Chapter 6

Buddhist Detachment as a Conceptual Point of Entry into Teaching Sociopolitically– Located Multicultural Education Online

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the concept of "Buddhist detachment," this chapter focuses on how the "distance" between students, and between students and faculty, imposed by the online teaching and learning environment, though typically viewed as antithetical to progressive educational pedagogy, can actually be integral to its realization.

INTRODUCTION

I first learned about the emerging field of online education in 1995. At that time, without having ever taken or taught an online course myself, and with only relatively basic technology proficiency, I was among those most diametrically opposed to virtual teaching and learning. I held this position based solely on the perception that online pedagogy *must*, by its very definition, violate what my field, sociopolitically-located multicultural education, held sacrosanct—the development of strong interpersonal and intellectual relation-

ships between and among students and faculty in the classroom. As if by a process of osmosis, technology slowly became my friend or, rather, it became a vehicle through which I maintained strong interpersonal and intellectual relationships with friends who lived at a geographic distance from me. Over time, technology also became a medium through which I developed new interpersonal and intellectual relationships with people I had never met face-to-face—people who, though I have never met them in person, and, in most cases, of whom I have never even seen a picture, I would call friends.

The cognitive disconnect between the source of my disdain for online education and my own

positive experience of interacting in cyberspace created fertile ground in my consciousness for a close friend to plant a seed. In the effort to make me more technologically proficient and, therefore independent (i.e., not dependent on him for technology support), my friend commented that social justice work and technology are both "forward-thinking" pursuits, thus, he argued, it makes sense for social justice advocates to embrace the use of technology in service to our conscientization efforts. Perhaps this is not a compelling argument for every critical pedagogist, and certainly it is not an argument without legitimate counterarguments; still, I found the essence of this argument compelling.

Not long after this epiphany, another friend contacted me, via e-mail naturally, to ask me if I would be interested in teaching online courses in cultural democracy, cross-cultural instruction, and, of course, critical pedagogy. I accepted the opportunity. That was six years ago. Today I teach, on a part-time basis, online courses in an array of multicultural teacher education content areas for five universities. I have become proficient with a variety of online educational interfaces (Blackboard, WebCT, WebTycho, E-College, etc.), comfortable with online teaching in general, and sophisticated in integrating a transformative pedagogical posture into the virtual classroom in particular. Despite this proficiency, comfort, and sophistication, during every online course, I find myself increasingly engaged in self-talk as to the role of what I have come to understand, both intuitively and intellectually, as "Buddhist detachment" in teaching progressive content in general, but especially online because of:

1. My commitment to build genuinely supportive relationships with each of my students (something I view as foundational to the practice of progressive multicultural educational pedagogy);
2. My concomitant recognition of how technology can and does limit the development of even the most basic interpersonal interaction skills that make student-teacher relationships sincere and otherwise meaningful; and,
3. My awareness of how cyberspace, by its very nature, amplifies non-Buddhist detachment.

In this chapter I work to "quiet," or, perhaps, better respond to this inner dialogue by constructing a dialectical scaffold that augments humanness through the practice of a pedagogy of Buddhist detachment in teaching social justice education online.

BACKGROUND

In the West, the concept of "detachment" is commonly associated with notions of apathy, aloofness, indifference, and even neutrality—none of which are typically embraced as positive in a progressive educational context. But from a Buddhist perspective, detachment has a much different meaning. Seeming to add insult to injury here, in *Glimpse of Reality* (1999), Berzin and Chodron explain that Buddhist detachment is more aptly associated with the notion of "renunciation." Once again, the Western concept of renunciation is similarly negative, especially when viewed through the social justice educational lens, evoking images of banishment, rejection, and austerity. But in Buddhism, "the word that has been translated as 'renunciation' actually means 'the determination to be free'" (p. 39). In this definition, the connection between Buddhist detachment and liberatory education surfaces. Fleshing out this connection, Harris, in *Detachment and compassion in early Buddhism* (1997), relates:

The Buddha was once faced with the remark that the most worthy person is the one who speaks neither in dispraise of the unworthy nor in praise of the praiseworthy. The Buddha disagreed with this. He replied that, because of his [sic] ability to [differentiate], the person who speaks in dis-

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