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Title of the chapter

Artist-Educator-Researcher -Spaces of Hope in Critical Education.

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Abstract

This paper stems from a point of personal reflection on teaching, research, and creativity in critical education. I bring prior experiences of working *with* people as a community artist, community-researcher and educator in community, formal and non-formal education contexts to my teaching and research in higher education. As a critical education teacher and researcher working at a university, it is important to acknowledge and address a sense of working in the periphery, and it is necessary to name and claim spaces that tackle alienation and cynicism with possibilities and hope. In May 2023 I attended and contributed my thoughts to the International Conference on Critical Education (ICCE). Reflections on my teaching on a module related to globalisation, education and social justice that incorporated creativity in critical education practice formed the basis of a presentation I gave at the conference. This paper offers a reflection on the personal question that I took to the conference, 'Is there still space for innovative and empowering practice in critical education teaching and research?'

Introduction

This paper stems from a point of personal reflection on teaching, research, and creativity in critical education in non-formal contexts and how this informs my current work in formal education. As an artist-educator-researcher, I bring prior experiences of working *with* people as a community artist, community-researcher and educator in community, formal and non-formal education contexts to my teaching and research in higher education.

As a critical educator and researcher working at a university, at times it is important to acknowledge and address a sense of working in the periphery, and it is necessary to name and claim spaces that tackle cynicism with possibility, as bell hooks would say (hooks 2003). So, when I say, artist I mean dreamer, when I say educator, I mean curious, when I say researcher, I

mean collaborator and facilitator in spaces to 'know and act in the world' as Freire would say, for a better world. (Freire, 1990). For critical educators, research practice, teaching and learning are rooted in social justice practice.

In May 2023 I attended and contributed my thoughts to the International Conference on Critical Education (ICCE) (<https://www.um.edu.mt/events/criticaleducation2023/>). Reflections on my teaching of a module related to globalisation, education and social justice that incorporated creativity formed the basis of a presentation on critical education practice I gave at the conference. It was based around a reflective research question that I took to the conference, 'Is there still space for innovative and empowering practice in critical education teaching and research?' With such a question in mind from my own context, I was drawn to the conference purpose:

Criticism has long been the staple of critical education. It is high time we revert to critique in its old sense of combining criticism with the ability to dream of a world not as it is but as it can and should be. We need to dream of plausible alternatives. (ICCE 2023)

As I engaged with ideas generated by rich conference papers, I found spaces of hope (hooks, 2003; hooks, 1994). While there I kept a journal and reflected on what it is to be a creative critical education teacher and researcher. Research 'texts' of journal, memory, discussions during and since the conference, continue to inform my practice (Okely, 2012).

This short reflective paper will, *hope-fully*, connect with you and your ideas, and is offered as a contribution to the sense of community among those who work in critical education, between the points of connection at International Critical Education Conference held at the University of Malta, 2023. Looking back at approaches to creative critical education, to situate the present and to inspire a looking forward I hope I/we can continue to locate spaces of hope for critical education. Specifically, this paper will reflect on the research question and explore plausible alternatives, as creative spaces for innovative and empowering practice in critical education teaching and research.

Artist-educator-researcher

I am an educator-researcher working at university in the UK. I have also lived and worked in several countries and prior to joining academia worked *with* people as an artist, researcher and educator in community work and in-formal education contexts. Researching social justice issues through grass roots based creative methods is never far from my practice as an educator and researcher (Daly, 2023; Daly 1999).

Before training as a teacher, I graduated from Art School. Art and education is always been closely connected for me. One of the most influential books I read at Art School was Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and later Minister of Education Freire, 1972/1990). Freire spoke about the importance of education in enabling people experiencing poverty or inequalities to analyse the wider contexts of their lives, and to use that knowledge to bring about positive change. Freire and others 'taught' through creative approaches, such as theatre, arts and adult literacy, to promote a political literacy, drawn from people's own lived experiences, that could create a pedagogy of hope. This idea of connecting the critical with the

vocational, the theoretical with the practice, though the creative, made a significant impact on me as an artist-educator-researcher (Daly, 2023).

Seeking critical education spaces of hope

I brought to the International Conference on Critical Education research artefacts created by students on a module exploring globalisation, education and social justice. The overall master's programme aimed to explore more critical notions of social justice education (Bourn, 2014). The sessions were workshop style with collaborative tasks to generate ideas, and ultimately create class notes to share. An initial task was to generate key words, drawings and reflections on understandings of 'education'. This resulted in an artefact of a creative collage of class notes summarised by students as "power (to the learners)".

Keywords generated included relational aspects of learning (respect, community, learner-teacher, caring, intergenerational learning, museum learning spaces, learning through sports (physical), show me-watch me, knowledgeable others, coach, collaboration). Another set of keywords expressed ways of learning (visualising, languages including sign language, technology, experimental, learning by doing, practice, reasoning, stages, planning for learning). Other keywords encompassed notions of social justice (equalities, freedom, power-to the learners, cultural contexts, working for community).

By asking the question 'what does education mean to you' the group responded with a set of keywords that generated rich discussion of notions education that goes beyond, and indeed problematises the globalised, standardised, isometric shape of formal education (Shields, 2013).

Where have we been and where are we going?

Taking up the notion of spaces and intergenerational learning, a second focus in the module was to explore migration, education and children's lives. Migration studies is an established research area, yet it is only recently that education and children's experiences are prioritised as a main focus of migration studies, rather than considered only in findings of research (Daly et al. 2021; Pherali, 2019).

Students were asked to meet the lecturer at a community project. Instructions were given to meet on a particular street at 4pm, "*you will find the project, meet me by the door near the railings.*" As I waited and watched the students arrive, some by bus, some in taxis, some walking. They wondered individually and in groups up and down the street, full of doors and railings, not sure which one to go in. After a while I walked to the project doorway hearing their exasperated groans about poor directions! The project was a community project offering psycho-social support to families of refugees who has experienced trauma. As noted in my journal,

The project worker explained: *As you can imagine, families are in a safe space here. How did you find us? Difficult to identify which door by the railings? Very often that is what it is like for refugees when they are given basic instructions for locations in cities they do not know and do not wish to ask people. Its highly disorientating and can be frightening.* (Author reflection).

Once inside the project, we did not meet the families using the project, but they had left snacks and tea as a welcome. We met teachers from local schools, specialist support workers and discussed the nature of ethical support to traumatised families. Students here, reflected on the

nature of listening to learn and learning from, by and with others to better understand contexts of education (Ledwith and Springett, 2010; Freire, 1990).

Conclusion: we are not docile academics

At times my motivation for reflexive writing is as an antidote to the sometime alienation and cynicism surrounding academic practice in higher education (hooks, 2003). Politics, policy and practice are struggling to address major challenges of society. Inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity persist and there is a continued need to address the cultural, economic and political in an era of neo-liberalism and globalisation in higher education (Bourn, 2014; Mayo, 1999).

Connecting again, to the conference preamble:

Adult Education and learning offer us possibilities in this regard as long as people, individually and collectively, engage their different faculties and senses such as reason, emotions, imagination, intuition, experience, physicality in all its varieties and deeply felt sense of social justice. It also necessitates the ability to learn to work collectively in a creative manner. (ICEC, 2023).

Collective spaces in academia, the interstices, in which we try to work critically and dream, are getting squeezed and narrowed (Jones & Ball, 2022). Yet we are not docile academics (hooks, 2003). Reflecting on working in HE education, notwithstanding the sense of loss produced by neo-liberal education, democratic education is a means of challenging dominator cultures at work in education systems. Can we seek alternative spaces, the cracks as Habermas noted (Fraser, 2012; Habermas, 1998) for opening possibilities for ideas, debate and critical education? These spaces may or may not be within formal participative, or academy/knowledge structures, yet by drawing on critical education approaches it is possible to facilitate alternative spaces for students to voice their own analysis, representations, and critique, including critically assessing the relations of engagement and participation (Lynch, 1999; Mayo, 1999).

The creative and interrelated collective offers a space for hope in critical education, as exemplified by students' keywords and reflections. For me, it is the wider 'outside' experiences of creativity-learning-participatory research that I bring to my 'inside' teaching and research in the field of critical education at university. While at the ICCE conference in Malta I benefited from the space to 'dream of plausible alternatives' and reflect on what it is to be an academic and to continue to pose the hopeful question to seek spaces for innovative and empowering practice in critical education research.

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