

## “Dear Student”: Individualized Written Feedback in Critical Courses

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### Abstract

Framed as a reflective letter written to the reader, this paper shares my recent thinking about feedback and assessment in critical courses. “Critical” here is taken to refer to decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, and anti-ableist perspectives, broadly construed. Courses that work from these perspectives can be affectively intense for both instructors and students, but they are also necessary given the social imperatives of the current moment. In considering these courses further, I reflect on Carolyn Melro’s (2023) doctoral dissertation, which presented empirical results that seem to question the effectiveness of some pedagogical interventions within mandatory Indigenous courses. These results lead me to interrogate my own pedagogical approaches, particularly around feedback and assessment. In the context of critical courses, feedback and evaluation can be fraught, as instructors walk a careful line between marking students harshly for disagreeing with them and allowing problematic beliefs to continue unchallenged. Over the last several years, I have navigated this tension through letter writing. At the end of student assignments, I write thoughtful responses to their work in the form of letters. While time consuming and overly intense for some students, many respond positively to this approach. Though I cannot profess empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach, I conclude the paper by highlight the inherent uncertainty of teaching and stating my desire to continue writing letters to the students with whom I work.

**Keywords:** Feedback, Assessment, Curriculum Studies, Truth and Reconciliation, Letter Writing

Dear Readers,

In this reflective paper, I share my recent thinking around feedback in courses that work from “critical” perspectives. First, I discuss the difficulty of these courses and the social imperatives that make them necessary. Then, I describe some of the literature about teaching from “critical” perspectives before reflecting on feedback in general. Next, I describe my own approach to feedback as a specific manifestation of the wider pedagogical interventions raised in the literature. Finally, I offer an example of my approach before concluding with a discussion of its limitations and the inherent uncertainty of teaching.

### Teaching Critical Courses

The courses I teach all work from what I call “critical” perspectives. In this paper, I use the word “critical” as a shorthand for decolonial, anti-racist, non-heteropatriarchal, and anti-ableist perspectives, broadly construed. My specific teaching of these critical perspectives in our Bachelor of Education (BEd) program manifests as two mandatory courses: An Indigenous education course and a foundations of education course.

These courses are hard ones to teach. The difficulty, for me, isn't intellectual—the concepts are not particularly complex, nor is the planning especially daunting. The difficulty of these courses is in their affective intensity. Teaching these topics, some of which directly affect my life or the lives of those about whom I care deeply, can be emotionally draining. That said, I occupy a relatively privileged position as a white, CIS male of relatively abled body with Indigenous ancestry on my maternal side, and with that privilege comes an accompanying felt sense of obligation to do this work and do it well.

That sense of obligation often propels me through my own emotional discomfort, but the students with whom I work also have difficulties in these courses. In critical courses, students are asked to reflect on deeply held beliefs and nonconscious biases. Such learning can be emotionally taxing and very personal (Boler, 1999; Saad, 2020).

Despite the difficulty of such learning, the social imperatives that compel it are clear: the Black Lives Matter movement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), and inequitable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on racialized communities all make obvious the need for critical consciousness raising. Indeed, in their calls to action, the TRC (2015) asked faculties of medicine, law, journalism, and nursing to create mandatory courses on Indigenous topics. Faculties of education were not specifically named, but many have moved toward mandatory Indigenous courses of their own volition. More broadly, where two main factors, Eurocentric curriculum and teacher bias, contribute to the so-called “achievement gap” between BIPOC youth and their white peers (Adams, 2012), interrogating bias remains vital to the project of teacher training. In short, doing this work, however difficult it may be, is not negotiable.

How we go about doing that work, however, is not at all decided. That was made strikingly clear to me earlier this year when a colleague sent me Carolyn Melro's (2023) dissertation. Melro looked at mandatory Indigenous courses offered in various professional health programs at one Atlantic Canadian university. She examined several cohorts of students in these courses using pre- and post-course assessment tools to quantify the attitudinal change the students experienced during the semester. What Melro (2023) found was shocking to me. While some cohorts saw positive change, in others the changes were negligible or nonexistent, and in one cohort, the students' beliefs about Indigenous people worsened. Melro (2023) is careful to offer explanations as to what may have happened in that cohort—it was in 2020 and the pandemic, #blacklivesmatter protests, and media coverage of fishery disputes pervaded Nova Scotian public consciousness. Those notes aside, Melro's research served as a call to action for me.

## Literature on Critical Teaching

Clearly, more attention needs to be paid to what is happening in those critical classroom spaces and what is effective in creating the desired dispositional change. Before looking at my own classroom practices, however, I turn toward the literature on teaching critical perspectives to help contextualize my reflections.

Melro's literature review was narrowly focused on the training of health professionals, and after surveying that literature she said, "there is a lack of consensus as to the most effective ways to develop a culturally-safe and competent workforce" (Melro, 2023, p. 25). While I question whether the purpose of education is directly linked to training a workforce (i.e., Kumar, 2014; Downey, 2020a), there is indeed a lack of consensus around the most effective ways to teach critical perspectives. That lack of consensus, however, may be at least partially intentional. For example, in critical pedagogy, a subfield of curriculum studies (discussed below) informed by the foundational work of Paulo Freire (1973) and social critique broadly, many scholarly purposefully avoid definitions and definitive statements of best practices (e.g., McLaren, 2007). To offer a simple definition or to prescribe specific practices, these scholars argue, would work against the spirit of an emergent critique and a responsive pedagogy (McLaren, 2007). Moreover, it would erode the intellectual autonomy of the teacher (Giroux, 1988). It would, in effect, become a dictatorial pedagogy rather than a critical one.

Consensus eschewed, there is a robust literature spanning the last 50 years that has thought about how to teach from and for critical perspectives. While a full accounting of that literature exceeds the scope of this paper, the short illustrative mapping offered below may demonstrate the sorts of things about which I have been thinking since reading Melro's (2023) dissertation.

To begin, Paulo Freire (1973) argued for reclaiming a lost humanity for the oppressed through dialogic, as opposed to banking (i.e., lecture), models of education. Those who followed in Freire's path sought pedagogies that worked against the capitalist underpinnings of modern schooling through analysis, social mobilization, and advocacy (e.g., Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2007). Pedagogues informed by feminism initiated a wave of critical consciousness raising around gender (e.g., Grumet, 1988; Martin, 1982) as well as a series of pedagogical shifts from the teacher-centered to student-centered models and a focus on caring for students (e.g., hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2013). Black educators in the United States mobilized critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to attempt to dislodge the white supremacy embedded within traditional schooling (see also Dei, 1993; hooks, 1994). Indigenous scholars made calls for education that centered Indigenous ways of knowing and being and responded to the specific instance of settler colonial oppression endemic to North American society (e.g., Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Graveline, 1998). More recently, critical feminist educators have made use of arts-based pedagogies and social media to speak back to dominant narratives (e.g., Burkholder et al., 2023), while QTBIPOIC scholars have reconceptualized the feminist notion of care (Owis, 2022), and others have used counter-stories as a way to disrupt normative

understandings (Strong-Wilson, 2021). The above can broadly be thought of as some of the literature within curriculum studies, a subfield of educational studies that, since its reconceptualization in the 1970s (see Pinar, 1994), has been centrally concerned with how to teach (for) social justice (see also Pinar, 2011, 2012, 2023). Much of my scholarly work, and thus my reflection here, is informed by that literature.

Merlo's (2023) literature review is more specifically targeted around pedagogical interventions in mandatory Indigenous courses for health professionals. After reviewing that literature, she summarizes that effective interventions ought to: 1) Dispel false beliefs, 2) create cultural awareness, 3) include critical reflection, 4) centre Indigenous voices, 5) offer opportunities for experiential learning, and 6) teach about the social and structural causes of inequalities (Melro, 2023, pp. 102-103; see also Allan & Smylie, 2015; Beavis et al., 2015; Braun et al., 2020; Durey, 2010; Mills et al., 2018; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008; Pedersen, Walker, Paradies & Guerin., 2011). All those points would be supported in some capacity by the curriculum studies literature referenced above. They are also things I think carefully about when teaching my classes. Yet, I am somewhat reluctant to speak to the effects of any of these interventions. A decade of experience has only given me a faint impression of what is accomplished in my critical courses. The empirical evidence Melro (2023) seeks is certainly lacking. As I suggest in my conclusion, curriculum studies has resisted the pull toward such empirical evidence in educational research (see Barrow, 2013; Egan, 2005; McNulty, 2019; Pinar, 1994), but Melro's findings still nag at me—what if all my efforts, as well-informed as they may be, are making things worse, not better?

### **Reflection on Feedback and Assessment**

The second turn in my reflective journey propelled by Melro's dissertation is toward my own teaching practice—specifically feedback and assessment. For me, the most challenging aspect of teaching has always been feedback and assessment. Indeed, I often wonder whether my assessment methods accurately reflect the desired learning in my critical courses. I even question if it is ethical to assess students on the degree to which they have imbibed certain critical perspectives. Can, for example, a student disagree with the perspectives taught in class and still be graded highly? Over the years, I've learned that they can, but they need to show an awareness of what the perspective is and name precisely why they disagree with it. Disagreeing effectively often necessitates a much more robust understanding of the idea than agreeing does. Despite the deeper knowledge they show, however, whenever a student takes that path, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. So does the alternative—failing someone simply because they disagree with the perspectives I teach.

Feedback and assessment are also where I have the most direct contact with student beliefs. During in-class conversations, students can tune out or remain silent if they don't agree with what is being presented. Indeed, silence is often noted as a tactic used by white folks to avoid discussions of race (Mazzei, 2007). On written assignments, it is much harder to hide one's beliefs; even when students try to mask their perspectives, bits of their own feelings often slip in. This sharing strikes me as a moment of genuine vulnerability on the part of the student—one that is affectively charged, especially given the emotional difficulty of critical courses discussed

above—and I think there is a clear duty of care in the way we respond (Noddings, 2013). With all that difficulty as a backdrop, and Melro’s dissertation as a motivation, then, I move now to a consideration of my approach to feedback in critical courses.

My primary approach to feedback is modeled in the form of this paper: I write letters to the students—though they are not as long or elaborate as this one. The educational literature sometimes names this as “individualized written feedback” (Zahler, 2020) or “responding” (Harmer, 2007), and most of the research on its use is situated in language learning contexts (Zahler, 2020). There, it is generally acknowledged that individualized written feedback is helpful to the progression of language learning and in students’ becoming competent writers (Zahler, 2020). Though I cannot now recall the text, I remember being taught in my teacher training a decade ago that if we wrote individualized written feedback to students, we ought to model for them the proper use of the grammatical points we were teaching. If a student wrote “I ain’t surprised,” for example, we ought to write back “I am not surprised” somewhere within the feedback. I still do that with some students when their papers have persistent grammatical errors, but my letters are less focused on grammar these days, and more related to the critical content of my courses.

In the specific courses I took on evaluation during my BEd, the advice I received about feedback on content took the form of the following list:

Effective Feedback:

1. Directs attention to the intended learning, pointing out strengths and offering specific information to guide improvement.
2. Occurs during learning, while there is still time to act on it.
3. Addresses partial understanding.
4. Does not do the thinking for the student.
5. Limits corrective information to the amount the student can act on. (Chappuis et al., 2012, p. 31).

These are all good suggestions, and they certainly served me well as a K-12 teacher. The more I engaged with critical content, however, the more I found them wanting. For example, point one above generally works well if the content isn’t related to a student’s deeply held beliefs, but reminding students that they are meant to be learning about privilege when they don’t believe in such a concept can seem passive aggressive more than helpful. Moreover, when one doesn’t think for the student, as suggested in point four, one may allow certain problematic beliefs to go unchallenged, and that causes its own set of ethical issues.

One of the biggest sources of influence on my approach to written feedback is the feedback I received in graduate school. Often, one of my doctoral supervisors would write elaborate and thoughtful responses to my work that contained specific corrections and larger questions. I always felt like my work was taken seriously, and that itself was both validating and, through the close attention, challenging. In many ways, it was a similar feeling to what I’ve felt when I’ve gotten a good, but not necessarily positive, anonymous review back from a journal. For me, a

close reading of my work and a request for revisions can feel better than an unconditional acceptance.

From my experiences in graduate school, one central axiom emerged that has guided my assessment and feedback ever since: “take what is presented to you seriously and treat it as you would have your own work treated”. Initially, I interpreted that axiom through tracked changes and in-line comments on student texts. That approach was not received well by many students in my BEd classes. There was too much information for many, and the feeling I got was that it was generally overwhelming and discouraging for students (see also Harmer, 2007).

Gradually, over the last four or five years, my letter writing began to emerge. First, I added the letters as a way to contextualize the in-line comments. Then I started using tracked changes less and less, opting instead to comment in the letter on persistent grammatical issues. The number of comments also eventually decreased, as the letter seemed a more appropriate place to offer specific feedback. Thinking back to the emotional nature of the courses I teach, the keyword in guiding my letters to students is “gentle”. I try not to push students too hard or take firm stances against what they purport to believe; instead, I offer alternatives, ask questions, tell stories, and write a great deal of context around the issues with which they are concerned. The personalized comments and questions offered in my letters provide opportunities to further students’ thinking in relation to the topics covered and encouragement to test new ideas in subsequent assignments.

### **An Example**

For the sake of illustrating the sort of letter I am describing, I have written an example below. This example was created specifically for this article, but it responds to a common phenomenon in my required foundations of education course. In that course, I teach a case study (Hare, 2003) in which a young female teacher is touched inappropriately by a male vice principal as he attempts to “squeeze by” her in the photocopy room. Later in the case, the same male vice principal makes an inappropriate comment about her attire after a meeting.

The case is written in such a way as to be ambiguous about whether there is enough evidence to say that sexual harassment has taken place, and one of the discussion questions after the text asks as much. In class, I clearly tell students that my intent with this case is not to interrogate whether sexual harassment has taken place, and that I don’t feel such a discussion is appropriate given the valid critiques of heteropatriarchy mobilized through the #metoo movement. There is, of course, a sound academic critique of the way the western legal system upholds white supremacy and heteropatriarchy behind that decision (e.g., Razack, 1998), but I often leave the details out, allowing contemporary social movements to stand in the decades of academic work that preceded them.

Rather than using the case to talk about evidence, then, I use it as an opportunity to discuss the ethics of “speaking up” and the valid concerns one may have about addressing racism, sexism, ableism, or discrimination more broadly when one is the target. Inevitably, this direction in the conversation makes some students uncomfortable—particularly young white men, who often

identify more with the vice principal than with the teacher. When they write about their discomfort, I am faced with the delicate task of responding. The below letter is a fabricated example of what I might write to these students.

Dear Student,

Thank you for your submission. I know these assignments take time and effort, and I appreciate that you've given this both. Moreover, I appreciate the honesty of your reflection.

Regarding the marking of your assignment, I can see that you've done what the assignment asks, "to reflect on moments of significant learning in the class". Thank you for that.

As for the content of your reflection, I do think what you've written here warrants some response. Specifically, I might suggest that you are thinking of the case legalistically when the course is about thinking sociologically.

Legalistically, you are right that there isn't enough evidence to determine the guilt of the vice principal. From a sociologically perspective, however, this isn't particularly relevant. As we've discussed in class, sociology as applied to the study of education offers insight into the power relations between and among educational stakeholders. It also gives us insight into the way our social locations (e.g., race, gender, and class) factor into the way we experience those power relations. In class, we were attempting to apply that lens to the case. While there are certainly other questions we *could* ask, they are not necessarily germane to the course. Moreover, those questions are not appropriate. I will remind you that many of your peers identify as women and the Canadian Women's Foundation (N.D.) estimates that 30% of women older than 15 report experiencing sexual assault at least once. The rate of women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace is much higher. Moreover, as we discussed in class, when women come forward with complaints of sexual harassment, their concerns are often dismissed. To ask questions about evidence in this social context seems profoundly insensitive.

I hope that this offers some insight into why I led the conversation in the direction I did; I also hope it offers insights into what some of your peers may have been feeling in reading that case study.

As always, thank you for your time, effort, and honesty. Should you like to discuss further, feel free to reach out.

All the best,

Adrian

There are a few things to note in the above example. First, I always begin by thanking the student for their work, and I do genuinely mean it. As discussed above, this is hard work, and I truly value their thinking, even though I may not agree with it. Second, I usually comment on the marking *separately* from any response I might have to make to their thinking. As much as is possible, I want to indicate that their mark was not tied to their beliefs, but rather to the requirements of the assignment. In cases where the student's thinking does not match the thinking presented in the course, I try to be clear about where the mismatches have resulted in a lower grade. My emphasis here is always on misunderstandings or misapplications of the concepts discussed in class. As above, sometimes this does result in students getting high marks and disagreeing with course perspectives, but the alternative remains unpalatable to me. Finally, after making my intervention, I usually summarize the main point and end the letter by

thanking the student again. Some might name this a version of the “sandwich” technique, where one point of constructive feedback is sandwiched between two points of praise. Personally, I think of it in more relational terms: I want the student to know that regardless of our disagreements, we can still treat each other with respect and compassion.

There are problems with the above letter, of course. It isn't nearly as gentle as I would like, and I would probably be much more specific were this sent to an actual student. Moreover, the distinction between legalistic thinking and sociological thinking isn't completely satisfactory to me. It is an artificial distinction drawn up to avoid going too far into intersectional theory (i.e., Razack, 1998) with the student. That said, this is generally representative of my approach to feedback on student assignments in my critical courses.

### **Conclusion**

Since I started working with this approach, students have responded positively, but it is not without its problems. Two major issues with this approach are: 1) some students become overwhelmed by the close attention to their work, and 2) this approach requires a tremendous amount of my time. To prepare students for the close attention they will receive, I mention my approach to feedback in the first class and offer to meet with students to talk them through my feedback should they desire. My response to the tremendous time commitment is less satisfactory. Maybe generative AI will be able to help me soon—and in the Orwellian nightmare that is our near future, perhaps students and professors only talk to each other through prose mediated by machine—but for now I see no way around this time commitment. Taking care with students' work, especially when their perspectives don't mirror those taught in the course, seems to me an incredibly important task—though it may fall squarely into the category of what Elizabeth Wells (2023) calls “overtaching.”

Flaws noted, this approach is the best one I've found for addressing student's beliefs. If Melro's (2023) work is any indication, however, even the best interventions can falter in the face of external factors, and there is still an unanswered question for me about whether my approach has the intended effect. I could, of course, point to instances where students have said that what I wrote to them “opened their eyes” or course evaluations that often comment positively on my feedback, but Melro's (2023) findings make me question those forms of evidence.

Even within my questioning, however, I remember that generations of curriculum scholars have argued that empiricism is a terrible fit in studying education (e.g., Barrow, 2013; Egan, 2005). They argue that there are simply too many external factors for learning to be measured accurately, especially complicated learning such as that which occurs in critical courses (Egan, 2005; see also Downey, 2020b). In the spirit of critical pedagogy, then, my reflection in this paper does not serve as a definitive statement about best feedback practices in teaching critical perspectives. Rather, it serves as an opening—an invitation for ongoing reflection and consideration of the feedback and assessment practices used within our critical classes.

“Overtaching” (Wells, 2023) though it may be, I will continue to write my letters to students for the time being. Indeed, I find something of a metaphor in the form of the letter itself. Once we

drop a letter into the mailbox, it is lost in uncertainty until we receive a reply. Sometimes the reply doesn't come, and we wonder about the intended recipient. Are they okay? Did my letter reach them? Once the class is over, so too do I wonder about the students to whom I've written—such is the inherent uncertainty of teaching. Following the critical pedagogues, that uncertainty might not be something to overcome, but rather an invitation to emergent reflexive pedagogy—a pedagogy without the certainty of effect but with the promise of an ongoing negotiation of what is ethical in each situation.

Sincerely,

Adrian

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