

CARAC TERES

Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

En este número participan ■ Simone Belli, Wladimir Chávez Vaca, Celia Corral Cañas, Elsa García Sánchez, Beatriz Leal Riesco, Antonio Martínez Arboleda, Marisa Martínez Pérsico, Alessandro Mistrorigo, Rafael Pontes Velasco, Pau Damià Riera Muñoz, Carlos Santos Carretero y Adrian Nathan West.



PALABRAS

Caracteres. Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

Caracteres es una revista académica interdisciplinar y plurilingüe orientada al análisis crítico de la cultura, el pensamiento y la sociedad de la esfera digital. Esta publicación prestará especial atención a las colaboraciones que aporten nuevas perspectivas sobre los ámbitos de estudio que cubre, dentro del espacio de las Humanidades Digitales. Puede consultar [las normas de publicación en la web](#).

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Liberation in OpenLIVES Critical Pedagogy: “empowerability” and critical action

Liberación en la pedagogía crítica de OpenLIVES: “empoderabilidad” y acción crítica

Antonio Martínez-Arboleda (University of Leeds)

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ABSTRACT: This article will examine the educational experience of OpenLIVES at the University of Leeds by looking at its learning methods and contents, its ideological influences and coincidences and its transformational potential for students, Higher Education and society. Particular attention will be paid to the publication of student coursework online, in the form of Open Educational Resources (OER), as a key component of student praxis, as well as to the students’ freedom to explore different genres of audio research-based production in order to engage with audiences online. It will be argued that these two features of the OpenLIVES pedagogy enable us to fulfil some of the ideals of liberation defended by Critical Pedagogy and update and translate, in a 21st Century Higher Education context, the Gramscian ideal of “critical thinking”.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examinará la experiencia educativa de OpenLIVES en la Universidad de Leeds. Se concentrará en la metodología de aprendizaje y contenidos, las influencias y coincidencias ideológicas constadas y en su potencial transformador para los estudiantes, la Educación Superior y la sociedad. Se presta especial atención a la publicación en línea del trabajo de los estudiantes como Recursos Educativos Abiertos (OER), un elemento clave de la praxis del estudiante, así como a la libertad de los estudiantes a la hora de explorar diferentes géneros de producción audio basada en la investigación y de conectar con audiencias en línea. Se argumentará que estos dos rasgos de la pedagogía OpenLIVES nos permiten realizar algunos de los ideales de liberación defendidos por la Pedagogía Crítica así como actualizar y traducir al contexto de la Educación Superior del Siglo XXI el ideal gramsciano de “pensamiento crítico”.

KEYWORDS: open practice, language learning, critical pedagogy, genre theory, OpenLIVES

PALABRAS CLAVE: práctica abierta, aprendizaje de lenguas, pedagogía crítica, teoría de géneros, OpenLIVES

1. Introduction

Or is it preferable to elaborate consciously and critically one’s conception of the world, and through the labors of one’s own intellect, choose one’s sphere of activity, participate actively in the creation of universal history, etc?

Antonio Gramsci.

OpenLIVES, funded by JISC (UK), is a project of Oral History, Migration and Open Educational Resources (OER), led by the University of Southampton in collaboration with the University of Leeds and the University of Portsmouth. The project envisaged the digitalisation of Oral History interviews with Spanish émigrés carried out by Dr Alicia Pozo-Gutiérrez as part of previous

research as well as the development of pedagogical applications for the use of those digitised live stories in the teaching of a wide range of disciplines including Languages, Cultural Studies and History. The project envisaged the embedment of these applications in the curriculum of the participating universities and the sharing of all the interviews and learning materials in the HumBox, the UK Arts and Humanities OER repository, and in other OER repositories such as JORUM, the national repository for Higher Education and Further Education in the United Kingdom. The funded part of OpenLIVES was completed in February 2013, but the teaching and dissemination work continues. All the interviews and learning materials are now available in the HumBox under different collections. Given the self-reproductive nature of the OpenLIVES Pedagogy, these materials will continue to grow thanks to the ongoing student involvement and, hopefully, the future participation of members of the global learning community.

There are a number of academic presentations, articles and reports on OpenLIVES that have been published already. The more salient scholar contributions so far on the OpenLIVES Pedagogy can be found in the 2012 and 2013 INTED conferences held in Valencia, in this journal and in two forthcoming case-studies that have been accepted for publication by the Open University on Language Learning, Open Practice and OER.

Although in this article there are references to OpenLIVES as a whole, the pedagogical applications discussed herein are those developed at the University of Leeds by the author. A good summary of the OpenLIVES pedagogy can be found in the following video produced by the LLAS Team at Southampton. LLAS, the Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies at the University of Southampton managed the OpenLIVES project: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeocSbDlfKE>

2. OpenLIVES at Leeds

The main pedagogical contribution to OpenLIVES produced at the University of Leeds is a Final Year course called “Discovering Spanish Voices Abroad in a Digital World”. (The Leeds OpenLIVES module). This course was originally conceived as a Spanish Language in context module for advanced learners (B2-C1 CEFR) worth 20 credits (1/6 of a full-time BA Year). It started to be taught at the University of Leeds in October 2012 and is a Final Year option for all

the BAs in Spanish. There is a publicly available [Collection of Resources](#) produced for this course, both by the tutor and the students in the HumBox, which is expected to incorporate the coursework of students of successive cohorts, future interviews, and any new materials produced by the tutors involved.

The teaching in the [Leeds OpenLIVES](#) module is geared towards supporting students in their production of the following outputs:

- 1) A collection of new Oral History interviews, that will add to the existing collection of interviews carried out by Alicia Pozo-Gutiérrez. These new interviews are planned, advertised and conducted in Spanish by the students of the course. They feature Spanish economic migrants who live in Leeds. Once the interviewees agree for the interview to be used for research purposes, students can proceed to work with them. At the end of the academic year, with the consent of the interviews, the raw footage of each digitised interviews is uploaded by the students in the HumBox and in Jorum. The licence under which this material is released is a BY-NC-SA Creative Commons Licence, which allows anyone to use, re-mix and share those educational materials for non-commercial purposes providing that attribution is given to the authors. These interviews are not formally assessed.
- 2) Half way through the course, immediately before the above interviews, students should have written a 750-words research report explaining and justifying their next steps in the research project, namely the interviews themselves and the documentaries. After the interviews have been carried out, students report again, this time orally, on their research progress.
- 3) A 2,500-words audio documentary in Spanish, one per student, to be submitted in its final version at the end of the course. The documentary incorporates soundtracks from the original OpenLIVES collection of interviews as well as from any new interviews conducted by the students themselves. Students start working in their documentary scripts once they have collected the data and shared their research and production initial plans with the other students and the tutor.

One of the aims of this course is to enable learners to become responsible digital scholars who feel empowered and motivated to make tangible and socially purposeful contributions to the

Global Community. In order to support student production, the module provides practical training in Oral History research methods, documentary scripting and production, including using editing software for audio files, OER Literacy, including Publishing and Licensing, and Spanish Language for Specific Purposes. The module promotes critical and ethical understanding of all the social, epistemological and educational issues connected to all the research and production work carried out by students. Therefore, the teaching programme needs to cover the following areas:

- 1) OER and Open Practice from a social, educational and political point of view;
- 2) Economic migration in Spain in the 21st Century, mainly in comparison with 1960's economic migration;
- 3) The economic, political and social situation in contemporary Spain;
- 4) Ethical protocols for research;
- 5) Oral History, from a social, scientific and ethical point of view;
- 6) The documentary genre.

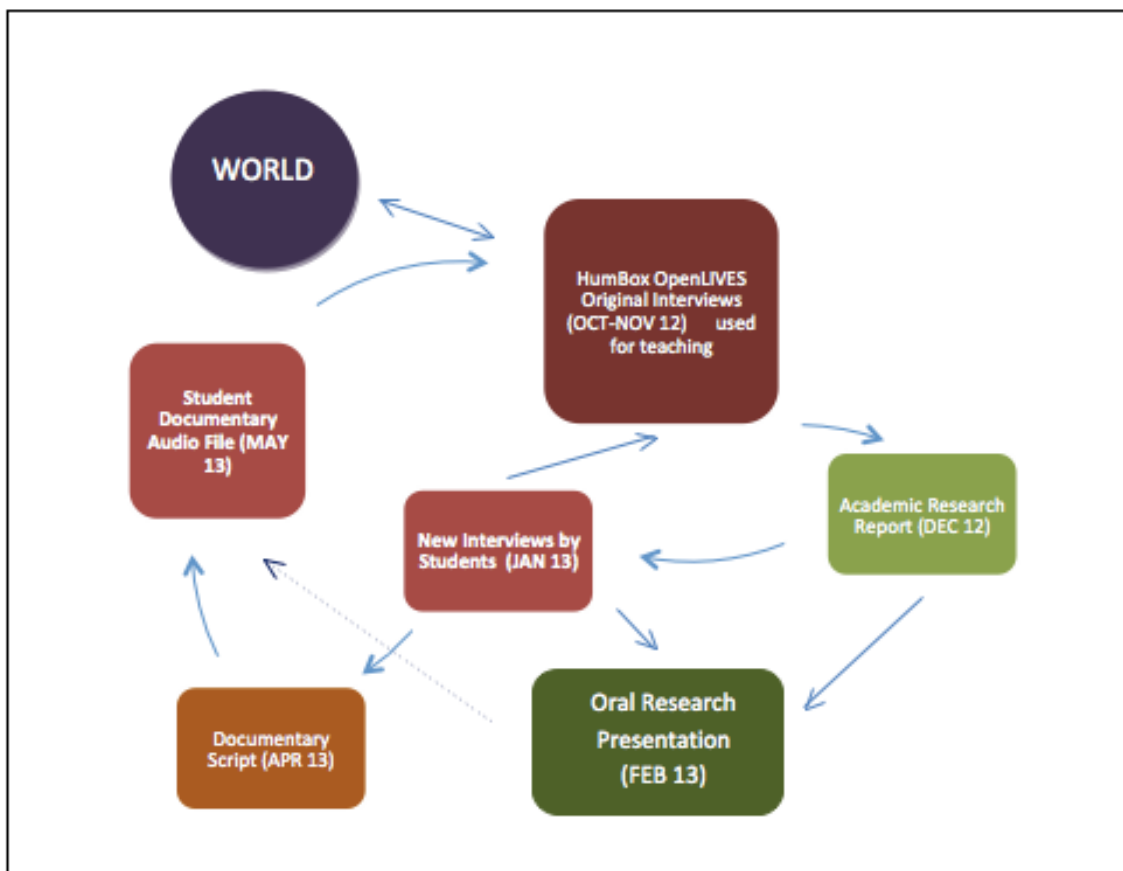


Figure 1: The Leeds OpenLIVES cycle of student production

3. Pedagogy and Ideology in OpenLIVES

The development of the pedagogical applications for OpenLIVES was inspired in three main sources: firstly the own teaching experiences of the participating academics from Leeds, Southampton and Portsmouth, which include extensive work with Open Practice and Open Educational Resources, especially in the HumBox and the Language Box, but also in Jorum UK. The ideology and educational principles of use and re-use of OER, formulated by authors such as Wiley or Downes, are at the very heart of this project since its inception.

Secondly, amongst the members of the team there was also an interest for integrating transferable skills in the academic curriculum in Higher Education. Performative and hands-on learning with strong motivational strategies is a key element in contemporary language teaching, which is the area of expertise of the majority of the team members. It is interesting to note that task based, communicative and meaningful language learning methodologies have informed the development of OpenLIVES learning activities for non-languages disciplines.

Finally, the third explicit influence on our work was the research carried out by Alicia Pozo-Gutiérrez in Oral History and migration. The ethical and epistemological principles of Oral History Research immediately captured the attention of the team. The sometimes dramatic and always deeply dignifying testimonies of migration that the team had access too gave the project, as it unfolded, an ever growing civic and social purpose. There were also many political factors, some more explicit than others, shaping the lives of all the informants. Many of them had to flee as a result of the brutality of the Spanish Civil War. Others left Spain because of the economic plea of Franco's Spain in the 1950's and 1960's. All of them went through extremely varied and singular experiences of self-discovery and cross-culturality.

During the first months of the OpenLIVES project, members of the team started to develop pedagogical principles and ideas in order to provide a coherent explanation for the learning materials and courses, such as the Leeds OpenLIVES module, that were being created in a rather organic and spontaneous way. In search of educational and political "soul mates" in Higher Education, the OpenLIVES team discovered the existence of Student as a Producer and Mike Neary in 2011. Shortly after this revelation, the team aligned itself with the philosophy of

such an innovative project. Walter Benjamin ideas on artistic production were also another discovery for the team, both through Mike Neary's work as well as through the readings of Yochai Benkler, who had inspired some previous work on OER of the author of this article. Finally, the ideas of Healey and Jenkins on research-based teaching, which had already been informing pedagogical developments in the University of Leeds Curriculum, were an obvious match for the work that was being carried out.

The paper "The OpenLIVES Pedagogy: Oral History of Spanish Migration, Collaborative Student Research, Open Practice and Transformational Education for a Radically Better Society" (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013) examines some of the most obvious connections between OpenLIVES and the work of Benkler, Benjamin and Neary in terms of ideology and practice. In the same line, the present article explores the extremely welcome coincidences and interactions with Antonio Gramsci and Critical Pedagogy. The objective of the reflections hereafter is to make better sense of the significance and potential of the OpenLIVES pedagogical applications, particularly but not exclusively, focusing on the Leeds OpenLIVES module.

4. Moral purpose and liberation in Higher Education

4.1 Gramsci today

The financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent economic pleas of the West have resurrected popular and academic interest for theories influenced by Karl Marx. Some of these theories defend that capitalism is in need of serious revamping (Kotz, 2009) whilst others conceive it as an inherently self-destructing system. Even for those with less of a deterministic and dramatic vision, mainly Social Structure of Accumulation theorists such as Terrence McDonagough, the current form of capitalism is culturally entrenched in our lives (McDonagough, 2006), which means that any attempt to initiate political and economic change without considering cultural transformation would be useless. One of the problems for democratic alternative political movements is that they simply cannot present electorally feasible alternatives to the neoliberal socio-economic paradigm. Our political establishment and the mainstream media are trapped in a situation of material and cultural captivity. In the case of the UK, as demonstrated recently during the funeral of Margaret Thatcher, the State, the BBC and most of the printed press, are determined to allow the one-sided nationalisation and glorification of the neoliberal ideology

and its individualistic market economy values. It is therefore legitimate to introduce in an article on critical pedagogy such as this a discussion around cultural hegemony, education and liberation. These concepts were at the centre of Antonio Gramsci's rich and influential thinking. Authors such as Broccoli (Álvarez, 2006) have researched and reinterpreted Gramscian meanings, and so should we if we want to make them relevant to today's global society.

The need to understand current educational challenges in the light of the Gramsci's educational theories has been supported by Haug:

Gramsci's contribution will be able to [...] remain a historically potent force only so long as it does not close upon itself but instead – rearticulating itself in the Marxian universe, at present more accessible than ever, of the three critiques – approaches the changing world of today. (Haug, 2011: 214)

Antonio Gramsci conceived education and critical thinking as culturally and materially liberating. In his thoughts and in most subsequent interpretations of his theories, notably those proposed by the Critical Pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the learners are presented as being in need of liberating themselves from hegemonic cultural domination. The individuals are invited to discover their place in society and in history and contest, with their own narrative, the very cultural conventions that oppress them. Critical thinking and political education need to be embedded in the life of the individual, as for Gramsci all human beings are intellectuals. He therefore rejects the separation between technical education and philosophical education. Gramsci opposed positivist and neo-idealist claims that all reality can be explained “from vantage point above or detached from history as a lived experience” (Buttigieg, 2011: 55). In Gramsci, liberation comes through praxis. This means that critical thinking must have the practical purpose of challenging and leaving behind the fetishising force of capitalism:

The philosophy of praxis is therefore in its own terms the self-enlightenment of human reality which arises as a break with all ideology in order to look with sober eyes at the active positions of humans toward each other and toward nature. (Haug, 2011: 212)

4.2. Reloading Gramsci's critical pedagogy

Gramsci's ideas around critical thinking and praxis need to be problematised with practical and current examples. In my view, Gramsci's educational thinking lends itself to misinterpretation when it comes to teaching practice. One of these misconceptions revolves around the question of the scope of critical pedagogies: as it is the global underprivileged classes that are more in need of liberation from economic and political hegemony, it is relatively easy to imply that they are the only target of any attempt to introduce critical pedagogies. The second possible misconception is related to the nature of the intellectual work of university students, particularly in so-called "non-vocational subjects": whilst, according to Gramsci, work-based and technical education needs critical thinking and philosophy at its heart, "high" academic intellectual work, by itself, is a fully-fledge liberating critical thinking praxis. It is difficult to prove whether these two potential misconceptions have had a real impact in today's pedagogies in Higher Education. However, there is one concerning fact that suggests that further research on those hypothesis is necessary: mainstream Western Higher Education is relatively sheltered from Critical Pedagogy methodologies itself, despite being the root of many of these transformative pedagogies and many of the cultural contents that underpin the human liberation agendas of Critical Pedagogy. As it can be seen in Neary's work (2012) Critical Pedagogy in Europe's Higher Education is a notable exception. Interestingly, Neary points out that the alternative methodologies of the 1968 university have now become common place and have been eroded of its political significance and purpose (Neary, 2012: 235). This almost total absence of Gramscian critical praxis, reveals that Benjamin's concerns about some forms of revolutionary Arts of his time are also applicable to today's progressive thinking academia:

The "bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate an astonishing number of revolutionary themes, and can even propagate them without seriously placing its own existence or the existence of the class that possesses them into question". (Benjamin, 1934)

4.3 In search of a radical educational purpose in Higher Education

Could educational institutions tease out the political and humanistic values needed for any kind of Gramscian liberation from cultural and material hegemony? The very context and dynamics of Higher Education, which has suffered an intense marketisation in the UK, dispel any hopes on

this front. Moreover, going back to the early 1980's university ethos would not be sufficient because by that time universities had already accrued a very heavy baggage of cultural symbols and practices that seem to sit well with today's hegemonic values. For instance, rewarding students' assessed work with detailed numerical marks and giving them a "classification" at the end of their degrees reproduces and legitimises monetary retribution as well as class hierarchy. The consolidation of practices such as this is the result of a long process of symbiosis between universities and religious, political and economic elites that deserves to be researched further.

A bottom up solution to this situation of impotence has been predicated by the detractors of HE marketisation in the book *The marketisation of higher Education and student as consumer* by Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon:

It is unrealistic and problematic to envisage that government would itself look to critique its own policy direction. Neither might we expect industry or students to undertake the detailed and systematic reflections contained in this book and elsewhere. (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2011: 227)

Interestingly, one of the actions suggested in response to marketisation is to urge academics themselves to "restate the intricate relationship that exists between scholarly research and good teaching and learning practice" (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2011:234). This focus on teaching and research can bring the debates about pedagogy and liberation closer to the hearts of those academics whose primary professional identity revolves around research. In my view, the reinforcement of this link can appeal to academics from different ideological backgrounds as well. Student as Producer, arguably one of the most liberating HE pedagogies in the world, looks at it as a stepping stone for radical educational transformation:

Student as Producer restates the meaning and purpose of higher education by reconnecting the core activities of universities, i.e., research and teaching, in a way that consolidates and substantiates the values of academic life [...] Student as Producer emphasises the role of the student as collaborators in the production of knowledge. The capacity for Student as Producer is grounded in the human attributes of creativity and desire, so that students can recognise themselves in a world of their own design. (Student as Producer, 2010)

4.4 The producer, the audience and the medium

Walter Benjamin himself, as Neary and Winn, believed firmly in intellectuals connecting with audiences:

By the 1930s, in an article entitled 'Author as Producer', Benjamin extended these ideas of productive autonomy between students and teachers and looked beyond the university to include relationships between authors and their readers. The purpose of these connections was to find ways in which intellectuals might engage with matters of serious social concern in practices that lay beyond simply being committed to an issue, or through disengaged academic forms of solidarity. (Neary & Winn, 2009: 202)

These two authors not only accept Benjamin's ideas on audience and relevance, but also recognise the importance of dissemination of learning and research outputs with open licences. In this respect, the connection between Critical Pedagogy and the work of Benkler (2006) needs to be reinforced (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013: 210). For Benkler, the liberating potential and aspirations of Open Production go well beyond education. Its transformational power can be the catalyst for a much fairer economic system in which human beings are fully tuned to their selfless side. (Benkler, 2011).

4.5 Liberation in Leeds OpenLIVES

There are very clearly established educational and research ethical parameters that students deserve and demand which OpenLIVES Leeds follows and, therefore, there is no political affiliation attached to the course. However, in Leeds OpenLIVES students have the opportunity to give to their education a moral purpose of personal and social self-liberation and liberation of others. This possibility is supported by the learning methods and pedagogical principles proposed to the students, but it is not compulsory or formally assessed. From the point of view of the student, liberation is conceived as a free and personal choice that makes sense only in relation to each individual student's plans of research production and publication. From the point of view of the tutor, intellectual honesty as well as upfront transparency about the motives for the methodology and content of the course are paramount.

4.5.1 A praxis of research, ethics and knowledge transfer

Students in Leeds OpenLIVES put in practice research ethics in a variety of ways as discussed in previous work (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013). They also produce their own primary research and discuss its academic and social significance with support of other primary sources in the OpenLIVES collection (the original interviews) as well as by using a variety of secondary sources. The degree of intellectual elaboration of the research report they submit is similar to the one expected in a final year undergraduate essay, but their OpenLIVES student work has a radically different political, ethical and pedagogical underpinning. From a Gramscian perspective it is worth adding that the nature and subject of the research carried out by the students allows them to contrast current political and media counts on the economic crisis and migration with personal histories as well as reflect about their own socioeconomic position as future graduates in search of work. The social and educational benefits of Oral History Methodologies are widely now and have been already discussed by the author of this article (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013).

Research dissemination and knowledge transfer online is essentially linked to the student work in Leeds OpenLIVES. The students have the option not to publish, which they can exercise at the end of the course, but they must always produce for an intended audience. Their research is produced in the knowledge that it can and should have impact, either amongst other students, the general public or any other specific group. It is worth to recall the anonymous testimony of one of our students, for whom there is a connection, as a learner, between research, liberation and practical skills. In my view, this link is essential in order to close the loop of any Gramscian virtuous circle of critical thinking and critical acting:

I have really enjoyed the OpenLIVES module as it has given us, the students, an opportunity to do our own primary research and genuinely engage with the issues we are studying. Having more academic and creative control over our own education is extremely stimulating and motivating. [...] It is also interesting to be able to engage with wider society through our work, through the interviews, and to be able to feel like we are doing something worthwhile and valuable outside of academia. The skills I have gained during this module will be of far higher worth to me in my future career than all of the other skills I gain from all of my other modules put together. (Borthwick, 2013: 5)

4.5.2 Genre and style choice

Although research and critical reflection on revolutionary contents can be extremely liberating, one of the great challenges for any critical pedagogy is to introduce self-awareness, reflection and purposefulness in every single aspect of the production praxis. In this line of thinking, students in the Leeds OpenLIVES course are introduced to genre theories through the work of Chadler (1997), who presents an excellent critical overview of the very concept of genre by problematising its own existence, its neutrality, its objectivity and its importance for understanding the relationship with readership and audiences. Students also examine critically the different modes of expression in the field of documentaries (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013). In this spirit, students are free to question the conventions and usefulness of other genres of student production such as essays. This aspect of students' reflection about their own position as public authors in society, personally and as a collective, is crucial for any opportunity of actual liberation to be effective. In consequence students have to write up a description of their documentary as if it were addressed to an actual audience in a specific media for it to be submitted alongside the script itself. Additionally, students are required to explain who their target audience are and what goals they pursue with their documentary. After having examined the documentary scripts produced this year, it is clear that diversity and self-expression is the norm. Some students have decided to take an academic role, others take a more journalistic role, and some others have decided to create a documentary with the idea of raising awareness amongst people who are planning to migrate themselves or the general public. Some of these documentaries are not short of artistic expression channelled through style, organisation of extracts, language and other literary and radiophonic techniques. These documentaries are expected to be released in the HumBox at the end of the academic year.

Each particular hegemony brings about a particular pedagogy (Álvarez, 2009: 96). Conversely, our current pedagogy of research, critical thinking and essay writing, based on the Stoic model of education (Holowchack, 2009), must necessarily correspond to a particular hegemony. As discussed in previous work (Martínez-Arboleda, 2013: 215), essay writing, a key part of the traditional research-intensive pedagogies in HE, is generally presented to students from a normative perspective. Students are taught all the stylistic conventions of academic writing as an unquestionable necessity of their program of study. There is no attention given to the fact that academic writing conventions and the essay genre are themselves contingent social

constructs that reflect the values of academia as much as the symbiotic relations of power between academia and the rest of world and within the academic community itself. There is no descriptive, never mind critical, consideration of what an essay is in comparison to other forms of human intellectual written and oral production. Audience or readership does not matter either. It is assumed that the tutor will read the work and that it is the tutor's role to enforce the writing norms through feedback.

5. Conclusion

Digital media and critical exploration of genre are crucial for progressive education in the 21st Century. Students should be the protagonist of their own intellectual and cultural liberation through enhanced critical action literacies.

Literacy in this sense means more than breaking with the predefined or, as Walter Benjamin has said, "brushing history against the grain." It also means understanding the details of everyday life and the social grammar of the concrete through the larger totalities of history and social context. (Giroux: 1996, 69)

Critical pedagogy is as essential for the global underprivileged as it is in economically "developed" countries where there exists a generalised sense of self-satisfaction about standards of freedom and welfare. The position of our students as intellectuals gives them the opportunity and the responsibility to engage in a dialogue with other voices in need of liberation in a socially and morally purposeful way. Our different worlds may be coming closer in unsuspected ways. In the words of the Spanish poet Iván Rafael, in reference to the pateras (shabby boats) migratory movement from Africa into Spain:

Por muy distinto que sea el color / de nuestra patera, / todos somos hermanos / hijos / de un mismo / capitalismo. (Rafael, 2012)

[No matter how different the colour / of our shabby boats maybe / we are all brothers / children of the same / capitalism.]

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