Pedagogic Practices in Higher Education and Peter Pan Syndrome: An Appraisal

Shree Deepa

Abstract
This article makes a case for inclusion of anthropogic perspective in higher education classrooms, critically examines the consequences of using pedagogic practices in such contexts. Peter Pan syndrome is one such outcome which could have debilitating effects on students. Two postgraduate courses that were taught and tested online during the pandemic and the varied student reactions and responses to the problems encountered are critically examined as an appraisal case study. The argument made is that adult learner responsibilities, teacher awareness and learner training in the conduct of all (including online) courses in higher education spaces are the need of the hour.

Keywords: Anthropogogy, pedagogy, Peter Pan syndrome, teacher awareness, learner responsibility, adult students.

The term pedagogy and associated literature, theoretical frameworks, research paradigms, and implications of work carried out with children, should not be applied to adult learners. Barring a few theorists like Knowles (1950, 1962, 1970), the domain of academics except those situated in distance education courses and open university learning programmes have conveniently ignored the fact that teaching practices deployed while teaching children are very different from what ought to be employed with adults. Teachers, researchers, learners, syllabus designers and policy makers seem to have been oblivious to this blunder. Pedagogic practices etymologically expect the teacher to treat the child learner as a deficient individual who has to be taught in a step-by-step manner because they have very little life experience and therefore need careful hand holding.
and strong ‘scaffolding’ and even then must “remain no less essential characteristics of the ‘product’ of that development” (Shanker & Taylor, 2001). Such pedagogicities are related to language acquisition theories with a base in psycholinguistics that are essentially child-centric. These practices place minimal importance as a design on learner responsibility and learner choice; teachers are expected to remind child learners of deadlines repeatedly, so as to teach them the values of timeliness making them totally teacher dependent. Thinking is not insisted and assumed as non-automatic, but when perceived within pedagogy seen with a need to be triggered or motivated. Pedagogic learning therefore is carefully organized to make logical sense and is presented as linguistically graded experiences; the communicative language used is again graded so that it is both age and cognitive level appropriate. In contrast, adults have a different way of functioning in the world and are required to take responsibility for everything they do. Societal expectations of children and adults are very different: this ought to be captured and emphasized in learning and teaching practices as well. Unlike children, adult learners are not deficient but are influenced by their own life experiences and have a strong cultural and knowledge capital. They are responsible for everything in their lives, including taking charge of their own learning and its pacing that often stems from prioritizing or juggling with other adulting responsibilities: thinking, planning and execution are major tasks that permeate each day that adults indulge in; organization in adults often amounts to prioritization even when it is about learning. Higher education students enrolled in Indian institutions are adults. The terms ‘anthrology’/‘anthrologic’ (Trott, 1991) and not the known ones ‘andrology’/ ‘andragogy’ is used in this article (for the latter is sexist in its orientation) to refer to such teaching and learning of adults. Anthrology, as understood in this article, refers to teaching adults (all genders) and has its own set of principles of teaching and testing where the emphasis is on living a life of a cohabitant alongside other beings peacefully on planet earth.

For many decades the term ‘pedagogy’ is the only term that has been used in mainstream Indian ELT contexts as a perspective modality and has ‘informed’ teacher training disciplines as well. This pedagogicity (in anthrologic spaces) is being studied, researched, applied to and directed at adult learners routinely. The end result is that all theoretical and learning principles that belong to pedagogy are just superimposed
on anthropology. A classic example is the Brunerian/Vygotskian notion of ‘scaffolding’ (Wood et al., 1976), the outcome of serious work done on child learning/acquisition/education is being applied to adult education contexts, spaces and classrooms. Such an academic teaching/learning confusion confounds everyone for, it has been done by/to many generations of teachers and learners in a systematic and institutionalized manner.

The online teaching/learning situation has raised many Pandora’s boxes including those of learner responsibilities. With all teaching done online with digital icon presences accounting for learning, learner participation, assessments during the Covid-19 pandemic got a full-blown-panic-button reaction from many learners that have resorted to being perennially disgruntled, or lodging grievances against course teachers on everything related to the teaching/learning processes. Many of the problems with such students could be traced to the Peter Pan Syndrome (PPS). The connection between anthropogy and PPS is important because where adult learning spaces expect the adult students to act, behave and take responsibilities as adults. Pedagogicity might contribute and bring out the PPS in them when adult behaviour is expected from them. The impending mismatch between expectations and actual responses in anthropogenic spaces could be widened and emerge as full blown PPS. This study explores such possible connections and tries to comprehend and establish issues that could stem from a confusion between teacher expectations and student responses in an anthropogenic teaching-learning environment in the form of a comparative narrative of two courses that were taught in anthropogenic spaces.

PPS is being used here for all genders, due to its digital manifestations in ‘online’ ‘iconic’ presences with “absence of the body” (Kolluri, 2010). Kiley (1983) originally used the idea of the PPS to recognize and indicate only men who were averse to the attributes of an adult and the resultant expectations or qualities. The PPS depicts the never-developing person who has arrived at a grown-up age biologically and physically, yet cannot confront their grown-up feelings and obligations. These adults do not have any physiological issues but are said to have either psychological or sociological issues. There is a perceptible criss-cross between the age and development levels of these adults.

As indicated by Kiley (1983), there is an articulated recklessness, particularly as they grow up. At the point when flippancy and anxiety
are joined, the condition of slowness that is the fundamental quality of the mental profile of PPS becomes explicit. All things considered, stalling is found in many adulting exercises that are normally expected in adults. Assumptions that there are some unacceptable things about him/her leave them with the sensation of forlornness as adults. These individuals have figured out how to avoid their feelings to not get injured, and will often be uninterested. At the age of nineteen or twenty, the quest for flawlessness and narcissism are apparent, which is used to cover the feelings of doubt and uselessness (Kiley, 1983).

Westman and Bennett (1985) have traced the origins of this syndrome in the literature as being referred to as “pseudoimbecility,” “pseudobackwardness,” or “learning impotence”. As teachers we are compelled to agree with Kiley (1983) that we often do not know whether we should metaphorically hug such students or hit them. Peer pressure contributes to this syndrome, rubs off on others until there is competition about who is the best at goofing off, and then, each one of them have the “legitimate right to stake a claim on being a child who won’t grow up” (Kiley, 1983, p. 44). The end result is that from classmates and friends these practices get reinforced till friends help such students maintain their irresponsibility; the art and science of procrastination could be acquired or learnt from a classmate.

The key words drawn from the literature on PPS are irresponsibility, recklessness, stalling, refusing to deliver, fatalistic procrastination, shifting blames, being lost and then the peer pressure to comply. When the academic and social expectations of adults as learners are anthropogenic but the system/institution supports or rather peddles pedagogy, the sudden onset of additional responsibilities during the pandemic could have catalytically and malignantly triggered the PPS in many adult learners which could have otherwise been latent in face-to-face learning or easily handled. This article is a case study of two content courses which were offered at the postgraduate level at a central university in India and all data cited in this article are sourced from student statements, comments, teacher comments, etc, all maintained as reflective records.¹ The purpose of this article is to examine the manifestation of the PPS in the learning contexts of these two courses and then link it to the anthropogenic contexts that expect learner responsibility from adult students.

Two adult student groups, hereafter known as group A, (GA) and
group B, (GB), were taught and tested anthrologically with no direct dissemination of content, students being asked to take responsibility for their own learning, prioritizing deadlines. They were also informed to be able to choose three best assignments as part of portfolio assessment. But they produced divergent responses. Both courses required enquiry-based critical thinking/working in line with the vision of NEP 2020. As content courses, texts were prescribed, with no ‘line by line summaries’ of these texts: the students were told and expected to read, comprehend, analyse and apply information for use in class tasks and voluntarily seek clarifications when needed either in class, or through a whatsapp chat or mail. It was also made clear that there would be classwork assignments, and others for grading, but a product portfolio principle (Durairajan, 2015) would be adopted. The two groups accepted all these ‘terms and conditions’ but later GB had issues with this and with the quantity of assignments, although it had already been made clear that not all of them would be used for formative and summative assessment.

GA who had seen (in face-to-face classes) the teacher prior to the pandemic and had interacted with her and stated that the course dissemination was one of the best: on a social media site, (Whatsapp chat) they texted that this course was “different” and “very interesting” because it pushed them to “read, internalize and exhibit” their reading and comprehension of the assigned chapters in books. They further added that “this course was one of the best” because they were “valued for their opinions instead of a clear right and wrong answer” as against “the other courses that dispensed content and treated them as children.” The other group GB, who had not yet visited the campus or interacted with the teacher face-to-face, but had only online classes in the midst of the pandemic, resorted to filing a serious allegation and grievance against the teacher for doing the same thing in the same manner for the same programme in the same department. The grievances and complaints began with small issues about timelines, ‘the large number of assignments’ (which had not been made mandatory or marked as formative assessment scores); they kept focusing on ‘stress and tension levels’ but went on to objecting to being called or referred to as ‘adults’ who were told by the course teacher to “take responsibility for their academic lives”, prioritize deadlines and finally finish the course. They were unhappy when the teacher pointed out their procrastinating behaviour, which was reflected in frequent alterations of deadlines,
and when they ran out of excuses, they opted to give up all their trials to participate in the course and found a convenient scapegoat in the Covid-19 situation as a panic reaction.

The two courses saw the teacher planning, sequencing, teaching, discussing, operating, communicating, interacting and assessing in the exact same manner on similar platforms, google classroom, social media sites like whatsapp chat as a group with synchronous and asynchronous lectures. The nature of deadlines for class work, assignments and projects were also similar for both the groups, where the students were treated as adult learners. GA was very responsive and in case of difficulties reverted to the teacher. Personal problems or network issues were discussed and deadlines extended. The students came up with alternatives for teacher-oriented technological issues: they suggested that a spreadsheet could be used to enter and edit classwork/assignment submission details for easy access. On another occasion, the whole group went into student conference mode to state that they did not know how to choose ‘3 best assignments’ and therefore needed time ‘till 12 noon tomorrow’. An administratively necessary admonition “do all of you need to be reminded that you are adults who are future citizens of the country” was comfortably acknowledged and final extended deadlines met. Student problems were resolved through negotiation, discussion and dialogue in an adult-like manner, following anthropogenic principles. Occasional cribbing in the form of requests that were from both the teacher “guys, deadline over, no submissions yet” and the students’ response: ‘ma’m, please give us more time; tough assignment ma’m’, were amicably resolved. Since the platform was online and digital presences did not necessarily mean cognitive presence of the students and attendance was also not compulsory, the teacher opted to temper the classes and discussions with ‘assignments’ that were required to be recorded, submitted and documented to ensure course participation.

The GB were also treated on the same lines. They too asked for extra time which was given and a lighter workload which was negotiated, but later the students grumbled about class work assignments. For instance, in the absence of attendance, and the possibility of a digital, ‘absence of the body’—iconic presence alone in a class, it was necessary to ask the students to maintain an online diary to capture academic growth. This was resented. Eventually, the demeanour, responses, cribbing and procrastination of these students led the course astray to such a point that
a full semester’s teaching bordered on requesting for an endless extension of deadlines and was filled with numerous negotiating experiences over whatsapp messages and synchronous classes. The procrastination turned out to be “fatalistic” because they were unable to submit anything for assessment and those who wanted to submit were not able to because of “peer pressure” that came out as confessions by two students who wanted to be anonymous. The teacher of GB felt that she was a glorious babysitter in a digital creche populated by temper tantrums throwing digital children. The statements started with a grumbling about doing 6 different courses, (which is par for any MA batch in this particular university) and went on to list the number of class/home assignments (not all of which were mandatory). The teacher was stumped and tried to make peace and vehemently tried to keep her cool during the entire semester with GB who would text her 24*7 with queries of all kinds. These were comfortably handled and personal problem discussions were welcomed from the teacher by GB. At the same time, when the teacher reminded them that adults were expected to handle home problems and keep their academics on track at the same time, the GB students cited this and wrote it as part of a grievance letter stating that the teacher expected them to ‘behave as adults’. It is shocking and not very clear as to how the postgraduate students who have the right to vote and elect their prime minister can be offended at being referred to as adults. Their irresponsible behaviour and ‘fatalistic procrastination’ of course-related submission requirements led to a rebellious response in the form of a long list of grievances, very much like children listing a long grievance rant. This behaviour is typical of PPS and students who are age-wise adults need to understand that they cannot escape irresponsibility and the consequences (Kiley, 1983). This was cleverly pinned on the teacher in the form of a grievance letter. When GB was questioned regarding submissions of assignments, they just went on to count the number of assignments, (9 compulsory ones, five graded) and then went on to assign marks to each one (total of 90) which is never done in portfolio assessment. Promises of submissions and agreements were made only to be broken to pieces with excuses about stress, tension and workload. The typical requirement of students selecting the best three assignments for grading, a normal part of portfolio assessment, was also seen as a big chore. This led the GB to move on from PPS to Peter Pan(ic) syndrome as too many deadlines kept piling up on them from all courses. Many
adjustments (deadlines, quantity, quality, word length, etc.) were made by the teacher with the intention of softly carrying the students away from their maladjustments with adult expectations from them in the course, such as permission to do fewer assignments, simplify the project work, write shorter responses, etc. Nevertheless in their refusal to grow up and act like adults and meet the course expectations they hid behind the curtain of the Peter Pan (demic) syndrome while passing on the blame to the pandemic and its effects. Throughout the course GB grew from being Peter Pan—refusing adult responsibilities; Peter Panic—scared of non-performance, anxiety due to procrastination and using the pandemic curtain to hide behind as Peter pandemic; and finally resorted to writing a grievance to complete the Peter pandemonic syndrome. Arnett, 2004 (cited in Kalkan et al., 2021) mentions psychological determiners that are important in the transition to adulthood. The first one is the process of completing separation - individualization and the second is the process of psychological maturity, which includes features such as impulse control, taking responsibility, and having a non-centralist perspective ((Atak et al., 2016, cited in Kalkan et al., 2021). GA maintained a good level of psychological maturity while GB lacked it as the only impulsive control was complaint and refusal to pick up the responsibilities expected of adult students in higher education classrooms.

Two groups of students, both registered for postgraduate courses, reacted and responded very differently to the same situation. It would be very easy to play a blame game and state that one group had intentions which were not part of a level playing field, or that one group consisted of overgrown adolescents while the other had adults in them. This is not the case. The problems cannot be conveniently placed at the door of the students and brushed under the ‘typical student rebellion’ carpet. Peter Pan Syndrome is one manifestation of the problem. PPS was explicitly and undoubtedly visible in the students but the actual cause for a display of this is rooted in using pedagogicity in anthropocentric contexts where students are not seen as responsible enough to take charge of their student and personal lives and as capable of handling multitasks efficiently with experience. The main cause for such PPS in learning spaces has to be laid at the door of the predominant pedagogic nature of education itself, at the system. A similar response could not have been possible in a gym or a music class. In the national education policy document the term ‘adult education’ is used to refer to adult literacy.
development courses; where the reference is to adult learners in higher education the term pedagogical approaches is used (NEP, 2020, p. 51). A purely online anthropogogy oriented course was probably difficult for fresh graduates to handle in their postgraduate admission.

The second source of such juvenile behaviour by adults can be attributed to the pandemic itself and how it has impacted teaching learning practices by opening up Pandora’s boxes. Recorded lectures replaced face-to-face teaching and compulsory attendance was removed to facilitate flexibility. Classes were actually expected to be a judicious mixture of synchronous and asynchronous ones. This implied that teachers recorded lectures and posted them: to ensure that these monologic lectures are ‘heard’ by the students, the teachers had to give assignments which could be perceived as increasing student workload. The third cause for the manifestation of such a syndrome probably lies with the teacher. She/he did not anticipate the multiple problems, and therefore the sign posting done was not sufficient. We teachers are used to facing students in a classroom where facial expressions and body language speak to us loud and clear. In the absence of such contact, accompanied by a worry that asks, if we as teachers have done enough, be it negotiation, dialogue and discussion. Also the quantification and qualification of teaching is very difficult with a set of students that were represented as a bunch of icons on the screen and the voices attached to them cannot suffice or the teacher in teaching while battling with technological disabilities that many do not apologise for.

Teachers need to reorient themselves to anthropogic perspectives and train the students on the expectations placed upon them. The teachers also need to train learners to take responsibility for their academic lives, meet deadlines and if and when that is not possible, understand that the ownership for such actions lies solely with them. Additionally, if the education system itself is oriented towards anthropogicity, which ought to be its true direction, many of the ambiguities such as the PPS will be resolved. The expectations of the stakeholders will have a clearer direction, a clearer perspective and create a situation of relevance if anthropogicity was explicitly practised. It is time that the system recognized, vocalized, trained, brought and taught anthropogicity into higher education spaces and took steps to leave behind pedagogy to where it belongs: children and save them from PPS when they become adults. Pedagogicity is for children while anthropogicity is for adults.
Note

1. Owing to the sensitive nature of this discussion, to maintain anonymity and de-identify the students, their statements have been paraphrased: only the teacher statements have been cited verbatim. However to indicate that it is authentic student data, single quotes have been used. The name of the organization and the titles of the courses taught have also been withheld on purpose.

2. Owing to confidentiality and ethical considerations no statement from the letter has been reproduced: wherever necessary, a few statements have been paraphrased, enclosed in brackets instead of single quotes as was the case with other student statements.

References


Shree Deepa is Associate Professor at the Centre for English Language Studies, University of Hyderabad.
shreedeepa@uohyd.ac.in