Getting to know… Shobha Avadhani

What are you currently working on? I’m involved in a few projects right now but they all do connect at a broader level. For example, one project has to do with teaching criticality using an online interface. While this project deals with university undergraduates, it is a part of my larger goal of advancing critical media literacy for young people in Singapore.

Another project relates to the professional development of higher education language teachers, and here I am seeking to facilitate and write about conversations around critical pedagogy in our classrooms.

My doctoral research looked into the scope for critical media literacy at secondary school level as a way of interrupting the formation of compliant subjectivities, and I see what I am doing now as a continuation of what that work started.

What has been your most memorable project so far, and why? It is the projects that make academic work satisfying, and I have learned a lot from working with my thesis supervisor and other mentors, as well as on my own. But I have also learned from supervising my students’ projects. I teach a public writing module, which is an interesting thing to do in Singapore, where the space for public discourse - especially online - is heavily contested. This usually leads to students expressing doubt in the political efficacy and the personal safety of online public writing (to give an example of the sort of landscape in which such doubt emerges, I direct you to this paper). At the same time, when given a chance to engage in some form of critique in the protected space of a university blog, students generally show support for state policy and use the rhetorical strategies they are
taught to shift the responsibility for change onto individual citizens. The discussions in class as we interrogate assumptions bring to mind a pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas, 2015). This is an intellectually fascinating space for me, because it mirrors the development of my own critical lens as well as the emerging trajectory of my larger research interest.

One particularly memorable example of this set of dynamics was a project on race relations in Singapore, which led to a long email conversation with a student who fundamentally disagreed with my position. I am often the only ethnic minority person in a class full of majority (Chinese) Singaporean students, and my experience with student dissent is very different from that of some of my colleagues, who experience Singaporean students as compliant in behavior. My experience of student dissent is not only based on teaching undergraduates. During my doctoral research, I faced indignant pushback from a 14-year-old boy who objected to my identifying as a feminist.

It is these experiences that fuel my goal of keeping teaching and research spaces open for the consideration of critical pedagogy. These experiences also lead me to reject the position that media literacy studies can be separated from issues of race, gender, sexuality, disability, or any other such category.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?

I think this would have to be my doctoral work. Developing an ideology critique of media education in Singapore meant challenging a lot of my own assumptions in addition to unpacking dominant narratives through a theoretical lens. We can still be complicit in the structures that we are critiquing, and understanding my complicity in an oppressive system, where the vocabulary for articulating oppression was murky, was an uphill task. Long after the thesis has been completed and the doctorate has been in hand, I am still challenging, unpacking and reflecting. My students and colleagues now receive the benefits of the work that I have started, and I am - I think justifiably - proud of my ongoing efforts to keep spaces for critical engagement open not only for myself but also for the people around me.
What is an important question from parents and practitioners that we as academics cannot provide a good answer to yet?

One important question I have been asked by teachers who genuinely want to do their best for their students is “How do we prepare our students to be good citizens in such a media saturated world?” This is of course a very broad question, and there is so much to unpack in it that I am tempted to rewrite it as two separate questions, based on the ideological position of the teacher/s asking it. The first is “how do I teach my students to fit into an existing worldview where media spaces are risky, and good citizenship means following rules, being kind, contributing to the economy, etc.?” The second is “how do I teach my students to engage with a worldview where media spaces can be empowering and good citizenship means actively questioning existing structures and working to change them if necessary?”

Both the first and the second have received some very good answers from academic work over the years, but there is a more fundamental question that comes up when the second question is posed. This fundamental question deals with the actual scope in schools and universities today for such critical media work, given the impediments that so many educators face when they try to engage in it. I think this is one question that we have not been able to answer, and it is one that we need to keep working at.

What would be your work motto?

My work motto is “I am deliberate, and afraid of nothing”. This is a quote by Audre Lorde, and I have it pinned to the noticeboard above my desk at work. I must confess that the motto is more aspirational at this point than actual, given that there are still many things that I am afraid of. But it is a goal that I work towards everyday in my work. I experience fear when I write, fear when I teach, fear when I think. But in all aspects of my work, I seek radical pathways for reflection and empathy that have the potential for the development of a deliberate and fearless approach towards theory and praxis.

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?

I think my favourite so far is a book chapter I wrote on “Young people, new media and citizenship in Asia”, in an edited volume by Larissa Hjorth and Olivia Khoo. Quite often in the literature, young people in other regions are either exceptionalised, generalised, or compared as discrete entities. What I tried to do with my chapter was to show how, while young people in countries within the region that have different political systems and cultures approach
the opportunities for citizenship afforded by new media technologies and spaces in different ways, they also face similar state processes of discipline and control. Through looking at case studies such as South Korea and Singapore, I explained how new media “affords states the ability to exert more control over their citizens, paradoxically constructing youths as both the bright future of the nation and its moral burden at the same time”. This case study approach allowed me to contextualise each situation and, precisely from that context, to conceptualise a new form of regionalisation. I particularly like this chapter because of the amount of independent thought that went into it, and the way it moved forward my thinking about the political potential of new media for youth activism and critical engagement.

If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?
I actually do have a plan for a project which needs only the funds to bring it to life. I’d like to conduct a media ethnography of Indian children and adolescents in Singapore. Studies of digital culture in Singapore tend to flatten out cultural differences based on language communities. Singapore does not have a deep digital divide in the way that that term is normally understood, but there is enough evidence to suggest that there are different levels of usage across and within communities. My research so far has focused on young people in Singapore and how digital media technologies and discourses have shaped their subjectivity as citizens. I think there is scope for examining the ways in which the local Indian community uses these technologies to navigate their identity within and beyond Singapore. How do they draw from and represent themselves within these spaces? What opportunities and challenges do they encounter? I would like to be able to interview families from this community in Singapore, and to acquire some funding for the project so that I can hire and mentor a research assistant from within the community. With enough funding, I could extend this study to other countries in the region that have minority diasporic Indian populations.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be? It is really important to have a good mentor who is invested in getting you started on your academic career, but not everyone is lucky to have one. And certainly, once you finish your doctorate, you’re pretty much on your own. While some people manage to build many connections before this, there are many who - for one reason or another - are not as well connected. The lack of
academic capital, especially if you are located outside of the Global North, can have a dampening effect on productivity. This in turn makes the accumulation of academic capital even less likely. One concept I have come across that I find quite radical in its possibilities for countering this phenomenon is that of feminist co-mentoring (McGuire & Reger, 2003). Whether or not you manage to find a mentor (in the traditional sense), I think that embarking on a co-mentoring relationship is something that will enable you to be academically productive as you pass through various life stages.

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?
I chose Gigi Durham because I can see that there is a development of her theoretical lens from her 2008 book "The Lolita Effect" to her 2016 book "Technosex", and I'd love to know how she narrates that trajectory.