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Theorizing Radical Practice: Community Arts and Transformative Learning

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Keywords: Community Arts, Critical Pedagogy

Abstract: This roundtable presentation provides an exploration of the role that creative, critical teaching and learning could play in addressing social and personal suffering through reflective practice, expressive ways of knowing and cultural resistance. It will draw on Freirean pedagogy, and feminist, critical and community theory to propose the way ahead.

Community education seeks to engage learners at all levels to be active in defining and creating the world in which they choose to live. It also serves a pivotal role in enhancing humanity and the society in which we live (White, 2014), developed through Freirean pedagogy (1972). In contrast, formal education, as a social institution, often enhances the powerful, rather than increase the creative and intellectual capacity of the overall population (Share, Corcoran, & Conway, 2011). At times, with intentional teaching methods, the dynamics of formal education can be shifted toward a more democratic and radical perspective (Lynch & Lodge, 2002, Thompson, 2000).

Critical pedagogy and transformative learning (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009) are approaches that intentionally aim to raise the consciousness of learner, especially through social analysis. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which critical practice could work in a community setting (hooks, 2003). We would like to consider fostering personal and social transformation through the practice of creative, critical pedagogy within a noncredit, community setting. In this setting, we will draw on the experiences and stories of participants to construct new meanings and frame possible solutions.

We will explore the potential for creative teaching and learning activities that are conducive to personal and social change. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, and Kasl (2006) describe creative options as “expressive ways of knowing” (p. 27) meaning expressions from one’s imagination and intuition. This can include: music, writing, art, dance, drama, photography, and craft-making. Establishing an environment that honors the learner’s creativity is similar to establishing the space for transformative learning to blossom. Taylor (2006) reminds us to practice “authentic teaching” (p. 92), as well as providing a “safe, inclusive, and open learning environment” (p. 93), in order to support “multiple knowledge productions, inclusive of the affective and relational and the symbolic, spiritual, and imaginative domains of learning” (p. 93). Building time into activities for intentional and critical reflection is another key to supporting transformation. At times adult learners in their busy lives will just go through the motions without being aware of the actual learning process and allowing the new ideas to intermingle with their previous knowledge. By providing venues and space for reflection – journals, nature

walks, and creative art expression – learners are encouraged to attend to the transformative learning process.

Through the venue of programs in adult and higher education, we will examine the practice of the community arts, including drama (Boal, 2000), dance, creative writing, and visual arts. One author will provide examples working primarily through groupwork in a course-based setting, in NUI Maynooth, Ireland. The other author will reflect on the techniques used during a recent workshop at Highlander Education and Research Center that focused on authentic leadership.

We then will appraise the role that the community plays in creative self-expression and the expression of social suffering and personal/societal oppression. As the learners become comfortable with their own creativity, it enables the potential for critical reflection, emancipatory learning, and cultural resistance, through creativity. Olson (2005) recognized that “music created space that fostered engaged pedagogy, where hegemonic structures of power and positionality could be challenged and new solutions could be imagined” (p. 58).

In this roundtable presentation and paper, we will review the literature underpinning community arts and education, with a view to developing a coherent theoretical framework for critical practice for social justice and equality. Correspondingly, we will examine creative activities employed in adult learning, to determine the critical intentions and vision of the educators. We will draw on research on critical pedagogy and praxis, ‘really useful practice’ (Connolly, 2008), to position practice within the social purpose of education for redistribution of society's resources. We will use qualitative, feminist research approaches, congruent with the overall topic and the meanings and implications of transformative adult learning. Finally, we will contextualize this creative, critical pedagogy within a communal perspective, as a key pathway to critical reflexivity.

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