

# **Assessing Critical Pedagogy:**

## **‘Non-traditional learning’ and module assessment**

**Maria Martinez Serrano,  
Mark O’Brien,  
Krystal Roberts  
and David Whyte.<sup>1</sup>**

## Introduction

This research project explores how approaches to assessment based upon principles of Critical Pedagogy can be developed. The project is conducted by researchers at the University of Liverpool (<http://www.liv.ac.uk/>) and is funded by the HE Academy (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>).

### The Research Team

The research team comprised two postgraduate students and two full time members of academic staff at the University of Liverpool. Maria Martinez Serrano is currently studying for a PhD Degree. Krystal Roberts is currently studying for a Master by Research Degree. Both are recent graduates of the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology and both were trained in social science methodology as part of their undergraduate studies. The academic researchers involved in the project are David Whyte and Mark O'Brien. David Whyte is Professor in Socio-legal Studies at the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology. Mark O'Brien is Senior Research Fellow in the Educational Development Division of the Centre for Lifelong Learning.

### The Project

This research draws upon examples of modules in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Liverpool (hereafter referred to as 'the Faculty') that apply principles of Critical Pedagogy. It aims to use these to inform 'good practice' in assessment that can be communicated across the HE sector. Eight modules were chosen for the research on the basis that they included forms of assessment that:

- allow the structure of learning to be defined by student learners' lived reality, rather than a predetermined or designed structure;
- encourage students to be 'free learners', able to challenge the physical and ideological structure of their pedagogical environment and relationships;
- move students to action and involvement in the world in ways that promote and further the causes of social justice and democracy.

The methodology used in-depth interviews with the eight module coordinators, to explore how successfully those principles are applied for assessment.

### Research Methods

A purposive sampling strategy was applied (Oliver, 2006). This approach frames a sample using a set of inclusion criteria (set out below), as opposed to a random sample that seeks to be 'representative' of a population. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to control the sample to include particular phenomena or experiences. It is therefore more suited to a research project that seeks to build upon good practice and learn from particular educational experiences, rather than one that aims towards generalizable conclusions.

This strategy also relied heavily upon the willing participation of colleagues in the Faculty. On 11<sup>th</sup> February 2014, a call was sent by the project-lead to staff with leading roles in teaching and learning at each School in the Faculty. This call included the following statement:

"I am currently conducting a small research project for the HE Academy, titled 'Critical Pedagogy in Assessment'. The purpose of the study is to explore methods of non-traditional assessment (i.e. beyond the essay/exam model) in modules taught in the Faculty. We would like to conduct an initial scoping exercise that looks at forms of assessment that in a broad sense seek to break down the barrier between teacher and student. Such assessments, for example, may involve, fieldwork or more self-directed forms of learning and assessment that are centred upon the student's experience or standpoint in some way."

It is highly likely that some module leaders whose modules matched our call did not read the message, or were unwilling or unable to respond. This purposive approach therefore does mean that some modules that were potentially relevant to the research may have been overlooked. At the same time, the sampling strategy was successful in bringing to the attention of the research team a range of appropriate modules. In the three weeks following the call, details of 12 modules from across the Faculty were forwarded to the project-lead. The team then met a month after the call, in early March 2014, to discuss those modules and to select a sample of eight. The module sample was finalised to include:

- as wide a range of 'non-traditional' teaching and assessment methods as practical (indicated by published teaching and learning/assessment strategies);
- a range of modules committed to the 'authenticity' of the student learning process (indicated by the degree to which students play a role in defining the perspectives and structures of learning adopted in the module);
- a range of modules committed to moving students to action and promoting the causes of social justice and democracy (indicated by both the modes of learning and assessment and by the substantive content of the module);
- a range of academic disciplines from across the social sciences and humanities.

Before we explore the data from our interviews with module co-ordinators, the next section of the report provides a detailed background to the development of the concept of 'Critical Pedagogy' as it has been applied in the research literature.

---

**Footnote 1.** We are grateful to the Higher Education Academy for funding this research (GEN 1016). And we are especially grateful to the participants in this research, not only for their generous time and for sharing their expertise with us, but also for the dedication and commitment they take to their teaching. Through the course of the research their teaching has been, and will continue to be, a source of inspiration for all of us.

## Critical Pedagogy and assessment in British HE: the ideal of the ‘free learner’

*“This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed ‘the pedagogy of the oppressed’, a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (be they individuals or whole peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade.” (Freire, 1970)*

With this unambiguous statement Paulo Freire declared the standpoint and political commitment to the cause of the oppressed from which his pedagogy had emerged. In his seminal book, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire outlined a pedagogical analytics that developed some key concepts. These included: the concept of the ‘teacher-student’ to capture the interdependent nature of the learning relationship; autonomous and narrative-based learning as opposed to mechanical or ‘banking’ models of learning in which knowledge is ‘deposited’ in the student; learning as a form of ‘praxis’ arising from conscious labour in which the human subject experiences ‘limit-situations’ that challenge understanding; and a dialogical approach rooted in the real ‘situation’ of the learner.

Freire’s keyword also contained some programmatic elements that were based upon his own educational practice in Brazil. The situated involvement of the human subject and their world occurs for Freire in a ‘thematic universe’ of meaning. These themes involve the ‘naming’ of things and situations that must be critiqued to reveal the systems and hierarchies of oppression for which they stand. This process can also be thought of as a ‘decoding’ by which the codes that conceal oppressive behaviours and social configurations can be broken down.

A starting point in any learning strategy is, for Freire, the development of a set of ‘generative themes’ by which learners working in cooperation identify their own pedagogical needs and the manner in which they will meet them. Working as an ‘investigating team’ they identify the ‘nuclei of contradictions’ that shape their lives and come to perceive their reality, more truthfully. In turn, they encounter the limits of what they are able to do within their oppression. As a result they come to the realisation that to move forward they must overcome the status quo that is holding them back, and in-so-doing that they must transform their world.

Underpinning Freire’s pedagogy is an unmistakable and frequently explicit value base. For Freire learning must overcome oppression; it must be liberating; it must be ‘humanising’; and rooted in a ‘love for the world’. Through it the learner must by steps become more ‘conscious’ of their situation and of how to change it: a process Freire termed ‘conscientization’. Finally, throughout the book there is a discernible and sometimes forcefully expressed concern with ‘authenticity’. For Freire authentic learning is critical, rational and transformative. Modes of learning that are rooted in oppression and self-interest can only be irrational and based, not upon trust, but upon deception.

Many of these themes were taken up and further radicalised by a second generation of Critical Pedagogy theorists. Growing out of the radical social movements of the 1960s in the US and Canada, the new currents of thinking they represented were overtly political. Ira Shor’s conceptualisation of radical educational practice positioned the teacher as the mediating figure between outside authority and the student, Shor defined his pedagogy as: participatory; affective; problem-posing; situated; multicultural; dialogical; desocializing; democratic; researching; interdisciplinary; and activist (Shor, 1992: 13). In the work of Henry Giroux (1989; 1997; 2000) critiques of the cultural framing of ‘youth’ (and especially black youth) as a social ‘problem’ draw upon critical analysis of the mass media. More directly, Giroux issues a challenge to educators to develop in themselves and in their students an ‘emancipatory authority’ (Giroux, 1994: 162-163) that legitimates their own critiques of oppression and hierarchy in the schooling system and that links it to democratic struggles. Students should also be ‘border crossers’ who work at the interfaces of different cultural landscapes, revealing and negotiating the tensions of identity and representation that these create in the classroom (Giroux, 1994: 141-152). This commitment to multi-dimensional and pluralistic pedagogical practice resonates with the work of another of the dominant names in second wave Critical Pedagogy, Joe Kincheloe. Kincheloe (2004; 2008) is best known for his concept of ‘bricolage’ in educational theory and practice, an approach which advocates that educational material should be drawn from many sources, perspectives and methodologies to be worked upon and synthesised into a more rigorous and more genuinely transformative teaching practice. This pedagogical heuristic is underpinned in Kincheloe with a ‘critical complex epistemology’ that privileges many standpoints and subjectivities; the aim here is to transform the classroom into a place where previously suppressed voices are heard. Similarly, McArthur (2010a: 312) has argued for a disciplinary knowledge in HE that is:

*“... intrinsically contested and subject to change; complex and able to foster a myriad of links into interdisciplinary hedgerows; and rigorous, thus helping to ensure the authenticity of student and teacher experiences.”*

bell hooks’ (1994) work seeks a Critical Pedagogy which is able to transgress gender, race and class segregation, building teaching as a community that is part of the community, rather than isolated. She argues that an engaged Critical Pedagogy is fundamentally an “expression of political activism” (ibid., 203) which rejects the banking model as a bourgeois constraint on authentic learning. For hooks, to choose not to break down oppressive structures of hierarchical education is not to be neutral, but to offer political support to existing inequalities (for a similar interpretation of Freire’s work in the context of the Irish experience, see also Quinn, 2009).

Peter McLaren (1995; 1997) has developed an explicitly Marxist approach to Critical Pedagogy with his concept of ‘revolutionary pedagogy’. McLaren’s pedagogy, influenced by the guerrilla insurrectionist philosophy of Che Guevara and the Mexican Zapatista movement, explicitly links educational practice to social activism for change (McLaren 1995; 1997). Recently in the UK, a new generation of Critical Pedagogy theorists have also adopted an explicitly Marxist orientation and have drawn upon pre-Freirean traditions of thought to critique and deconstruct the

otherwise submerged structures that define the educator-learner relationship within capitalism. This, 'Student as Producer', movement has gained traction in some progressively inclined British universities; particularly at the University of Lincoln where it is becoming established as the in-house educational model for social science and humanities curriculums. Pioneering this current, Mike Neary (2014) emphasises the influence of Walter Benjamin and Lev Vygotsky.

*"Together Benjamin and Vygotsky establish the key principles for a pedagogy for the avant - garde: that students are the subjects of the intellectual process of teaching and learning, and that a progressive pedagogy involves reinventing the politics of production from within, against and beyond the current social relations of capitalist production. The issue for them is not simply how do students learn, but how do radical intellectuals teach?" (Neary 2014: 3)*

In his 1915 essay 'The Life of Students', Benjamin had held up the Humboldtian ideal of the student who is "...an active producer, philosopher, and teacher all in one ..." (Benjamin, 2011) against the instrumentalist and alienated nature of the German university of his own day. Of more direct relevance to the 'student as producer' perspective however is the 1934 presentation that Benjamin gave at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism, 'The Author as Producer'. In that paper Benjamin explores the inter-dependencies between the technical aspects of creative production and how they shape the relationship between artists and writers and their audiences. Highlighting the deliberate banalities of the Dadaists, the broken photomontage images of John Heartfield and the disruptive theatre techniques of Berthold Brecht amongst other avant-garde movements, Benjamin demands that writers consciously and critically reflect upon their position within the production process (Benjamin, 1998: 101). By critiquing the technical modes of creative production as operating within capitalist social relations, the artist, no longer believing in their own 'magic strength' (Benjamin 1998: 103) can connect meaningfully with the audience, as that hitherto fixed and alienated relationship is overthrown.

For some, 'the university' as an institution was incapable of developing anything other than a patronising, top-down model of education. Writing in the early 20th century the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci argued that the mode of teaching in the universities was closely connected to their philanthropic structure of patronage. His proposal for a transformation of the organisation of learning came 40 years earlier than Freire but shares a remarkably similar orientation:

*"Philanthropically, the bourgeoisie have decided to offer the proletariat the Popular Universities. As a counter-proposal to philanthropy, let us offer solidarity, organisation. Let us give the means to good will. Without which it will always remain sterile and barren. It is not the lecture that should interest us, but the detailed work of discussing and investigating problems, work in which everybody participates, in which everyone is both master and disciple." (Gramsci, 2012: 25)*

Recurring throughout the literature we have covered so far is an insistence that to disrupt power relationships, learning should be 'authentic'. Broadly speaking this can be taken

to mean learning conceptualised as 'understanding' and opposed to the mechanical memorising of facts. However as we have seen, being 'authentic' also has profound implications for the student-teacher relationship. Indeed, the notion of the 'authentic' in learning processes provides us with a key thematic that can be applied and explored fruitfully in any pedagogical setting and for any pedagogical problem. We seek to develop this notion of 'authenticity' in the HE setting. In this study we will apply it to our analysis of assessment.

### **Critical Caution**

The empirical research presented here seeks to explore how assessment can adopt key principles of Critical Pedagogy. We are not naive about what this task means in the context of western HE systems, not least in a system that in recent years has become one of the most marketised in Europe. In the spirit of critical reflection, this section articulates some of the key problems faced by adopting Critical Pedagogy in a contemporary British University.

Of course, Freire's work in Latin America in the 1960s was conducted within a distinctively different context - in terms of the composition of social classes - than we find in the UK today. In Brazil and later in Chile, Freire worked with landless labourers and peasants within various agrarian reform and literacy programmes (Holst 2006). These programmes were largely concerned with the integration of the rural poor into the mainstream of national and cultural life, and centered upon the raising of social and political consciousness (Freire's 'conscientization'). It is therefore the general techniques and orientations of his learning strategies that have been of interest to radical educationalists and that have guided our interest for this study. However, it is also the constraints to radical educational practice in a modern British university that we set out to explore.

The first problem we confront here is that the places of learning to which latter day Critical Pedagogy has sought to enter are established institutions, with established ways of doing things (cultural norms, rules, protocols and hierarchies) that have been established over centuries. Critical Pedagogy by definition seeks to establish an alternative set of norms that are not necessarily compatible with the established culture of the UK University. The danger that follows from this dilemma (of a sub-dominant culture entering an established culture) is that the latter will always be able to co-opt the former. McLaren (2013: 33) has identified the tendency to sanitise Critical Pedagogy, making it a philosophy of minor classroom reform:

*"The conceptual net known as Critical Pedagogy has been cast so wide and at times so cavalierly that it has come to be associated with anything dragged up out of the troubled and infested waters of educational practice, from classroom furniture organised in a "dialogue friendly" circle to "feel good" curricula designed to increase students' self-image."*

As Neary (2014) notes, the limitations of the 'student as producer' model is brought into sharp relief when it comes to the question of formal assessment. In particular he notes that learning outcomes are antithetical to the model in the sense that they can become overly prescriptive, stifling creativity and undermining "critical, open-ended notions of student-centred learning" (Neary, 2013:8). It is important to note that this type of problem is acknowledged

and addressed elsewhere. Forms of peer-learning and assessment (Boud et al. 2001), dialogue-based modes of assessment feedback (Nicol 2010), student self-regulated models of learning (Nicol 2009) and self-assessment (Orsmond et al. 2002) for example all have a central place in the current generation of educational scholarship.

The marketization process that has intensified in the British HE sector in recent years presents an incremental set of process and practices that are similarly antithetical to principles of Critical Pedagogy (Giroux, 2011; Fenton, 2011; Neary and Winn 2009). The recent trebling of student fees, coupled to now established and highly individualised 'student as customer' model has elevated the ends (good grades) above the means (the learning process) in unprecedented ways (McGettigan, 2013; Callinicos, 2006; Bailey and Freedman, 2011). The net effect is, as Gibbs (2006) points out, that:

*"Students are strategic as never before, and they allocate their time and focus their attention on what they believe will be assessed and what they believe will gain good grades."*

This highly individualised model of learning prevails in a highly commoditised education system, even where there is clear evidence that collective learning strategies based upon mutual support and solidarity are more effective (Burgess-Proctor et al. 2014).

For all of the reasons given in the previous section – and mindful of Giroux's concept of 'border-crossing' and work that has grappled with the challenges of applying Critical Pedagogy in the western educational context (e.g. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008) – we need to find ways to cross the border between the historical, political and social context of classical Critical Pedagogy and the setting for which this project was designed

Returning briefly to Freire to explore this concern, we note that his earliest pioneering literacy work was conducted whilst he was the Director of the Department of Cultural Extension of Recife University in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco. Working in this Latin-American cultural context the influence of liberation theology is apparent in some of Freire's more existentialist and quasi-religious formulations. Of more direct importance here however, is that Freire interpreted his own work as taking place within a society that was in transition. In his earliest published work he describes the opening-up of economic and political life as Brazil became integrated into the regional and global economy in the early 1960s (Freire, 1974). Anticipating the 1964 coup d'état that would end Brazilian democracy for the next two decades, Freire described a 'sectarian' mind-set exhibited by elites who were threatened by this transition. It was this closed mind-set against which he positioned his own 'freedom-oriented' perspectives on education (Freire, 1974: 3-20).

Although we are focused upon a much narrower question of how Critical Pedagogy may be applied to forms of student assessment in an HE setting, we emphasise Freire's core message, that educational practice and social transformation are indivisible. We also reiterate that transition to new modes of learning are to a large extent predicated on changes in the structure of social relations. We live in a rather different context, but one that is similarly characterised by social instability, rapid change precipitated by economic cycles of boom and bust,

unprecedented public-sector cuts and wider and more permanent environmental and ecological threats to our social fabric. Against this background we would argue that whilst there appears to be reason for pessimism in the development of alternative approaches to teaching, the fundamental social changes that we are currently experiencing also necessarily open up unexpected avenues to develop alternatives. Moreover, precisely because we find ourselves in a situation of material and even ontological crisis, Freire's insistence upon 'authenticity' in learning becomes timely. (Toscano, 2011; Giroux, 2010).

### **Towards Authenticity in Assessment?**

In summary, then, the notion of authenticity in Critical Pedagogy approaches is premised on the following principles:

- recognising and making more visible the material impact of power relationships in the educational process;
- reshaping the relationship between teachers and learners;
- facilitating the development of students' social consciousness as part of the learning process;
- involving dialogue as opposed to what Freire called 'the banking model' of education, to allow teachers and students ultimately to become co-investigators.

This research seeks to explore whether methods of teaching and learning that deliberately subvert the conventional student and teacher relationship, that deconstruct the formal educational environment and curriculum and that invite students to question the standard tropes of formal learning and to control the content and structure of the seminar, tutorial etc. can be reproduced in the context of the modern British university.

A useful device for us in setting out the parameters of our inquiry is the idea of the student as 'free learner'. We propose that the ways in which Critical Pedagogy can be, and has been applied in the context of UK universities gives this term meaning and include the following: the student (re-framed as the student-teacher) is encouraged to consider what they know rather than what they do not know; students are encouraged to explore their own reality and to define in theoretical terms the problems of their own condition or that of the world around them; the autonomous and independent critical thinking of students is sought in place of the mere transmission of 'knowledge'; students are enabled to see how their social situation and society generally might be transformed; and to imagine a new social reality.

The concept of the authentic 'free learner' is as central to Critical Pedagogy in assessment as it is to the learning process. In order to achieve authenticity, assessment itself must to some extent stand in opposition to the prevailing tendencies towards a purely ends-based model of HE. Assessment that focuses upon the process of learning, rather than a measurable outcome necessarily involves a more thoroughgoing critique of the conventional student-educator relationship. The challenge for Critical Pedagogy approaches is to conceptualise the forms of assessment that remain true to the notion of the authentic 'free learner'. Our review of the literature allows us to understand more precisely how the three principles that we set out in the

Introduction of this report might open up possibilities for assessment which support the authentic 'free learner'.

To recap then, the research is interested in forms of assessment that:

- allow the structure of learning to be defined by student learners' lived realities, rather than by predetermined or designed structures;
- encourage students to be 'free learners', able to challenge the physical and ideological structure of their pedagogical environment and relationships;
- move students to action and involvement in the world in ways that promote and further the causes of social justice and democracy.

Those principles might encourage student learners to: be open to personal change through their learning; be concerned with knowledge and understanding before

accreditation success; develop a deeper understanding of their own life experience, cultural identity, social background and personal viewpoint as having epistemological validity in the learning relationship; critique the structures of oppression and hierarchy that shape the physical, social, cultural and pedagogical aspects of the learning environment; and teach as well as learn in the context of a 'learning-group' or '-community'. Those are the types of outcomes – perhaps less measurable than the normal learning outcomes found in standard module specification – that are crucial not just to the intellectual horizons of individual learners, but to broader aims of intellectual development in its more social aspects (McArthur, 2010b).

It is the possibilities for developing those types of outcomes that this research explores.

## The Modules

The undergraduate modules that this research focused upon were Year 2 and Year 3 taught modules based within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Liverpool. In the following section a set of 'pen pictures' of those modules is presented, providing an overview of the general approach to learning and assessment adopted for each.

### Module 1: A performance module for music students

The key aim of this module is to develop professional skills in music performance. At the end of the module, students should be able to demonstrate an ability to perform a programme of 40 minutes of music at a near professional standard. The module is taught across three years and includes instrumental/vocal tuition, workshops, master-classes, seminars, attendance at rehearsals and concerts and ensemble work. Key features of formal module aims that are based on non-traditional teaching methods include: the development of a strong professional working relationship between the student and his or her tutor; the development of confidence in performance situations; and working with other musicians to critique and reflect upon performances and the process of rehearsal. Assessment is split between the performance (70% of total mark) and the essay (30%). The essay uses an ongoing production of a practice diary/blog to 'assist a progressive maturation' of students' learning and self-awareness as a practical musician. The practice diary is then used as raw material for the essay. Instructions to students state:

*"Ideally, the best diaries recall and record all your frustrations, anger, success and problems as they occur, and also show evidence of both problem-stating and tactics for problem-solving",*

They also emphasise authenticity as crucial to the learning process:

*"A general rule of thumb is to be completely honest with yourselves. Only then will a genuine self-awareness have a chance."*

### Module 2: A module on asylum and immigration for law students

Learning strategies in this module are distinct from the traditional lecture-seminar model. The module is taught mainly via a combination of knowledge-based and skills-based seminars designed to reinforce independent learning and to develop skills. A feature of the formal 'module aims' that corresponds to a Critical Pedagogy orientation is its explicit commitment to developing "critical approaches" to the subject by "situating the law within its wider political, economic, social and cultural context." Assessment for the module comprises: an 'open book' online multiple choice test (10% of total mark); an essay (50%); and an advice letter (40%). The latter assessment element addresses the practical skills needed to support people requiring asylum and immigration advice. There is a commitment in the module to on-going feedback that enables students to reflect upon each stage in the assessment. It is also expected that feedback on student work will be developed through interaction with the module leader and with student peers on an ongoing basis during seminars. The course documentation states:

*"... the interactive nature of the Seminars is such that there are ongoing opportunities for feedback (from both the Seminar leader and other students) throughout the course – this is an extremely effective learning method, so make use of it!"*

### Module 3: A volunteering and experience module for arts students

This module provides students with an opportunity to take up a placement in an organisational setting which matches their academic and/or career interests. Integral to student progress on the module is the completion of a learning agreement between the student, the host organisation and the academic supervisor. The student takes the lead on drawing up this agreement in consultation with the other parties.

The aims of the placement are varied, but can include improved knowledge of the host organisation, awareness of the effectiveness of the organisation's work, and the ability to apply the student's knowledge to working in the organisation. Students are encouraged to keep a placement journal in order to reflect upon their activities and personal development. The journal may form part of the portfolio of project material. Placements are supported with a workshop programme which is delivered by the Careers and Employability Service and academic members of staff. Assessment is based upon: the project report (50% of total mark), which reflects upon the ways in which the student used their 'academic knowledge' to inform their practice, and on the personal and employability skills the student has acquired and developed during the placement; a portfolio of project material (30%), the contents of which are decided in consultation with the academic supervisor, but would normally contain examples of work completed during the placement such as teaching plans, press releases, exhibition designs, photographs or reproductions of websites; and a presentation that displays placement work (20%). Students are encouraged to use Careers and Employability Service training in presentation skills to support this assessment.

### Module 4: Asylum practice for law students

This module offers students an opportunity to apply their legal knowledge and practical legal skills to real cases involving asylum seekers. It is directly linked to Liverpool Law Clinic's *pro bono* legal advice and representation service for asylum seekers. The Module is designed to develop student skills in client care, team work, file-management, file analysis and planning, legal interviewing, legal research and legal drafting. According to the module documentation:

*"...attributes which are developed are persistence and resilience: we expect you to respond positively to supervision just like a trainee solicitor or pupil barrister."*

The module therefore provides an opportunity for deep practical engagement with the law in support of a relatively vulnerable group of people, all of whom experience social exclusion and many of whom experience destitution. Groups of students are assigned to work on a real case in which a client's claim for asylum has been refused by the Home Office and are given the task of identifying whether the client has a new application that might be made and to prepare that application to the point at which it is ready for submission. Assessment is based upon: file management and quality of research (40% of total mark); interviewing and statement-

drafting (30%); and other drafting tasks (30%). The marking system uses a system of peer-moderation where the teacher gives the group a mark and the students answer a set of questions to rate one another. The answers provided can move the mark up or down. In a well-functioning group, the marks change very little if at all. However, in a group that isn't functioning very well, marks can move, where for example there is a view that one student has not contributed fully to the group's work.

#### **Module 5: A module on community and public involvement for criminology, social policy and sociology students.**

The module aims to provide students with 'hands-on' awareness of a growing government emphasis upon public involvement in crime reduction and criminal justice (and other social policy areas), ostensibly to be more responsive to public needs and desires. Students on this module are invited to ask a number of questions in relation to the assumptions underpinning government reforms including for example how 'communities' and members of the public are 'involved' in crime control and how the public actually engage and interact with criminal justice institutions. The module involves two forms of assessment: a report on a court visit (20% of total mark; and an essay (80%). The first assessment consists of a 'court observation report' based upon at least one short period (minimum of 3 hours) of observation-based research in either a magistrates' or Crown court. The court visit aims to encourage students to reflect on their classroom learning. It also aims to ensure that criminology students have some engagement with, and critical understanding of the criminal justice system. This part of the assessment requires students to formulate a research problem before they go into court and to investigate that problem. Students then participate in a debrief session with peers following the court visit.

#### **Module 6: A module on ethnographic research in politics for criminology, social policy and sociology students.**

This module focuses upon the contribution made by ethnographic research to understandings of politics. The basic idea behind the module is that the best way of learning about political ethnography is by reading ethnographies and by following the examples they set. The module introduces students to ethnographic methods; a family of overlapping research techniques and analytical practices, providing an understanding of those techniques and the variations that exist in different disciplines such as 'case-studies', 'fieldwork' and 'observational research'. In order to further students' understanding of political ethnography the module involves a practical exercise in which students engage in observational fieldwork. Students visit a location where political practices are observable (a public political event such as a council meeting, a public consultation exercise or a public demonstration in Merseyside). The aim for the student is to write field notes, thus allowing them to develop their own ideas about how they might engage with policies, politics and political actors in society. . This will involve various forays into ontological, epistemological, political and moral territories. As part of the practical exercise students are involved in a peer-supported debriefing session that allows them to structure their approach to the assessment. Assessment on this module has three components linked to the practical exercise: submission of field notes (750 words minimum but no maximum; 20% of the final mark); a 1,500-2,000 word essay (40%) in which students are asked

to outline two contrasting ways in which they could write up their field-notes as pieces of ethnographic description; and a one-question, 2hr examination (40%). For the examination, students are given back their field notes to use. The question in the examination is: "How can ethnographic research help us better understand politics, social policy and the state? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Discuss with reference to 1. classic and 2. contemporary studies and provide illustrations drawn from your own field-notes."

#### **Module 7: A module on the global media industry for communications and media students**

The module explores the ways in which media texts exist within a global culture of commerce. It focuses on particular modes of production, distribution and reception and consumption of a wide range of media texts (films, television programs, popular music, broadcast news, etc.) and examines the economic and commercial imperatives that shape these texts as well as the industrial and economic landscape within which they circulate. Particular emphasis is placed on the concentration of power in the industry, and attention is focused upon the small number of transnational entertainment conglomerates that tightly control the media in an increasingly globalised environment, as well as upon the business practices and the regulatory frameworks that allow corporate domination of the media business. Specific topics examined in the module are: globalisation; the conglomeration of the various strands of the entertainment industry and their increasing convergence; media synergies; alternative media business; and many others. The assessment for this module has three components: one 1,500 word report (20%) ; a 2,000 word essay (40%); and a two-hour exam (40%). For the report, students are asked to look at one entertainment conglomerate and discuss the ways in which it has controlled a particular media and entertainment area (film, TV, cable, satellite, music, games, print media, social network media etc.) and to analyse the corporation's business strategies in terms of helping it maintain a position of power in the media market. For the essay, students are given a list of well-known media texts and asked to trace their production and distribution history and the reasons why it made sense for the companies behind them to invest in them. The aim of those assessments is both to develop students' research skills and to allow students to understand the distribution of power in the media industry in a way they can apply more generally.

#### **Module 8: A work-based learning module for criminology, social policy and sociology students.**

This module provides students with work-based learning opportunities. The module has the broad aim of sharing experiences, exchanging ideas and pooling resources between communities and the University. The module is organised by 'Interchange', an independent charity organisation based in the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, that uses its extensive links with local voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) from Merseyside for the purpose of developing mutually beneficial research and work-based learning projects. Working closely with VCOs and students, this module helps to develop a wide range of projects that include: evaluation reports and studies; documentary and oral histories; feasibility studies; and community development activities. Interchange teaching staff run a year-long series of workshops that supports students in their activities and conduct a series of briefing sessions with VCOs over the summer. This enables



VCOs to understand the process and to shape their project ideas. Before the projects begin, the student, member of the teaching staff and a representative of the collaborating organisation meet to finalise the detail of the project and sign a 'learning agreement'. Students are then supported through the process of completing risk-assessments and gaining ethical approval for their projects (the latter process

is part of the student's formal assessment). Assessment is based on three elements: a portfolio report on the project undertaken with the VCO (50%); an essay on 'critical policy analysis' or 'reflexivity and research methods' (30%); and an oral presentation that reflects upon the work undertaken and the student's role in the process (20%).

## The Findings

### Critical Pedagogy

Most participants had no detailed understanding of the 'Critical Pedagogy' educational tradition. Two were aware of Paulo Freire's work, and one noted familiarity with Henry Giroux's work (although he was not familiar with Giroux's work on Critical Pedagogy). However, all of the participants did report motivations for, and commitments to, developing approaches to teaching that corresponded closely to the principles of Critical Pedagogy set out in the previous sections of this report.

The leader of the performance module for music students, for example, reported that he had read critiques of the 'banking model' since being asked to participate in the research and noted a natural affinity with this approach and the way he taught music:

*"I had no idea there was such a thing...so I've looked it up, and as I understand it, it is the assumption that a student changes from being an object to fill with information to an active participant. Now, the reason why I've never heard of it is because you cannot fill somebody with the knowledge as to how to play the violin. It doesn't work that way, never has done, never will." (MI1<sup>2</sup>)*

Module leaders identified a range of reasons for developing non-traditional approaches to teaching. The seven reasons referred to most frequently are set out below.

Firstly, some noted that they were taking a 'non-traditional' approach, and that this meant challenging the traditional relationship between 'the student' and 'the learner' as well as enabling the learner to reflect on power differentials in this relationship. One summarised this approach as:

*"...trying to challenge conventional ways of teaching students...and trying to break down some of the barriers between student and tutor and to really work alongside students and to see it as a dialogue rather than just a one way conversation." (MI4)*

Secondly, some argued that the process of learning should allow power differentials to be identified in collaborative project work and to move towards ways in which relationships can be transformed. One pointed out that their primary purpose was to get the student to explore in university work:

*"the process the politics, the power differentials, the ethics, the underpinned process" (MI5)*

and that:

*"one of the key things underpinning this is identifying power differentials and [that] the whole process should be empowering.... respecting each other and learning from each other, the shared conversations in the workshops in the community and supervisors and students." (MI5)*

Thirdly, some saw Critical Pedagogy more fundamentally as being about having the opportunity to reflect upon teaching practices. One noted in this respect:

*"I suppose I'm aware of it as a way of being a bit more reflective and thoughtful about your teaching practices and how they impact on different types of learners. So, not just focus everything on a kind of traditional university teaching style, a sort of chalk and talk kind of approach, but thinking a bit more about how different approaches to teaching can favour or disadvantage different types of learners" (MI2)*

Fourthly, there was a similar emphasis on the process of learning, rather than the outcomes, or outputs. Thus, as one noted:

*"... students are not just passive - they are engaged in the process." (MI5)*

Indeed, for some it was the process of learning itself that was being assessed.

*"...What I assess is the process, rather than the end result...what needs to happen is that the teacher and the pupil need to understand how you get to be good, and that is an assessment of the process. The process is where the work is..." (MI1)*

*"when I started doing empirical research I fell in love with it, but also thought it was the most effective way of dealing with complexity in the world. If you want to gather empirical data particularly in graphic detail, you can't go in with pre-conceived ideas, because it won't fit the template. It's very difficult so I thought this was a good way of getting people to gather some work of their own and think about the problems connected with making sense of a situation...I also wanted to design the course in a way that it took people through a series of operations they can perform step after step; so starting with going to the council meeting then writing up a few notes then analysing them from different perspectives and seeing that there is not just one correct way of doing things but a variety and you can choose between them. Reflecting back on the value of gathering evidence in this way and thinking about politics in particular through the lines of fieldwork, people are seeing that they have got the capacity to say something new about the world based on doing those types of things." (MI7)*

Fifthly, a key aim, for the majority of participants, was simply to allow students to challenge dominant ways of reading the world and seeing things in a more open way:

*"The idea that students, when educated, basically get much more critical thinking skills, and also this philosophy .... giving students enough to be able to develop these critical thinking skills ... and being able to question things when they see things that are wrong." (MI8)*

*"Whether its [applying] feminism or Marxism or any other approach to any of the kind of challenges they face, it's the idea that our lives are pervaded by political issues ... hopefully it will give people a few resources to see politics as not just something that happens on the television during election time which you kind of feel alienated from but something which involves people in all sorts of practices in lots of different places and lots of different societies which is really important to life." (MI7)*

---

**Footnote 2.** Quotations are identified by module number. So, 'MI' for Module Interview 1. etc.

Sixthly, and related to the previous point, some explained that introducing an understanding of the social and political dimensions of their subject in ways that identify power and oppression was their key motivation.

*“... the way in which [teaching] interacts with the wider kind of social, political, economic kind of questions ... not following a syllabus in the sense that ‘you need to know this’, but thinking about the bigger ideas that are thrown up ...” (MI2)*

*“A lot of the students are interested in social justice and are wanting to engage in research or work and processes that will address social inequality and I think this gives them the chance to have a go at engaging in a project that is doing that, even in an only small way ... inspires them to go on and do that ...” (MI5)*

*“Media industries up until I guess fairly recently have been dominated by political economic approaches that are about questioning how the industries structured, how the industry works and so on... more recently there has been a kind of development of...a new kind of disciplinary tradition...much more neutral in terms of how it presents itself. [It] has been critiqued by political economists as an approach that’s not critical enough, as an approach that sometimes is celebratory of the industries without really asking the questions... So what we do is start by looking at issues like globalisation, media convergence, then we look at how these companies emerged and who and what allowed them to become so big.” (MI8)*

Seventhly, participants highlighted the significance of genuine forms of student-led approaches to learning. For some it was crucial that students played a part in developing their own research questions, and even the topics of their inquiry. For others, the key motivation in their teaching was to allow students to reflect on their personal development and their skills development.

It was clear from those discussions about participants’ motivations for developing their particular approaches to teaching and assessment that the principles of Critical Pedagogy we identified earlier in this report were present in the rationales and strategies that shaped their module development.

What is clear in many of the responses reported here is that all of these teachers worked with some level of ‘intuitive’ Critical Pedagogy. Ideas of challenging the ‘traditional’ top-down relationship between the teacher and the student, reflecting upon power differentials that affect the learning relationship, emphasizing the process of learning rather than formal outputs, critiquing the social and political dimensions of learning and reflecting upon personal development for example all relate to, are all underpinned by Freirean thinking in modern pedagogy. The fact that most of the academic staff who participated in the research had little if any conscious knowledge of Critical Pedagogy does not gainsay this at all. Indeed quite the contrary: the fact that all expressed some awareness of Critical Pedagogy principles, albeit often without a conscious knowledge of the tradition, highlights its pervasive and extensive influence within these departments. Moreover, underlying the testimonies of all of the participants was the kind of value base that we have seen informs the writings and pedagogical practice of Freire and his followers. Crucially, this included a commitment to a pedagogy that is about

genuine learning rather than simply accreditation; and a commitment to authentic educational development rather than instrumentally measurable outcomes.

### **Authenticity and the Learning Process**

So, our participants expressed a clear commitment to an alternative, more authentic pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy was seen by all of the participants as a rewarding approach that enabled students to work at an advanced educational level. There was a strong awareness, for example, that the complexities and contradictions that students face in the real world are less easily captured in traditional learning strategies. Student-led research work in particular, opened up a much richer process of social inquiry. As one participant noted, what students commonly find in their investigations into local politics is that:

*“... things are not always as simple as they seem and the lines we draw are not as obvious and clear when we actually come to engage with practices.” (MI7)*

Moreover, where the project or research problem itself throws up unexpected findings or challenges, a reflexive element in the assessment can allow students to use such challenges as part of the learning process.

*“If [something] broke down, that could be written about. So, there is that opportunity to reflect on why it didn’t work. The fact that there is that reflective element mitigates that problem.” (MI3)*

This kind of reflexive practice was incorporated into four of the modules included in our study.

There was also a general awareness that the traditional techniques and skills students are taught in within academic disciplines can be very limiting. In teaching performance in music, for example:

*“By and large, the instrumental route is the route most [institutions] go down...which makes the assumption that a course in performance consists only of instrumental lessons, which is complete rubbish: of course it doesn’t.” (MI1)*

The process of performance by definition involves autonomous learning. For some, encouraging creativity also had the purpose of ensuring that everyone can develop a unique approach to their work.

A majority argued that developing a range of assessments was crucial to enabling a more open and inclusive style of learning. As one noted:

*“one assessment will favour certain learners in different ways... a mix of skills to give everyone an opportunity to do well at some point.” (MI2)*

Some argued that more traditional modes of assessment are less authentic for students, simply because they tend to be detached from the person’s experience. For one, the solution was not to ignore popular culture for example, but to encourage different ways of negotiating the cultural references students are familiar with:

*“... James Bond everybody knows, whether you come from EU or [are] Home EU. Maybe they don’t know the independent films. One of the albums they have to analyse the production history of is Rhianna, only because it’s the biggest name I could think of these*

*days, even though I don't even know her music. People start thinking about how, race issues, how race is played up in some instances ... So I did try to ensure that they will take a lot of these examples from their own lived reality. It's films that they have seen or they're aware of and TV shows that they are aware of and so on.” (MI8)*

Another advantage of offering non-traditional forms of assessment is that where assessment is based upon student-led work it becomes impossible and actually pointless to rely upon others work or to plagiarise.

What is revealed here is the particularity of understandings of 'authentic' learning. The authenticity of the learning process is seen by many of these academic staff in proximity to students' own lived experience. The presumption is that traditional and didactic forms of pedagogy often rely and draw upon artificial constructions that do not apply in the daily realities of students' worlds. Such constructions have to be learnt by rote and be assessed by mechanical recall. The types of learning being described here, in keeping with the principles of classical Critical Pedagogy are premised rather upon how they resonate with and emerge from the lives of the students themselves. In this interpretation it is by reflection upon the complexities of social reality and contemporary culture as they are experienced that the student comes to really know their world. In some cases this was also how the outcomes of learning could be meaningfully assessed.

### **Active learning**

For the majority of the participants practical engagement with the world, based upon the learner's own experience, provided the basis for developing alternatives to traditional academic ways of doing things. This finding is consistent with our discussion of the relationship between 'authenticity' and 'experience' in the previous section.

Two of the modules involved students in building their own curriculum. In those modules, students were asked which particular skills they felt they needed to work on, and a workshop around those skills was then designed into the schedule. In one module open 'learning cafés' were used where student groups have an appointment with their tutor to discuss progress on the course in more general, unstructured terms.

*“I don't like that idea of teaching somebody so they know something. I don't think that ever happens. You learn what you experience. If you experience deadness and dullness in a lesson, you just switch off, you don't learn, you just go through the motions, you do repetition.” (MI1)*

Another reported that the way in which fieldwork was designed was crucial to the process of enabling students to:

*“have their own empirical experience with which to challenge ideas that either they may have held or assumptions of what happens...or the kind of dry stuff you read in the text books.” (MI6)*

For many, subject matter grew organically from the students' own reflections upon their personal and social experiences in classroom discussion:

*“... in the sense of disrupting taken for granted assumptions, being able to gather personal experience and data and being able to reflect critically on ideas and literature as well as being able to bring the students own critical understanding.” (MI6)*

For some, it was important for students to challenge their own experience-based knowledge:

*“...it's about making students aware of what is happening in the system and what is done in the name of public justice; how social divisions are reflected there and their own position in relation to that - this assessment allows them to think about where those impressions they have of the world come from and how that fits with their experience.” (MI6)*

The 'experiential pedagogy' reported in these testimonies (different from the broad life-experience described in the previous section) is again true to the spirit and programmatic design of Freire's educational practice. The teacher here does not 'tell' the student what conclusions they should be drawing from their inquiry. Rather the student comes to their own conclusions as a result of a 'practice' undertaken with the teacher. Together, they explore the topic and material at hand to achieve insight and understanding. Of course, Freire himself distinguished between the 'teacher' and the 'student' understood as separate actors, and the notion of the 'student-teacher' in order to emphasise the relationship-based nature of learning.

### **Motivating Students to Action**

Earlier in this report we discussed the principle in Critical Pedagogy that invites students to actively engage in their social world, particularly around issues of social justice and equality. There was a unanimous view in our sample that the teaching and assessment styles used in the various modules were important in motivating students to action.

Raising awareness of social and political issues is crucial to motivating students to action. As two of the participants put it:

*“...with recent legal aid cuts, there are fewer and fewer actual immigration practitioners, and a lot of legal advice in immigration and asylum cases is going to come from commercial lawyers doing pro bono work... an important part of the module to me is to introduce as many students as possible to the kind of problems and difficulties that individuals trying to navigate the immigration and asylum system in this country come across...to make sure that they leave the module knowing that, actually, asylum seekers just have a really hard time trying to navigate the system.” (MI2)*

*“Well...our expectation is that our students...are really showing a desire to change what they thought was their career direction, which is great. So hopefully, we're nurturing some of the sort of critical lawyers, radical lawyers of the future... we're encouraging them to continue to think of pro bono as a sort of essential part of their career as a lawyer in whichever kind of direction they might go in... I think the Immigration and asylum work is potentially very transformative, because for many of the students, they wouldn't have met anybody who's got an immigration problem in their lives, and they may never meet somebody [like that] again, but hopefully, we've just given them a bit*

*more of a critical eye when they listen to some of the media reporting of the issues about what it might be like to be an asylum seeker....” (MI4)*

To teach in a truly critical sense also requires that lecturers are able to challenge their own perceptions and assumptions. One module leader illustrated this by explaining the need to challenge how student engagement in political and social issues is viewed:

*“for some people keeping a family together is the most political activity to engage in. It can be incredibly difficult, particularly if you live in a bad area where things are difficult, resources are stretched, asking them to engage with political issues is a very difficult thing to do, because they’re very insecure you know financially, socially insecure they don’t have the security to say ‘actually I’m free tonight’ and ‘I’m going to go off and campaign about whatever’. Many do... so that’s also to be highly respected. But you should also respect those who don’t... we shouldn’t necessarily say action comes in one particular form. It takes many different forms and lots of things can be political when you think about it.” (MI7)*

For those involved in placing students in an organisation, ‘social action’ was also about mutual exchange and co-operation in the community. For one of the modules the community organisation was invited to participate in the assessment as part of a mutual learning process. At the same time, it was equally important in that module that students were encouraged to “think critically about the organisation they have been working with.” (MI3)

Making the step from ‘passive learning’ to social action has been a crucially important process to Critical Pedagogy throughout its historical development and in its various incarnations. As already noted, this aspect of Critical Pedagogy links powerfully with concerns around social justice that pervade the thinking and practice of its practitioners and theorists. Our participants provided some powerful examples of where educators and students alike were not only concerned with, but even driven by, issues of social justice and injustice. Again this was not normally connected explicitly to a Critical Pedagogy approach to assessment, but it was present nonetheless and indeed was a strong theme in the findings.

### **Critical Pedagogy as Transformative Practice**

Participants were all enthusiastic about the transformative potential of their approach to teaching. This transformative potential was apparent in two ways. Firstly, in the sense of enabling students to move beyond the constraints they feel as a result of their background or social position. Secondly, in the sense of increasing the confidence of students to rise to challenges they had previously seen as insurmountable. In relation to the first aspect, one module leader provided an example of how even deeply held social prejudices can be challenged by community-engaged work:

*“a few years ago we had an international student who had been to the international schools who went into a very low income area in Liverpool to do a project and they found it incredibly challenging and in fact they kept coming back and saying all these barriers to why they couldn’t get on with doing the research. The more we interrogated what these barriers were the harder it was to see what they really were and gradually this student began to recognise the barriers were*

*totally internal and that this was a very challenging environment for her. She was scared, and she had never been in an environment like that before. She didn’t really know how to position herself and she expected prejudice. She didn’t experience prejudice but she expected it and when she began to realise the barriers were her own, the experience began to transform. It was very late in the day when this happened so she really struggled with the actual piece of research, but her reflection on it was absolutely brilliant because...she was able to.. challenge herself really and a lot of her prejudices and had a much better understanding of lower income communities than when she went into that project, and developed a respect for the people she was working with.” (MI5)*

Yet, two participants were also cautious about a simplistic and ‘top-down’ approach to transforming students’ social awareness or consciousness. As one argued, noting the dangers of a reproducing a ‘socially aware’ banking-type model of teaching:

*“...it’s about giving people the resources to question inequalities rather than perhaps hear me saying this particular way of doing things is bad.” (MI7)*

However, all of the participants could see a potential for personal transformations in their teaching. Some were also able to measure the extent of their influence in transforming the social and political consciousness of students. One module leader who taught one of the immigration and asylum themed modules noted:

*“I asked the students, at the end of this module, just handed them all out a bit of paper and said ‘write down on here one thing that you didn’t know at the beginning of the module that having actually studied what the Law is on asylum and immigration, that’s now changed your perception’. And, by a long way, the number one comment was that they now realise that all of the headlines about how many immigrants there are in the country and how we’re soft on immigrants is just complete nonsense.” (MI4)*

For some participants, this theme of transformation was linked more to a growth of personal and political confidence.

*“...you can really rapidly see a transition between a very nervous student at the beginning, but by appointment three they’re much more confident [and] into their stride. They realise that they can’t just lamely write down what was said: they have to probe... that they have to challenge things that are not consistent with what’s been said before. And I think that...for me, that’s the sort of, the really clear learning curve: a really quite dramatic change, from the very nervous student at the beginning to the more sort of professional interviewers that they can be by the end.” (MI4)*

*“It really develops confidence and you literally do see their ambition to engage in different ways with organisations and with different social groups and they gain in confidence.” (MI5)*

Another module leader noted,

*“Going into court can be quite a daunting thing... once they’ve done it has an impact on students confidence too, so there is an anxiety about it and then the overcoming [of that anxiety] and then there’s the strength in the overcoming which is quite nice to see.” (MI6)*

*“A variety of people who come through the Department do get a sense of engagement and activism....some people I’d hope it would spark an interest in politics as not just being this confined thing which belongs to a particular group of individuals who we call politicians, but something which we’re all engaged in reproducing collectively, through our activities and practices.” (MI7)*

This theme of personal transformation of different types recurred throughout all of the interviews conducted. Students were said to change their minds about issues they engaged with and to shift their perspectives when confronted with ‘the unfamiliar’ in a learning situation. Indeed for some students this could be radicalising as they shed long-held beliefs and notions they been raised with. Again, the theme of transformation linked in some important ways to the underlying principle of authenticity that runs through our argument here. Where learning is inauthentic the ‘learner’ can parrot facts and concepts for assessment, scoring highly perhaps but not engaging with that formal output on any personal level. Where learning is authentic the learner has engaged with the pedagogical material at hand without mimicry or cynical playing-of-the-game for the highest grade. In this latter scenario, the learner opens themselves to the possibility of personal transformation, regardless of accreditation imperatives.

### **Inequalities in the Classroom**

The process of learning can bring classroom inequalities and social divisions to the surface that would otherwise remain hidden:

*“It’s very interesting actually, with the international students when it comes to the seminars on the Tier-based VISA system, which is the system which the international students get their entry and residence under. They have a lot to say on that actually. And it’s very interesting because it horrifies... the Home and EU students... they had no idea, you know. They know these students, they sit next to them in lectures and seminars...and they have absolutely no idea... what this country makes these students go through...” (MI2)*

One argued that social background made little difference to the performance of students on their module, but that what counted was how students resisted the labels ascribed to them. One module leader noted that students’ reactions to their own backgrounds were also key to developing self-awareness:

*“One, for example, comes from a family who just doesn’t get why she is interested in music at all; that’s made her very stubborn. Because she’s that interested, she’s going to do it. And that’s made her almost difficult to teach because of her passion, because the assumption of her environment is that it’s going to be denigrated, misunderstood, not understood. At the same time, people from equally musically non-privileged backgrounds haven’t developed that at all...*

*something else has happened. So, I don’t think it is possible to predict.” (MI1)*

The personal and social relevance of the module was reported by three participants as significant in encouraging students from a range of backgrounds to engage with it. As one noted:

*“... some of the students that might come from more deprived backgrounds and who struggle to relate to the normal structures of the university can, actually, in these practical tasks, excel. That’s certainly one of the positive things about the clinic. And obviously, it’s not true that all students from deprived backgrounds don’t get excellent marks anyway outside the clinic. But...my perception of university is that is full of coded structures and languages and meanings ...” (MI4)*

The process of assessment itself was seen by some as reflecting social divisions. For example, one module leader saw the processes and types of assessment used as profoundly gendered:

*“Boys tend to do much better at the exam thing, because their brains tend to work in a way that they remember large amounts of information and can repeat it in a relatively structured way, whereas girls tend to do better on the coursework side of things because they’re better at the going away and thinking things through in a kind of more conscientious way... It’s not universally true... but with my academic advisees it does tend to play out like that.” (MI2)*

For one module leader, the type of assessment used was crucial to including overseas students.

*“The one problem that I have faced... is about understanding the differences between essays and reports. This is a big problem for some of the students. On the other hand, I found out that people who come from abroad in particular existing EU students - all of whom take my module because the work is global - kind of understand what, the report is because I think they learn how to do reports way before our students ...” (MI8)*

This module leader continued:

*“I think the ethnicity aspect is more important here because of the way arrangements work in this University. I think it’s more inclusive than non-traditional assessment, more inclusive for the Chinese students who come in by direct entry at level two and the first ever thing they will do is take this module. So as I said, many of them struggle with the essays and certainly with the exam. But the report is something they do quite well. So I guess in that particular perspective it is more inclusive than traditional modes.” (MI8)*

This theme of inequality within the learning situation itself and within formal assessment of learning brought together a number of other themes that have already been described, including the centrality of teaching styles to developing experiential learning and personal transformation. The example of Home British students hearing from overseas students about the difficulties of the VISA system and its challenges is illustrative of this. These students, having had no experience of this process themselves, were struck by the

direct accounts from their fellow overseas students, learning about the prejudices and irrationalities of that system far more vividly than from any book or formal lecture. With respect to assessment, the examples given of where gender and ethnicity affect the fairness of specific assessment modes need to be highlighted as areas of potential ethical-pedagogical concern.

### **Institutional Barriers**

In most modules, room facilities were seen as a key barrier to developing critical and dialogue-based learning approaches. Some noted that facilities were wholly inadequate for what they were trying to achieve in the classroom.

*“Very rarely do I get given a room that is decent enough... I feel most comfortable in a situation where you can have a lecture and give a discussion about the lecture and go on to the exercise and then questions can go backwards and forwards and give it a bit more openness... So to have a kind of space where you can merge the two is useful but you never get rooms like that.” (MI7)*

Another difficulty noted was the structure of the University year. One participant pointed out that the semester-based system, with its requirement that teaching be carried out across two semesters of twelve weeks was not flexible enough to develop a level of interaction that would produce the best results. Another referred to this same issue:

*“Because it’s ongoing assessment, the assessment kicks in very early on. The processes aren’t there to ensure that we’ve got approval from the external examiner for the questions... so, every year I have to release the questions to the students and say that ‘this is subject to approval from the external examiner’... because, the whole School operates under the assumption that all coursework questions are released in week 10... The processes just don’t work to facilitate that sort of thing.” (MI2)*

Also, a rigid application of anonymous marking can cause problems in dialogue-based assessment strategies designed to support students. As one noted:

*“It is impossible to keep work anonymised in the way it’s meant to be...I mean, first marking of the work is always done anonymously, but you can’t decide on a final mark if you don’t de-anonymise them. So, those sorts of processes just aren’t set up.” (MI3)*

This concern with structural and material barriers is illustrative of how implicitly Critical Pedagogy informed approaches to teaching and assessment seek to deconstruct the learning environment. As they do so, they expose and often subvert the inequalities embedded within the physical and temporal structures of the learning environment. Strong examples of this here were found in the accounts of how inadequate teaching spaces and compressed semesters worked against the high quality interaction and dialogue necessary for authentic learning to occur and for critically inclined assessment to be possible.

### **Student Resistance**

For some, the key barrier to developing students as ‘free learners’ lay not in institutional or physical barriers, but rather in the expectations and commitment of students themselves.

*“Well... I think I’m much keener on that approach than they are... which is quite interesting... I have a syllabus, of course, in the sense that is on the module specification - the topics we are going to cover. I’ve sent them readings and questions before the seminars. But there are no lectures in this module, so ...I think what they’re used to in [other] modules is to have a hand-out with...this heading and ‘we’re going to look at this bit’ and ‘you need to know these cases’ and ‘then we’re going to look at this bit’ and ‘you need to take this legislation’. It’s a very prescriptive syllabus. I don’t do that sort of thing at all... And they get quite anxious, actually. I think they’d like to have a very detailed syllabus that they can just work to bit by bit and make sure they understand all of it.” (MI2)*

Indeed, as one participant noted, the idea that being a ‘free learner’ was an option to be offered to students made little sense: in other words that students had to be forced to be ‘free’ learners. Their module was set up in a way that if students did not engage in autonomous learning strategies, they would not be able to pass the module. Others experienced this concern in the context of a marketised university system in which students probably expected to be spoon-fed and be less rather than more autonomous:

*“There’s no permission involved there. They’ve actually expressed a commitment by turning up with an instrument and wanting to take the performance course, which they don’t have to do in this department. You know, we’ve got a very flexible course. So I don’t think again I would accept the premises upon which the question is based: ‘allowing them’,?: No; they have to be, and they come with that assumption, whether or not it’s been articulated ...that’s a different matter. And I think there are some instances I can quote where they have expected me to do the work for them. But I know very well I can’t, so, you know, it’s never going to happen.” (MI1)*

A majority of module leaders reported that students typically found their module more challenging than other modules. Half of the sample noted that although students tend to find the module highly rewarding, at the outset the intensity of the work became a source of complaint:

*“We get: ‘It’s a lot of work’. We get: ‘It’s a real shock to the system. I knew it would be a shock, but it’s more of a shock than I imagined.” (MI4)*

*“I had one person saying average third year classes expect you to read 200 pages you have given us at least 450 pages to read. I think alright I’ll try and dumb it down then. I realise I do probably because the nature of ethnographic work is descriptive you need to read unfortunately, so I’m also aware that I am impinging upon peoples time by asking them to read quite long tracts...People who want perhaps, an easier more traditional learning experience, which is fine, different horses for different courses, don’t like particularly large reading loads and not be given straight forward*

instructions about how to complete the exercise and so on.” (MI7)

Some reported that they had to deal with student antipathy to, or even a fear of, new styles of learning and assessment.

“They’re anxious about anything new, but when they realise it’s working for them, they’re fine about it.” (MI2)

This anxiety means that the module leader is required to dedicate more time to reassuring students in classroom discussion.

“I think it’s because it’s unusual, they haven’t really come across it. So I do spend quite a lot of time in the seminars saying ‘have you got any questions about the assessment?’” (MI2)

In the case of the modules that involved fieldwork based assessments, it was reported that students simply feared being out of the classroom and encountering a different organisational setting. One module leader reported a technique that was used to deal with such anxieties:

“I have a ‘preparations seminar’ and I give students sticky notes and ask them to write down their main anxiety about doing this ... and I then stuck it on the wall and 90% of these were about the [research] questions: ‘Do our questions need to have some connection to the reading?’ ‘What if the court proceedings on our visit don’t fit with our own questions?’ And anxieties about retaining all the information on the day... I put all these up on the wall and that was reassuring for them because they saw ‘it is not just me, everyone is thinking the same thing.’” (MI6)

Another student worry reported was that marking would be inconsistent across modules. On some modules, students were concerned that a higher standard of work was required, or that the marking criteria would be different from other modules.

One participant explained that how prepared students were for different forms of assessment and different learning strategies was dependent upon the degree to which they have experienced such strategies earlier in their degree programme. It seems, therefore, that Critical Pedagogy approaches applied across the programme can have a significant effect on preparing students for non-traditional types of assessment even if they are not consciously intended for that purpose.

The unconventional nature of the assessments in the modules we analysed meant that significant time commitments on the part of teaching staff were needed to support the students who lacked confidence in those types of learning. In some modules, the formative nature of the work meant that on-going feedback in workshops was important and also time intensive.

“Unlike on other modules, students will submit a first draft. So, let’s say, for a ‘letter of advice’ to the client, they’ll draft up a ‘letter of advice’, and they’ll send it to us, and we’ll give them really detailed feedback, and then they have to go away and incorporate that feedback and do some more work, and then they’ll submit it again, and we’ll say ‘it’s still not right’, ...and

that letter might go back four or five times, ten times even ... so there’s a lot of feedback in this module and an expectation that they incorporate that...” (MI4)

“Supervising a student’s work properly requires immense amounts of staff time to do well.” (MI4)

“It’s highly resource heavy. I think it’s a big commitment from the academic side of it, because it’s weekly workshops and there’s a lot of individual supervision that goes over and above those particular workshops... if you’ve got a student who’s got a dilemma it can’t really be shelved for another week it has to be dealt with...” (MI5)

In modules that are based upon collaborative relationships in the community, there were added time and resource pressures. As one module leader noted:

“... we can’t have more than 24 projects at undergraduate level and say 6 posts at graduate level doing these kinds of projects because we wouldn’t be able to support the community organisations. We could do it from the academic side and again the ethos is if it’s going to be of benefit to the organisations has to be properly prepared an supported throughout the process and that’s very resource heavy.” (MI5)

These data suggest that Critical Pedagogy approaches to learning are not an ‘easy option’ and do require an attitudinal shift by the students and tutors, as well as a resource commitment. For students from educational backgrounds where didactic teaching has been the norm, notions of autonomous learning and co-learning with the teacher can be difficult. Indeed the discovery of student resistance, conceptualised in this way, can be seen as a ‘positive’ in that it suggests a real application of Critical Pedagogy educational principles which are after all intrinsically challenging. With respect to assessment this finding does also indicate that there is much to learn about how the student experiences critical forms of assessment. Students in today’s HE climate are bound to be challenged by Critical Pedagogy, seeing in it a potential threat to their eventual success.

### Gauging Student Response

Module leaders generally reported a consistently high and above average level of student feedback on their modules. As one noted:

“It’s down on the left-hand columns and it’s very, very embarrassing. I mean, any single sheet is all down the left-hand column...Excellent, excellent, excellent, excellent... every single sheet, every year” (MI1)

In three modules, the results were typically higher than any other module in the department. One module leader reported that some weak students tended to do better because they responded to the social relevance of their work on the module:

“... one thing that we are really aware of is that students who maybe struggle with the sort of conventional, academic assessments; sometimes some of those students really shine when they’re asked to, in a practical way, apply the law to a real, practical problem. So, sometimes students who are pegging lower marks elsewhere get higher marks for their casework, because [it] motivates them more



*powerfully, because... they're working on a real problem...The real worldliness of it... can be very inspiring for students, I think.” (MI2)*

This final theme is important for what it tells us about how the student experiences Critical Pedagogy approaches to assessment. A first reading of this testimony seems to indicate that many students thrive on this type of learning and associated assessment. More than this however, there is a hint in the last quote given of a deeper and potentially strategic pedagogical theme: the value of those approaches to assessment differentiated by learner-type. In recent years the University of Liverpool, along with all other Russell

Group universities have faced calls to ‘diversify’ their student profiles. In the case of the University of Liverpool this diversification is apparent across many schools and departments with increases in the proportions of students from backgrounds of low participation. The same can be said for ethnicity, disability and, in some subject areas, gender. This diversification is likely to register also at the pedagogical level as students with quite different learning characteristics and needs take up places. Critical Pedagogy may then come out of the educational sidelines to play an increasingly important and even mainstream role across a wider range of subject areas.

## Conclusion

All of the participants in this study worked with some level of 'intuitive' Critical Pedagogy, even if they did not follow a particular author or refer to a particular pedagogic school of thought. In the sample of modules selected for this research, we have found a range of innovative ways in which module designers and module leaders have sought to enhance learning by applying the core aims of Critical Pedagogy as we set them out in the introduction to this report. Here we use those core aims to structure our conclusions.

### *1. Forms of assessment that allow the structure of learning to be defined by student learners' lived reality, rather than a predetermined or designed structure.*

For some participants, the object of their assessment strategies was to enable students to play a part in developing their own research questions, and even the topics of their inquiry. For others, the key motivation in their teaching was to allow students to reflect upon their own personal development and on the development of their learning skills. Participants reported that student-led research work opened up a much richer process of social inquiry. Two of the modules involved students in the construction of the curriculum. The inclusion of an ongoing process of reflexivity sought to enhance students' experience of their learning. Space for reflecting on the learning or research process was designed into four of the modules included in our study. In some modules, students were required to use their own interpretations of the social environment as a starting point. In others, students were required to critically reflect upon their own lived reality in order to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of other social groups.

### *2. Forms of assessment that encourage students to be 'free learners', able to challenge the physical and ideological structure of their pedagogical environment and relationships.*

There was an explicit acknowledgment by participants that they sought to challenge the traditional relationship between students and learners in ways that could enable the learner to reflect on power differentials in the learning process. For some, this meant power differentials were explored in collaborative project work with tutors, with other students and with community partners. We found evidence that the modules provided a transformative potential by providing the opportunity to overcome the intellectual and emotional constraints shaped by their background or social position. For others the transformative process occurred simply through giving students confidence to deal with novel and difficult assessment tasks.

### *3. Forms of assessment that move students to action and involvement in the world in ways that promote and further the causes of social justice and democracy.*

The majority of participants were explicitly committed to allowing students to challenge dominant ways of reading the world and thinking critically, in a more open way. This inevitably meant that their understandings of the social world were challenged by the learning process. For some, introducing an understanding of the social and political dimensions of their subject in ways that identify power and oppression was their key motivation. The process of assessment itself was seen by some as a way of ameliorating social or inequalities in the classroom. There is evidence

that forms of assessment that allow students to achieve autonomy are likely to include an increasingly socially diverse range of students in HE. There may be more fundamental questions to be explored then in relation to the potential of Critical Pedagogy approaches to enhance widening participation efforts.

In the introduction to this report, we argued that there are considerable structural barriers to the application of Critical Pedagogy in the UK context. The problem that always confronts an emerging cultural practice entering a dominant culture is that it will lose its autonomy as it is incorporated into that dominant culture. Our participants were generally aware of this as a problem that confronted them in the classroom.

Some difficult questions for the University of Liverpool were raised with respect to this process of incorporation. Before we summarise those, it is important to note that all of the modules included in the study were designed by staff members who were individually (or collectively in their departments) committed to developing non-traditional learning strategies. None of the critically-inclined approaches in these modules were explicitly encouraged by the institution – at Faculty or University level. However, it is equally important to recognise that neither were they discouraged. However, Those module leaders did not generally feel supported by the institutional environment. Indeed, we identified a series of unintended institutional characteristics that restricted their approaches to learning, including: a lack of appropriate room facilities; the rigid structure of the University year; and the strict application of anonymous marking. None of those would normally be regarded as problems in more traditional modules. The fact that those aspects of the University system cause unintended problems for Critical Pedagogy approaches highlights its place as marginal to the institution's mainstream educational culture.

Participants were also acutely aware of the general problem of seeking to develop transformative forms of learning practice and assessment in a system that in many ways is antithetical to Critical Pedagogy. Fundamentally, in the context of a system of HE increasingly focused on the end-point (the achievement of a degree classification), participants were keen to underline the importance of the process of learning, rather than the simple measurement of *outcomes*.

At the same time, it is precisely the possibility that their results might be compromised by a new and challenging form of assessment that makes students nervous and in some cases unwilling to engage in those modules. It is clear that the marketisation and commoditisation of the British HE system has made it simultaneously more difficult and (we argue) more important to pursue principles of Critical Pedagogy. Again, this was a contradiction that our participants were well aware of. Yet there are practical advantages to using assessments based upon Critical Pedagogy that can reduce some of the harmful effects of marketization on authentic learning. Assessments that depend upon a high level of original student work - especially those that involve students formulating their own research questions - meant that students could not draw upon standard texts. In an increasingly ends-focussed and results-focussed system of HE, self-directed learning strategies by definition allow the process of learning to be

valued, rather than the grade. Having said this, in terms of the awarding of final grades it is also clear that students on those modules did perform very well; and even perhaps better than in more traditionally structured assessments.

All of this suggests that Critical Pedagogy approaches may offer an important route to maintaining high quality educational experience under increasingly difficult conditions.

## References

- Bailey, M. and Freedman, D. (eds.) *The Assault on Universities: a manifesto for resistance*, London: Pluto.
- Benjamin, W. (1998) 'The Author as Producer' in Benjamin, W. *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, available online at: [[http://yaleunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Walter\\_Benjamin\\_-\\_The\\_Author\\_as\\_Producer.pdf](http://yaleunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Walter_Benjamin_-_The_Author_as_Producer.pdf)]; accessed 31 March 2014.
- Benjamin, W. (2011) 'The Life of Students', reproduced in full at [<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/benjamin/>], accessed 21 March 2014.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Sampson, J. (1999) Peer learning and assessment, *Assessment and Evaluation in HE*, vol. 24(4): 413-426.
- Burgess-Proctor, A., Cassano, G., Condron, D., Lyons, H. and Sanders, G. (2014) *A Collective Effort to Improve Sociology Students' Writing Skills*, *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 42 (2): 130-139.
- Callinicos, A. (2006) *Universities in a neoliberal world*, London: Bookmarks.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. And Morrell, E. (2008), 'Critical Pedagogy in an Urban High School English Classroom', *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: The Promise of Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Fenton, N. (2011) Impoverished Pedagogy, Privatised Practice, in Bailey, M and Freedman, D (eds.) *The Assault on Universities: a manifesto for resistance*, London: Pluto.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1974) *Education: the Practice of Freedom*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing cooperative.
- Gibbs, G. (2006), How assessment frames student learning, in Bryan C. and Klegg K. (eds.) *Innovative Assessment in HE*, London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H (1997) *Channel Surfing: Racism, the Media, and the Destruction of Today's Youth*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Giroux, H. (1994) *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (2000) *Impure Acts. The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (2010) Lessons From Paulo Freire, *Chronicle of HE*, vol. 57 (9).
- Giroux, H. (2011) Beyond the Swindle of the Corporate University, in Bailey, M and Freedman, D (eds.) *The Assault on Universities: a manifesto for resistance*, London: Pluto.
- Giroux, H. and Roger, S. (1989) *Popular Culture, Schooling and Everyday Life*, New York: Bergin and Garvey.
- Gramsci, A. (2012) *Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Chicago: Haymarket.
- Holst, J. (2006), Paulo Freire in Chile, 1964-1969: Pedagogy of the Oppressed in Its Sociopolitical Economic Context, *Harvard Educational Review* vol. 76(2): 243-270.
- hooks', b (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, London: Routledge.
- Kincheloe, J. and Berry, K. (2004) *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualising the Bricolage*, London: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. (2008) *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy: an Introduction*, London: Springer.
- McArthur, J. (2010a) Time to look anew: Critical Pedagogy and disciplines within *HE*, *Studies in HE*, vol. 35 (3): 301-315.
- McArthur, J. (2010b) Achieving social justice within and through *HE*: the challenge for Critical Pedagogy, *Teaching in HE*, vol. 15(5): 493-504.
- McGittigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble: money, markets and the future of HE*, London: Pluto.
- McLaren, P. (1995) *Critical Pedagogy and predatory culture: Oppositional Politics in a post-modern era*, London: Routledge
- McLaren, P. (1997) *Revolutionary multiculturalism: pedagogies of dissent for the new millennium*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- McLaren, P. (2013) *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy against Empire*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Neary, M. (2014) Student as Producer: A pedagogy for the Avant-Garde; or how do revolutionary teachers teach? Paper available online at: [<http://josswinn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/15-72-1-pb-1.pdf>]; accessed 31 March 2014.
- Neary, M. and Winn, J. (2009) Student as Producer: reinventing the student experience in HE, in Bell, L, Stevenson, H and Neary, M (eds.) *The Future of HE: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience*, London: Continuum.
- Nicol, N. (2010) From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass HE, *Assessment & Evaluation in HE*, vol. 35(5): 501-517.
- Nicol, D. (2009) Assessment for learner self-regulation: Enhancing achievement in the first year using learning technologies, *Assessment & Evaluation in HE* 34 (3): 335-52.
- Oliver, P. (2006) Purposive Sampling, in Jupp, V (ed.) *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, London: Sage.
- Orsmond, P., Merry, S. and Reiling, K. (2002) The Use of Exemplars and Formative Feedback when Using Student Derived Marking Criteria in Peer and Self-assessment, *Assessment and Evaluation in HE*, vol. 25. Pp.309-324.
- Quinn, P. (2009) Paulo Freire's Theory of Education as political transformation, in McDonnell, C (ed.) *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society*, Maynooth, Dublin: Mullin Print.
- Shor, I. (1992) *Empowering Education*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Toscano, A. (2011) The University as a Political Space, in Bailey, M and Freedman, D (eds.) *The Assault on Universities: a manifesto for resistance*, London: Pluto.

**This report is published by:**  
The University of Liverpool and the  
Higher Education Academy

**Published:** 2015

**ISBN:** 978-1-908812-02-5

**Layout:** lowwintersun.info



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL

