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Real World Impact: The Rise of the Scholar Activist

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Professorial Lecture
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Percival Lecture Theatre, University of Cumbria
Ambleside, Cumbria.

Abstract

Introduction

The agenda tonight is grounded in my experience of realising I had not only the capability, but also the duty to do more with my scholarly work. You may or may not feel the same at the end of the evening which is fine. Our journey together will include:

- My journey to scholar activism
- Activist continuums
- Scholar activist foci – social justice inquiry topics
- Scholar activist approaches – socially just methods
- Scholar activist impact – social change towards social justice
- Your journey to scholar activism

We started the evening with a mentimeter survey to see how many people in the audience considered themselves either scholar, activists, or scholar activists. The results are shown below;



Figure 1: Mentimeter: How do you think of yourself? Audience Responses.

Why does Scholar Activism Matter to Me?

I identify the starting point for my scholar activism in my early life experiences. I grew up cold and hungry and experienced a degree of economic disadvantage which made life just less than comfortable and made me aware of how different I was to peers at school. I had some developmental health issues and spent a lot of time in hospitals, this again set me apart from friends and meant that I missed school due to these health disadvantages.

As I has missed a lot of school I didn't do very well and ended up really disliking the experience. The worse I did the less I liked it and I got locked into a cycle of educational disadvantages. Because I did badly and because I wore second hand clothes and had worn out shoes I was bullied and ended up truanting, giving me an early experience of social discrimination.

I was lucky and in time my parents moved to a new area – some 200 miles away – and a better school. Whilst this was a great opportunity I experienced regional discrimination as my Yorkshire accent did not fit into a Kent Grammar school. This was mostly from a French teacher (“how can you speak French when you can't even speak English?”). However, one teacher there was excellent. She invested in me, she saw past the lack of experience, the shyness, and saw potential. This was a real catalyst for change and I started to believe in myself and do well in school.

This was the motivation to want to support others to make good. I became a primary school teacher in the hope I could enable them to have the best start in life. Later I moved to secondary education thinking that was the key period when young people needed support. But all of this was focused on individual young people within a wider system. I changed sectors and worked in social care with young people with profound emotional and behavioural issues, trying to support those most in need. I re-trained to work in outdoor education and was a youth development worker at Brathay Trust and expedition leader. These were all attempts to achieve social change, but for individual people. All this time I studies voraciously and kept updating qualifications in the hope I would learn the keys to making more of a difference, but that scholarship didn't seem to help as much as I hoped.

What I realised later was that I was working within a system that was broken, and I could not see the system, how broken it was, and therefore not do anything other than perpetuate its ill effects despite my best intentions.

Activist Continuums

I think there is a continuum of scholar activism, I've grounded this on the levels of conscious competence (unknown), a model of how we gain competence in any area. That model says you progress through four stages when, say, learning to drive a car:

Unconscious incompetence – don't know I'm doing it wrong

Conscious incompetence – know I am doing it wrong

Conscious competence – can do it right with a lot of effort

Unconscious competence – can do it right without even thinking.

The model I have developed from there looks like this:

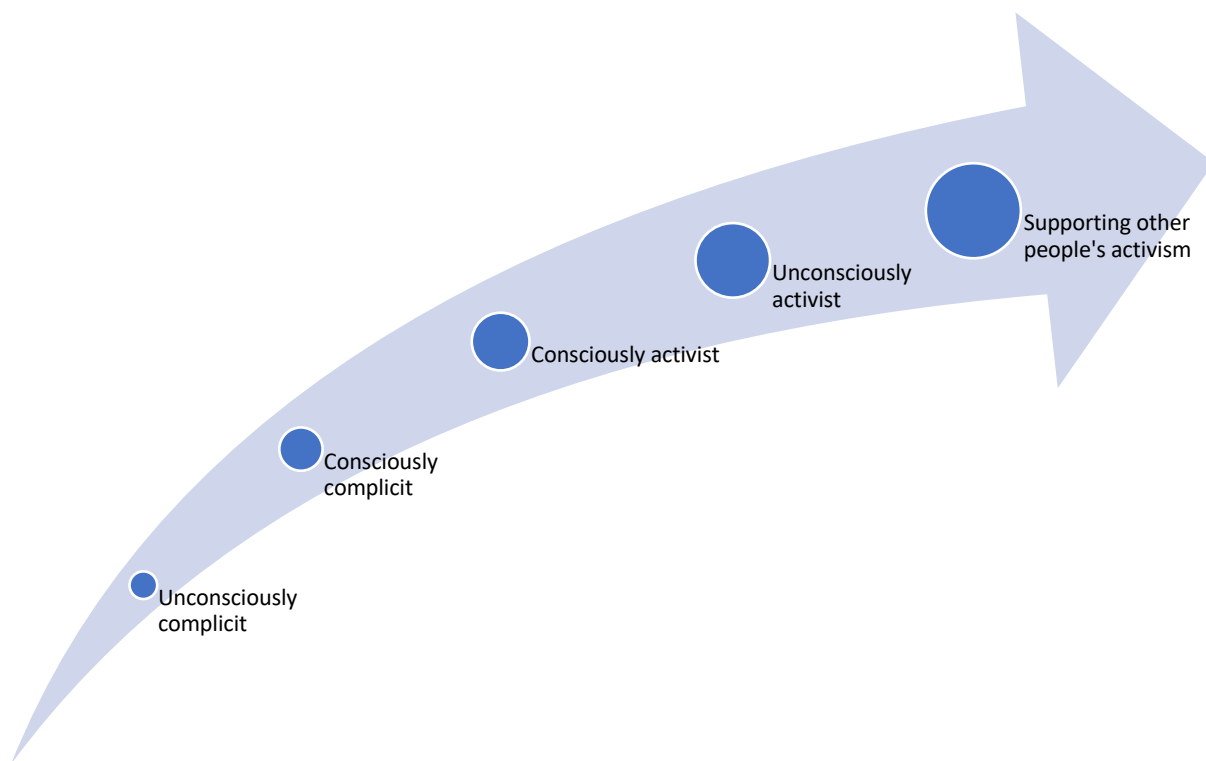


Figure 2: Scholar Activist Competence (Stuart, 2020).

In my career to date I had been unconsciously complicit in my work, I had not really thought about the 'system' or the 'organisation' that was shaping teaching, or youth work or social care. I just got on with the job to the highest level I could. Of course there would never be enough of me to be able to change everyone's lives, so I was bound to feel frustrated.

Later I started to realise that I was working within an oppressive system in powerful organisations which dominated children and young people, but I was not brave enough to do anything about it – this was me acting in a consciously complicit way. This was deeply uncomfortable.

Eventually, a few career moves later, I was working as a researcher, studying for a PhD and developing the critical thinking I needed to be more critically conscious. My work started to take a more critical stance but I only published within the usual academic domains which was also unlikely to lead to any serious social change. I started to consider how I could achieve more through my scholarly work. This led to a writing more 'daring' papers where I overtly challenged the system and said what I really thought as per the paper below:

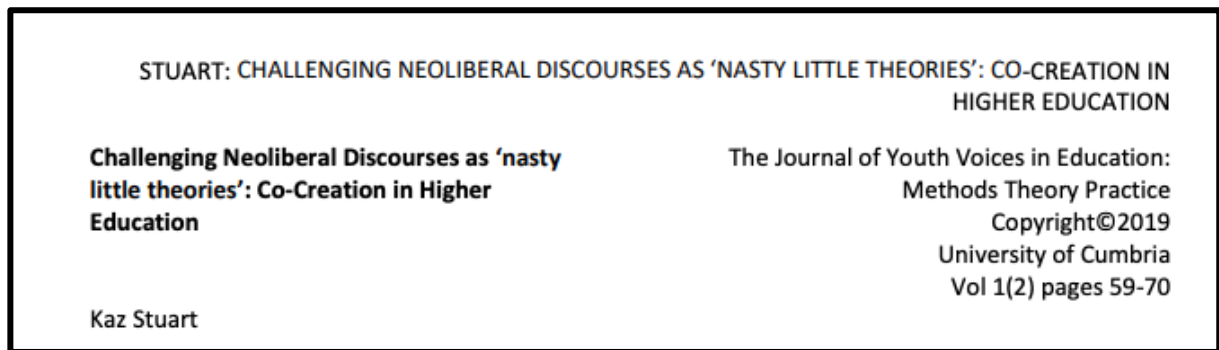


Figure 3: *Writing Critically Conscious Papers (Stuart, 2019).*

This was a start, writing in a more activist style, but I was not reaching people who cared, or who would make a change. Here my work became more consciously activist and I started to send my writing, research and reports to local councillors and members of parliament. Whilst this rarely prompted a change I hoped it would make those power holders think more deeply about the issues they had power over. An example of a response is shown in figure four below:



Figure 5: *Writing to Members of Parliament.*

Writing to power holders tackles one end of the hierarchy. Another potential for achieving social change is to work with the people most affected, to build a social movement and community of people who want change from the bottom up. To this end, I reached out to colleagues in other organisations and we jointly created the Carlisle Equality Group, attempting to draw people across Carlisle together to discuss and act on issues of inequality. Figure six shows us hosting a stand in Carlisle City Centre to try to attract new members:



Figure 6: Launching A Grassroots Movement.

I hope that at some point in the future this will become an unconscious and effortless activity, where public outputs oriented to social change come ahead of academic publications, and indeed, inform them. Beyond that, I see a role in supporting others to become more activist in their scholarly work.

So why is it so difficult to get to scholar activism? Aside from all the usual barriers to getting anything done, we often feel paralysed by the enormity of the issue at hand. So even if we do reject the oppression we see in the world and wish to move to the left of the figure below, many of us end up sitting in the centre, doing nothing.

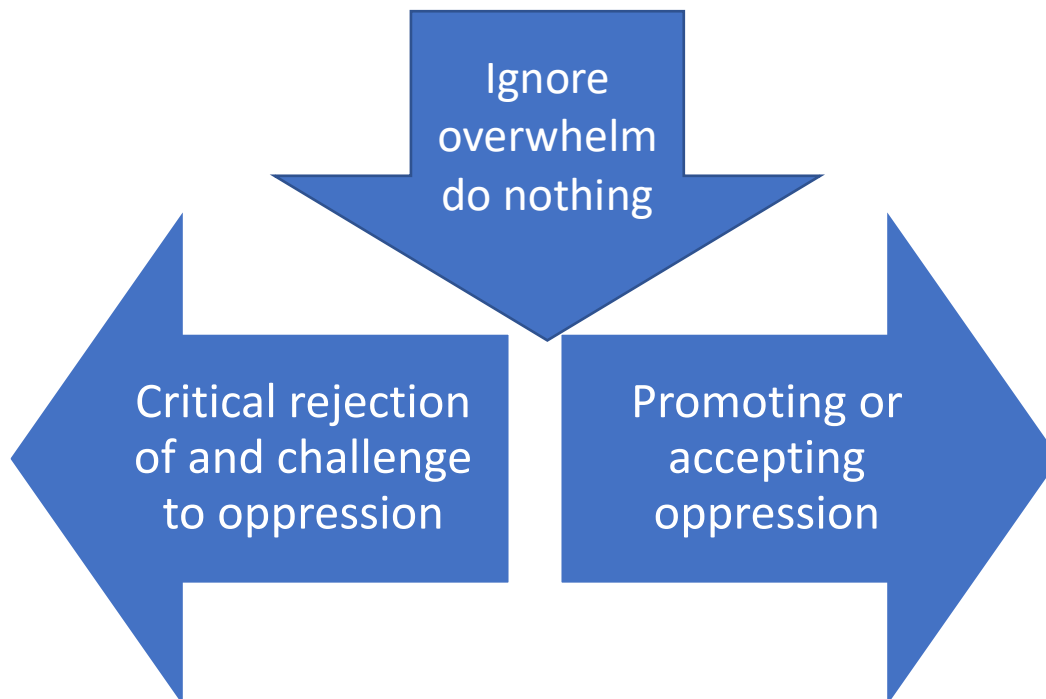


Figure 7: Too Frozen to Act?

This is a phenomenon Andre Lourde wrote about as long ago as 1982. As he points out, however, this position is untenable, we have to find a way to act:

“To refuse to participate in the shaping of our future is to give it up. Do not be misled into passivity either by false security (they don’t mean me) or by despair (there’s nothing I can do). Each of us must find our own work and do it. Militancy no longer means guns at high noon, if it ever did. It means actively working for change, sometimes in the absence of any surety that change is coming” (Audre Lorde, 1982 cited in Fine, 2018a).

Say we do act, how should we do so? Ideally our activism should enhance outcomes for everyone and not happen at our own expense. There may be a cost, however, and Fine (1991) observed working class kids rebelling about the poor education they were receiving, often refused to attend school. Whilst an act of rebellion and activism, this was also self-defeating as it prevented them from gaining their education. This observation equips us with a good critical question – is there any aspect of my work that is self-defeating, and is that acceptable to me? To personalise the example, if I spoke or acted in a way which was intolerable to the university I work for, I may lose my job, and therefore the opportunity to continue use the privileges of higher education for social change.

A second scholar activist position speaks back to the levels of activist competence, but also to a deliberate choice. We may decide that we can best optimise our activities through what Fordham (1996) called conformist resistance. So I may not shake the university setting too strongly although I know it to be deeply oppressive, as I wish to use the privileges of higher education to affect social change in other communities. That may be a case of picking your battles, or accepting some power imbalances whilst challenging where you can. The third position shown in figure eight below, is transformational resistance, where you do the work to affect social change (Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal, 2001). This is where I aim to work on issues of social and health inequalities.

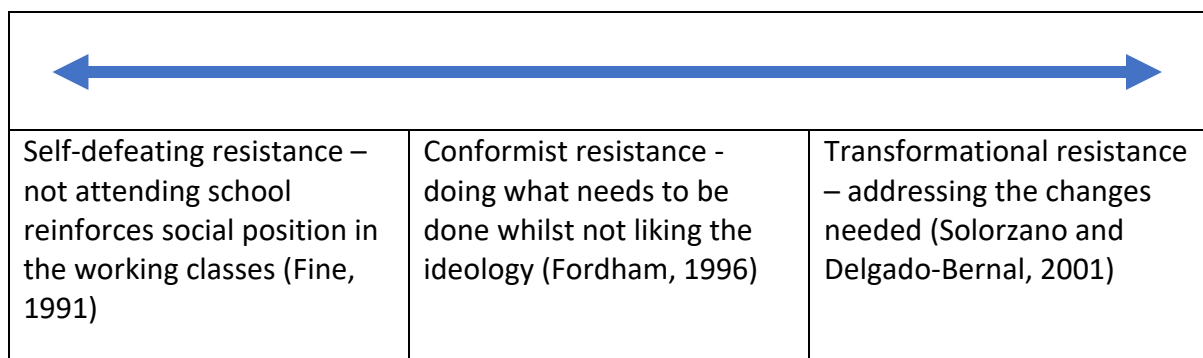


Figure 8: A Spectrum of Activism.

Wherever we are able to act, within our own and contextual parameters, I feel we must. Whatever the issue, whatever the scale, whatever the impact. As Spooner and McNinch in their text *Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education*, state:

“The future is on all of us. Time to resist, organise, and act in concert with initiatives, collaborations, affinity groups, and movements within and well-beyond the academy at both local and global levels – it is incumbent on us to expose, provoke, and tear

down these systems of illegitimate authority power” (Spooner and McNinch, 2018 p.xxii).

Scholar activist foci – social justice inquiry topics

So what do you ‘do’ your activism about? We started this section of the evening with another mentimeter survey to see what issues most concerned people in the audience. Their answers are shown in the wordle below – the larger the text the more people thought the issue was a concern.

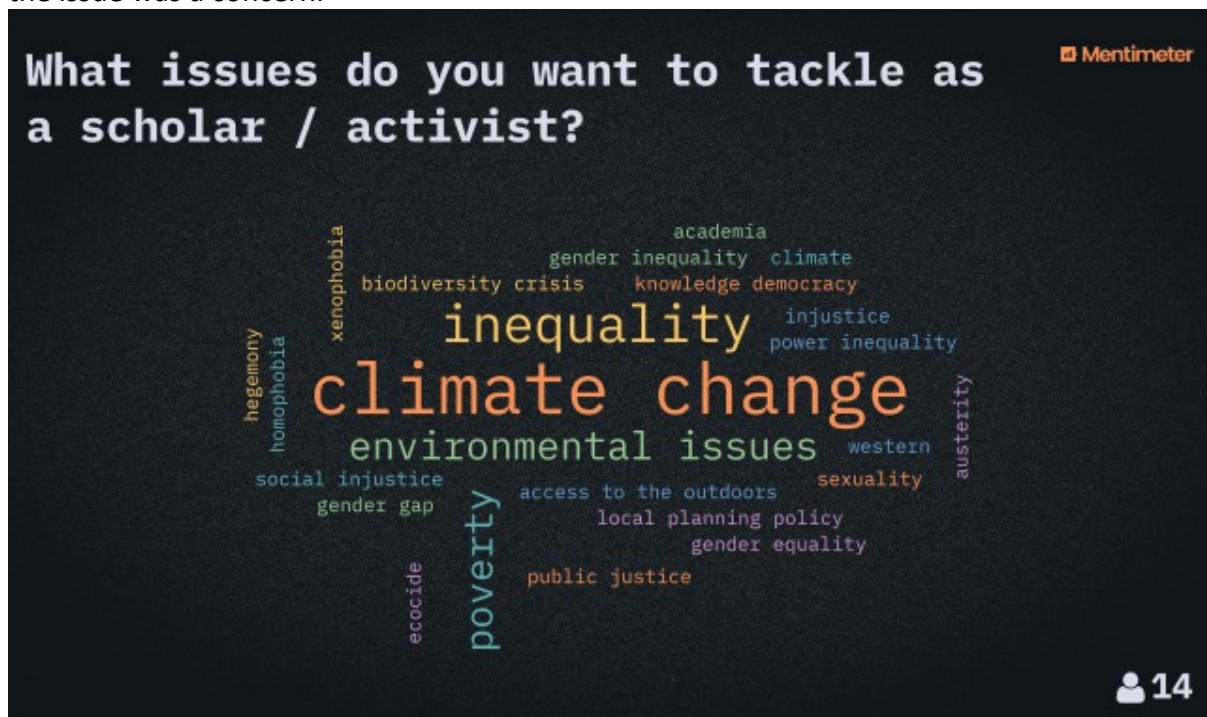


Figure 9: What Issues Do you Want to Tackle? Audience Responses.

I shared a framework which guides my choice of foci for scholar activism – The Equalities Literacy Framework (ELF) (Stuart et al., 2019) as shown in figure ten below.

This model was developed initially as a theoretical framework to help a participatory research team understand the phenomenon of school drop out. We found, however, that this was also powerful as:

- A reflexive tool to enable us to understand our educational experiences of privilege and disadvantage and how they shaped our research
- A dialogical tool to use with young people to help them understand their own educational privilege and disadvantage
- A workshop tool to help groups of people identify what is happening in their lives
- An implicit tool for practitioners to hold in mind when working with individuals and groups.

I can provide examples and resources for any of the above if you are interested in knowing more. I now, also use this framework as a tool to guide my activism.

Firstly, the ELF informs me that I must take context seriously – be that global, national, regional, local, community, organizational. Everything happens in a context, and activism is rooted in exploring the oppression and freedom that exists in these contexts.

Secondly, ELF supports me to think about the impact those oppressions and freedoms have on an individual, how it shapes their lived experiences.

Thirdly, we are all positioned by others in society – by friends, family, peers, colleagues, organisations, society, media, the state and so on. This framework reminds us to explore this form of oppression or liberation, to understand who is doing the positioning, who is the target, and how they are positioned.

Next comes consideration of the way in which this positioning happens, whether it is through stereotypes, labelling, silencing, ignoring, willful blindness, othering, social abjection, etcetera. Knowing and naming these processes is key in activism as they are often left out of sight.

People do not float around like debris in their own lives, despite all of the freedoms and oppressions above, we all have agency or choice about what we do. The fourth part of ELF encourages us to identify the positions people adopt in response to this system. People may confirm, rebel, comply, become victims and so on. It is important we do not leave out this stage of analysis, as without it, we risk positioning people as entirely responsible for their own lives (part of the neoliberal project), or entirely without choice in the world (a deterministic perspective).

All these factors lead to a final trajectory, a degree of freedom or oppression and associated outcomes. Working through the five steps above enables me as a researcher and the people I research with to understand how they have come to be who they are and experience what they do. I have found this a potent emancipatory tool when used in dialogue with communities and encourage you to play around with it. It is even useful to help map how free or oppressed you may be as an activist!

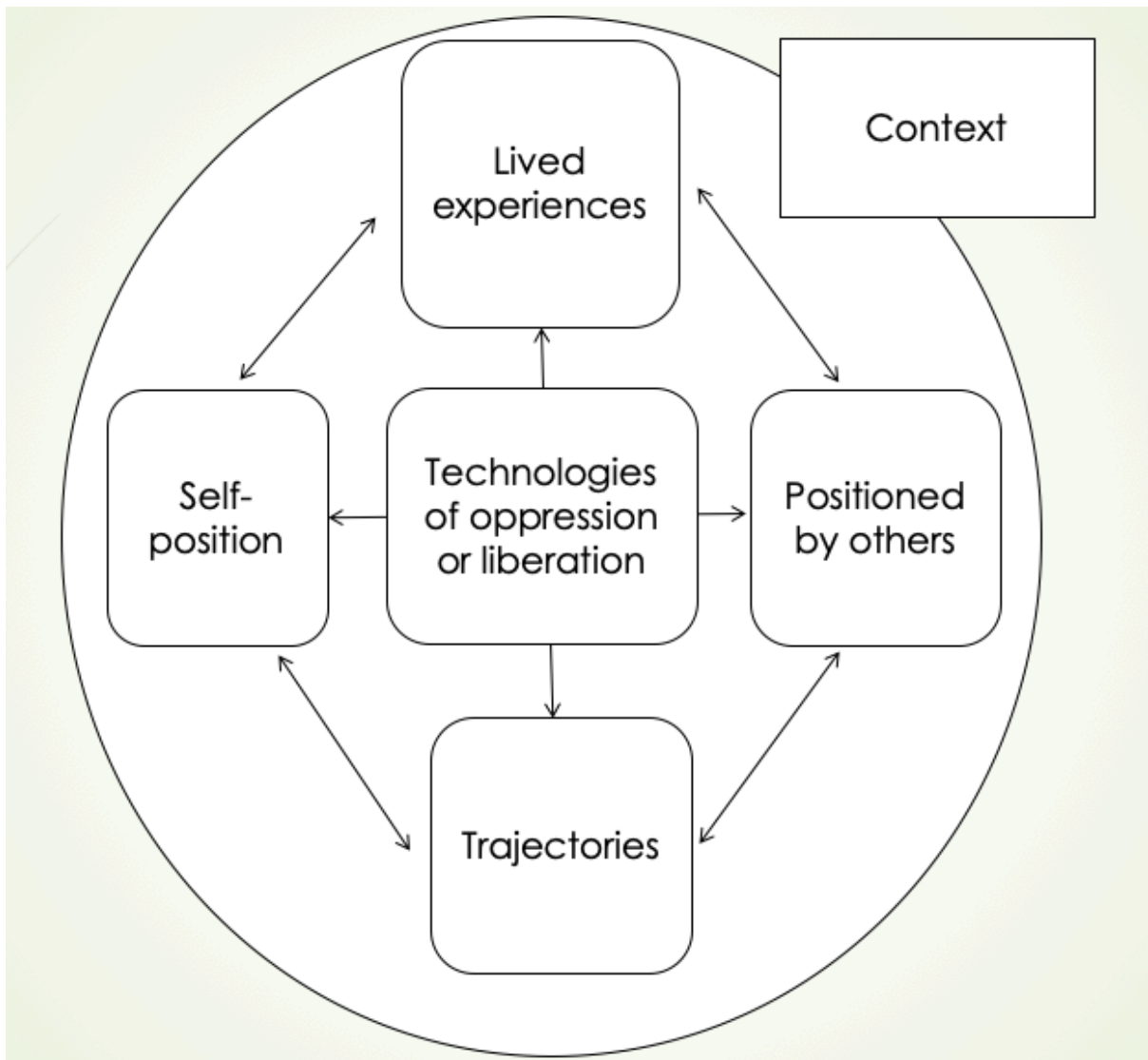


Figure 10: The Equalities Literacy Framework (Stuart et al., 2019).

Scholar activist approaches – socially just methods

Now we will move on to consider ‘how’ you can work with people in a way that is congruent with the anti-oppressive aims of activism. To epitomize the challenge, I may start by asking: do western, white, male, middle aged scientists really know best? I don’t think so, however, much of the research conducted in the world today is grounded in work by this group of people and the assumptions they held.

‘Medical model’ positivistic research assumptions still dominate and post-positivist methods are often rebuked and challenged. ‘Experts’ are still seen to know best although they may be much removed from the phenomenon they research. These realisations led to Sarah Walker (2003) expressing the “archipelago of human otherness”. On one side of the archipelago are the accepted positions of power of; expert, man, normal, rational free. And these are juxtaposed by the unaccepted positions of; disenfranchised, other, subhuman, irrational, savage, immoral. These words highlight the “predatory relation and longstanding, perverse hierarchy of knowing versus being known” (Fine, 2018, p.81).

Such analyses have led to a wide range of critiques of knowledge creation as:

- “epistemologies of ignorance” (Mills, 2012)
- “epistemicide” (De Sousa Santos, 2014)
- “intellectual colonialism” (Fals Borda and Mora Osejo, 2003)
- “epistemological exclusion” (Stuart and Shay, 2018).

What alternatives exist then? If we reject these power laden domineering perspectives, how else do we work? Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) exhorts us to make use of complex overlaps in knowledge, in the rich ‘borderlands’ between insider and outsider status’. Rather than privileging one position over another we can bring them together in rich intersectional tapestries of knowledge (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Such a ‘decolonisation’ of knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) enables us to move towards what Escobar (2018) would call a ‘pluriverse’ where knowledge and action in the world are grounded in multiple pluralistic perspectives.

Seeking different forms of knowledge is now more commonly referred to as a knowledge democracy (Hall and Tandon, 2015), and can be defined as:

1. acceptance of multiple epistemologies
2. affirmation that knowledge is created and represented in multiple forms (e.g. text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, etc.)
3. understanding that knowledge is a tool for taking action to create a more socially just and healthy world and for deepening democracy.

Whilst encouraging us as scholar activists to seek wider knowledge and to build knowledge inclusively, further practical methodological guidance may be helpful.

Activism is not new and has a long global heritage. Leading scholar-activists include:

- Paulo Friere (1970) Brazil
- Orlando Fals-Borda (1985) South America
- John Gaventa (1980) Appalachians
- Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) Maori
- Ignacio Martin-Baro (1990) El Salvador
- Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) Brazil

These key figures “*all argue for community-based, participatory research by, with, and alongside communities, engaged to contest the hegemonic academic hold on what is read as valid science and to widen the construct of ‘expertise’*” (Fine, 2018, p.72). This is because researching with people seeks to remove the power hierarchy existent in traditional research relationships and because it enables greater knowledge democracy.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) becomes a method of choice due to its emancipatory, participatory aims and its focus on achieving social change (alongside other more domesticated forms of action research). PAR is also a method of choice due to its ability to encompass any data collection tool that will lead to the answers its community seeks to find, be it art work, performances, surveys or statistics.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is particularly powerful as it has the potential to start young people on their own activist journey, first as agents of change in their own lives, and second as agents of social change. As Cammarota and Fine (2008) state:

“YPAR represents a systematic way to engage young people in transformational resistance, educational praxis, and critical epistemologies. ...YP create their own sense of efficacy in the world and address the social conditions that impede liberation and positive healthy development. Learning to act upon and address oppressive social conditions leads to the acknowledgement of one’s ability to reshape the context of one’s life and thus determine a proactive and empowered sense of self” (Cammarota and Fine, 2008).

There are amazing examples of PAR and YPAR from a leading scholar activist Michelle Fine from the City University of New York. To provide just one powerful example, she has successfully prosecuted the city for providing a sub standard education to Black youth leading to significant reinvestment in their community schools and educational outcomes. The legal case was grounded in stories, pictures and images curated with young people wanting change to happen.

Fine (2019) helpfully defines a set of principles to accompany her activist action research:

- *No research on us without us*
- *Design research in solidarity with communities under siege / activists / performance to challenge the dominant lies, creating epistemic justice.*
- *Get deep participation by those most marginalised*
- *Establish contact zones for epistemic justice – share, gather, hyper privilege the most marginalised forms of knowledge*
- *Adopt a critical biofocality to document struggle and unjust privilege across time*
- *Use participatory analysis too– use PAR as an epistemology not just a methodology*
- *Generate materials for policy, organising, teaching, popular education, performance, to expand the radical imagination* (Fine, 2019).

Tuhiwai-Smith (2018, p.37) writing to support decolonised research with indigenous populations in New Zealand encourages us to question all research proposals to find out:

- *Who is this research for?*
- *Who is asking the questions?*
- *Who will own it?*
- *Who will benefit from it?*
- *What does it mean to give consent?*
- *How is this organised?*
- *How will data be stored?*
- *Whose knowledge is it?*
- *How is local knowledge acknowledged and protected?*
- *Who owns the copyright?* (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2018, p.37).

This criticality will be a great support to all research of all types, addressing all issues as it enables us to reveal power within the research process. This is not to make such work

appear simple, indeed, participatory research is some of the most challenging work I have ever undertaken. As Fine states;

“In each research setting, challenging questions emerge about expertise, objectivity, and validity; sacred silences and suppressed “data”; Whiteness, privilege, and the colonial legacy of social science in communities of colour; the tenuous relation of science and advocacy; the delicacies and ethics of legitimacy; and the vulnerability when academic researchers and community members link arms to cross dangerous power lines” (Fine, 2018a, p.77).

Scholar activist impact – social change towards social justice

We have explored the topics and the power relations we might study as scholar activists, we have started to explore how to research in ways that limit power relations, next we turn to the question of how to achieve social change with the knowledge we generate. Spooner and McNinch encourage us to think beyond our usual confines (such as academic journals):

“We call on scholars to be beyond the audited confines of the academy and to be teacher-researcher-advocates, to assume the responsible long view, to face head-on our own domestication and query the purposes and consequences of knowledge production, consumption, and engagement” (Spooner and McNinch, 2018, p.xxvii).

I felt guilty that I had written so extensively about the social issues young people had experienced without actually **doing** anything about them. I had not set out to do so, but now felt my career had developed as a result of this work rather than those of the young people I sought to support. This deeply uncomfortable realization emerged when reading Michelle Fine’s book *Just Research*, where she comments that: *“Critical researchers are neither tape recorders nor ventriloquists. And so what do we do with these luscious transcripts scattered around our living room floors?” (Fine, 2018, p.12).* I felt I had not done enough with the transcripts I had been privileged enough to collect.

There are (thankfully!) so many possibilities, some small, some large scale, some safe others risky, and all are important and valid forms of scholar activism. It was listening to Michelle Fine at the 2019 Action Research of the Americas conference explain her wide range of activist activities that really enabled me to step further into activism. Consider whether some of the following are possible for you.

Get Story telling – listen to, tell and share stories.

- Who we are connects us to our causes
- Find out who people are and what their stories are
- Find out what matters to people
- Connect, explore, validate, differentiate
- Become a community (Dara Frimmer, 2015).

Get writing – find something to say and someone to say it to

- Letters
- Newsprint

- Reports
- Papers
- Flyers
- Leaflets

Get visible – find something to show to someone

- Posters
- Exhibitions
- T-shirts
- Badges

Get social – join people up for discussions

“Networks are a form of resistance to marginalisation, they join people across borders, they broaden participation, they enable and strengthen collaborations, and they are inherently dynamic and can accommodate diversity” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2018, p.34). These could take the form of:

- Book clubs
- Discussion groups
- Interest groups
- Rallies
- Associations
- Interest groups

Get Online – mainstream your messages and go viral

- You tube films: <https://morrisjusticeproject.tumblr.com/>
- Twitter storms: <https://www.fightinequality.org/>
- Blogs: <https://wellbeingandsocialjustice.blog/>
- Instagram: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhRthP7-tD4>

Get Creative – limited by words? Make something to communicate your message

- Performances
- Art work / displays
- Installations
- Yarn storming

Get Organised – make your mark by building a community who will be visible

“seek to build a critical social analysis drawing upon, and drawing in more and more people” (Choudry, Hanley and Shragge, 2011). You could do this via:

- Campaigns
- Petitions
- Protests
- Marches
- Sit-ins
- Blockades
- Legal action

Get Real – model your rejection of dominant ideologies

- Talk to everyone as an equal
- Say hello to people often ignored
- Walk your talk – recycle, reuse
- Challenge people in conversation
- Put your views across, hold your line.

And beware that our often activist aims to work from a knowledge democracy can often descend into or diminish into the usual tokenistic approaches, as Affiong Limene Affiong, (2017) states:

:

- *“when imperialism hijacks the struggles and infuses it with cash:*
- *mobilisation descends into consultation;*
- *organising struggle degenerates into organising conferences;*
- *campaigns degenerate into charities;*
- *revolution becomes a dirty word, spoken in hush tones and replaced by respectable terms of civil society, democracy and good governance”* (Affiong Limene Affiong, 2017, p.5).

That is not to say this work is easy. You may encounter dissent, disagreement, conflict in your community or participatory groups. How you manage that without ‘tidying’ everything away and allowing the more palatable messages to prevail is a challenge I have not yet managed to overcome. Everything you do counts though, so don’t be deterred, do what you can when you can to enable your scholar activism to support a more socially just world.

Your journey to scholar activism

“Those of us for whom oppression is still shocking, and privilege a tradition, would do well to learn from colleagues and allies who know well the long march to freedom and justice” (Fine, 2018, p.81).

I conclude by asking you:

Why might you be interested in scholar activism?

What are you passionate about, what social change do you want to support or affect?

How do you think you might generate knowledge to support that change?

What will you do with the knowledge generated, how will you mobilise it?

What are your next steps?

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