having served as a Webmaster for numerous Web sites, I had no reason to adopt a new e-learning environment when I could create my own with simple software tools and freeware.

After attending a series of Blackboard workshops, I began to see some of the benefits of this e-learning environment. Blackboard could automatically enroll students as they signed up for my class and block access to other students and Internet users. The ability to time-release documents, program quizzes and tests, use an online grade book tailored to each student, and lead and track online discussions converted me to a Blackboard user.

At the beginning of the fall 2005 semester I adopted Blackboard for the Landscape seminar and uploaded the syllabus and some of the courses readings, added a few Web links, my contact information, and went to class. After the second in-class meeting of the seminar, discussion was going well but not all of the students were participating equally. While not unusual, it is important to stir things up a bit and try to get the quiet students involved. The idea to change students to instructors came from my experience with GIS internships in which I seek to have students feel a sense of ownership towards their work. If students could feel a similar sense of ownership towards their course they may act differently than if they were simply taking a course for a grade. Second, graduate students, even in a cultural geography seminar, can be challenged to learn new information technology skills by engaging with Blackboard. Furthermore, Ph.D. students seeking to become faculty would benefit from exploring this e-learning environment. Seeking to change the mentality of the students, and remove my own authoritative position, an e-mail about changing status to “instructor” was e-mailed to the seminar class. It was surprising to see how

quickly the students responded by posting their photos to the staff information section of Blackboard.

Interaction was slow for the first few weeks after the status change. Students-turned-instructors posted announcements and some finally figured out how to change the appearance of the Web site by adding pictures into the course banner. The first banner posted by a student-turned-instructor was very curious: the banner was a series of pictures of me strung together across the top of the course Web site. The student had searched the Web and found old published photos of me from various sources and posted them to the class Web site. I was a little annoyed and subsequently replaced the banner with a photograph of a pastoral landscape. But later my annoyance turned to intrigue. Was this critical pedagogy at work? Was this a challenge to my authority? I did not challenge or change any further photographs that reflected challenges to my authority or commentary on the class or society. After this, changes began appearing more frequently to the Web site. At least once a week a new course banner (picture) would appear. Photographs frequently reflected different natural or urban landscapes. Some were humorous, other quite political. For a few weeks the photos and commentary related to the Iraq war. A member of the Air Force posted pictures he had taken while on duty in Iraq. Other students-turned-instructors responded by removing these photos and posting graphs showing the number of war dead in Iraq. These active virtual community debates were never topics of discussion in class, but rather played out in this virtual environment. This showed that a community dialogue was forming and that the critical pedagogic process was at work. Other interactions ensued as well. The discoverer of Yi Fu Tuan's blog caused quite a stir for a while, as did the sudden appearance of Gillian Rose and Nigel Thrift in the staff information section of the Web site.<sup>2</sup> Near the end of class, my own picture was replaced by one of actor Tony Danza. At first, I was concerned with this simple prank.<sup>3</sup> But after some consideration, this active challenge to my authority and even violation of the one rule stated in my original e-mail was simply part of the critical pedagogic process.

### STUDENT-TURNED-TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

As a student, the ability to manipulate Blackboard's interface was exciting. The prospect of turning the interface over to the student was a novel and provocative idea to which all students-turned-instructors quickly adjusted. The interface display changed regularly, from tiger-striped themes to deep purple to the maroon and gold of Arizona State University colors. Although some students used the interface more than others, everyone benefited from the learning community. Especially apparent was personal identity expressed with each student posting of unique pictures and self-descriptions. Occasionally, a famous scholar would become a temporary member of the seminar, added by a student-turned-instructor. This was a fascinating concept because I often wondered what it

would have been like for "heroic" academe personages to participate in previous seminars and courses. Now, my fascination could turn to reality (well, virtual reality) as a new scholar would join us every so often, complete with picture, biography, and link to their homepage. In a regular classroom, lab, seminar, an information technology (IT), or e-learning setting, if the instructor were to point out to the students that a famous scholar had "joined" the class, few students noticed. If a famous scholar were brought in as a guest speaker that might get the students' attention, but bringing in "high-powered" guests is not always feasible. If the interface is given to the students-turned-instructors to administer however, the result is not only intense student engagement—whether surrounding famous, honorary classmates or some other phenomena—but also enhancement of a learning community not found in other lab or instructor-led IT-learning classes.

With the ability to upload items (e.g., pictures, articles, links to other Web sites), manipulate objects and postings other students-turned-instructors uploaded, and posted information or happenings deemed pertinent to the seminar, the creation of a unique learning community was an imminent result—even though there were some initial annoyance between instructors. The annoyance, however, never quelled the appetite for posting items of interest. Special landscape-related events in the surrounding area were often included in weekly (and sometimes daily) announcements, such as:

- an invitation to First Fridays, a local art walk related to landscape studies;
- a film screening of *The Lost Boys* to benefit Sudanese refugees. The movie, in part, depicts the various landscapes navigated by the 'boys;' and
- an on-campus colloquium with Donald Worcester, the famous environmental historian.

Other postings were more general, for example interviews with WJT (Tom) Mitchell, a biography of JB Jackson, a free e-book on radical and critical theory in geography, a local article on the landscape of coffee producers in Mexico, Taller Yonke's U.S.-Mexico Borderland murals and artwork, a tribute to Yi-Fu Tuan from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (which brought out a poignant discussion on landscapes of gender and sexuality), and a *New York Times* article semirelated to J. B. Jackson's *Ghost at the Door* on "Paving the Lawn." The ability to post, manipulate, and delete items had a small downside. A few times during the semester my postings disappeared after a few weeks or were taken off the "permanently show" list. Yet even with full course power, students still followed basic moral steadiness. One posting in particular caught me off-guard: "Good news for theory weenies." Even though the course was steeped in landscape theory, the thought of being a "weenie" (even in the nicest sense) was upsetting. The initial impression

to delete the entry was overcome by a desire to see how others would react. Most took only small offense, but it still illustrates that even contention—no matter how small—begets community interaction. After reading the information from the posted link, it was clear that my understanding of anthropological landscape theory was lacking. This lack was remedied by further discussing these theories with the person who posted the note. The virtual learning community provided the opportunity to expand the scope of inquiry beyond the structures set out by the professor. Because of these types of interactions, students became more fully engaged in areas of landscape studies that may have been missed in a solely lecture-and-read-and-write-a-paper seminar.

Especially significant to community interaction were course banner and supplementary material related to the banners. Banners provoked frequent in-class discussions, often initiated by the professor. Banners were seemingly swapped every week. Many were striking and provocative: the Iraq debate mentioned earlier worked well with the landscapes of power section of the seminar and provoked many discussions about power/knowledge regimes. Other banners were stretched beyond recognition as students learned to manipulate images to fit Blackboard's requirements. Panoramic pictures of wilderness landscapes, urban landscapes, mural landscapes, ancient ruin landscapes, and popular culture landscapes were all represented at one time or another. The images provided another mode for the students-turned-instructors to interact in virtual and face-to-face learning communities, resulting in cross-pollination of disciplinary-specific pedagogies and epistemologies.

### SUMMARY

In geography, critical pedagogy has been used to promote social justice in the classroom (Merrett 2004; Heyman 2004), as a tool to integrate English language learning and geography (Forrest 2002), to help explore identity and gender issues in the classroom (Oberhauser 2002; Ansell 2002; Huckle 2002), and as an instrument for enhancing the teaching of human geography (Mains 2004). Along the lines of Mains (2004), Merrett (2004), and Heyman (2004), the virtual interface of this landscape seminar demonstrates an underutilized way to use critical pedagogy in geography. Even with the shortcomings experienced, the plethora of students-turned-instructor postings and inevitable discussions that followed was impressive for a graduate seminar. Equally impressive was the restraint of students-turned-instructor to change assignment requirements and deadlines. Everyone in the seminar had full instructor powers on the Blackboard course site, yet no one changed a deadline or manipulated assignment requirements, perhaps evoking an unstated egalitarianism and respect for at least some of the established rules, and a sense of morality towards some greater hierarchical power structure. Or, perhaps no

one realized it was possible to change deadlines and assignment requirements!

The cross-collaboration between the various interests and research topics was, more often than not, enlightening. Interests of students ranged from Hispanic neighborhoods, downtown Las Vegas, national parks, memorial landscapes, actor-network theory, and taskscapes. Equally diverse were students' fields of interest: historical geography, media geography, physical geography, anthropology/ archeology, Latin American studies, policy management, and military studies. Virtual interaction frequently provided the basis for interpersonal interactions and knowledge creation. Following the change to the course Web site, the professor would start each class with a brief discussion about what was new on the course Web site. In short, while critical pedagogy was successfully implemented into Blackboard, it did require the professor to constantly monitor virtual and interpersonal interactions. Monitoring does not mean policing or censoring, but rather moderating, encouraging, and perpetuating dialogue. Ownership of seminar courses is possible through in-class and virtual dialogic methods, but it does require a professor to be humble and restructure pedagogic power away from a central authority model and towards democratic egalitarianism.

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### NOTES

1. The embedded power relations inherent in Blackboard run so deep that an instructor cannot permanently change the status of a student on their own Web site. The university's Blackboard administrator must change the students' status within a course.
2. <http://www.geography.wisc.edu/~yifutuan/archive.htm>
3. Some students have told me that I look like Tony Danza.

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