

How to Change the Gravitational Constant of Your Universe (without breaking the Laws of Physics)

Kate Krug
Cape Breton University

Abstract

The discourse on teaching and learning includes work on anti-racist education, decolonization, trauma informed pedagogy, universal design for teaching and learning, feminist, and queer pedagogies, etc. While each of these frameworks represents a different set of interests, they vibrate in harmony around critical reflections on the production of knowledge and the practices and processes of teaching and learning. The demographics of university classrooms of the 21st century are much different than the classrooms of the 20th century. Many of our students are there to acquire a gateway credential, and not to develop a deeper understanding of our disciplines. I have been developing and implementing a pedagogy based on the principles of play as an interaction form. This pedagogy of play was initially inspired by the work of folks like Paulo Friere and bell hooks and more recently by the 2015 TRC Calls to Action and the work of folks like Marie Battiste and Lee Maracle. This paper will outline how practicing a pedagogy of play can effectively change the gravitational constant of your universe.

I came into my career as a teaching academic because I fell in love with Sociology as a way of thinking about the world and with teaching as a way to practice the kinds of critical inquiry that sociologists do. Teaching is a political act as much as it is a process for producing and disseminating knowledge. There is a politics in both what we do and in how we do it. The discourse on teaching and learning includes work on anti-racist education, decolonization, trauma informed pedagogy, universal design for teaching and learning, feminist, and queer pedagogies, etc. While each of these frameworks represents a different set of interests, they vibrate in harmony around critical reflections on the production of knowledge and the practices and processes of teaching and learning. Critical sociology and critical pedagogy have been at the centre of my life as a teaching academic, the ultimate goal of both philosophies is to empower individuals and collectivities and to create a more socially just society.

However, the social climate of the academy has been shifting over the course of the past few decades. Changes in the institutional climate that started in the 1980's with an increased emphasis on research grants and industrial partnerships (Newson & Buchbinder, 1988) have intensified in the subsequent decades so that "today's universities have become more commercial in orientation, more business-like in practice, and more corporate in self-presentation" (Polster & Newson, 2015:1). These changes have had both direct and indirect impacts on the what's, how's and where's of teaching and learning as class sizes increase, full-time faculty complements decrease, and expectations shift toward instrumental rather than critical teaching and learning.

The demographics of university classrooms of the 21st century are also much different than the classrooms of the 20th century. Student populations have become increasingly diverse and their motivations for seeking undergraduate degrees have also shifted considerably. Many of our students are motivated by a need to acquire a gateway credential and bring a primarily instrumental attitude toward teaching and learning. Thus, as teaching academics we find ourselves in classroom contexts with learners of varying needs, interests, and abilities.

We are now working in a social universe that calls us to provide courses and classrooms that respond to calls for equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization. We are also working in a material world that requires that we do more with less, that emphasizes quantity of registrants over depth of inquiry and that often sacrifices collegiality and community engagement in the interests of bureaucratic efficiency. Collectively these shifts in the practices and processes of the academy are something of an “extinction level event” for the kind of world that the academy has had the potential to be.

There is an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in which the Enterprise crew is trying to save an inhabited planet from an extinction level event. One of the planet’s moons was knocked out of its orbit by an asteroid strike and is now on a collision course with the planet. Although they work the problem from a variety of angles, the Enterprise crew cannot find a solution that will save the planet or its people. There is simply not enough time to evacuate the planet, and the ship’s engines are not powerful enough to change the orbital trajectory of the moon. As it happens, an omnipotent being named “Q” has taken refuge on the Enterprise as he has temporarily lost his powers. When asked how he would solve the problem, Q responds, “that’s easy, just change the gravitational constant of the universe” (Danus & Landau, 1990). While it is not actually possible to literally change the gravitational constant of the universe (even in science fiction), Q’s suggestion does get the chief engineer imagining different kinds of possibilities and eventually a solution emerges from this process of approaching the question from a completely different angle.

Just as the laws of physics informed how the Enterprise crew approached the impending planetary disaster, my teaching practices and processes have always been informed by the principles of critical pedagogy. I put the interests of my discipline and the learning outcomes for my courses at the centre of my teaching practices and processes. Some years ago I began developing and implementing a philosophy of teaching that I refer to as a pedagogy of play as it is grounded in ‘play’ as an interactional form. I began building this approach as a strategy for addressing student engagement in the classes I was teaching. Initially inspired by the work of folks like Paulo Friere (1992) and bell hooks (1994) and more recently by the 2015 TRC Calls to Action and the work of folks like Marie Battiste (2013) and Lee Maracle (2017), developing and implementing the pedagogy of play has not only changed what I do in the classroom and in course design, but also how I do these things. So as I look at the potentially disastrous effects of the plethora of changes in the nature, spirit, and form of academic teaching and learning, I find myself looking for a way to change the gravitational constant of this universe – and I believe that a pedagogy of play affords the possibility to do that.

In play, the participants are all agents, they need not be equal in their access to power and privilege in the grand scheme of things, however they are all active participants in that context. All of the participants are involved in defining the terms or frames of reference for the interactions that take place, even though those interactions may be only loosely structured. Thus, play is a decidedly intersubjective endeavour in which the roles taken up by the various participants may shift or fluctuate at various points along the lifespan of the interaction. All of the participants have some agency in play, decision-making may not always necessarily be equalitarian, but it is collective and consultative.

Using play as the core of a pedagogy has radically transformed how I have approach all aspects of my teaching over the course of my career. What, for me, began as a series of “outside the box” classroom exercises has gradually become an ethic and a foundation for all aspects of course development and delivery. I suppose that one could say that this pedagogy has changed the gravitational constant of my universe by transforming how I perceive my role as an educator. I am not a guardian at the gate of my discipline ensuring that the “quality” of the student measures up to the expectations of the discipline or the institution, thereby protecting and preserving their intellectual rigour and reputations. I have come to perceive my role as more akin to that of a success coach. I design and implement curricula that my students can engage with and build assessment strategies that provide opportunities for further learning and offer my students the possibility to express their understanding and critical reflection in formats other than the essays and exams that have been the ‘gold standard’ for assessments in my discipline. Sometimes that means building in a do-over, sometimes that means providing an alternate assessment strategy, like an oral examination or conversation, or the possibility to submit a PowerPoint presentation with voice over instead of an essay.

Intersubjective relationships require that all participants have the possibility of being fully present in the room and to be considered as complex entities with multiple, and often conflicting roles and identities. For me, that has meant being willing to be vulnerable in the room and to bring my whole self into the context and that includes being as “out” and genderqueer in all my classes as well as I am in my everyday life. In another universe, my sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression might not be relevant. In this universe, these are categories of privilege and marginalization. Given that I am trying to teach my students that critical thinking includes the ability to recognize and challenge the operations of categories of privilege and marginalization, I must also be willing to put my own intersectional identity on the table – to own my white privilege as well as my class privilege and not to hide the elements of marginalization behind them.

Intersubjectivity means that all the participants must have the opportunity to be speakers as well as listeners. The practice of negotiating grading schemes, assessment strategies, due dates, assignment weightings has helped my students believe that their voices matter and that they are agents in this context. Listening to my students taught me that they need deadlines for the coursework to help them manage their workload. It also taught me the importance of a “published” deadline with the built-in flexibility of a slightly later ultimate cut-off date so that students could have an easily accessible extension as a safety net.

Intersubjectivity also carries with it a responsibility to take care with, and for, one another and that includes recognizing and responding to our individual and collective limitations with compassion and kindness. So often, the real barrier to success in many contexts is fear and compassion is the most effective strategy for disarming fear. Compassion requires a capacity to hear the fear underneath the surface text and in order to hear that we need to be able to listen to the whole speaker and not just hear the words spoken. Practicing a pedagogy of play has taught me to be such a listener.

In the contemporary context, as we struggle against the corporatization of education institutions, contend with increasing class sizes, and navigate the complexities of diverse student populations it is sometimes difficult to remember that we are teaching people and not disciplines. At the heart of critical pedagogies, universal design for learning, and decolonizing education, is a belief in the possibility that teaching and learning can be transformative processes. Teaching is a political act as much as it is a process for disseminating knowledge and reproducing ideologies. We have the possibility to respond to the pressures in the current context, rather than simply reacting to them. If we can change the gravitational constant of our own universe, perhaps resistance is not futile after all.

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