

Comics in classroom space: Towards an alternative pedagogy of teaching and learning¹

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Abstract

Considering the classroom as a political and ideological space, the present paper examines the role of comics as a teaching-learning tool. The paper pleads to cultivate classroom activity as a transformative and democratized space for both the teacher and the student while looking into comics as an alternative pedagogical tool. Along with the discussion on the content, humour and dramatic storyline of comics, the paper brings out the importance of the role of debate on freedom and power relation in terms of classroom space and argues that comics as teaching and learning tool enhance freedom and the notion of self-creation as well as self-realization in the classroom.

Keywords: *Classroom space, class contradiction, humour, power mechanism, and structure of fear*

Introduction

The classroom ought to be seen as a space having multiple powers and hierarchically organised. During the teaching-learning process, a set of ideas emerges which is intrinsically rooted in culture; and hence the classroom maintains power relation. In Foucauldian conception, this entails a relationship in which a class dominates overall social-formation. Classroom's allegiance to social structure often defines hegemonic class relation in teaching-learning

activities (TLAs). Classroom along with its power relations and associated elements represents an ideology creating different identity of a particular spatial configuration in teaching-learning activity (TLA). This in the words of Lefebvre (1991) is a *political space*² that seeks to strategically organise the reality without knowing the actual reality that societies often produce. A classroom space, therefore, is sequential to create a condition for mutual relation in the teaching learning

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² The term political space according to Lefebvre (1991) is a strategic space which seeks to impose itself as reality reproducing certain condition and social position whose power imposition does not allow freedom and critical thinking as the basis of their own social position. Lefebvre in his discussion over this term very much focuses to expose its strategic face that creates condition for their existentiality (p. 35).

activity. Teacher and student in that sense work as agents and redefine a set of values and conditions for knowledge production. Teacher and student in the classroom space as the visible social agents are the most antagonistic to represent their own social and spatial identity by visualizing the classroom as a *potential space*³. Teachers and students constitute two dominant social groups. Along with classroom design and course curriculum; they disseminate a/some set of values and beliefs to create a new identity and new battleground for an ideological response.

Culture, in the entire event, emerges as a key ideological actor to maintain. In Foucault's (1978) term, the mechanism of power is not liberation or a promise to liberate; rather it reproduces power to control freedom and self-creation in the classroom space. As Tokya (2008) argues, culture does not function as a simple entity but as a phenomenon and constitutive to various layers of culture and subculture. Culture, thus is a phenomenological substance and very close to the power mechanism. It visualizes the classroom as a site of fear. Teacher and student constituting their own respective identities posing them pitted against each other. Tolstoy (1904b) has underlined an antagonistic relationship between the teacher and the student as a source of power.

He also claims both teacher and student are the constituent of power mechanism that often imposes uncertainty in the *classroom space*⁴. The act of a culture that signifies power relations defends the classroom as a battle in terms of suppression of freedom and self-creation. In this paper, the debate over culture and its relation to the classroom space exposes how culture creates a shade of fear and illusion in the classroom instead of its meaning and role in TLA. Therefore, we cannot claim that culture is a simple entity or a way through which something is communicated. According to Marx and Engels (1969), culture is constituted in terms of an unequal social relation or represented by the struggle between two *antagonistic social groups*; is determined by the social condition and also represented through dominant identity (p. 24). That is the reason; Jerome Bruner defines culture as a treasury of toolkit⁵ and remains incompetent to lead social determinants. Student-teacher relation, therefore, does not exist as an independent actor; it always proceeds through a treasury of cultural toolkit. A social and spatial condition following antagonistic power relation between privileged and unprivileged social class, introduce class contradiction through social-economic status of the teacher

³ The term potential space is conceived by Psychoanalyst Winnicott (1989) describing the experience as an intermediate zone between objective reality and subjective perception of that reality. Potential space in Robert M. Young, in his work on psychoanalysis, discusses the concept of the "object in setting," which, among other intriguing concepts, regards the psychoanalytic relationship as transitional. He elaborates on the idea that this relationship can be reconstituted in the external world through cultural experiences, sublimation, and more broadly, through the potential for spatial pairing or coupling.(Young, 1994)

⁴ See Tolstoy (1904a) has analyzed the pattern of training and teacher student in art education. He interestingly exposes the trainer's way of teaching and behavior during the class and make that dominating teacher's behavior always cultivate alienation among student and that reflects through his behavior and artistic creation (p.123-229)

⁵ Bruner (1991) in "The narrative construction of Reality" discusses culture which is popularly called a way of life constituting a set of value and belief that remains as incompetent and lead the human being to acquire their privilege domain (p. 3). Culture as Marx and Engels (1973) claim is a domain to ruling idea that visualizes dominant narrative to subjugating suppressed voice (p. 72)

and the student in TLA. ‘Social Class’ in the classroom, therefore, emerges as a result of inherent social determinants and antagonistic power relations.

In this paper, we examine the power relations and its nexus to the classroom space by looking at teacher-students relation as well as antagonistic social classes that exists in the classroom. Keeping high school students in mind, the paper discusses about classroom activities and comics as alternative pedagogical tool. Classroom in that sense has been treated as a specific factor that defines the social status of both teacher and student. In the last, the paper describes comics’ intention to map out its possibility to enhance freedom, notion of self-creation and self-realization in the classroom.

Revisiting the classroom space

The classroom space is a site of struggle and the battle of interconnection between two social groups and provides a certain condition for power relation. Teacher and students in that sense perform as a constituent of a certain condition of power relation. Moreover, culture as a context appears and takeover or it is imposed by a certain phenomenon or context with a certain limitation on the way teacher and student think and communicate. Culture, for the reason, leads to a significant subjective phenomenon that determines social condition as well as its potential behaviour which are mediated by the power relation. Teachers and students on the basis of culture in the classroom space produce a set of values, beliefs and a way of thinking to impose their self over each other. The character of this antagonism is solely influenced by a certain social group or class and do emphasize to lead to a domain of ruling idea. But Bourdieu (1998) claims that

social class does not exist [...], what exists is a social space, a space of differences in which classes exist in some sense in a virtual state, not as something given but as something to be done (p. 12). Classroom space as a social space is an invisible reality (Bourdieu, 1998) but to some extent exists as an organised and represented behaviour in constructing proximity between the teacher and the students. Thus, the intervention of comics like other teaching-learning tools (TLT) (i.e. PPT, flow chart, paintings) in the classroom space is a negation of power relation through critical engagement with two different social groups. Comics, similar to other TLT often constitute consensus to negate the power relation by engagement and participation in teaching- learning activity. But in this paper, it is argued that a comic is just not a tool that democratizes knowledge production and knowledge distribution, but that its central role is to promote debate as to how do comic as a TLT redefine teacher-student relation in different ways or how does it emphasize to maintain the collective notion in teaching-learning process.

Multiple power relations and comics as teaching –learning tool

As discussed earlier, a classroom intentionally imposes a set of values, beliefs to mitigate the ideological domination over the unprivileged social group. In this section we discuss how does power relation exist and create a wave of ideological determinism through different values, symbolic attitude and a certain social condition in the classroom. Through this discussion, we examine how do comics perform and question the power relation and ideological configuration as well in the classroom. Power relation, as already discussed, is a device of complex structure,

also represents a complex social condition to produce antagonism between social groups. Social classes in the classroom therefore, as Harnecker (1981) and Donnelly et. al. (2014) defined, exist as “*antagonistic social groups*”⁶ in which one group often dominates the other or politically determine and legitimize their status in terms of class domination and consequent repression. Debating the genesis of groups, Bourdieu (1985) exposed its varied aspects by drawing from its concrete definition, highlighting the question of power. Groups or group agents for him is a social class that defines himself as a key actor in a certain social condition following their social and economic status. For this reason, classroom is a composition of social classes in which one class always create their dominance following their social and economic status. Classes or groups in terms of creating their social position in the classroom, always legitimize authority over the classroom using the cultural toolkit. VanderStaay *et al.* (2009) in their study on teacher’s authority in a classroom discussed the significance of power in the classroom examining teacher’s authority, which constitutes power as well as the social position to legitimize their superiority in the classroom. They came to the point that teacher’s authority is most essentially a form of professional authority granted by a student who affirms the teacher’s expertise, self-confidence and belief in the importance of his or her work. Similarly, Wong (2015), in his study, discusses teacher-student power relation going through a

debate on power sharing classroom practice. Acknowledging many sources of power relations (i.e. structural, teaching learning context and teacher character), he describes several social and cultural factors that shape teacher–student interaction in the classroom. But, the teacher’s authority and student teacher power sharing mechanism that Wong (2015) exclusively highlights in itself, in Bourdieu’s (1985) terms, is mechanism of class dominance. Knowledge production or the whole education for them is an object to maintain a feudal social structure in society. Professionalism that recognizes balanced power sharing mechanism between teacher and student as well as teacher authority. Therefore, as Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) rightly indicate a substantial point that it is a dominating social construction that depends on the changing economic and labour organizations’ paradigm; it indicates in terms of teaching and learning is a marketized and bureaucratic form of educational values (p. 83). The emergence of professionalism in that sense leads to a very mechanical and unrealistic condition between teacher-student relations. Weber pointed out that the rules and laws that legitimize authority and uphold legal or bureaucratic authority, actually claim devotion and worshiping of thought regeneration (cited in VanderStaay *et al.*, 2009). But the question is, who controls it and how? Marx (1997) and Tolstoy (1904a) give an answer in a broad framework that the society, which is controlled by a certain class, always monopolizes power through the

⁶ The term Antagonistic social groups are generally used to expose power relation or conflict situation in social space. Bourdieu (1985) noted in terms of group that agent and groups of agents are defined by their relative position within the space (p. 724), to describe this space, groups of agent in Bourdeu’s view are defined by the social position that they occupies. Thus, in Lenin view it is classes that differing from each other the place they occupy in the society. For the reason, as Harnecker (1981) writes social classes create antagonism within the group that is called Antagonistic social classes (p. 15).

projection of new trajectory and new living identity by a set of value, belief and the way of life. Thus, in Tolstoy's view, classroom or school is a projected and much authoritative space where teachers always enjoy the power and perpetuate their self and defend their identity over the students using professional activities such as teaching and learning. For the reason, Tolstoy (1904a) and Dewey (1914) proposed 'freedom as a key component for education that releases human being from bondage to any authority' (p. 11 and p. 190) because freedom allows equality and true democracy in teaching-learning activity.

Any form of authority, represented either through teacher or student or through curriculum, course content or classroom design is nothing but a projection of power that often determines teaching-learning activities in the classroom space. Restricting freedom in this way in the classroom hampers individual movement, expression, and free thinking. In Tolstoy's views, freedom is a primary need and it counters power relation or those who control teacher's authority, environment and curriculum in the classroom. Freedom therefore as Marx (1969) noted is a right of the people to determine their own action that promotes self-experience and self-motivation to guide their own action based on the objective condition of the society. But the existence of power relations, including social status of the teacher and the student in the classroom space, advocates an atmosphere which are governed by feudal right instead of real freedom. But our purpose is not to define freedom in a broad sense; rather to discuss the importance of comics as a teaching-learning tool that may enhance freedom and democratize the relationship between the teacher and the taught.

Two important aspects, i.e. critical resonance and humour remain the key constituents of the comic as a TLT. These elements of comics determine its nature and attitude while making it influential and convincing form of expression. Both the elements evolve conditionally; expressed through different sign and symbols and offer a realistic picture in a particular language context. Comics in this sense emerge as a natural device that transform the complexity of language into more realistic and in a more conventional form. Many scholars such as Schwarz (2006), Hecke (2011), Norton and Vanderheyden (2003) discussed different characteristics of comics and came to common ground, 'in reference to English language, comics resume a condition where students get more interest to perceive word and the complexity of sentence structure in different conditions'. Going through a realistic sense of meaning, Comics in English language classroom, as Norton and Venderheyden (2003) highlighted, include picture, dialogue, context and spatial background, which intentionally provide condition where students realize consensual and more realistic meaning of every word and its context. In pedagogical sense it leads to a holistic sense of teaching and learning. Jacobs (2007), while analyzing "Polly and the Pirates" argued that comics involve a complex and multimodal text, through which students get involved with different meaning and its context that gives insight for creativity as well as criticality. Its multimodal characteristics in other words, have a close relation to human imagination as well as experience that students get directly from society. This relation in its condition makes students more active and more realistic to show their intention for dialogue, conversation and critical thinking skill.

Now, relating to political and socio-cultural aspects of the classroom, the composition of both critical resonance and humour first pose the capacity in this art form to question every power relation through different forms of signs and symbols. Second, comics emerge as a power relation by controlling a certain authority to reinforce their own power over the classroom structure. The intervention of the comic in teaching-learning activity, therefore, allows a different milieu in the classroom structure and power relation as well. Then the question arises as how does comic as a teaching-learning tool enhance freedom and democratize teacher-student relation. Maggio (2007) for example examined nature of emotional appeal that maintains accessibility of comic and cartoons in a larger population of the society. In his own words, “the art form of comics/cartooning has an inherent element of democracy to it: democracy based on cognitive freedom and self-freedom” (Maggio, 2007, p. 238). This notion reinforces the laws and phenomenon of restricting cognitive freedom and curiosity of self-creation in the classroom space. Tolstoy (1904a) in his writing on art clearly claims “art is the revelation and vindication of freedom because it is free from darkness and incomprehensibility of finite things” (p. 36). Comic as an art form challenge the power mechanism and structure in a subtle way which otherwise get constituted and operationalize in multiple ways inside the classroom. This kind of challenging is possible with engagement and validation of freedom as Tolstoy (1904, a) noted.

Hence, power relations that the comics represent constitute a different attitude and different cognitive actions by posing more satirical and critical condition against what is called the “*structure of fear*”. Satire and critical resonance offer much pleasant atmosphere that destroys the sense of fear and its nexus to classroom’s power relation. In the classroom, fear is projected by multiple forces in various forms such as powerlessness, restrictions, unseen memory and state of anxiety that engenders the most unbearable state of mind among the teachers and students⁷. Breuer and Freud (2004) argued that socially regenerated state of mind restricts an individual’s autonomy to cultivate feudal norms. In reference to the classroom, fear, therefore, is structuralized and more substantially cultivated by multiple forces. Structure of fear, in this case, usually leads to a distinct emotional feeling in individuals. It appears when multiple forces visualize unexpected condition in the classroom space claiming their authority, it becomes detrimental to others and the entire set of social and cultural values. Psychology addresses fear as an individual’s state of mind that appears following certain historical causes. Lang (1979) has also suggested fear is represented as a network in memory that includes three kinds of information: (a) information about the feared stimulus situation, (b) information about verbal, physiological and overt behavioural response, and (C) interpretive information about the meaning of the stimulus and response to the element of the structure (cited in Foa and

⁷ Josef Breuer and Freud (2004) in their studies in Hysteria have presented detailed analysis of fear and its source that how does fear emerge in individual’s mind and control most prominently individual’s thinking processes. It is most unbearable state of mind that regenerates the faculty of nervousness, helplessness and inability in human being. Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud clearly notice on various sources exist in the society, which often reinforce nervousness, helpless and inability in the human mind (p. 70).

Kozak, 1986). The power relation produces a certain ‘emotional feeling’ that Jarmowicz *et al.* (2006) call fear. Tudor (2003) has noted it does not integrate the natural environment that exists (in the classroom), rather it is mediated and more organised in a way to maintain domination based on an antagonistic relation or contradiction that exists among the social classes. Comic as an art form or a medium of humor and satire pose indirect challenge to the ‘power relation’. This also can be taken as a set of ‘culture’ that often encounter the “*anxiety*” and fear, posing hope in order to cultivate a consent for cognitive freedom and self-creation in the classroom.

Increasing number of scholars believe that comics could emerge as a popular and accepted form of art (Lopes, 2006; Scott, Cord A, 2011; Coogan, 2006) for teaching. In Eisner’s (1985) view, they constitute sequential art incorporating humor and satire to reach a wider population conveying information in a realistic manner. The comics are filled with shared imagery and cultivated meanings that allow expression of public opinion through persuasion. Eisner (1985) while examining the parameters of comics argued it to be ‘instinctive’, which tap into readers’ apathy as a core principle having potential of engaging human intellect by eliciting different emotions. Comics therefore, in the classroom setting, aim to visualize human intelligence through the depiction of body movements, emotional states, gestures, and nonverbal behaviours. Comics also encounter resistance, often reinforcing fear to maintain power structures over other social groups. The classroom, therefore, is itself a site of power relations, politically organised to influence social processes, social relations, and teaching-learning activities.

Continuing the debate on comics, it is important that humour is a structure of feeling that just releases tension and psychic energy from the human mind (Mulder, and Nijholt, 2002). Humour performs as a key component in the comic to lead human into a different state of mind. Morreall (2009) argued comics through humour and laughter encourage human mind for alternate critical thinking, because it has the potential to release the human mind from the fear and anxiety. He indicated two significant aspects: first that humour and laughter (in comics) challenge self-control and second that they always break the social rule. However, our analysis of power and relative social hierarchy in classroom suggest that at time even use of comics can have only limited contribution in releasing human mind from the fear and anxiety. There is possible inherent fear even while using comic as a TLT or for the creator of comic as TLT itself. Power structure tries to control and regulate cartoons and comics as evident from several controversies surrounding particular comics especially critical comics. Comic as a teaching-learning tool broadly function in two different ways. First, it breaks ‘the laws’, which is expressed through power relation and are reinforced by the multiple social forces in the classroom. Second, it genuinely aims to create freedom and to destroy the set of values, morality in terms of repression and traditional way of life, which are overwhelmingly reinforced by the dominant social classes. The notion of the classroom or its pedagogy reinforces dominant view and dominant morality over teachers and students. Without creating antagonism or contradiction, Comics challenges these dominant social values and morality using laughter and humor. Through the application of different means

and symbols approaching the power relation at times allows comics relatively easier path to challenge the hierarchical and pervasive power relation.

Comic intention and teacher-student relation

We have discussed how multiple social forces exist and create their dominant power relations in the classroom in different cultural and linguistic contexts. We have also discussed how does a comic endures the potential to perform as a teaching-learning tool and engage critically with existing power relations. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to outline that the art of cartoon or comics often imposes dominant social values and morality over the teaching-learning activity. Here, it can be argued that multitude of social forces not only limits the transformative and democratic activities in the classroom but also allow the domination of hierarchical, often feudal relation between the teacher and the student. Comics, as a teaching learning tool, potentially provide the spaces for cognitive freedom, self-creation and actual democracy in the classroom. Maggio (2007) pointed out “comics, as opposed to many other narrative visual art-forms leave a large cognitive space for the viewer/reader to interpret their meaning” (p. 237), strengthening the viewer/reader’s opinion for self-creation and self-realization in teaching-learning activities. It is important to try using comic as a TLT at different levels of education.

Cognitive freedom and self-creation lead to the symbolic structure in cartoon or comic enabling legitimacy to the reader/viewers’ opinion. Having potential use of cognitive freedom, the possibility of interpretation increases multifold and depend on the cultural and intrinsic value of the interpreter at both

the levels: the teacher and the students. Comic uses additional information and provide cognitive-psychological and pedagogical as well as technical effect that allow the teacher and student a range of choices (Martin, 2007). On the one hand, self-realization and self-creation is a real possibility; they also visualize the classroom space as the site. On the other hand, where both teachers, as well as students agree to participate actively in teaching-learning activities. Comics, as Martin (2007) pointed out, serve as a sort of mnemonic technique or memory aid. Comics, with both components of humour and satire, engage readers to envision consent to change individuals' minds, sequentially catching their attention and guiding them towards self-realization and self-creation. This concept, as explored by Upson and Hall (2013), forms a complex interactive site for cognitive discourse and can be of value while analysing space and spatial fix and the distribution of activities over space. Serving as the basis of many complexes and distorted symbolic structures, comics thus dismantle the fear and feudal rights that mediate power, thereby maintaining coherence in teaching-learning activities.

Components of comic’s intention

The advocacy of comics as an educational tool, therefore, can be said to comprise three determinant social factors: Self-creation, cognitive democracy, and self-realization. But in reference to the classroom, several scholars have studied many aspects of comics and define its intention and advocacy from different perspectives. Focusing on characteristics, genre and effect of comics, they also examine the role as satirical art form and its advocacy (Sperzel, 1948, Zorbaugh, 1944, Schoof, 1978). But, the term

“advocacy”, in reference to the classroom, touches the undisclosed aspects in comics, highlighting how comics make teaching-learning activity as more transformative and democratic for both teacher and the student. Guthrie (1978), in his study on comics in the classroom, identified at least two logical facets to the question of attention and learning: first, it focuses on enhancing excitement in children through various approaches and alternative methods of information dissemination and second, the incorporation of dramatized storylines, symbolic structures, and satirical imagination in comics guides both teachers and students towards an open cognitive discourse and facilitates self-creation and self-realization in knowledge production activities. Consequently, comics possess the potential to serve as powerful pedagogical tool (Hosler, 2009). They effectively engage both teachers and students, with a primary emphasis on naturalizing freedom within the classroom environment. Additionally, comics can undermine existing power dynamics, often reinforced by social class distinctions through their critical portrayal. Tolstoy, in his writings on education, espouses a similar perspective, suggesting that freedom in education serves as the singular criterion for ensuring equality and fostering mutual relations between teachers and students. He contends that teacher authority perpetuates alienation within teacher-student relationships (Tolstoy, 1904 p. 300). Comics, as Guthrie (1978) suggests, stimulate student interest through their dramatic content, imagery, and storytelling, utilizing elements such as irony, humour, and satire to present information in compelling ways.

Conclusions

We argue to consider the classroom as political (Harvey, 2008) and ideological

space (Lefebvre, 1976). Classrooms are mediated in the form of morality, social values and the way of life in a particular cultural context/s. Classroom, in our view, represents the litigating attitude to maintain the power relation in terms of domination at times may be repression and set of cultural determinants. The power relation that the classroom constitutes by virtue of the structure of fear and feudal right also aim to control the teaching-learning activities and teacher-student relation. Social forces within the classroom periphery exist as *antagonistic social groups* in which one group often dominates the other or determines politically to control the entire peripheral attitude and legitimize their position as dominant over the other social forces, what Gramsci (1971) would call hegemonic relations.

A comic as a pedagogical tool in terms of classroom appears to be political to claim a different narrative for cognitive discourse and teaching-learning activities. Comics, therefore, are a device of creative experience and critical engagement to the existing power structure that the social forces pose. Engaging with social determinants through critical and satirical resonance, comic could be equipped to acknowledge the antagonistic relation among social forces and therefore oppose “*structure of fear*”, which is posed often as social values and morality. Comics for that reason, lead a different ornament for teaching-learning activity constituting cognitive- psychological and pedagogical-technical effect. Comics through humour, alter visual image and dramatic storyline, illustrate key aspects of situational value toward knowledge creation and lighten the classroom setting into a more generic way for the teacher and the learner. This type

of dual processing pedagogy composing emotional and visual technique characterizes student-teacher relation as more cognitive and perceptual and defines freedom as a magnetic attitude for teaching-learning activities in the classroom space.

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