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Haptic Criticality: Can Risk be Deflected Through Development of Critical Thinking with Adult Learners?

Introduction

This paper responds to policy from the Foresight Review on adult education (2016) and the Department of Education (DfE) Adult Learners Policy (2018). The objective of this paper is to develop critical thinking (CT) skills for adult student to equip them to be flexible, creative, problem solvers in a world risk society. The first aim of this paper is to demonstrate how creating channels of communication and connection could enhance the student experience. It is proposed that this could lead to better student retention and could help mindfulness and progression for adult learners. The second aim examines the meta-narrative of pedagogic policy in relation to adult learners in the petite-narrative (Lyotard 2004) of my classroom. This is done through Action Research (AR) (McNiff 2014) interventions including book club, poetry writing group, and diaries. The research of concepts and theories from the traditions of social sciences, linguistics, anthropology and philosophy have informed this research.

The research for this paper is conducted at Gimmerton College of Art in the North of England. Access to Higher Education (AHE) is the smallest course at Gimmerton, and there are around 600 Further Education (FE) students on campus, comprising of AHE, Foundation in Art and Design and Extended Diploma in Art and Design. Gimmerton College of Art has recently been granted University status. The institution is located on split sites; one in the city centre for the FE cohort and the other building a mile away for the HE courses. The FE building is in the heart of post-industrial city centre. Its location brings students from the city and outlying parishes. Gimmerton offers a wide range of FE arts and crafts disciplines from printmaking and photography to fashion design and film making, painting, ceramics and digital animation. All these pathways are designed to industry standards. For the aspiring art student Gimmerton College of Art is an attractive destination for a gateway to the creative industries and HE studies.

I teach at both campuses, from level two to level seven. This gives a range of levels and abilities to work with and chimes with my teaching experience as a whole. Early in my career I taught on

outreach programmes as part of Gimmerton's widening participation curriculum. Kennedy (1997) outlines the need for adult learning to reach into the community and education to work for social cohesion as well as encouraging social mobility. I have taught adults in a variety of settings from night classes and in the community, libraries, secure facilities in the National Health Service, men's mental health groups, twilight family teaching settings in schools. This gives a grounding in teaching and learning in flexible and inflexible surroundings, formal and informal learning settings.

Literature

This research has its biases just as I have and therefore may need a 'health warning' in this current antagonistic political climate. My recommendations of social intervention via a book club or a poetry writing group could be viewed as 'un-scientific' due to the use of soft skills and emotional intelligence methodologies. Interventions analysed interpretively in a small scale ethnography are not the same as hard statistics. In a recent DfE report it states,

“There is a lack of evidence on how current practices operate to improve quality and improve learners' outcomes.” (Owen 2018).

Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence that FE is being researched and practical strategies are being found. These strategies come from 'practitioner in the sector' authors such as Broadhead and Gregson (2018), investigating adult learners on an Access course, and Coalter (2008) who examines students with low qualifications on an FE course and their success in progression to HE. Other investigators include; Lavender (2015) who researches FE adult student resistance; McNicholas (2012) who investigates inclusion for dyslexic students in an FE institution; and Powell (2017) who researches teacher trainers in an FE institute in a time of austerity. The DfE report (Owen, 2018) goes on to say that

“it will be necessary to improve the visibility and perceived status of the sector”.

There are organisations such as the Education and Training Foundation who are funding research into FE in order to 'improve the status' of the sector.

AHE, Access and Andragogy

Responding to the conference theme 'Education policy and new social risks: How can adult education and learning policy contribute to community integration today?' an outcome of this paper is that community building interventions such as poetry group and book club do create social

cohesion and group bonding. Participants become agents of change in their own education. Wider implications are integration in work, higher education, community and family.

The research problem or question asks; can risk may be deflected through the development of critical thinking (CT) skills with adult learners. Brown (1998: 1) believes there is a thinking skills deficit. To increase possibilities of social mobility, and social capital, CT skills could be instrumental in escaping poverty and gaining qualifications. The Canadian Ministry of Education states that all students will need to develop a flexibility and a versatility undreamed of by previous generations and to employ critical skills (Shaheen, 2007). This flexibility and versatility could be supplied by the use of CT skills developed by adult learners in order to counteract risk. Walport and Leunig (in Foresight 2016, p.5)

“Better skills enable freedom of opportunity, provide people with the tools to adapt to a changing world and promote social mobility, inclusion and wellbeing.”

This approach underlines the interventions undertaken, and assists in revealing that ‘better skills’ could be a result of improving CT abilities through the curriculum. The world is changing and Gimmerton’s adult learners need to be flexible, adaptable, problem solvers so that they can change with the innovating world and not get left behind. Social mobility is really important factor for adult learners at Gimmerton. Many AHE adult learners are from Widening Participation areas in the city which means they are from social housing, sink estates, and poor neighbourhoods. These students desire to be socially mobile. That is why some of them are in education; they are on the first steps to try to make a difference for themselves and for their families.

Freire (1968) and Brown (1998) both advocate education as social mobility and as a route out of the poverty trap of minimum wages. Freire (1968) considers people as uncompleted beings, they are conscious of their incompleteness and engaging in education is, he believes, an attempt to become more fully human. Students, Vili and his brother Vé have increased the whole family’s social capital (Bourdieu 1993) by entering education. Vili had been sleeping on the streets and is unemployed and Vé is a pub chef. Their plan is to be script writers and work in local film and TV industries. Vili has many obstacles; course costs, a growing family of three toddlers, and a partner out of work. He perceives education as a way of healing his educational past and becoming a role model to his children. Education could be seen as the practice of freedom and social mobility, a route out of

poverty and a life of violence and addiction. The brothers are forging a new path, writing a new script.

Ryan (2019) states that lifelong learning under New Labour 1997-2010 sought to find a third way, a middle ground between capitalism and socialism, a synthesis. Lifelong learning under this regimen, according to Taylor (2009), created an Orwellian dystopia which derailed the good that lifelong learning sought to engage in. If Corbyn (of the Labour Party) comes to power he has pledged a policy change in education. He has promised a new kind of lifelong learning something much more akin to what Brown (1998) and Freire (1968) would recognise as a socialist, a fair system with education for all, across all ages.

What policy?

The paper is relevant to the conference in that, the Education World Forum (EEF 2019) asks, 'how might education policy encourage using what we know to improve what we do?' A good question when considering risk, haptic criticality in andragogy or adult pedagogy. There is a role for the critically engaged artist in a world risk society. Relevant policies are the Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning (2016) and the Department of Education (DfE) Adult Learners Policy (2018).

Foresight conduct many reviews on important global risk and risk averse policies. The Foresight Reviews have been written on such social issues as poverty, obesity and sustainability. These reviews inform British government policy and are integrally linked with government, advising and shaping policy in the UK for over 20 years. These global policy devisers make my little project on CT, risk and adult learning seem very small. However, my paper highlights important evidence derived from its site of action. AR projects such as mine may be a small endeavour among many research papers but it reflects student voice and student experience. In this world risk environment, local-global, small world/whole world holds the key to understanding one another's stories. Our petite narrative or small story in a Northern UK Art College reflects the wider prevalence of mental health issues amongst students, Johnstone (2018) states that '75 per cent of mental health problems are established by the age of 25'. There is a need for social bonding to enhance social cohesion and the value of being heard and having a voice as an adult learner.

Methodology

The significance of the paper highlights the importance for students to understand 'wicked problems' as part of a world risk society. Then to translate their story into the universal. Gregory (2009), suggests that myth and narrative are a vital part of our identity, although Adichie (2009) warns against the idea of a single narrative becoming dangerously inflexible, if taken to risk extremes.

Theoretical and conceptual frame works are a double ontology of the art school and the world of andragogy. Auto/biography and anthropology are methodological approaches used to add reflexivity to the paper. Pedagogy is a socially constructed reality, with power dynamics. When postmodernist theories unsettle assumptions and decolonise educational theories then space can be made around historical concepts. Qualitative mixed methodologies are inclusive and illuminative in this newly created space (Kara 2015: 26). A sample of 133 self-selecting participants volunteered for CT methods. Data is inductively, iteratively linked and analysed in a cycle of reading, labelling and coding, to discover patterns and themes.

The stories/ social mobility/ mental health wellness/ transferability

According to the DfE (2018, p.13), the UK economy has an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies; and social mobility is low by international standards and does not appear to be improving. What could improve it? Education is part of the solution, the CT interventions I have piloted have demonstrated that education must be more than the mere dissemination of knowledge. In order to achieve social mobility and a path away from the risk of a life of addiction and violence there needs to be a more holistic approach to students. Student, Boreas illustrates how re-engagement with education through FE can result in social mobility. Boreas is from post-industrial fishing town. He was unemployed, on recreational drugs and at risk of addiction. He states,

“I had a need to get it out, like the story was burning in me to be made.” Boreas, Book Club participant.

He could easily have drifted into education and slipped away without completing or gaining a qualification. He nevertheless joined the book club and the community of inquiry he found there gave him an added reason to keep attending the course when it becomes challenging. Baker (2017) examines how FE and the choices students make about their futures are shaped by the way they critically think through the social capital at their disposal. Gibb (DfE, 2018) elucidates on current

social injustice and how it can be righted through increased social capital and CT in the curriculum to give all post compulsory students a fair chance at further education.

Mental health illnesses has increased year on year at Gimmerton College of Art. In the last five academic years from 2014 to 2019 students with mental health issues has risen from 44.4 per cent to 51.1 per cent. Although this is not a therapeutic course, anecdotally some students may have been directed to art as part of treatment by NHS professionals. Young (2018) agrees saying that GPs are overwhelmed with a rise in mental health patients, in a survey 40 per cent of all appointments involve mental health issues. Art therapy is a resource as a part of the NHS but FE has none of the nursing or occupational therapy experts on hand. The reading group may be useful in developing CT skills but also for the participants who benefit their wellbeing by being part of the group. An unexpected avenue of this research has shown me that the NHS is already using bibliotherapy, expressive writing and poetry therapy. That is, wellness through the strategies of reading, therapeutic storytelling, healing through autobiography, and life-world care, seeing the person as a whole entity including the emotional, creative side (Mcardle 2001, Shipman and McGrath 2016 and Hemmingway, 2011). This approach allows that 'positive treatment outcomes have been reported' (Mcardle, 2001). Interestingly the authors also recommend a collaborative approach among practitioners. They are clearly talking about health practitioners but this is equally effective in the classroom, where lecturers work closely with colleagues and Student Welfare in supporting students with mental health issues in a mainstream classroom setting. The benefits of informal group sharing is expressed by Poetry Writing Group participant, Lamia when she says,

"I think for me it's been a sense of belonging I expected to feel really embarrassed but I actually don't. It's quite scary but it's a nice kind of scary. You never feel like you're the odd one out... I think it has encouraged me to be more, I don't know, to think a bit more about what I say and how I say it in here [in the poetry group] and outside [in the classroom, or in the outside world]." Lamia, Poetry Writing Group participant.

Lamia had been on other FE courses and her mental health illnesses, depression and anxiety had isolated her and left her disenfranchised from her class and the year group as a whole. This meant that she did not achieve her course. Currently on AHE, she goes on to say that the poetry group has really made a difference to her college experience, and that,

“I have grown more confident in my own voice and look forward to continuing writing poems and taking part in important discussions once I leave - a prospect that would have seemed incredulous at the beginning of my journey here. “ Lamia.

The transferability of skills is important for adult students who are still diagnosing, what course, what apprenticeship or what line of work is the best fit for themselves and their family situation. As adults this is not a simple matter, people have lives, worries, responsibilities, commitments, careers, ties that bind. The more transferable skills CT can give them the better. With these CT skills they will be more adept at responding to different circumstances. The more CT training I can give them, the better equipped they will be to be flexible, when their mental health is tested. CT encourages students to become problem solvers, creative and caring thinkers, community minded in a wider global sense motivated by an environmental conscience of the shared world we inhabit.

Ethics

With regards to ethics, this is an area kept just by using the motto do no harm (BERA 2018) as a guide in all my research transactions. I try to be representational and avoid deceptions in my dealings with participants and reading material. The thesis aims to protect and anonymise participants and institutions. Confidentiality of identities and institutions is kept safe in encrypted files and locked draws. This project collects data from my own students who I teach as well as other FE participants. This brings up the ethical issue of insider/outsider data. ' Insider/ outsider Research is an issue often associated with a researcher who is also a participant, or a lecturer who is also a researcher using their own students as participants. (Bell 2005; Denscombe 2003; Kara 2015)

What is haptic criticality?

The significance to the field of policy studies in adult education is that, haptic criticality, thinking through doing, is essential to equip vocational students for problem solving in industry or self-employment. Could engagement in critical thinking (CT) encourage a link between vocational practical making and the capturing of the tangible in written or spoken analysis. A thinking through doing, a haptic criticality, a translation of practice through CT into the language of academia. Ofsted's 2010 report, *Learning: Creative Approaches that Raise Standards*, encourages CT and creativity.

“Practice as research not only produces knowledge that may be applied in multiple contexts, but also has the capacity to promote a more profound understanding of how knowledge is revealed, acquired and expressed.” (Barrett and Bolt, 2007).

Art practice, being a craftsperson, a chef, a coder, a writer, a landscape gardener or equally a teacher creates tacit knowledge, as Hyland, (2017) puts it knowledge becomes a thinking hand. Creative arts research has the possibility to extend understanding of the role of experiential, problem-based learning (Barrett and Bolt, 2007) and there is real potential for situated knowledge and narrative inquiry or personally motivated understandings that could demonstrate how knowledge is revealed and acquired. This practice led research gives the participant when they reflected upon it, a deeper way of knowing and an illumination of understanding of how it is that they know what they know. Barrett and Bolt (2007) believe it is muscle memory that imputes a deeper understanding of practice. Further they believe there is a dialogic relationship between the exegesis, research and practice.

Inherent tacit, practical wisdom reveals philosophical contexts for critical thinking about the theoretical underpinning of art and design as advocated by Broadhead and Gregson (2018) in their recent publication, *Practical Wisdom and Democratic Education*. What is practice – led and practice - based research in the context of pedagogy and art-practice? The Australian academic art collective, Creative Connections, explains the distinction, commenting that, if a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based. If alternately the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led.

“...the innovative and critical potential of practice-based research lies in its capacity to generate personally situated knowledge” (Barrett and Bolt 2007)

personally situated knowledge add authenticity to research, as Lorraine Leeson (2017) concurs in her book *Art: Process: Change*, written from a very practical point of view, critical thinking in her opinion can only happen in situated practice and practice based research.

In practice led learning students participate in their own education, collaborate with each other facilitated by the teacher. Developing CT through practice based research with students often in my experience addresses issues of equality diversity and inclusion, it asks learners and lecturers to actively engage (as hooks 2007 recommends), in the class room in order to speak to the questions of race, gender and class through the practice of teaching and the lens of criticality. Practice led approaches presents an alternative to traditional pedagogies that emphasise more passive modes of learning. Traditionally the teacher stands at the front and expounds while the students go to sleep. Barrett and Bolt's, (2007) anxiety over the normalisation of the passive classroom is echoed by Ken Brown (1998) who declares that all this thinking about thinking provides an impetus for the introduction of programmatic methods for remedying passive, rote learning which may well prove self-defeating. Brown (1998) believes early years learning should comprise repetitive memorizing so the students have a foundation from which to start to think critically and this also could have some truth to it. Art practice I believe has to start with emulation and repetition. As a designer crafts person this is how I began my education at art school, find a designer you love they told us and make something using the same techniques.

As Sennett says in his book *The Craftsman* (2008) the path to mastery has stages, and right at the beginning is observation, watching, researching, reading, looking, absorbing; Next have a go, imitate, emulate, seek, mirror, echo; after that is the practice, repetition, repeat 10,000 times to become proficient, rehearse, study, train; and finally transcendence, become your own person, have your own thoughts, ideas, designs, to innovate. This is the kind of slow learning Sennett and Hyland comprehend and perceive as the most fruitful way to becoming a master of your particular practice. Tacit thinking – thinking with the hands, the thinking hand – thinking by doing, debating, writing, speaking and listening – getting what is in a student or a teacher's head out of the interior castle and into the classroom. Creating using haptic criticality.

What is Critical thinking

Elder and Paul (2007) comment that,

“Critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and the question at issue. They question information, conclusions and points of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well as to their speaking and listening.”

This could be viewed as a kind of framework against which to compare the extent of criticality. How fundamental is CT to creative problem solving which is the work of an art student? As bell hooks advocates in her book; *Teaching Critical Thinking, Practical Wisdom* (2007) CT is powerful, it enables the students to self-actualize, self-motivate, across class, gender and race. Milton in Foresight (2016, p.4) states that,

“Improving our skills base is critical to increasing prosperity in the UK, as well as delivering considerable benefits to society as a whole...Developing our skills is not just an aspiration, but with a changing job market is essential.”

Developing skills is where CT comes in, by developing thinking skills the intervention develops the skill set students have to offer when they enter the job market, making them more adaptable, problem solvers, creative carers and the haptic part comes next.

Local-global perspectives on critical thinking in education

Leeds City Council (2015 p.19) sees CT as a tenet of the religious studies (RE) curriculum from key stage two to four at sixth form. CT has a place in the discursive and reflective parts of the syllabus. The policy document says that CT generates independent thinking skills, self-confidence and a sense of identity. But why is CT under the umbrella of RE? Religious studies like its secular counterpart Personal and Social Education (PSE) is a way to involve students in higher order thinking skills. Welsh Assembly Government (2008 pp. 11-19) sees PSE as a way of equipping future Welsh citizens for life within the larger forum of the UK, not only that but they see themselves as global players. Wales see itself as offering a uniquely Welsh perspective, in the theatre of world culture and economics. The Welsh PSE curriculum actively encourages a development of soft skills. Emotional, spiritual issues, and moral standpoints, elements that make us human are recognized and encouraged as an aspect of CT. In my opinion the FE curriculum is badly in need of this aspect of CT. Often my older, non-traditional students have so many more issues and so much fewer places to air them. As ‘grown ups’ it is presumed they have it all sorted out, possibly and quite often they have not. Poverty and lack of education has stopped these issues being sorted out in our students. The Welsh Programme also advises as part of PSE that students are equipped to challenge stereotyping and prejudice. CT through PSE and RE appear to be a good way into discursive and active dialogics and debate about current important philosophical subjects. However if CT is domain specific as Brown (1998) argues then aren't we limiting students to believe CT is only applicable to religious debate?

In discussions by Longfield (2017) the Children's Commissioner for England raises the controversial issue of 'Fake News'. Saying that the important thing is to make sure students are given the possibility and teaching to develop vital CT skills. Forearmed students with CT skills would then be able to spot fake news that is designed to 'mislead and create divisions in our society.' This is an important role for the higher order thinking skills. The ability of students to read information on the internet and not to take it at face value but be able to find multiple sources, to verify or disprove so called facts. And most importantly of all make up their own minds.

Continuing in this vein the theme for the Education World Forum (EWF) 2019 asks,

"What we should do with what we know: Developing education policy for implementation, impact and exponential success."

The riches and vast horizons of the internet are still somewhat a Tabula Rasa, a blank slate, and undiscovered country, ever expanding universe. What we know is no longer what we have read and absorbed and taken on as our own, now every answer every question is at our fingertips in the minicomputer that is our smart phone. CT helps us make those decisions, gives us right judgement, wisdom, experience, and helps us think around and through problems. The EWF theme is about the information digital age. Those who are digital natives, our students need to be creative craftspeople with all that information. They need to make information work in education and find moral, judicious, globally beneficial ways to use it, engaging CT skills to decipher it.

Speaking for the Department for Education (DfE) recently at the EWF (Gibb for the DfE, 2018) spoke about CT as one of the key strategies to increase cultural capital for less affluent students. Further he argues that education and CT can increase social mobility. Aspirationally he says,

"A successful curriculum should enable pupils to participate in the great conversations of humankind, and it should prepare pupils to thrive in an ever more globalised and competitive economy. "

This he says is to be achieved by utilising CT skills. He believes that it is a mistake by educationalist to believe that 'creativity is a skill independent of subject domain-specific knowledge'.

What is risk in the art college?

The art college is a place of formation, of strongly held passions and beliefs, our students can sometimes be very dramatic and wanting to make a statement with what they wear or what they believe. All these actions are not necessarily a risk, it is when other issues are combined that risk may surface. Some of the great innovations in the art world came about through an amount of risky behaviour, trying something new, pushing the boundaries in terms of social norms or religious thought or politics. The art school is the place of the provocation, the manifesto and the bold statement. The Italian Futurists of the 1900s are a perfect example of such inflammatory statements,

“We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight ... all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice”. Marinetti 1909

Hargreaves (1997) states we need to dismantle and reconstruct the old institutions - a little like Marinetti and his fellow Futurists, ... the traditional educational system, Hargreaves believes must be replaced with a polymorphic education provision, an infinite variety of multiple forms of teaching and learning. Smith and Smith (2014) have strong views on creativity in the curriculum, they write the slogan, ‘All schools should be art schools.’ This was the call from artist Bob & Roberta Smith when they stood against Michael Gove at the UK General Election in May 2015, in protest against what he termed the Coalition’s devaluation of arts education. Whether or not you agree with their manifesto, a Turner Prize nominee running against a former Education Secretary gives some idea of how politicised the future of the arts in education has become (Smith and Smith 2014). Sometimes the risk is from policy itself, or government or a local council with funding powers; which could appear to be limiting, blinkered and not inclusive having agendas which leave some more liberal subjects with no funding or cut from the syllabus.

There is much risk of mental health illness amongst the student population with nineteen percent of the student population displaying common mental health disorders (Office of National Statistics, 2018). This vulnerability because of mental health issues can lead to many worrying outcomes such as suicide, self-harm and risk taking behaviours as a cry for help. Other issues may be that vulnerable students are more open to radicalisation with strong passions for animal rights, politics, the environment. This can lead to idealism in moderation or in the extreme, violent and illegal actions in the name of that group. There is the risk of vulnerable students falling prey to sexual grooming either by other students or from online communities and chat rooms. Addictions to alcohol, gambling or drugs, because of mental health illness or being a vulnerable adult, feeling the stress of college deadlines, or hoping to escape poverty, responsibility and commitments.

Summary

The central theme and question of the paper is, what is CT and practice based research? Can it aid deflecting concepts of fear and risk? Could connection be discovered through community of inquiry and narrative? What are current andragogic policies, are they community makers or cohesion barriers? Tentative conclusions are, a community of inquiry accesses the legacy of the critical traditions. Classroom democracy is a high-risk strategy, Beck (2013) implies, risk can be both positive and negative. Democracy is unpredictable and it does not have a predetermined outcome, it can be, 'the transformational power of critical thinking.' Participants in the AR interventions such as book club and poetry writing group have become more confident and articulate, argumentative and discursive. I have observed an increase in the way participants use haptic criticality to talk about practice and theory in lectures and workshops thereby confronting risk.

Initial findings touch on such issues as equality diversity and inclusion, a fair hearing of all participant voices and the possibility to non-professionally support underlying mental health, loneliness and well-being of participants. As Biesta and Lutters (2017 p.37) see it, bringing students out of themselves and into the world and into dialogue with the world. Not presuming to have all the answers but directing participants to professional services if the need arises. Participants become agents of change in their own education and have the connection and recognition of a wider community.

The Change Theory hypothesis from (Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane, 2017) seem to be the best way to describe change rather than 'test' or 'measure' change. A single conversation can demonstrate change, a phrase written in poetry can demonstrate a shift in thought brought on by the tantalizing, informative, movable feast of CT. Recommendations are that mental health wellness, group bonding and an holistic approach to the student is very important and has an effect on adult learners confidence. It lowers risk through increased empathy to others as well as studentship and progression. CT interventions such as Book Club or Poetry Writing Group, as either an additional enrichment activity or as part of the curriculum is beneficial in deflecting risk. The output of the paper is to disseminate findings at conferences and in a relevant journal.

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