What 'Gives Life' to Critical Pedagogy in the Lifelong Learning Sector? Some early findings

Paula McElearney
University of Worcester
(p.mcelearney@worc.ac.uk)

Introduction

Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy and approach to teaching and learning whereby teachers and students co-create knowledge in order to develop an awareness of the oppressive structures and forces at work in their own lives and in the wider world. This is known as a 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1970), which leads to social action and/or personal empowerment and transformation. Traditional pedagogies are relatively silent regarding social and political hierarchies and questions of power, whereas critical pedagogy challenges these by teaching people to critique oppressive structures and exercise agency. This is critical if we are to progress morally, socially, politically, economically and ecologically, and for the development of democracy. Critical pedagogy is therefore an important area to research and develop. We need to educate students to lead a meaningful life, to hold power and authority accountable and to be willing to work for a more socially just world (Giroux, 2011).

Critical pedagogy is an alternative pedagogy and has traditionally been practised within the Lifelong Learning sector. However, the work of practitioners has become constrained by funding cuts (Association of Colleges, 2016), instrumental curricula and accountability measures, and teachers can feel that they have little room for professional autonomy and thus the practice of critical pedagogy (Daley et al., 2015). Yet there are practitioners who continue to adopt a critical pedagogical stance, often in relatively isolated circumstances, by working within the system but drawing upon their own agency and professional identity.

This paper presents the early stages of a piece of research which examines what led practitioners to critical pedagogy, what inspires, motivates and sustains them in the face of constraints, which teaching strategies they consider to be successful, and how these stories of inspiration and success could be harnessed and mobilised across the sector, creating a space in which critical pedagogy may flourish. A qualitative research strategy with a multiple case study design is employed, comprising fifteen semi structured interviews with practitioners of critical pedagogy in the West Midlands' Lifelong Learning sector. The research will provide an original contribution to knowledge through using a 'positive lens' approach, drawing on the philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), in order to capture practitioners' positive stories of inspiration and success, with a view to inspiring other practitioners. AI demonstrates that the nature of the questions we ask and the stories we tell, determine the direction of our future actions; when we relate stories of success, we draw upon and develop these further in the direction of positive change (Cooperrider and White, 2005). Searle and Hanrahan (2011) show that people are inspired by others' values, beliefs, vision and stories and Goodson (1992) believes that it is important to hear teachers' voices in order to counter the growing managerialism in education. This positive lens research approach contrasts with the well documented difficulties of using critical pedagogy in the current climate, (Cowden and Singh, 2013; Daley et al., 2015), thus addressing a gap in the literature and knowledge.

To date, three pilot interviews have been analysed for initial themes. Literature relating to the motivations of practitioners of critical pedagogy indicate a wide range of personal, pedagogical and theoretical drivers, and the themes arising from the pilot interviews accord with these.

The interviews firstly examined what led practitioners to critical pedagogy and the interviewees cite parental values and behaviours around politics and equality, together with personal experience of inequality and class issues, as key factors. The literature reflects this together with the influence of key non-family members, religious experiences (Connolly, 2008), early politicisation and activism, and the role of academics and critical theorists (Torres, 1998; Porfilio and Ford, 2015). The pilot interviewees' current motivations to practice critical pedagogy relate to a fundamental belief in equality and social justice, the need to challenge power and enable equal voice, unchecked capitalism, unfiltered digital news and social media, global threats and disaffection with the current instrumental education system. The literature also highlights critical pedagogues' commitment to the contestation of neoliberalism, both politically and educationally (Torres, 1998; Maxted, 2015; Porfilio and Ford, 2015). A deep love of humanity also features as a motivator, with a strong sense of hope for the future (Kirlyo, 2013; Porfilio and Ford, 2015).

The pilot interviewees' sources of inspiration derive from witnessing the transformation in students as a result of critical pedagogical practice, together with the felt need to make a difference in the world. The literature also reports inspiration being provided by students, together with a belief in human transformation, and the personal need to take action. The teaching strategies the interviewees find to be most successful comprise discussion, dialogue, listening, questioning, problem posing, thinking time, turn taking, digital pedagogies, and the use of arts and poetry. The teacher's sharing of their authentic self with students is also felt to be crucial in minimising power differentials and fostering the co-creation of knowledge. The need for honesty with students is expressed, and this is echoed by Maxted's (2015) critical pedagogues. The strategies cited by the pilot interviewees are mirrored in the literature, along with many others (Connolly, 2008; Canaan, 2013; Cowden, 2013; Motta, 2013; Maxted, 2015; Hammond, 2017).

The interviews explore what sustains practitioners of critical pedagogy in the current education climate, with like-minded people, including colleagues and digital communities being paramount, particularly in relation to the sense of isolation experienced as a practitioner of an alternative pedagogy. Maxted's interviewees echo this sense of isolation and Kirlyo asserts that a number of the pedagogues in his volume have risked the loss of their jobs for taking such positions of resistance (Kirylo, 2013; Maxted, 2015). Both Torres' (1998) and Porfilio and Ford's (2015) interviewees highlight the importance of supportive colleagues and institutions in sustaining their practice. In relation to harnessing and mobilising critical pedagogy, the pilot interviewees cite supporting new practitioners through connections with like-minded others, the inclusion of critical pedagogy in teacher education and CPD, and they exhort teachers to take risks, take small steps and to 'chip away' in the spaces where it is possible. Lobbying at a macro level with organisations such as OFSTED is also seen to be an important way to mobilise critical pedagogy.

The main difference between the narratives expressed in the pilot interviews and those documented in the literature is that for the latter, the influence of theorists and academics feature more strongly, together with the development of their academic careers (Torres, 1998; Porfilio and Ford, 2015). In contrast, the palpable passion of the pilot interviewees regarding their students' transformation and their personal values of social justice is foregrounded, but this passion may be a product of face to face communication as opposed to text based literature. This passion is at the heart of many teachers' original vocation and my task now is to analyse and report on the main body of interviews and to capture and communicate that passion. Thrash et al., (2014) have found that people are inspired both 'by' an elicitor object (e.g. a person, action, or scene), and/or 'to' actualise the inspiring qualities exemplified in the elicitor object.in order to inspire others, and my intention is to do this through the narratives of these inspirational practitioners.

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Paula McElearney is a PhD student at the University of Worcester researching critical pedagogy in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Prior to this she spent 13 years in a large Further Education College as a Course Leader for Adult

and Community Courses as well as SENDi Courses. She also worked with Higher Education students with learning difficulties with a group of NATSPEC Colleges where she completed her MSc based on Rudolf Steiner methods. She has also been Head Teacher at a residential special school.