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## CREATING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENTS TO FLOURISH: A CASE STUDY OF CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED THROUGH A NON-FORMAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IN A COLLEGIATE UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT:** It is widely acknowledged that higher education offers great opportunities for students to develop as learners, as future employees and as citizens. Much of this learning and development takes place outside the structures of the formal classroom and yet there is little evidence about the ways that these spaces may best create conditions for students to develop their capabilities and interests, and flourish as positive members of a just society. Universities are in a position to “provide the enabling spaces and conditions for development and learning in the way that individuals cannot do alone” (Walker, 2006: 37), and this research seeks to explore ways that non-formal spaces can create conditions for such learning to occur.

A new learning community has been set up within one university college with a focus on learning about and engaging with issues related to international development and human rights. Learning communities are structured with the purpose of encouraging students to connect ideas from different disciplines and of creating long-term, sustained social interactions (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). This learning project aims provide participative and critical learning opportunities for a core group of approximately ten students, and considers student development based on a holistic concept of areas of life that a student has reason to value. Since this differs depending on the interests and ambitions of the student, the project is necessarily student led, but support is provided to students to ensure equality of opportunity to participate. Non-formal (i.e. non-credit bearing and optional), interdisciplinary workshops are run for students who sign up to the community and networking events to facilitate links with international organisations, human rights activists and local refugee



groups to help the students self-organise and lead events and activities for further learning.

The research looks at the ways that the project develops students' capabilities, defined as their sense of agency and their "freedom to achieve well-being" (Sen, 1992: 48). In an ever more competitive market, universities are increasingly interested in what they can offer to the student experience in addition to classroom teaching. Often the focus is on employability, understood narrowly as a 'checklist' of skills perceived to be of value to prospective employers. Here we explore broader areas of value that contribute to students' well-being and how these might impact on their experience of university and their freedom to make a positive contribution to society beyond university. In particular we focus on the way students engage with social justice issues through the project, and consider the ways they become involved with issues of global importance and how they interpret their freedom to act, participate and contribute in a more just society, through consideration of their perceptions of changes in their capabilities.

In this paper I report on the development of capabilities that increase students' freedom to achieve well-being and agency, and to participate in issues related to social justice and the learning outcomes for students involved in the learning community in terms of knowledge and understanding, attitudes and transferable skills that may enable them to make a positive contribution to society beyond university. These outcomes have been explored through Sen's capability approach to examine the impact of a learning community from the perspective of what students value. Through observations of the activities the students organise, we attempt to unpick the interpretations of the learning community as a space to learn, consider different attitudes and acquire skills.

**KEYWORDS:** capability approach, non-formal learning communities, transformative education, social justice.

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**RESUM:** És ben conegut que els estudis universitaris ofereixen grans oportunitats perquè els alumnes cresquen com a aprenents, futurs treballadors i ciutadans. Una bona part d'aquest aprenentatge i desenvolupament té lloc fora de l'estructura formal de l'aula, i tot i així, hi ha poques proves sobre quins són els mètodes amb què aquests espais poden crear millor les condicions



perquè els alumnes desenvolupen les seues capacitats i interessos, i prosperar com a membres positius d'una societat justa. Les universitats es troben en situació de «proveir els espais habilitadors i les condicions de desenvolupament i d'aprenentatge d'una manera en què no ho poden fer els individus sols» (Walker, 2006: 37), i aquesta investigació pretén analitzar com es poden crear condicions per facilitar aquest aprenentatge en àmbits no formals.

En un centre d'aquesta universitat on es promou l'aprenentatge i el compromís pel que fa a temes sobre desenvolupament internacional i drets humans s'ha establert una nova comunitat d'aprenentatge. Les comunitats d'aprenentatge estan estructurades amb el propòsit de motivar els estudiants perquè relacionen idees de disciplines diverses i crear interaccions socials i sostenibles a llarg termini (Zhao i Kuh, 2004). Aquest projecte d'aprenentatge mira d'oferir oportunitats participatives i d'aprenentatge crític a un grup fix d'aproximadament deu estudiants, i considera que el desenvolupament de l'estudiantat es basa en un concepte holístic d'àrees de la vida que un estudiant tinga motius per valorar. Com que això varia en funció dels interessos i de les ambicions dels estudiants, el projecte ha d'estar encapçalat per ells, tot i que se'ls ofereix suport i se'ls garanteix igualtat d'oportunitats per participar-hi. Per als estudiants que s'inscriuen en activitats comunitàries i de formació de xarxes es realitzen tallers interdisciplinaris no formals (optatius i sense crèdits acadèmics) per facilitar l'establiment de vincles amb organismes internacionals, activistes de drets humans o grups locals de refugiats i ajudar-los a autoorganitzar-se i dur a terme esdeveniments i activitats de formació contínua.

La investigació examina de quines maneres el projecte desenvolupa les capacitats dels estudiants, definides com el seu sentit d'«agència» (voluntat) i la seua «llibertat per aconseguir benestar» (Sen, 1992: 48). En un mercat cada vegada més competitiu, les universitats estan més i més interessades en allò que poden aportar a l'experiència dels estudiants com a complement a l'ensenyament a les aules. Sovint, l'enfocament se centra en l'ocupabilitat, entesa de manera limitada com una simple *llista* d'habilitats suposadament valorades per possibles ocupadors. Ací analitzem àrees de valor més àmplies que contribueixen al benestar de l'alumnat i com aquestes àrees poden influir en la seua experiència en la universitat i en la seua llibertat per fer una contribució positiva a la societat més enllà de la universitat. De manera particular, ens centrem en com els estudiants es comprometen amb qüestions de justícia social a través del projecte, i considerem les formes que tenen d'implicar-se en temes



d'importància mundial i com interpreten la seua llibertat d'actuar, participar i contribuir a una societat més justa, tot considerant la percepció que tenen dels canvis en les seues capacitats.

En aquest article presentem el desenvolupament de capacitats que donen més llibertat als estudiants per assolir benestar i lliure voluntat i participar en assumptes relacionats amb la justícia social, i els resultats d'aprenentatge per als estudiants implicats en la comunitat d'aprenentatge en termes de coneixement i d'entesa, d'actituds i d'habilitats transferibles que puguen permetre'ls de contribuir positivament a la societat fora del context universitari. Aquests resultats els hem abordat a partir de l'enfocament de les capacitats de Sen amb l'objectiu d'analitzar la influència d'una comunitat d'aprenentatge des de la perspectiva d'allò que valora l'alumnat. A través d'observacions de les activitats que organitzen els estudiants tractem de desconstruir les interpretacions de la comunitat d'aprenentatge com a espai per aprendre, considerar diverses actituds i adquirir habilitats.

**PARAULES CLAU:** enfocament sobre les capacitats, comunitats d'aprenentatge no formals, educació transformativa, justícia social.

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**RESUMEN:** Es ampliamente conocido que los estudios universitarios ofrecen grandes oportunidades a los estudiantes para desarrollarse como educandos, futuros trabajadores y ciudadanos. Gran parte de este aprendizaje y desarrollo tiene lugar fuera de la estructura formal del aula y aun así hay muy poca evidencia acerca de las formas que en esos espacios puedan crear las mejores condiciones para que los estudiantes puedan desarrollar sus capacidades e intereses y prosperar como miembros positivos de una sociedad justa. Los universitarios están en una posición de «proveer los espacios habilitadores y condiciones de desarrollo y aprendizaje de una manera que los individuos no pueden hacer solos» (Walker 2006: 37), y esta investigación busca explorar maneras en las que los espacios no-formales pueden crear condiciones para que dicho aprendizaje ocurra.

Una nueva comunidad de aprendizaje se ha establecido en uno de los centros universitarios con un enfoque en el aprendizaje e involucramiento en temas relacionados con desarrollo internacional y derechos humanos. Las comunidades de aprendizaje están estructuradas con el propósito de estimular a los



estudiantes en diferentes disciplinas y crear interacciones sociales y sostenibles a largo plazo (Zhao y Kuh, 2004). Este proyecto de aprendizaje busca ofrecer oportunidades participativas y de aprendizaje crítico para un grupo estable de aproximadamente 10 estudiantes, y considera el desarrollo estudiantil basado en un concepto holístico en áreas de la vida que un estudiante tenga motivos para valorar. Ya que esto varía dependiendo de los intereses y ambiciones del estudiante, el proyecto ha de estar necesariamente liderado por estudiantes, pero se ofrece apoyo a éstos asegurando la equidad de oportunidades para participar. Se realizan talleres interdisciplinarios y no-formales (opcionales y sin créditos académicos) para los estudiantes que se inscriben en la comunidad así como eventos de trabajo en red que facilitan vínculos con organizaciones internacionales, activistas de derechos humanos o grupos locales de refugiados para ayudar a los estudiantes a auto-organizarse y liderar eventos y actividades para futuros aprendizajes.

La investigación se centra en las maneras en las que el proyecto desarrolla capacidades en los estudiantes, definidas desde su propio sentido de voluntad y su «libertad para lograr bienestar» (Sen, 1992: 48). Encontrándonos en un mercado cada vez más competitivo, las universidades cada vez están más interesadas en lo que pueden ofrecer a la experiencia estudiantil como complemento a la enseñanza en clase. A menudo, el enfoque se centra en la empleabilidad, entendida estrechamente como una *lista* de habilidades percibidas como de valor para posibles empleadores. Aquí exploramos áreas más amplias de valor que contribuyen al bienestar de los alumnos y cómo éstas pueden tener un impacto en su experiencia en la universidad y su libertad de hacer una contribución positiva a la sociedad más allá de la universidad. De manera particular nos centramos en la manera en la que los estudiantes se comprometen con asuntos de justicia social a través del proyecto, y consideran las formas en que ellos se involucran con temas de importancia global y cómo interpretan su libertad de actuar, participar y contribuir a una sociedad más justa, mediante la consideración de los cambios de percepción en sus capacidades.

En este artículo informo sobre el desarrollo de capacidades que incrementan la libertad de lograr bienestar y libre voluntad en los estudiantes y de participar en asuntos relacionados con justicia social, y en los resultados de aprendizaje para los estudiantes involucrados en la comunidad en términos de conocimiento y entendimiento, actitudes y habilidades transferibles que puedan permitirles realizar una contribución positiva a la sociedad más allá de la universidad. Es-



tos resultados han sido explorados a través del enfoque de capacidades de Sen para analizar el impacto de una comunidad de aprendizaje desde la perspectiva de lo que los estudiantes valoran. A través de entrevistas con estudiantes tratamos de desmontar las percepciones sobre la comunidad de aprendizaje como un espacio para aprender, considerar diversas actitudes y adquirir habilidades. Además, preguntaremos qué aspectos de la comunidad de aprendizaje facilitaron el desarrollo de resultados a los que dieron valor y cuáles fueron los resultados clave. Consideramos si el espacio aportó oportunidades para la reflexión y la colaboración y qué factores las propiciaron o inhibieron.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** enfoque de capacidades, comunidades de aprendizaje no-formales, educación transformativa, justicia social.

## Introduction

University is perceived as a place where students can begin to fulfil their potential, develop their skills, learn to flourish in the world around them, make life-long friends and improve their chances of finding a satisfying and well-paid job. Much of the process of facilitating this focuses on academic departments and the curricula offered to students through the degree courses that universities provide. However, it is evident that much of the learning that students do at university happens outside the classroom. A lot of this is informal and social: meeting people, learning to cook and do laundry and to cope away from home. However, universities are increasingly considering the provision they offer for students to get involved in non-formal learning; spaces provided for students to develop leadership and other skills that will set them apart from the rest when they apply for jobs. These spaces exist outside the classroom and are non-credit bearing, but are part of the student experience and are increasingly considered by employers. For many the motivation to get involved in such activities is not about employability, but about doing something they enjoy or perceive as meaningful. Student societies and associations, junior common room or student union committees, voluntary work and short-term projects are all examples of ways that students can be active at university in non-formal settings.



Learning communities are another example of non-formal spaces in which students can learn and grow at university. While common in the United States, there are few examples of these in a European context. Learning communities are structured with the purpose of encouraging students to connect ideas from different disciplines and of creating long-term, sustained social interactions (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). There is often a residential element to these programmes; living together helps students engage in the activities. Learning communities can be set up in different ways and with different goals. In this paper we discuss the specific arrangements of this case study in a collegiate university in the UK.

## 1. Overview of the project

The theme of the learning community was based on the ethos of the college and the partnerships and collaboration that had been developing for several years within the college. The theme was described as a focus on ‘international development and human rights’. It was set as broadly as possible, with the idea that the students would be able to narrow this down and focus on aspects that they were most interested in. Before the start of their first term students were invited to sign up to live in one residential block, which was allocated to the *global community*, as it became known. Eleven students signed up: three UK students, three international students and two European students on full degree courses, and three visiting international students in the UK for one term. In addition, all students in the college were given the opportunity to get involved on a non-residential basis. Over 30 students turned up to the information session, from all three years, and of these four third-year students became fully involved with the group, and a small number of other students from all years engaged sporadically with the activities.

After the first information session, a workshop was run for the group by staff from the department of education to begin thinking about the theme, student-led approaches to learning and the possibilities arising from involvement in the group. Following this, staff organised a networking event. This was the focal point of the autumn term for the community and was scheduled for the first week in November, half way through the term. International





organisations based in the local area were invited to the event to interact with the students, with the aim of identifying ways they might collaborate together. There were two development organisations that send international volunteers to work on development projects, a city human rights network, the equality and diversity group for the city and the university, a group that works with refugees, a Food Not Bombs activist group, a human rights initiative and the centre for applied human rights, based at the university, including a group of human rights defenders from around the world at the university on a six-month fellowship.

Around 30 students attended the event and the afternoon was run in ways designed to facilitate dialogue and make connections. The education staff introduced the aims of the day and presented the ideas behind the global community and the students' involvement. The first activity allowed each of the organisations to give a one-minute overview of their activities, their values, and the work they do. The second activity was focused networking, set up like speed-dating; in small groups the global community students circulated around the organisations for periods of five minutes in which they could talk about what they did and identify points of common interest.

The organisations then had a break and an opportunity to meet each other, while the students came up with some potential plans and ways of working based on the information they had received. They divided into groups with particular plans and proposals and set up stations around the room. The organisation then had chance to circulate and look at the ideas to see which plans they might be able to collaborate with. All parties had forms to collect contact details of people they hoped to work with further and then feedback was gathered informally through post-it note responses around the room. The final part of the afternoon was a free mingling session with refreshments where people could develop conversations with people they were keen to get to know.

From this point on the global community began to take a more student-led approach. Staff attended a couple more of the planning and discussion sessions as students worked out which of their ideas they wanted to take forward and how. Staff then stepped back from the group and gave the students free rein to continue the development of their projects. They were supported by three PhD students, two of whom were resident in the college. The commu-





nity was provided with resources and a small amount of funding to take their ideas forward.

The group decided on five main activities. The first was a collection of unwanted food at the end of term to be donated to Food Not Bombs, a local activist group. The second was a documentary looking at engagement with human rights and development issues at the university through interviews with a range of participants. The third was a cine forum, where the group put on regular film showings in the college, inviting all students to watch a popular film which touched on a social justice issue and then hold a facilitated discussion at the end. The fourth was a workshop on intercultural competencies run by an external facilitator. Finally, the focal point of the group's energy lay in organising a Refugee Week within the college. They worked closely with the local refugee action group, which they met at the networking event, and came up with some original ideas about how to raise awareness about refugee issues. In order to analyse the outcomes of the Global Community so far we will now discuss the capability approach as our conceptual framework.

## 2. Capability approach

Walker (2012) argues for the importance of considering capabilities in our conceptions of development, both personal and international, rather than focusing exclusively on human capital. While human capital can capture the development of many "goods" that lead to people living a more fulfilled life, there is an economic emphasis that in a world of "staggering inequalities" we should aim to complement by capturing notions of what people value. She argues that "if human capital is subsumed into a capabilities approach, then there is a real potential to enrich the approach by drawing on extensive empirical research to make the argument for human capabilities, beyond human capital" (Walker, 2012: 388).

The capability approach was put forward by Amartya Sen (1979; 1985) as a framework for considering international development, by looking at human development in a more holistic way and reducing the exclusive measurement of economic indicators as evidence of development. Sen understands that the human capabilities approach, "focuses on the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they



have” (Sen, 2003: 35). The notion of *functionings* is important to the capability approach; these can be “(1) activities like reading or writing; (2) physical states, such as being able to well-nourished and healthy; (3) mental situations, like being happy; or (4) social functionings, such as being integrated into society” (Lozano, Boni, Peris and Hueso, 2012: 134). Another important aspect to the approach is *agency*, the ability to pursue goals that one values. Agency is important both for individual freedom, but also for collective action and democratic participation (Sen, 1999), making it an essential aspect of education that aims for social justice and social change.

Indeed, there are clear overlaps between aspects of the capability approach and education for global citizenship or development education, which are both underpinned by social justice values and consider the development of attitudes towards injustice and inequality as a central feature of their aims and objectives (for example: Andreotti, 2006; Brown, 2013). McLean et al. (2008) argue that universities ought to be educating citizens in self and ethical awareness for engagement with social and civic responsibilities (cited in Walker, 2008: 6). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (1997) proposes three key capacities for cultivating humanity as central to the capability approach:

[...] the capacity for critical examination of oneself and ones traditions; people’s ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern; and finally, the narrative imagination. This last point means the ability to think what it might be to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself. (Nussbaum, 1997: 9-11, cited in Lozano et al., 2012: 135)

Walker (2006) proposes eight basic capabilities for higher education: (1) practical reason, (2) educational resilience, (3) knowledge and imagination, (4) learning disposition, (5) social relations and social networks, (6) respect, dignity and recognition, (7) emotional integrity, and (8) bodily integrity (Walker 2006 cited in Lozano et al., 2012: 135). In this sense, the aims of higher education should be more closely aligned with the development of the whole person, rather than focusing only on the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to the job market.



So there is a role for education, and in this case higher education, to provide opportunities and resources for students to develop the skills that will allow them to access opportunities and make informed decisions in order to lead lives that they value. In addition, however, there is an element of the approach that reflects an underlying value of social justice that must be incorporated into the provision of such opportunities in higher education, since the “freedom to choose gives us the opportunity to decide what we should do, but with that opportunity comes the responsibility for what we do” (Sen, 2009: 19). The idea here, then, is that human capabilities education is empowering and emancipatory (Baptiste, 2001); the benefits from education include “enhancing well-being and freedom of individuals and peoples, and influencing social change” (Walker, 2012: 389). There are therefore arguments for including critical inquiry and discussion as pedagogical guidance for capabilities education (Sen, 2009) and a connection with ideas around developing democratic citizens (Nussbaum, 2006). This approach has clear overlaps with transformative pedagogies based on participation and experience such as those espoused by Friere (1972) and Mezirow (2000).

Critical reflection on the goal of human life beyond productive knowledge, with participation and dialogue as central teaching methodologies, is a focus within the capability approach (Lozano et al., 2012: 138). There is an emphasis on internal demand, with learners deciding what they value and being able to choose their own way as a principle aspect of their freedom and agency. Like Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory, Sen encourages a critical view of society, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and the idea of agency as the capacity to generate social change (1999: 19). Similarly, the goal of *conscientização* for students to reflect on the world around them and take action on it (Freire, 1972), is clearly mirrored in much of the capabilities literature.

The capability approach offers a social justice stance on education (Walker, 2003). It “requires us to go beyond employability (without underestimating it!) as the goal of higher education” (Lozano et al., 2012: 144). According to Walker, the capabilities approach to education “captures the significance of human capital and embeds it ... but unlike human capital prioritises human beings as ends in themselves, always asking what growth is for and, how does



education reduce injustice?" (2012: 390). It is therefore clearly appropriate for analysing a project designed to develop students' skills and opportunities, through engagement with issues of international development and human rights.

### 3. Findings from observations

In this paper I will primarily refer to observations of the global community activities during the spring term of its first year, in particular the series of activities the students arranged for their Refugee Week. These will be considered in terms of the nature of the activities, the contribution to the engagement of the core group members and the perceived development of capabilities within the group. This research will later be supplemented by individual interviews with all the core group members, including those that did not engage with the spring term activity, although those findings are not reported here.

The documentary is still in early stages; some initial plans have been made and the group have done some video interviews with two of the human rights defenders. This is still very much a work in progress. The cine forum has run three films so far, with an average attendance of between five and ten people. The intercultural competencies workshop attracted a group of about ten people in addition to the seven core members of the group. This was an opportunity for people to explore their own identities and discuss inequalities and injustices relating to prejudice and stereotypes.

The development of the Refugee Week activity began in the early meetings after the networking event with students motivated by collaboration with a local refugee action group and discussions with human rights defenders in the UK on a six-month fellowship scheme. It was notable that some of the group stepped back from the community at this point, claiming that this was not the focus they were most interested in and as such decided to get involved in other initiatives. As a result the size of the core group fell to about seven: four of the resident first-year members and three third-year students. The overarching aims of the week were to raise awareness of refugee issues, disseminate information about refugees' stories, and present ideas for people



who wanted to become more involved. A subsidiary aim was also to raise money for the Refugee Action group.

The week began with a publicity event, where two members of the community went around the college giving out donuts, flyers and information about the sessions due to take place. The first session, a workshop incorporating art and live music, ran on the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup> February and was attended by eight people in addition to the three global community members running the session. Participants were asked to create posters based on questions about what they would take with them if they had to leave their country and what they would miss, and what they would want their country to represent in the eyes of refugees. This was done in small groups and stimulated lively conversations. After each question some information was presented with a refugee story capturing some aspect of the question. During the session a guitarist played live music, creating a comfortable environment.

A clothes swap was held on the Friday. Members of the college were encouraged to bring clothes to swap or to buy second-hand items. The clothes were laid out in the common room over a four-hour period and a steady flow of people came to bring and buy items. Leaflets about future events and flyers with information about refugees and ways to get involved in the community were available and handed out. The clothes left over at the end were sold at a university-wide second-hand sale the following day and all the proceeds and any remaining clothes were donated to the Refugee Action group.

The Saturday night was a sleep out in the middle of the college grounds. This coincided with a social event so the global community thought this would be a good opportunity to speak to a range of people about the issues about which they were raising awareness. They gave out free tea and coffee, set up a gazebo and provided sleeping bags. They spoke to passers-by and a small number of people joined them. They played live guitar music and had discussions throughout the night. The participants also had the chance to be interviewed by two MA students at the university who were directing a documentary for the Human Rights Film Festival.

The following night they organised a quiz. This took place in one of the common rooms and was attended by about ten people including members of the community. The quiz questions touched on refugee issues, but also



focused on large civilizations through history. Again, there was space at the end for informal conversations and debate.

Finally, the focal point of the week was the ‘big debate’. This was organised as a debate between political parties in the run up to the general election. Six parties (Socialist, Green, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative and UKIP) were each represented by a student member who had researched their party’s position on the questions in advance. There were four questions on refugee and asylum seeker issues and the debate followed a set format with space to outline their position, respond to each other’s positions and then take questions from the floor. This was chaired by a staff member from the centre for global programmes. The debate was attended by almost 30 people in addition to the global community. Some of the people had also attended the original information meeting about the global community, although they had been less involved in the spring term. It seemed that this was an opportunity for more people to get involved again.

#### 4. Discussion

In terms of students being able to lead lives that they value, clearly the opportunity to be involved with the global community was a way they could develop skills and agency towards this aim. However, this can only be said for those who remained engaged throughout, while for some of the students the community did not offer this possibility. For the core group of seven it could clearly be seen that they were gaining confidence and taking pride in being able to design and plan events, and they shared taking the lead across the different events they organised. This generated a sense of individual freedom, but also encouraged teamwork and collective action. They not only collaborated with other student groups and local organisations, but they also generated involvement from other students who came along to the events and activities they ran. Through the debate they engaged with the idea of democratic participation and civic responsibility. They were keen to give voice to a range of perspectives and managed a respectful and meaningful discussion of important issues.



They were perhaps in the early stages of affecting social change with their actions; they worked with activists and filmmakers, and provided a forum to discuss key issues. They made their focus quite specific to allow them to work on particular ideas and inform others about these too. However, the numbers attending most of the events were small and in many cases the messages about how to get more involved were lost, so participants swapped clothes, or attended the quiz, without fully engaging with the issues.

Nevertheless, there was evidence of the core group developing skills and functionings that contributed to their freedom to achieve well-being and agency. For example, they had experience planning and organising events; they went through several phases with this and learned about setting aims and objectives, the logistics of the planning process and the work involved in publicising activities. They developed team working skills and learned to compromise on their ideas and work through problems that arose. Each member of the core group substantially improved their understanding of the issues concerning refugees, as well as other issues arising from the cine forum and workshops. These were all areas they had a prior interest in and this allowed them to deepen their knowledge. Through discussion with others and workshops from external facilitators, they also had the opportunity to critically reflect on a diverse range of issues. The degree of their critical reflection varied, but in general there was evidence that some of the group members were challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, although that was less clear for other participants, and to some extent there was a sense that the activities ‘preached to the converted’ and few other people engaged with the activities. Where they did, they were rarely encouraged to think critically. The group did also raise funds, and were clear that this was not their main objective and that awareness and understanding were more important. Nevertheless, this opened a dialogue with local organisations and allowed them to consider the impact of these funds on the well-being of others.

In terms of Nussbaum’s capabilities, some of the activities certainly fostered critical self-reflection: the intercultural competencies workshop encouraged group members and other participants to reflect on their identities and their role in society. The planning of the Refugee Week also allowed group members to think about what they wanted to do and how they could make a





difference. There was also some evidence of self-reflection through the art session.

There were also activities that generated connection to others. In particular, by working with other groups, societies and organisations and connecting on areas of importance to them, they created a sense of solidarity. They worked with human rights defenders from around the world and engaged other students in their activities. They made a connection with others through the 'big debate' and the clothes swap, and spoke to other students through the food collection activity.

Finally, in terms of narrative imagination, there was clear evidence of the development of solidarity through the art session, where they engaged with refugee stories, and through the sleep out, where they lived through a challenging situation, on a cold and windy February night. The core group developed their ability to put themselves in other people's shoes and thought about how a range of situations would feel from different perspectives.

## Conclusion

Through a highly participative and experiential pedagogy with a focus on critical reflection and challenging social inequalities, it could be argued that the first year of the global community was a chance for some students to enhance their capabilities and feel empowered to work towards social change. The nature of their engagement conformed to ideas from popular education (Freire, 1972) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). While evidence of their learning is speculative here, and will be explored further in the interviews, it can be said from the observations that this type of initiative can allow students to develop capabilities that could prepare them for greater participation in society and for working towards social justice and social change. However, there were also occasions when the activities were not sufficiently critical of the *status quo*, or where participants took away only a superficial understanding of complex issues. Moreover, the numbers of people involved were low. The core group fell from around 30 at the original meeting to only seven, and participants in the activities run by the group ranged from three to thirty, but tended to be fewer than ten. There are certainly things to be learned



for future cohorts and a clear range of aspects to be explored further through interviews with the students themselves, in order to more deeply understand their perspectives and interpretations.

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