E-TICK: The Piloting and Development of a New Course in Ethical Communication

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Abstract: This article presents and discusses some of the pedagogical insights arising out of the development of E-TICK, a new online course on ethical communication developed by Comhlámh (the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers) together with European partners Zavod Volontariat (Slovenia), Društvo Humanitas (Slovenia), Inex (Czech Republic) and FOCSIV (Italian Federation of Non-Governmental Christian Organisations for International Voluntary Service). In particular, the article discusses the value of the course pilot which led to refinements in terms of sequencing and flow but also, more significantly, enabled us to identify instances of 'push' back among the learners.

Key words: Critical Literacy; Reflexivity; Pedagogy; Difficult Knowledge; Discomfort.

Introduction

bell hooks said of the African American film-maker Arthur Jafa:

> "I always use him as my example of what the decolonised gaze can produce. Who is looking and what do they see? Every work that A J produces poses this question in a radical way. His images come back at us, forcing us to think 'what is it that I am seeing?'" (hooks and Jafa, 2014).

This question of 'what is it that I am seeing?' is at the heart of E-TICK (2020), a new online course on ethical communication. Funded by the ERASMUS + programme of the European Commission and developed by European organisations working in the domain of global citizenship education and volunteering, E-TICK was launched in early May 2020. While the 18-30 age bracket was a key target for the project (18-30 years is a key cohort for the programme partners), the course has garnered interest from a wide range of

actors since its launch including people working in family resource centres, international development organisations, local integration projects as well as policy researchers. With E-TICK, project partners faced the interesting challenge of how to encourage learners through a self-directed online course without compromising on depth and criticality. This article presents and discusses some of the pedagogical insights that arose as part of that process.

E-TICK building blocks
In terms of approach, E-TICK offers an expanded understanding of 'text', weaving a range of films, music videos, art pieces and social media news feeds through the course sessions. From different angles the course expounds on the links between media, society and the reader, inviting learners to reflect on what their readings can tell them about themselves and how their communications (and those of others) are always of consequence. Topics include who gets to communicate what, stereotyping and its entanglements with prejudice and discrimination, the problem with good intentions and digital literacy for the new media age.

With its emphasis on the relationship between media (its power to shape understanding) and audience (active digesters of same), Stuart Hall's decoding/encoding model of communication provided E-TICK with valuable scaffolding. 'Meaning', wrote Hall 'is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean' (Hall, 1982: 67). The notion of the audience's agency and the role of their motivations and interests in meaning making is particularly key to E-TICK since it invites the question what am I (not) willing/ ready to see?

As part of course inception, the kind of 'readings' E-TICK wished to encourage and support was considered (Andreotti 2014; Bryan 2016). Citing Andreotti and the critical literacy framework employed in the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) project for example, Bryan (2016) describes the distinction between *critical readings* and *critical-literacy readings*. While the starting point for a *critical reading* of a text might be questions like: what is the intention of the author? What is the position of the author (political

agenda)? What is the author trying to say and how are they trying to convince the reader? The starting point for a *critical-literacy reading* would be questions like: what are the assumptions behind the statements? What/whose understanding of reality do they represent? How was this understanding constructed? Who decides (what is real, can be known or needs to be done) in this context? In whose name and for whose benefit? And what are the implications of the claims?

Through E-TICK, we were keen to encourage the latter kind of reading, in other words reflexive readings where the learner is supported to interrogate the context for a given text whilst also problematising the search for 'objective' knowledge or 'real' news and recognising themselves as an active player in the ongoing production of meaning. For the E-TICK team, the value of the reflexive reading is that it implicates the reader and in so doing, carries the potential to surface 'new ways of hearing, seeing and reading the world' (Boler, 1999 cited in Bryan, 2016). At the same time, as pedagogues, we have to take care at this juncture. For a learner, growing in understanding of how they are '*part of*' can bring discomfort and possibly push back. Britzman and others have called this 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman, 1998, 2000, 2013; Britzman and Pitt, 2004; Pitt and Britzman 2003, cited in Bryan, 2016).

The course pilot: a lesson in reflexivity
With E-TICK the challenge was thinking through how to support reflexive readings (Andreotti, 2014) and to work with this possibility of 'difficult knowledge' and discomfort in the context of a self-directed, online course. Central to the effort was a three-month long pilot process with 50 participants from across the partner countries. Over the three months' pilot, learners made their way through the different (draft) sessions, feeding back as they went and providing overall feedback at the end of the course as well. Additionally, face-to-face focus group discussions were held with pilot learners to delve deeper into the feedback and to identify overlaps as well as contrasts in terms of what people were saying. Crucially, this pilot generated plenty of ideas for second phase refinements including how to bolster motivation among learners and

ensure they kept going. Perhaps more significantly the pilot revealed the 'sticky' areas, i.e. the sessions that were, at least for some, generating push back and discomfort.

Indeed, the pilot feedback helped us to tune in to the question of content and potential reception(s) of it and prompted the team to consider the kinds of questions that might come up for participants through the course: 'how could my good intentions or those of others ever be a problem?'; 'surely it is both okay and necessary to speak for others when they are suffering'; 'I agree with the point of that person but it can't be generalised'; 'surely action is better than no action at all'; 'why is it only called cultural appropriation when I do it?' Along with this line of inquiry, we also asked ourselves how *we* might be read (the 'voice' of the platform) and how the voices we included on the platform might be read. The pilot feedback helped us to do this. Might participants tire of these voices after a time? Might they switch off the computer at some point? Can we imagine a point where their motivation to continue with us slowly ebbs away?

On the basis of our reflections, we set about making refinements. We encouraged learners to meet responses (to 'texts') with attentiveness and curiosity and re-formulated the guiding questions for journaling (with the right kinds of questions, journaling can provide learners with space to self-examine without judgement and builds capacity to be reflexive). Through carefully crafted auto-responses to short text answers we also found an additional way to connect with / feedback to participants. As part of this refinement phase, we also re-looked at language, editing instances of 'equivocal' voice or suggestions that there was a 'more complete' way to read something. Finally, we re-worked sequencing and strengthened patterns within and across the sessions to achieve more flow. In short, the pilot process proved invaluable in that it gave us deeper insight into the potential ways in which sessions within the course could be 'read'. The feedback didn't lead us to remove content or create sweeteners but rather it helped us to reflect on how we could otherwise support learners to engage in the challenge before them.

Overall, the process of developing the course (including the pilot) serves as a reminder of the value, pedagogically speaking, of attending to learning as an emotional process as well as a cognitive one (Bryan 2016). For the purposes of E-TICK we were particularly mindful of these two, interrelated tracks since we knew that the course would only work if it sustained the attention and motivation of the online learner. At the same time, understanding (and holding) these two entangled tracks is central to our practice as global educators. It provides a way into and through the difficult knowledge and the discomfort of learning, for ourselves and for the learners we work with.

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