

# Why critical pedagogy and popular education matter today

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# 1. Introduction to ‘Why critical pedagogy and popular education matter today’

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Few today doubt that English Higher Education (HE), like the wider world in which it is located, is in crisis. This is, in part, an economic crisis, as the government response to the current recession seems to be that of introducing the kind of neoliberal ‘shock doctrine’ (Klein 2007) or ‘shock therapy’ (Harvey 2005) that previously resulted in swingeing cuts in public services in Southern nations. But as Charles Thorpe has noted, HE also faces ‘a crisis in the very idea of the university’ as the softer face of neoliberal restructuring is leading to the de-legitimisation and public deriding of HE’s ‘traditional values and motives’ that is resulting in ‘the complete subordination of intellectual life to instrumental values and, most brutally, to the measure of money’ (2008:103). It is in this context of crisis, and of the seeming loss of hope for the future, that the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education Group developed and worked to produce this volume.

Two inter-related themes of critical pedagogy and popular education are articulated in papers in this volume. First, papers explicitly or implicitly explore the need for critical pedagogy in HE and popular or informal education elsewhere—in large part in response to the restructuring that neoliberalism mark one (before the September 2008 economic crash) was introducing, a response with even more urgency as neoliberalism mark two (post-September 2008) is being imposed. That is, papers argue that the current economic crisis is being used politically as a ‘shock’ to justify the introduction of greater work intensification and insecurity for lecturers than previously that has consequences for students. At the same time, students entering HE often have fewer skills and resources (but better grades!) and have been encouraged to see the services provided for them as, just that—services given to customers. The implications of these two factors on learning and teaching today are considerable and suggest to the authors herein the greater need for a pedagogy that is less alienating and more supportive of HE lecturers and other educational and political workers as well as students under current conditions. Second, and consequently, the authors argue that this need is motivated by a shared sense of the power of ‘critical hope’ for transforming formal and informal education and, through that, helping build an alternative education system. Indeed, as noted in the Critical Pedagogy / Popular Education group statement of intent, that follows this introduction, as a group we start “from the assumption that ‘all life is pedagogical’ . . . [and] seek to develop pedagogies of engagement that combine academic and activist knowledge, and ‘classroom learning’ with social action” (p. 12 below).

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Thus the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group aims to critically examine present, worsening conditions in and outside HE with which authors are well-familiar in order to build upon practices we and other are now developing. Papers herein were predominantly given by presenters at the 'Pedagogy, Democracy, Practice' day we held at Coventry University in February, with a few additional commissioned pieces. All papers share, as we noted in our statement of intent:

a recognition from our experience of the world, that there is profound injustice, inhumanity and an attack on human dignity in many parts of our lives and, importantly, the lives of those around us who are often less privileged than we are. We are struck by the fact that although we work in differing ways in different contexts, we often have similar experiences of, for example, eroding autonomy and spaces of freedom, increased repression and oppression and dehumanisation and, in response, a wish to work with others in a more democratic and autonomous way (pp. 11-12 below).

Our aim in producing this volume is that these contributions help develop a collective response to the seeming limits of these conditions. We view the strength of these contributions in part as providing palpable evidence of how we and our colleagues are acting with critical hope under current conditions so that we might encourage others to work with us to build, together, more progressive formal and informal education systems that address and seek to redress multiple injustices of the world today. Further, we believe that authors' voices in this volume acknowledge and speak to the multiple locations that critical pedagogues and popular educators can and do occupy in and outside HE today; they suggest that the spaces of our practices are and should be diverse—perhaps especially under current conditions.

Following this introduction is a statement of intent of the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group. We include our full statement so that readers can learn more about the debates we have engaged in and the positions we have taken so that, if they are interested, they can join us in developing a fuller, more complex and stronger network of dialogue in future—which we believe is necessary under current conditions. This statement is a 'work in progress' in a double sense. In part it indicates where we see ourselves at present. It also is written as an ongoing dialogue that we aim to 'progress' as we develop our thoughts and actions further in future, hopefully with a wider network as we work to help imagine and create an education system that more fully enables all within it to realise themselves and to work together and with others to help build a better world for all.

What, then, do we mean by popular education and critical pedagogy? Popular education, as Crowther notes in his paper herein, is 'popular' in that it is:

- rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people
- overtly political and critical of the status quo
- committed to progressive social and political change (p.16)

## Introduction

Processes of popular education, committed to and often located in communities, have a curriculum stemming from 'the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle'; share a collectively produced pedagogy; and seek to link education with social action (ibid). Crowther further points to ways that he and others at the University of Edinburgh (i.e., Ian Martin and Mae Shaw) have partly realised popular education practices through setting up an international Popular Education Network (PEN) whose members share with one another the politically engaged practices they have been developing. They also produced a volume offering grounded strategies for renewing democracy in Scotland post-devolution and a poster that questions what democracy can mean in post-devolution Scotland. Many Scottish groups have used ideas from the volume and poster to improve their conditions. Thus Crowther speaks from and with examples of popular education that have made a positive change.

Critical pedagogies, developed in and for universities, in contrast, seek, as Sarah Amsler notes (pp. 20-23), to 'challenge the dominant ways that education has been explicitly imagined, and to inject—sometimes against every grain of possibility—the value and legitimacy of alternatives' (p. 20). Such a challenge is crucial at present, as neoliberalism at least partly erases the meanings and possibilities of and for critical pedagogy in HE, deploying and consequently subverting critical pedagogy practices for its own regressive aims. Amsler argues that in this context critical pedagogues must, crucially, work the contradictions of having a 'double consciousness' of both neoliberal discourses and practices, and an awareness that critical pedagogy offers tools for creating progressive alternatives. Those of us with such consciousness must, she concludes, 'build communities of intellectual and political practice, starting from wherever we are, in which to nurture the alternatives' (p. 22). I would only add that this conclusion is one that impels the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group.

Echoes of this critical hope reverberate in the rest of the papers herein. Like Amsler, Stephen Cowden focuses on HE, summarising the keynote talk he gave at the group's February 2009 'Pedagogy, Democracy, Practice' day conference. Cowden speaks of the need for a 'problem-posing' critical pedagogy to replace the 'banking' pedagogy of which Freire spoke that has been imposed on education anew today as economic logic has been used to restructure the education system. Yet as the current economic crisis indicates, this logic is equally bankrupt in HE (as in other educational sectors), as well as in the economy. HE restructuring with this logic has resulted in grade inflation, lower analytical and critical skills of graduates and the likelihood, at least in the near future, that graduates will not be able to realise their aspirations for graduate level jobs—or, perhaps, jobs of any kind. Cowden concludes, then, that the present is a moment when critical pedagogy could (and should) have a resurgence given its alternative dialogical pedagogy.

Gurnam Singh and Stephen Cowden next suggest that the present might also be a moment when anti-racist pedagogy and practices more generally could be replaced by post-race pedagogies and practices. The former have been de-

politicised by government policy whilst links between processes of racialisation and other forms of oppression such as class and gender are often not made. Without such linkages and without an understanding of how government policies sustain these linkages, there is little opportunity to challenge and work to eliminate these oppressions. Concomitantly, anti-racist practices have led to the isolation of racialised communities, many along fundamentalist grounds that sometimes act in collusion with the government. As these, and other, examples discussed by Singh and Cowden indicate, efforts to de-essentialise 'race' have led to greater emphasis being given to processes of racialisation that continue to reify 'race'. For this reason, Singh and Cowden suggest that we consider developing a post-race perspective.

Cath Lambert suggests that HE teachers should remember the privileged position we occupy—not simply of being able to think reflexively about and offer insights on ourselves and the world in which we live but, importantly, our position as teachers whose efforts 'contribute to the making and remaking of the social world' (p. 33). Lambert discussed the workshop she ran at the 'Pedagogy, Democracy and Practice' conference in which she offered participants the opportunity to consider, in small groups, "different forms of 'classroom'" (p. 33) and approaches to the knowledge present in the resources that she gave groups of participants to think with. Her aim, clearly informed by a commitment to critical pedagogy's dialogical method, was for workshop participants to develop, together, a sense of how "'classrooms' can become 'locations of possibility'" (p. 33). This aim was one that I, as a participant in this workshop, was able to realise as the workshop gave me ideas from the practices of others as to how to more effectively rework classroom space with students.

Whilst the above pieces largely focus on HE in the UK, a very different piece by a French academic activist, Emilie Souyri, describes how in 2009 French university lecturers and students were resisting President Sarkozy's efforts to impose a more stratified and audit-driven HE system (familiar to lecturers in the UK) and creatively rethinking aspects of their practices, at least implicitly utilising critical pedagogy's insights. French strikes occurred in the context of university and wider strikes in Italy and Greece in response to their governments' cuts in 2008. Souyri's example shows how French university staff and students were not necessarily accepting the restructuring of HE as we in the UK have largely done. Indeed, these actions open up the positive politics of collectively created possibilities. Souyri offers strategies of resistance, some of which English HE lecturers have used, such as not submitting marks for students' work. Other strategies resonate with points made by other authors (such as reworking understandings of what the classroom is and where it could be relocated and reconfigured—as Lambert notes—and working with students in more dialogical, engaged ways as Amsler, Cowden, Russell and Scandrett note). Perhaps those of us working in an HE system increasingly dominated by the neoliberal logic to which there seems to be no alternative might reflect on, be heartened by and seek to utilise the kind of strategies French lecturers and students have together devised to resist this logic!

## Introduction

In addition to the above consideration of critical pedagogy in HE, papers in this volume also explore popular education outside the academy, and/or how popular education and critical pedagogy can work together (like that of Crowther discussed above). Maureen Russell discusses how the Workers' Education Association (WEA) has used popular education in courses to enable students to engage in learning more deeply (Second Chance courses) and, in some cases, in more politically effective ways (Trade Union programmes) than previously. With regard to the former, Russell explores processes through which 'Second Chance' courses can engage students previously damaged by and disaffected from formal education, given that, as Russell notes, in formal education, teachers are increasingly trained to help students pass exams rather than develop their understandings of topics studied. With regard to the latter, Russell discusses how Trade Union courses provide shop stewards with strategies to work more effectively with peers and against managers' efforts to limit the terms and conditions of their work. In both cases, Russell provides insight into the perils of popular education (i.e., losing some control over what happens in the classroom) and pleasures of popular education (i.e., seeing students engage more fully and keenly in learning than initially seemed possible) that can inform the efforts of those of us in HE utilising critical pedagogy.

Both Eurig Scandrett and Alice Cutler (like Crowther) explore popular education as practiced in HE and in sites of informal education. For Scandrett, who moved from being an activist for Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) working with communities and a university, to being a university lecturer working with FoES and local activists, the challenge of straddling this divide has been considerable, especially in the HE context. As a FoES worker, Scandrett sought to use popular education techniques to help community activists build on their knowledge of and work with communities so that they could more effectively resist ecologically damaging developments than they had previously. Scandrett's piece partly discusses the 'agents for environmental justice project' in which academic and political knowledges of environmentalism (of professional community and FoES campaigners) were brought together with knowledge community activists had already gained as they sought to fight against the environmental degradation of their communities. Interestingly, all gained from this effort except university lecturers—not due to their own failings but to limits that universities, now prioritising profit over people, put on lecturers. That is, as this project was financially expensive and had results that were 'only' socially (and not fiscally) significant, the university decided not to continue it. This example provides further evidence that the neoliberal logic can limit the potential for university participation in progressive projects.

Alice Cutler's piece frames a call for critical pedagogy and popular education in the context of the recently released film, 'The Age of Stupid', whose narrator asks, from the future, why climate change wasn't dealt with when we had the chance. Cutler suggests that the university can offer the opportunity to utilise the practice-based critical thinking of critical pedagogy to develop solutions to the grave problem of climate change. Cutler refutes the idea that predominates today in HE that education should train students to compete in a global economy. She suggests instead that there is a real need and urgency for a different, more

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actively and critically engaged pedagogy, providing examples of work with activists outside the university and progressive teachers in the university that the collective TRAPESE (Taking Radical Action through Popular Education and Sustainable Everything!), which she is part of, has been doing. This work aims to help activists outside and students inside the university develop and empower themselves and others to 'both understand and be prepared to try and change the structure of the world they live in' (p. 49). She argues that such empowerment is only possible with a critical pedagogy that breaks the teacher-student divide and encourages students to actively, dialogically engage in debate and work together—listening, speaking and acting—to help understand and develop realistic solutions to the world's problems. Her piece demonstrates the possibilities made available by practicing critical pedagogy.

We in the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group therefore hope that this volume inspires critical hope and offers examples that encourage others both to utilise critical pedagogy and popular education and to bring these two pedagogies, and their efforts at transformation, together. Our ultimate aim is to address and develop solutions to today's problems with others—we hope that after reading this volume you will think of joining our group—and if so, email one of us at an address at the bottom of the following jointly written piece.

### References

- Harvey, D. (2005) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, N. (2007) *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. London: Allen Lane (an imprint of Penguin Books)

## 2. Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education Group

This is an initial document that explores what we understand to be key components/debates of critical pedagogy at present. We see this as a continuous work in progress that will be revised as we take further steps in developing the group and considering the situations in which we in HE find ourselves. It builds on initial meetings held in July 07, November/December 07 and April 08 as well as the day workshop event held on 20 February 09.

The discussion below started from a summary of key points and questions raised at the 04/08 meeting of this group. Our hope is that this summary can provide a basis for future development and debate.

### **What is the Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group?**

The Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education group is an independent group of academics, political activists, artists and popular educators who hope to work together to further progressive education for social change.

The group consists of those located in what has been called both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ education—that is, education located in state-supported institutions such as Higher Education and educational/cultural work located outside formal institutions but nonetheless funded (at times) by bodies such as the Lottery or City Councils. Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education is founded on the premises that: a) critical learning for progressive action happens everywhere in society, not only in the university or on the frontline of political struggle, and b) those working in different spheres should, in the current climate of multiple global crises exacerbated by top down neo-liberal globalisation, join strengths to create new types of knowledge that can inform, motivate and enable more critical and progressive social, cultural and political agency. The group offers space for critical cultural workers—many of whom work independently against the grain of their own professions and institutional cultures and who often more directly challenge regressive and repressive practices and agendas than has (seemed) possible in the university—to share their knowledge and experience, and to use this shared knowledge/experience to work towards collectively creating, publicising and realising more socially just and egalitarian alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. The group also can potentially offer space where critical cultural workers can explore the usefulness of insights from academic analysis to developing their practices further.

Our aim, then, is to enable those involved in social transformation and political struggle in informal and formal education to pool their sometimes complementary knowledges. What we have in common is a recognition from our experience of the world, that there is profound injustice, inhumanity and an attack on human dignity in many parts of our lives and, importantly, the lives of others often less privileged than we are. We are struck by the fact that although

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we work in differing ways in different contexts, we often have similar experiences of, for example, eroding autonomy and spaces of freedom, increased repression and oppression and dehumanisation and, in response, a wish to work with others in a more democratic and autonomous way. Indeed, we recognise, from some universities' implementation of the Terrorism Act against students and support workers that the university is not simply a space where theory is created about social life, but is also a space where the effects of power (including state power) are felt and must be resisted. This flags up both the status of the university as a hegemonic institution that is therefore subject to state power and thus the potential of the university as a space for critical resistance. It also indicates the need for those of us in the university to link with those outside for the issues at stake are much broader than those that impact on the university alone.

We thus view this group as offering opportunities for listening to and talking with one another, rethinking the boundaries between critical thinking and activism in and across a number of spaces and institutions in society. We aim to build and strengthen the bridges that connect us, using our at times complementary and at times shared insights to organise to help build an alternative to the current status quo. For those working both within and outside academe, it means rethinking the possibilities of academic activism and the relationship between formal and informal education. For non-academic cultural workers and activists, it means expanding spaces for critical reflection on activism and building links between differently located individuals who are involved in similar social and political movements. Starting from the assumption that 'all life is pedagogical', we therefore seek to develop pedagogies of engagement that combine academic and activist knowledge, and 'classroom learning' with social action.

### **What do we do?**

Specifically, the group aims to:

- Develop and advocate pedagogies of engagement, life and hope, aiming to break down the barriers between informal and formal education, contributing, in a different way than governments often propose, to a reconnection of these domains to enable progressive, collective change;
- Rethink the university as a radically democratic social and political institution, since the university is a site where some of us happen to be located;
- Rethink spaces of informal education where others of us work—community work, cultural work, campaigning work—so that these spaces can be organised in more radically democratic ways;
- Challenge the individualised atomisation and instrumental and fatalist thinking that neoliberalism encourages in part through its assumption that 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA). We, in contrast, seek to create learning and

teaching environments in formal and informal educational spaces that facilitate dialogue, reflexivity and connection to real life needs that enable the creation of methodologies encouraging and realising more democratic practices;

- Link activism outside and inside the academy, utilising the insights stemming from both practical engagement with the world and engagement with theory that seeks to understand the world. That then would work to produce new knowledge that can bring together academic research with insights gained from grassroots action and everyday practices to produce new knowledge that serves to help improve the world;
- Build on past and present experiences in social, cultural and political action (e.g., Latin American social movements, WEA (Workers' Education Association), IRR (Institute of Race Relations), TRAPESE (Take Radical Action through Popular Education and Sustainable Everything!));
- Use such experiences to develop social research projects that can build theory further for future critique and action;
- Develop an independent, cross-sector, organised community of progressive cultural workers in informal and formal educational contexts working together for a more social just and sustainable future.

### **Some questions arising within the group**

It is important to note that many of the words, ideas and agendas which we have used to describe the work of this group are presently contested within the group itself. We are hence working to explore and clarify the following questions.

- What do we mean by 'practice'? For example, need there be a division between 'theory' and 'practice', or can formal academic thinking also be a form of political practice? In what ways can processes of learning and teaching be considered political practices? In what ways can political practices be considered processes of learning and teaching? How do activists in formal and informal educational contexts understand these terms, and what can we learn from or contribute to each other's work so as to enable a greater harnessing of our efforts for progressive social, economic and political change?
- What do we mean when we use the word 'community' in contexts where face-to-face communities seem to be eroding, and is this always a legitimate way to think about where politics happens? What about arguments that 'community' may also be understood as a form of populist unity that can be appropriated by the right or the left, as the notion of community—like the notion of education—is not inherently politically neutral or necessarily progressive? What about arguments that we need to develop strategies for collective action in the absence of any 'community'? Or, do possibilities for virtual communities enable us to develop a different sense of community?

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- What are the possible relationships between ‘academe’ and ‘activism’ – why does this binary exist or seem to exist? Are these categories self-imposed or imposed by others? What can the notion of ‘academic activist’ actually mean in practice? Is this a useful notion in helping us reconfigure the university? Academic knowledge? Progressive practice occurring in informal educational spaces? How is this notion differently interpreted and understood and how do these different meanings affect ideas about practice? We ask these questions being mindful of the work of Santos, Bourdieu and others who have observed that as the university is being opened up to top down neoliberal structures and processes, which are eroding the assumption that academics should be separated from the world outside, this opening up of the university could be used to work with more bottom up progressive structures and processes. But are we reproducing the binary in making this point or are we working to erode it?
- Why do we find ourselves wanting to talk about building ‘bridges’ between academics and activists, or between different groups of cultural workers? What do we do with the fact that some of us perceive ourselves to be located in radically different locations than others and others of us do not? What factors have brought us to these different understandings and how do we deal with these differences? Might we view the process of speaking of and from our distinct social locations, as a problem that may always require strategies of negotiation, of bridging, as new political, economic, ecological and social contexts emerge? Is it possible that we sometimes create artificial divisions which we then seek to overcome? What are the possible meanings of the politics of bridging itself and what actions might result from them?
- How do we understand the meanings of ‘subversion’ and ‘transformation’, concepts we find ourselves using? Their usage might be more problematic than we think. If we focus on ‘subversion’, do we as a consequence limit our action to responding to the dominant and thereby not focus enough of our energy and ideas upon transformation? To what extent should we be working to ‘subvert’ dominant definitions of education and forms of institutional power; to what extent should we be working to ‘transform’ them?
- Some of us found the concept of ‘ideology’ useful in articulating our understanding of the current moment whilst others found the concept objectionable because of its historical emergence from particular left locations. This brings up the wider question of how do we communicate from our different social and political locations given that we may rely upon different vocabulary, different political assumptions and different kinds of theories and practices?
- What do we mean by radical education, when there are different traditions and practices of politics linked to pedagogy with often conflicting assumptions and understandings of the nature of knowledge and knowledge production, agents of knowledge construction and relationship between theory and practice, concrete and universal, means and ends. There are

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conflicting articulations of popular education as a transfer of a particular ideological critique of society or the construction together of critique as practice, and different articulations of critical pedagogy. We want therefore to explore the resonances but also the dissonances in order to forge pedagogies that are living processes of critique.

At present, we find ourselves asking these questions; we look forward to developing answers to these questions so that we can ask further questions in the future!

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Critical Pedagogy/Popular Education Core Group, (February 2009 update)

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University-based teachers and researchers can still choose to use their work to support popular struggles for greater democracy, equality and social justice – even at a time when all the demands being made upon them are, seemingly, towards institutional *disengagement* from social and political action. However, universities are, at one and the same time, privileged and contradictory places in which academics, whatever the pressure and constraints they encounter, still enjoy a high degree of relative autonomy. In this paper three initiatives – developed in conjunction mainly with my colleagues Ian Martin and Mae Shaw – are introduced which illustrate this argument.

#### **The international popular education network (PEN)**

This network was established in 1997 and now has about 160 members in 57 institutions of higher education in 24 countries. One of the main purposes of the network is to sustain a sense of solidarity and common purpose among politically committed academics who are trying to work with marginalised community groups and social movements in civil society, but who themselves exist in increasingly precarious isolation on the margins of their own institutions.

Like all educational terminology, popular education is subject to a range of competing interpretations which reflect a variety of historical traditions and cultural contexts. So it is as well to be clear about what is meant here. Membership of the network is open and free to all who are willing to subscribe in general terms to the following statement of intent:

#### *Popular education*

Popular education is understood to be popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is:

- rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people
- overtly political and critical of the status quo
- committed to progressive social and political change.

The process of popular education has the following general characteristics:

- its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle

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- its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action (Crowther J, Martin I, Shaw M 2005:1).

PEN members meet in conference every two years (the most recent one was in November 2009 at the University of Edinburgh). These are low budget affairs to cover basic costs and participants do not need to produce a paper. There are no conference proceedings and no set theme to address. Instead, participants are invited to discuss issues that are important to them, share methodologies, talk about their research and so on. A newsletter and other relevant information are also circulated electronically on a regular basis. PEN has no resources other than the people involved in it.

### **Renewing democracy in Scotland**

This subhead refers to an educational sourcebook, *Renewing Democracy in Scotland* which is designed to be used as study material in a programme of public education about democracy and citizenship in Scotland today. The aim is to encourage people to understand democracy as a social and cultural process that is *learned* and must be continuously *re-learned*, as well as a set of political institutions and procedures. The intention is not to 'teach people how to be good citizens', which is essentially what seems to be wrong with much of the current British government agenda for 'citizenship education', but rather to stimulate and resource the development of a critical and reflexive civic culture of democratic discussion and debate.

This publication consists of 49 short essays, each about 2,000 words in length, which have been written exclusively by members of staff or close associates of the University of Edinburgh, ranging across seven of the university's eight faculties. They are written in an authoritative yet simple and accessible way, and each is followed by *Questions for discussion* and suggested *Further reading*. It is also important to emphasise that both the publisher and the authors have agreed to waive copyright – which means that the contents can be freely photocopied and circulated.

The text is divided into five sections:

1. *Making democracy work: key ideas and values*
2. *Major Scottish institutions*
3. *Contemporary Scottish identities and interests*
4. *Issues for democratic renewal in Scotland today*
5. *Scotland in the international community*

The book is intended to express the view that academic knowledge and expertise should, ultimately, be understood as public property and deployed in ways that inform and enrich the social and cultural contexts in which they are generated.

## Learning for democracy

It is worth remembering in these days of managed consensus that the awkward citizen has always been as important to democracy as the conformist citizen. However, in the area of community adult education the pressure to conform to government and economic objectives linked to employability and social cohesion is tangible. It is in this context that we recently circulated to people working in this area an open letter entitled 'Whatever happened to learning for democracy?' (Martin, Crowther, Shaw 2006). An extract from it reads as follows:

*There is now an historic opportunity to renew democracy in Scotland, and yet we are beginning to feel a profound sense of disappointment about the way in which both our own work and the lives of people in communities are being managed, regulated and controlled . . .*

*What is required, in the first instance, is a much more open, democratic and imaginative dialogue and debate about what kind of society we want to live in, and how we can begin to build it in Scotland today. Education and learning in communities can contribute to making this vision a reality, and they are a rich resource for tackling significant problems in society. Ordinary people need the opportunity to have their say, to be listened to and to **talk back** to the state. This is essentially a democratic process. It cannot simply be managed and measured; it has to be nurtured and cultivated in communities. It requires faith and trust in the people, and a valuing of genuinely democratic dialogue and debate.*

In relation to the above we were involved along with other academics, practitioners and student activists who met over a period of a year to look at ways of presenting our ideas to a wider audience about what learning for democracy should entail. The end result of extensive discussion and debate was an eye-catching laminated wall chart (available from Mae.Shaw@ed.ac.uk) rather than a lengthy alternative report which had been originally conceived. The wall chart presents ten propositions and ten proposals about learning for democracy which express commitment without being prescriptive; it is accessible and provokes discussion; it articulates an alternative rather than simply responding in terms which are already too loaded; it stresses the political nature of a very depoliticised professional discourse. In summary, it goes completely against the grain of the current hegemony, which we propose is its unique value.

The wall chart is now in its second print run and has had a high demand. We believe that the value of this kind of initiative is that it is a very modest but public act of resistance, which provides a distinctive resource for the difficult business of learning for democracy.

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## 4. Education as a critical practice

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*‘There is no genuine democracy without opposing critical powers.’  
(Bourdieu 2001: 8)*

My commitment to critical pedagogy stems from a belief that education should contribute to the expansion of human freedom and autonomy, from the knowledge that it more often serves as a mechanism of social discipline and control, and that the balance between these possibilities is worked out through educational practice itself. This is not a novel position; indeed, in addition to being informed by a decade of teaching in mainstream educational institutions, it is inspired by theories of critical pedagogy that emerged in other times and places from ‘a need to name the contradiction between what schools claim they do and what they actually do’ (Giroux 2005: 123). John Dewey’s experience-based learning for liberal democracy, Theodor Adorno’s education for autonomous thought, Paulo Freire’s education for critical consciousness, bell hooks’ teaching to transgress, Henry Giroux’s schooling and the struggle for public life – each of these contributions emerged as an act of resistance against the legitimization of cultural practices which promoted conformity and hierarchy and constrained autonomy, criticality and democratic relationships. They aimed not only to expose presumably hidden discrepancies between the claims and realities of education in particular situation, but also to challenge the dominant ways that education has been explicitly imagined, and to inject – sometimes against every grain of plausibility – the value and legitimacy of the alternatives.

These theories are diverse and in some ways exist in tension with one another, particularly around the politics of particular educational philosophies and practices. However, they are united through an overarching proposition: that autonomous critical thought, open dialogue and social action are vital conditions for the defence of social justice, and that educational practices which neglect, repress or devalue these capacities diminish the possibility of recognising and resisting domination. From within this tradition, then, critical pedagogy is not merely a professional identity or body of teaching methods, as it may sometimes be defined, but a name for the tradition of cultural politics which takes education seriously as an important site of struggle for freedom in any society.

One difficulty of using the term ‘critical pedagogy’, therefore, is that while concepts like freedom, power, justice and autonomy seem to express a self-evident agenda, until they are articulated in practice they actually explain very little about the meaning of either criticality or pedagogy. Critical educators do not all speak the same theoretical language, and the term ‘critical pedagogy’ may refer to anti-capitalist education, anti-racist pedagogies and feminist pedagogies; training in social activism and mastery of social theory; individualised education

in critical thought and community problem-solving; studies of language and of social structure; education for raising consciousness and for dismantling social boundaries; and pedagogical work inside the classroom and in other public spheres. Similarly, some of the hallmark practices of critical pedagogy such as facilitation of democratic dialogue, participatory knowledge production and the development of critical media literacy are employed in liberal and conservative educational projects as well as radical ones – consider, for example, new government agendas to ‘engage’ and ‘empower’ communities in implementing public policy, or longstanding critiques of ‘participatory’ research methods that are essentially hierarchical. In other words, the form, content and consequences of critical pedagogy, like definitions of freedom, autonomy and social justice, are not pre-given or transferable but shaped by their articulation in practice. Clarifying these meanings in new and changing circumstances, and defending the value of struggling to do so, may thus be one of the most important roles that critical pedagogy can play in society today.

It is not uncommon for the principles, theories and practices of critical pedagogy to be marginalised within mainstream education. All of these traditions in one way or another emphasise the importance of spontaneity, creativity, criticality, radical individuality and collective solidarity in learning and teaching, and each of these are often resisted in large systems of mass education. What is new, in England and other neoliberal societies, is the rapidity with which long histories of critical education are being erased from public memory—even amongst educators themselves—and the ease with which principles of critical pedagogy are reconstructed as threats to social and economic progress. For arguably, ‘what cannot be tolerated’ in neoliberal institutions ‘are the unknowables’ (Allen 1998). Where proposals for research must be supported by policy-centred and economically focused ‘impact statements’; where the form and content of university courses must be decided far in advance of their offering and approved on grounds of financial efficiency and market popularity; where lecturers must provide detailed documentation of their planning and presentation and of students’ participation and evaluation, written in a proscribed language of liberal-conservative ‘learning and teaching’; where students are required to meet ‘learning outcomes’ that are predefined not only by teachers but by vast machineries of ‘benchmarking’; where researchers are required to set and achieve ‘performance targets’ for their work, and can be individually disciplined for failing to do so; where critical debate about issues of common concern to members of a university is frowned upon as disruptive and repressed through layers of bureaucracy or the erosion of space and time for informal dialogue; where experimental mistakes in teaching are punished as incompetence—in such conditions, the forces mitigating against critical pedagogy can seem indomitable. As a result, both these practices and the hope they engender are suffocating in the very spaces where they might be expected to flourish most.

Those who aspire to teach critically are thus often unable to realise these goals in their professional work. This is partly because the autonomous, public spaces where such work might have been undertaken within educational institutions are becoming confined, monitored and economised to such an extent that teachers may find it difficult to incorporate any principles of critical pedagogy

into their educational practice. In other words, while universities have rarely been identifiable sources of radical social change, it matters that there is increasingly less tolerance for critical pedagogy within the mainstream, and that explicitly critical spaces have been closed down. The sense of double consciousness that this can create for educators who choose to work in formal education – who perhaps, like me, hold out hope for it – is well documented, if not well articulated, in individualised experiences of alienation, disillusionment and frustration, as well as physical or even mental illness. But what is not often recognised is the possibility that abandoning the basic insights of critical theories of education, on the one hand, and dismissing the important contributions of critical education to social change, on the other – major changes that we now take entirely for granted as basic elements of a democratic society – may be impoverishing the transformative possibilities of education on the whole.

Hence, my goal is not simply to make my formal teaching more critical or relevant to students' lives – this is the basic foundation for good education. Rather, I seek to work within the contradictions which emerge between the principles of critical pedagogy and the existing political economy of organised higher education, and to empower the former. For if we are to retain space within universities where critical pedagogy might flourish, then the work itself must be engaged at the level of institutional and cultural transformation, as well as individual practices for particular political purposes. We live and teach in a cultural environment where radical possibility is regarded as suspicious, where the hope of emancipation is dismissed as either naive or oppressive, where curiosity about open futures has given way to a fetishization of predictable and measured outcomes, where intellectual and political communities are divided by competition, and where education has become integrated both economically and ideologically into neoliberal agendas.

However, we are also surrounded by critiques and alternatives to these trends. We have the resources to open new debates about the meaning, purpose and organisation of education, in the popular media, within our own institutions, in the spaces of civil society where politics is pedagogical, and within the smaller publics that we create around our particular projects. We must not underestimate the extent to which the lack of such debate contributes, even if only negatively, to the neoliberal transformation of both education and society. The marginalisation of critical pedagogy contributes to a collective amnesia about alternative histories of and possible futures for education; it allows us to bracket hard questions about how knowledge is related to power in this society. We need to understand why the visions of intellectual and political freedom have fallen into disrepute, and why the needs of the powerless have become invisible and maligned, and work to make these public issues again both in and out of the university. And in order to accomplish any of this, we need to resist the individualisation of our professional identities and build communities of intellectual and political practice, starting from wherever we are, in which to nurture the alternatives. In other words, these activities are not preconditions critical pedagogy; rather, these changes may only be possible through its continuous practice.

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## 5. The moment of critical pedagogy

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The present climate, politically and economically is one dominated entirely by the crisis within the financial sector. This is hugely significant because under the conditions of the political and economic doctrine known as neoliberalism, this sector has been consistently held up as the exemplar of the power, efficiency and strength of unregulated markets. The key theme of this discussion is the implications which the collapse of these markets has for Higher Education (HE), as a market driven model has been emulated here, in spite of HE remaining publicly funded. This crisis has demonstrated the bankruptcy, literally and figuratively, of the political and economic regime in which the market was always 'to decide', and in which the individual rather than the social represented the only valid unit of political calculation. While the forces which have brought about this crisis remain powerful, and our political leaders cling to the wreckage of the ideas they have propounded for the previous 30 years, at the same time we now are in a situation in which a space has opened up to argue for a different approaches. In this context, the legacy of critical pedagogy, the seminal work of Paulo Freire and others, offers us an essential contribution to thinking about how the way we work in Higher Education, in both a directly practical sense, as well as a wider political and societal sense.

There is not time now to discuss the complex processes which led to the collapse within financial sector (but see Lanchester, J. 2009, for a succinct and accessible account of this), but suffice it to say that this sector has, for years, been the dominant sector within advanced economies; its collapse has thus revealed the flimsy foundations on which neoliberalism has been built. This casts an interesting light on the hubris of Francis Fukayama's (1993) notion that we had reached 'the end of history', that is, that the universalisation of the Western forms of government and global capitalism represented the pinnacle of human achievement, and that all alternatives were simply not viable. The collapse and bailout of all the major banks across the developed capitalist reveals that our new moment is 'The End of the End of History'.

During this period we have also seen pedagogy in schools and universities re-shaped in the fetishistic image of neoliberalism. Nothing exemplified this more clearly than the fiasco associated with the outsourcing of SATs papers for 14 year olds in 2008. This was part of a major agreement between the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and a private company, ETS Europe. Only after huge numbers of the papers were either lost, sent to the wrong schools, or done so badly that teachers and parents were up in arms, did the government shamefacedly admitted the scale of the errors, resulting in the termination of the contract between ETS Europe and the QCA. The privatisation of marking illustrated here went catastrophically wrong, but what did this mean for actual teaching in schools – what had neoliberalism done to pedagogy here?

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Francis Gilbert (2008), a teacher in inner London schools for over 20 years, argued that:

the root of the problem is that SATS have made children better at passing abstruse exams, but in doing so have bludgeoned out all enthusiasm for learning, leaving them lacking in initiative, floundering when confronted with unexpected challenges, unable to construct sustained arguments and powerless to think imaginatively.

In other words, the curriculum under neo-liberal conditions was standardised into a process that could be regulated, audited and then outsourced, but in the process the pedagogy offered in schools was impoverished. A moment like this reveals the relationship between neo-liberal economics, managerial audit culture which has dominated the public sphere, and the resulting standardisation and control of knowledge within educational institutions. This has resulted in what Henry Giroux has called “the devaluation of the critical intellectual work on the part of teachers and students for the primacy of practical considerations” (1988:123).

The managerial marketised model of education was thus constructed in the image of the very sector whose manifest problems are now apparent to all – is it not therefore a time in which we need to question the way that model has impoverished educational processes? I would argue that it is at a moment like that when we need to recognise the value of insights of the great educationalist Paulo Freire. Central to Freire’s conceptualisation of how education needed to be different was the distinction he made between ‘banking’ and ‘problem-solving’ education. He characterised this as follows:

*Banking education* involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient listening objects (the students) . . . His [sic] task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance (1970:52)

*Problem-solving education* . . . consists of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. . . through dialogue . . . the teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches but who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (1970:61-62).

The distinction between these two different approaches to pedagogy represents a crucial starting point both for new and more creative approaches to pedagogy at a practical level, and for challenging the managerialised and audit driven approaches to pedagogy that has taken place in UK HE. The latter of course represents, in Freirian terms, a massive elevation of ‘banking education’. Just as neoliberal banking created a mirage of ever increasing wealth which turns out now to be non-existent, the managerial formulas of neo-liberal education are equally empty. This leaves us with a pedagogical challenge: the conflation of education with training has undermined students’ capacities to pose fundamental questions at the very time when it is urgent that we and they think

differently about how our economic life is organised. It is in this sense that educators need to recover and reinvent the tradition of critical pedagogy, and particularly Freire's concept of education as the capacity for critically engaged citizenship.

Thus as HE teachers we face a challenging moment ahead. The economic crisis has revealed the false foundations on which the neo-liberal world was based - yet cuts in public sector funding are already being proposed directly as a consequence of the vast expenditure entailed by the re-capitalisation of the banks; already a number of universities across the UK have sought to close whole departments. Alongside cuts and redundancies, we are likely to see the foisting of managerial control upon academics and students with greater vehemence. At the same time we may see the return of students themselves as political force, as recent events in Athens and Paris (as discussed by Souyri herein) illustrate. While this is still nascent in the UK I am constantly struck within my own institution by the yearning students and academics feel for an alternative to the thin gruel of dogmatic managerial pedagogy. The renowned historian and economist Immanuel Wallerstein (2008) has said the most certain thing is 'that the present system cannot survive' though we have no idea yet what will replace it.

We are living in risky times, but this makes it all the more important that we continue to defend and take forward the philosophy, values and politics of a dissenting academic tradition. It is crucial not to forget the richness of the legacy we are drawing on, and of the ways in which moments of social crisis will create new constituencies for radical and utopian ideas. The moment of critical pedagogy in this sense is the moment of awakening, not just a personal awakening, but an awakening to the materiality of the struggles that confront us.

As Freire has noted "at the heart of experience of coherently democratic authority is a basic almost obsessive dream, namely to persuade or convince freedom of its vocation to autonomy as it travels the road to self-construction, using materials from within and without, but elaborated over and over again" (Freire, 1998:87).

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## 6. From ‘anti-racist’ to ‘post-racist’ education: Problems and possibilities

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This short ‘think piece’ seeks to raise some critical questions regarding the current state of ‘anti-racist’ and diversity education. In doing so we share some of our concerns with the uncritical way that categories of ‘race’, ethnicity and culture are understood and articulated by students and teachers. Rather than enabling students to see beyond ‘racial categories’, our observations indicate that much of what passes as ‘anti-racist’ and more so ‘diversity awareness’ education ends up re-inscribing these categories. We end by tentatively offering for discussion the idea of ‘post-racist education’ as a possible way forward.

Any attempts to theorise and talk about ‘race’ - and for that matter other aspects of human difference - are fraught with dangers. This is not only because of the elusive and contested nature of the concept, but, most critically, because of the subjectivity of those doing the theorising. In this sense, we are interested in the underlying assumption one deploys in invoking the discourses of ‘race’. Broadly speaking such discourses fall into two opposing perspectives. One perspective, traditionally associated with providing the basis for racist thought, understands ‘race’ as a marker of human biological and/or moral superiority and inferiority. The other perspective, traditionally linked to anti-racist thought, seeks to talk about ‘race’ as an ideology, social construction or set of discourses. ‘Race’ in this case is related to social and psychological processes of racialisation, rather than a description of human biology or difference.

Historically, the systematic study of ‘race’ has three pivotal points. The first can be understood as the emergence of scientific racism from the late eighteenth to the mid- twentieth century. Broadly speaking, here we see ‘race’ studied as essentially the science of physical differences, designed to explain and justify racist practices. The second is the emergence of political movements within European colonies and amongst oppressed ‘racial’ groups in the colonial centre – the work of W.E.B. Du Bois is a classic statement of this position, which lays the ground for modern anti-racism and anti-colonialism. The third pivotal moment follows the revelation of the horrors of the Nazi racial state, resulting in the mass slaughter of Jews and other minorities on the ground of ‘racial’ impurity during the second half of the twentieth century. It is through the impetus of both of these latter two moments that the international academic community questions the ‘scientific’ basis of race and racial difference.

Whilst scientific racism managed to retain a long, albeit thin, tail stretching through the twentieth century, we see an important shift away from the study of

'race' as a standalone idea to analyses aimed at uncovering the social, ideological, psychological and historical mechanisms causing racialisation so that racism may be eradicated. This new preoccupation with the wider questioning of universal truths in the natural and social sciences led to heated debates about the kind of knowledge most likely to undermine 'race' ideology and ultimately eradicate racist oppression.

One argument is that 'race' represents a myth born out of a particular history of white European imperialism and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Through the past 300/400 years this myth has become universalised. The task then is not to ignore 'race' but to undermine this myth through rational debate.

The other argument is based on the idea of 'racial' equality, namely that to accept that 'race' exist in the social imaginary, but to reject the idea of superior or inferior 'races'. Given that the idea of 'race' has historically been reliant on notions of superiority and inferiority, by demonstrating this is not the case, such a strategy seeks to shift the social imaginary and ultimately the conception of 'race' as a marker of superiority/inferiority to a benign marker of human difference, a celebration of human diversity even.

So, whilst anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles have a much longer history, in the early 80's we saw a particular moment where anti-oppressive voices began to reverberate in work-places and classrooms resulting in the emergence of a particular form of anti-racist praxis (Srivastava 2007). Taking on the traditions of critical pedagogy, many people began exploiting the spaces opening up for anti-racist praxis, mostly, but not exclusively, within state institutions.

By the early 2000's we see a totally transformed landscape:

- Race now masquerades as religion, ethnicity and diversity – in this sense it is everywhere and nowhere. In this sense the allure of 'race' (Gilroy, 2004) is perpetuated, and the concept has retained its potency through a chameleon-like ability to reproduce itself, symbolically and materially. Political anti-racist social movements have largely fragmented and disappeared from the radar of public institutions, including universities.
- Anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogy has often been tarnished with the brush of 'political correctness gone mad', with liberals being some of the most vociferous objectors.
- A significant number of left intellectuals have been ambivalent about new resistance movements based on alliances between groups whose ideological views were hitherto seen to be insurmountable, the most significant example being the Muslim Council of Britain and the Socialist Worker Party.
- Until one year ago, with some significant exceptions linked to anti-globalisation's social movements, neoliberalism and consumer capitalism appeared to have undermined, through various strategies, forms of radical progressive politics, including community based anti-racist activism.

But, criticisms of anti-racist education and its associated, Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP), Diversity Awareness, multi-cultural education and so on, are not confined to the right and popular media as political correctness gone mad; elements of the left have sought to question their efficacy. For some there is something inherently problematic with 'anti-ism'. bell hooks writes in her book *Yearnings* that once one has decided what one is against, there is a need to define what one is for (hooks 1990).

Many on the left such as Sivanandan (1990), Malik (1996) and Kundanani (2007), object to the way anti-racism has become reconstructed in culturalist terms and its eventual co-option by governments and the resulting decoupling of the political dimension (Lentin 2008:327). They argue that this has been done at the expense of analyses of racism based on a critique of the intersections of 'race', class and gender and the need for revolutionary socialist change. This, as Kundanani (2007) suggests, has resulted in the creation of self-styled authoritarian community leaders of minority ethnic groups in Britain who have colluded with the government in policies that have weakened autonomous anti-racist groups such as the Asian Youth Movement in the 1980's.

Other criticisms are based on the problematic of developing a conceptual language to discuss the experiences of certain oppressed groups. Particularly influenced by some postmodernist and post-colonialist accounts, discourses with even a hint of 'essentialism' are seen to be problematic – see here, for example, postmodernist and post-colonialist critiques that point to a fluid world of ultra subjectivity, where rationalism becomes a swear word and, as Sivanandan (1990) has suggested, the 'world' become transformed into the 'word'. Kenan Malik (1996) is less kind; for him this represents a cowardly retreat from real historical material struggles of oppressed people. Interestingly, some of these writers - for example Spivak (1988) - in realising the problems with such a perspective for building political alliances based on a material understanding of identity have suggested the pragmatic notion of 'strategic essentialism.'

Paradoxically, in a strange pincer movement, reactionary elements appropriated many points of post-colonialist and postmodernist critics to legitimise their own particular, ethno-religious nationalist claims (see Sen 2006). Even more bizarrely, the British state, whilst proclaiming to be part of the so called 'War on Terror' has at the same time courted, and in some cases funded, fundamentalist groups, whilst at the same time undermining secular anti-racist forces, both within and outside the public sphere (Bhatt 1997, 2006). Hence the activism which developed became polarised, particularly after the Salman Rushdie affair, 9/11 and 7/7, along communal lines and thus redefined as the struggles for/by specific religious/ethnic groups on the one hand and struggles for community cohesion on the other. This has its corollary in the assertion of a communal definition of the 'true White British' ethnic category, as articulated by the BNP (Guardian 1/7/09).

Taken together, whilst the landscape has changed dramatically, we have seen a dramatic increase in racialisation, and in this respect, we would argue that some

blame must be laid at the hands of certain ways in which anti-racism has become configured and reconfigured. But where do we go from here? We finish by offering a series of questions which may help in this regard. Do we hark back to some kind of renaissance of anti-racism and seek to recreate those times? Do we, as some anti-racist writers like Lentin and Bonnett argue, recognise that antiracism is multifaceted and needs to be seen as an umbrella term representing a wide range of pedagogical and ideological approaches addressing inequalities and social justice? Or do we need to develop a new conceptual language rooted in a utopian pedagogy of hope and possibility, where the possibility of the death of 'race' can be contemplated?

By posing this last question, we would not want to imply that we believe that 'race' is dead or even dying, but we want to ask whether the election of Barack Obama is indicative of the possibility of a 'post-race' future. The significance of Barack Obama's election has become a source of considerable debate. Is he the US's first black president, or its first 'post-racial' president? Is Obama himself able to shape the terms of this discussion by the way he constructs his own racial identity and autobiography, often in fluid ways? How significant is his symbolic (and political) importance in light of the continuing oppression of black men in the country, the disproportionate number in prison, educational underachievement etc . . . ?

There is no doubt that Obama fits squarely within the capitalist system, albeit a system that is creaking under its own contradictions. But he does represent what is possible within it and also a yearning for radical change. His election has revitalised the language of hopes and dreams, but on the other hand, this is often translated into a new version of the 'American dream', which presents particular problems. However, it is possible that the Obama 'dream' could also expose or re-energise a movement, particularly if this dream does not become reality and it becomes clear that having black skin and being in a position of power does not equal the end of racism.

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## Why critical pedagogy and popular education matter today

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## 7. ‘A location of possibility?’: Critical pedagogies in the university classroom

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We live and work and play in a world of inequalities, injustices, pains, pleasures and possibilities. Education has always played a central role in both generating and reproducing inequalities and injustices, and providing the possibilities for challenging them. As educators and as learners we therefore have to think critically about how our involvement in education contributes to the making and remaking of the social world (locally and globally). This is why critical pedagogy matters.

My contribution to the critical pedagogy / popular education event of 20 February 2009 was a workshop entitled ‘A location of possibility?’ following the claim made by the Black US feminist bell hooks (1994) that ‘The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility’. ‘The classroom’ invokes the image of students sitting in a box-shaped room behind desks, with a teacher standing at the front providing knowledge to the students. In my role as a Sociology Lecturer I have been imagining, and where possible putting into practice, different forms of ‘classroom’, including learning and teaching which takes place through discovery and research, in local schools and communities, in museums and art galleries, on demonstrations, in archives, on the bus or street or over coffee. In my own research I have been learning about critical educational work being done in many diverse ‘locations’ and I have been inspired by some of the questions, methods and outcomes from these ‘experiments’. I wanted to share some of these resources with fellow teachers, students and activists. However I was reluctant to do so by standing up at the front of a box-shaped room and providing them with this knowledge (or my version of it). This was because one of the most significant things to come out of genuinely critical pedagogy is that it does not automatically privilege one form of knowledge or the voice of one knowledge provider. Critical approaches are able to recognise that knowledge is made, not given, and must always be subject to debate and contestation, making room for alternative or marginal perspectives.

So, I selected a range of resources which provide ideas, examples or theoretical resources for thinking about how our ‘classrooms’ can be/come ‘locations of possibility’. Some of these were text, some images, and I gave them to the workshop participants to see what they thought, and encouraged them to share their ideas with each other. I was expecting that some of these examples might mean different things to different people. In brief, these were the resources and their potential relevance for critical education:

One presented a picture of an Edwardian classroom with boys sitting in hierarchical rows on benches facing forwards, with their teachers standing behind them. The photograph speaks volumes about the production and reproduction of knowledge and social value. The disciplinary role of education is also made very clear. When we looked at this image in the workshop, our eyes were drawn to a poster on the wall of the university classroom in which we were sitting, instructing users of the room to ensure the furniture is always ordered as shown in the picture: in rows, chairs facing forwards. It was a funny and sad reminder of how little some things have changed. An extract from the Leitch (2006) report provided an example of how current government policy on higher education is seeking ever stronger links between universities and business. It was interesting to look at this alongside a critical quote from Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein (2006) on the ways in which current education politics shapes the identities of students as consumers, which can have a negative effect on the relationship between teachers and students and reduce education to what Paulo Freire would call 'banking'. The pictures of the classrooms and these two texts are a reminder of our current educational (and social, political and economic) context.

Participants were also given a picture and short quotation from the Copenhagen Free University (CFU) which was opened in May 2001 by a group of artists in their own flat. These artists wanted to create a learning space which rejected the 'knowledge economy as the framing understanding of knowledge' and instead worked with forms of knowledge which are 'fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising, subjective, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced . . . collectively' (<http://copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/>). In the work of CFU, and also another project called SUMMIT (<http://summit.kein.org/node/269>), art, activism and critical educational practice are intertwined. Thinking about the diverse activist possibilities for educational work is import to me, and a black and white photograph of student activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit staring cheekily and defiantly at the police in May 1968, as well as the poster for the Anti University of London (also established in 1968) offered alternative prompts. All these resources – though very different – seem to me to offer educational responses which are hopeful and generative as well as highly critical.

I also included words from two academic writers. One was from Bill Readings (1996) in which he argues that 'the scene of teaching should be understood as a radical form of dialogue'. The other was from the philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) in which he presents a radical alternative to the transmission of knowledge. My work is heavily influenced by Rancière's ideas at the moment, and so I wanted to share them!

Importantly, I wanted us to consider what students have to say too and so I included two extracts from undergraduate students' personal responses to the rather bleak short film 'A Vision of Students Today' (Wesch 2007). One student wrote '[At university] you don't have the opportunity to present your whole self, charisma, personality, passions... your identity is confined to a record of your seminar attendance, essay completion and exam results. Sometimes it's hard to

feel like an actual person because you aren't treated as one'. This was the very dilemma the CFU artists were responding to.

These resources were not presented in a logical order but given to the participants to make their own links. Even critical educators sometimes like being told what to do in a classroom, and so the outcome was uncertain. I hope people took something – different things – away from the resources which have been (and continue to be) inspirational to me.

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## 8. The French movement against neoliberalism in universities

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Last year, the French government passed the LRU law (*Libertés et Responsabilités des Universités* or Freedom and Responsibilities of the Universities), directly descended from the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process. Students protested against the law. They feared that the proposed 'autonomy' given to universities would worsen their financial situation by forcing them to sell their real estate assets in order to raise money and create more inequalities among students by opening the gates to higher tuitions and various forms of selection. However the students' unions eventually accepted the reform on the grounds that it would be the manner in which the reform was implemented that would make the difference. The decree regarding the status of teaching and research staff (*enseignants-chercheurs*) has now been published by our Higher Education and Science Secretary, Valérie Pécresse, and unions on both sides of the political spectrum have virulently shown their opposition, particularly the larger ones (SNESUP).

Demonstrations, organized every single week from February 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 through to at least the time of the completion of this paper (May 2009), united tens of thousands of people throughout the country (in Paris on February the 5<sup>th</sup>, approximately 1,5000 people, on March 10<sup>th</sup> between 8,000 and 25,000, on March 19<sup>th</sup> approximately 20,000 people, on March 24<sup>th</sup> approximately 15,000 and still several thousand yesterday (8<sup>th</sup> of April 2009). Out of 83 universities in France, 70 have been involved in some form of protest. More than 40 of them remain highly mobilized.

The idea behind this decree is to give fewer teaching hours to the most efficient researchers to help them work better (we call this modulation). Coupled with deep budget cuts, modulation would have the teaching and research staff devote the majority of their time to teaching, impeding their ability to be 'efficient researchers'. Furthermore, most professors believe that inspired teaching is related to up to date research. Improving one at the expense of the other makes no sense pedagogically, especially when professors have no say in the distribution of teaching and research loads.

In order to get universities to function with the same independence that businesses have, the decree grants university presidents an incredible amount of power in hiring and firing their staff and managing their resources (*automomie des universities*). In a nutshell, the decree virtually neutralizes all faculty search committees and leaves university presidents free to decide how much teaching each professor will have to do, just like a CEO who makes all the final decisions regarding workers in his business.

Furthermore, the reform also tackles teachers' training for elementary and secondary schools which, as it stands now, is highly inadequate. Particularly to blame is the lack of pedagogical training: observation and supervised teaching are not part of the competitive exam that future high school teachers take, and lectures about the social and cultural conditions of working class and minority students are not included. In order to rectify this, Xavier Darcos (our Secretary of secondary education) launched a reform called *mastérisation* that will turn the year long teacher preparation for the competitive exam into a normal Master's year in which students -on top of preparing for the competitive exam- will have to write a research dissertation. Only a small proportion of trainee teachers will have the opportunity to observe classes and to teach under the supervision of a qualified teacher. In other words, under this new law, most newly qualified teachers will never have seen a single student before they start teaching. Moreover the trainee teacher who get their master's diploma but fail at the competitive recruiting exam, will be swelling the ranks of underqualified teachers who can thus be hired on precarious—and cheaper—contracts. The university professors charged with designing the diplomas for teachers are strongly opposed to this reform.

On January 22nd, President Sarkozy delivered a speech on science and research, accusing researchers of being lazy and unmotivated. In partial response to the arrogant and defamatory tone of the speech, and in order to get the government to retract this reform, researchers, backed by (numerous) university presidents and a large numbers of students, started to fight back.

Here is a list of various courses of action that have been taken:

- Most university teachers have been on strike since the beginning of February until the end of May. They ceased teaching fully or partially, teaching on a rotating basis (*grève 'perlées ou tournante'*), and offering conferences and debates instead of regular lessons.
- Sometimes tables and chairs were brought outside of classrooms in order to invite people to start teaching and learning in different ways. This was called 'le printemps des tables' (the spring of tables).
- Teach-outs have also been widely used, a recent one blocking a couple of bridges in Paris.
- Last year in May an Academic Pride day was organized.
- University-wide consultations on possible forms of alternative reform have started in various universities.
- Researchers also threw their shoes at the higher education ministry protesting against changed conditions and started an uninterrupted chain of complainers (*la ronde des obstinés*) that will cease only when the government withdraws the decree.
- A very large number of teachers have stopped handing student grades to the administrative staff (grade retention), thus blocking the official attribution of diplomas, except when this

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prevented students from getting need-based grants. The method has finally been abandoned as it started to backfire but teachers are already organizing to continue the protest in September.

- Many professors refused to participate in any form of auditing of other programs or universities.
- University presidents refused to send Xavier Darcos the syllabi for the new teacher's training program (syllabus retention).
- On March 16th, over 250 directors of scientific laboratories (mostly from the CNRS, the national center for scientific research) threatened to all resign if the government does not grant back the posts that have been cut.
- On March 17th, the conference of university presidents (CPU) demanded the postponement and renegotiation of the mastérisation reform. In May, the minister finally agreed to postpone it until 2010.
- In order to assist students, teachers involved in the movement have organized 'pedagogical encounters' to give students advice on what to read, and what to do in order to prepare for the future.
- On March 26th, the Sorbonne was occupied by professors and students protesting the LRU law and the ID check that has been imposed at the doors of the university. The police ousted them the next day.

After many weeks of strikes (up to 12 for more than 20 universities), demonstrations and various pedagogical actions, teachers, students, unions (such as SNESUP or UNEF ) and university presidents remain mobilized. The government has not given in and the media (except for the newspaper Libération and a few online papers) have provided very little coverage. But the academic world is not defeated yet. The issues at stake - researchers' independence in front of the university president, the pedagogical preparation for future teachers, the increasingly precarious status of many teachers, and finally a genuine recognition of the importance of research and education for the country's future - are too important for them to stop fighting.

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## 9. Why popular education matters

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I have been working for the Workers' Education Association (WEA) for the past 15 years, since leaving work in secondary schools which had become wearing, both for me and the students I taught. What drew me to the WEA was its usage of popular education in courses to enable some people previously alienated from and damaged by the education system the first time around to see that, if done differently, learning could be really useful. I remain convinced by the power of popular education and want to discuss here its immediate and longer term learning and teaching benefits. I also want to suggest that HE students and tutors can benefit from these teaching methods and will use examples from two WEA programmes to make this point. I first discuss how our 'second chance' programme (designed for those who missed out on education the first time around) offers a powerful learning and teaching tool. I then discuss how our Trade Union (TU) programmes enable students to challenge their ideas about how the world is organised.

### **The 'second chance' programme**

'Second chance' is a programme for students who left school with few or no qualifications and who had negative experiences with education and therefore lack confidence to engage in formal learning. These are largely people from groups discriminated against in society—working class people, women and minority ethnic groups.

The WEA have found that popular education is more stimulating and interesting for tutor and student than formal education's conventional ways of learning and teaching. Students get more actively involved in discussions, recognising that they know more than they thought and through that gain confidence to challenge themselves further. Tutors get immediate feedback from students about whether or not they're engaged and what they understand. Teachers can then more effectively teach students from where they are at, and adapt teaching as they are doing it. Students don't then fall into the trap of thinking 'I don't understand and can't understand'; instead, learning becomes a more positive experience as teachers are guided by students' responses to their efforts.

As a tutor, I like the fact that even when you teach the same course again, the experience is never the same. Working with students who feel comfortable enough to say that they don't understand something, or that something isn't relevant for them, helps you develop as a tutor, linking ideas that might have been latent in your own mind, enabling you to broaden your knowledge. It is also stimulating to be made to think on your feet, and widen your subject knowledge when students ask questions you haven't anticipated—and therefore develop confidence in your own skills. There is great satisfaction in seeing students

engage, seeing 'a light switch on'. Because students control the pace of their learning and how they are engaging with topics, they learn more. I remember, for example, a very short piece about racism, called 'Sikh by night', a first person account by a young Birmingham Sikh boy reflecting on his experiences of being a student in an all white grammar school more than 30 years ago. The reading aimed to both help students develop different types of reading skills like skimming and scanning, being able to draw out key points and summarise an argument. It was also about helping students feel confident with looking at a topic from several viewpoints and then making critical judgements about it. Within a few weeks of starting a course, these students, some who hadn't been in education for 30 or 40 years, were actively engaged in topics. We did this by having students work in small groups, talking amongst themselves and without tutors (as tutor presence could inhibit them, especially early on). We also only asked each group to present one point they discussed with the larger group so that they didn't feel exposed if they didn't have the entire answer.

This programme also helped students understand the world by getting involved in their communities. For some this meant doing things like being treasurer for the Brownies; others became parent governors at their children's school, or started a petition on a local issue. While this may seem a long way from intervening in and transforming the world, it is important to remember that popular education starts from and builds on where students are at. We hopefully helped students renew their interest in learning, an interest that some might take further later.

### **Trade union studies programme**

In the trade union (TU) studies programme the link between education and social action has been direct and clear: TU Stewards and Health and Safety Reps develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to improve terms and conditions for their members. In one programme, for example, a campaign video about the death of Simon Jones, a young man killed while on his first day of work at a building site in 1998, was organised around a discussion that asked TU workers to think about how the film linked with their own experience and then to work out some strategies and tips about how to improve health and safety in their workplaces. Importantly, tutors started with the recognition that employers placed barriers in the way of workers improving their workplace, and sought to help trade union students figure out how to use their understandings of their workplaces to counter these arguments. Students were then asked to participate in role playing around employer and employee union negotiations about health and safety to prepare them for real situations they could face when raising such issues at their workplaces. Then students were asked to report back on incidents that arose when they raised these issues at their workplaces. Further discussion, amongst students and with tutors, explored how students could move things forward at their workplace. Discussion was ongoing throughout the course and students were encouraged to share problems and successes in order to learn from one another.

## Conclusion

Over the past 10 years the government's narrowing skills agenda and focus on accreditation and employability have made it increasingly difficult to use popular education particularly on 'second chance' courses. The WEA can no longer organise programmes as we wish as the government has sought to ensure that FE and adult education focus less on the kind of personal development and satisfaction we previously encouraged and more on ensuring that public money for education enhances national economic growth. Thus there is now more government intervention in FE and adult education. Whilst we have sought to educate to help people develop self confidence and self esteem, and hopefully take the next step of working to change society, it is becoming more difficult to do this *and* meet the government agenda. The government are now less interested in us doing the things that most mattered to students and us than in preparing students for the workplace.

To sum up, there are plenty of reasons *not* to adopt a popular education approach in any formal education environment at present: popular education requires more tutor work and energy in terms of preparation and face to face delivery; it can be scary to have less control or leave yourself exposed as a tutor. Students can be resistant to a non-traditional programme as many have had an alienating and instrumentally oriented education. Yet in the current climate where we are encouraged to ensure high student attendance and retention on courses, popular education could be useful as it encourages greater engagement—which actually could help meet the government's agenda.

It is worth remembering that popular education is an approach and a political stance, not just a set of activities. Activities such as pair work, small group discussion and role play that popular education encourages, are also used in management training and by organisations such as The World Bank. They do not by themselves indicate that popular education is taking place. Respect for students, acknowledging that students bring with them a wealth of experiences that can provide a starting point for learning, considering education a tool for change, and having a genuine desire to break down the hierarchy between educator and participants is what popular education is about. For these reasons I believe that the models the WEA has developed in its TU studies and 'second chance' programme can offer insights useful to HE lecturers keen to better support their more diverse students today and facing, as WEA tutors are, greater government pressures.

## 10. Popular education in the university

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For the past 10 years I have been practicing popular education with, and in, higher education (HE). I started with the community action team at Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES), convinced that popular education had a role in promoting justice among communities directly affected by environmental pollution. In Scotland, most communities affected by pollution, environmental degradation, unsustainable development and urban neglect are poor, working class, isolated or in some other way socially disenfranchised. Whilst at FoES I was involved in putting together a course in conjunction with Queen Margaret University (QMU) which attempted to hold to the principles of popular education (see Crowther, p. 11, this volume) and meet the requirements of a university validated course. The Higher Education Certificate in Environmental Justice ran from 2000 to 2009. By 2005 I had a job with QMU and used the experience of the environmental justice HE Cert to start to establish other courses using the principles of popular education, and conducting research into learning in social movements.

This paper critically reflects on this process and raises questions about the extent to which popular education is possible within the university, especially in the context of the commodification and bureaucratisation of HE. I explore the extent to which the principles of popular education are compromised by their practice within current university settings, and whether these principles might be well served by other activities in which academics are able to participate.

In 1999, Friends of the Earth Scotland received a grant from the Community Fund to run a project designed to support communities directly affected by environmental degradation and pollution. FoES had been providing training and *ad hoc* advice to communities fighting against damaging developments and pollution incidents for some time, and was exploring how this could be offered in a more sustained and systematic way. The communities we were supporting tended to be working class, poor and geographically isolated. These are the social demographics of communities most likely to be affected by environmental pollution, and are quite different from the traditional support base for environmental NGOs. In this sense we were aware that these were instances of environmental injustice, in which socially disadvantaged communities are disproportionately affected by pollution and often have less access to the physical and cultural resources required to oppose it.

We sought to use popular education to respond to the needs of such communities whilst also building communities' capacity to tackle such issues in

future. This possibility also enabled a connection with community work for sustainable development which FoES had been conducting. Popular education was able to recognise the skills and experience local activists gained through self-directed learning, whilst also contributing skills and knowledge to strengthen this capacity collectively within the community, connecting the necessity to react to polluting incidents with the importance of taking action to improve conditions globally for the long term: what Julian Agyeman et al (2003) have called 'just sustainability'.

The 'agents for environmental justice' project drew on the tradition of 'community agents' who, in the Indian subcontinent, and increasingly in rural Scotland, have been local activists supported by development agencies to mobilise for community development and action in their own localities. In the first presentation of this course, 16 agents were recruited and provided with support for their local action, financial support, printed resources, opportunities for networking and, centrally, a Higher Education Certificate in Environmental Justice, validated and accredited by QMU.

The project took a self-consciously popular education approach to making academic and other knowledges relevant to the struggles of communities involved in promoting environmental justice. A popular education approach differs from traditional university education in which academics are employed to generate and keep up to date with changes in a body of peer reviewed academic knowledge. These academics select from this body of knowledge that which is regarded as suitable for a course on a particular subject, and then deliver this knowledge to the individual learner. Through being educated, the learner is engaged in a process of change akin to apprenticeship into the knowledge and conventions of academia.

The environmental justice course operated in a less linear and more dialectical way than a traditional academic course. Academic knowledge was selected by university academics and the knowledge of 'environmentalism' by professional community educators and experienced campaigners employed by FoES. In preparing the course a negotiation took place to derive a curriculum from these two sources. It is on the basis of this curriculum that the validation of the course was approved.

The community activists (agents) brought with them a selection from another body of knowledge derived from the experience of living in a community with, say, an opencast mine on the doorstep, and being involved in a struggle against it. Teaching staff from FoES and the university worked with the agents to generate a dialogue between their experiential knowledge and the prepared curriculum in the educational process, thereby ensuring that learning was relevant to social action.

In this process the main objective is that the community's reality is changed by the social action leading to an improved environment for the community. Change also takes place within FoES in as much as the interests and struggles of local communities are incorporated into its campaign priorities, its understanding of

environmental justice and ultimately contributes to the body of knowledge of environmentalism (Scandrett 2007). The potential is also present for the academic institution to be changed through the experience of being accountable to popular struggle through popular education dialogue.

The course was justified within the university widening participation policy context because it attracted adult students drawn from communities under-represented in universities, rather than in terms of the intrinsic educational and social legitimacy in engaging with communities in struggle of popular education. Of the 16 students recruited half were without previous HE experience, four continued to live in geographically isolated communities, and people with disabilities and from minority ethnic communities were more highly represented than in the student population as a whole. The students/agents attended residential teaching weekends and were expected to continue to be active in their communities on environmental justice issues. Equal legitimacy and comparable rigour applied to their community activism and their intellectual study. Social interests outside the academy were given access to its intellectual resources and the academy was enabled to participate in the life of communities and social movements around it.

Providing popular education in this form raises a number of questions and contradictions. The academics involved in this project were prepared (indeed eager) to participate in learning of this kind within the space created by widening participation. However, the extent to which the institution was prepared to change, and enable the experience to contribute to the mainstream curriculum or to academic knowledge generally, is limited by this policy context. The model of community based and supported academic learning is financially expensive and this was made possible by additional funding, but it is incompatible with the market model of education prevalent in universities, which squeezes out popular education principles. Market approaches are designed to increase productivity, income and efficiency whilst decreasing costs, therefore valuing only those products which may be exchanged in the labour market. Work with poorer students or which requires the university to be accountable to social values are often incompatible with this as illustrated in the following example.

Whilst employed as a full time academic I have initiated other courses using the same model of building connections between the university and social movement organisations involving struggles against injustice. In collaboration with Scottish Women's Aid, a successful course *Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence* has been offered to activists, professionals and full time sociology students. A series of unaccredited *Critical Race Dialogues* was delivered with anti-racism activists and community workers. Both of these involved some external resourcing (the time of one Women's Aid worker was funded from the Scottish Government's Domestic Abuse Strategy, whilst the Critical Race Dialogues received financial support from C-SAP). These courses were to contribute to an undergraduate degree in social justice, designed to be accessible to activists and relevant to struggles for social justice. However, prior to

assessment of academic quality or social relevance, the course was withdrawn on financial grounds.

There are already some popular education principles compromised by the requirements of 'quality assurance' through validation. Popular education emphasises collective learning for social benefit, and whilst this course is based on the collective learning of the whole group, and of the communities in which most of the work takes place, nonetheless the process relies on the accreditation of individual students. Freire warned against manipulation by educators and 'one of the methods of manipulation is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for individual success' (1972:149). At its roots, popular education emerged from the people's movements in Latin America - using it within the environmental movement in Scotland raises important analytical and practical questions. During the course, deliberate attempts were made to connect students, graduates and other activists for environmental justice, thereby attempting to create the conditions whereby such activists learn from one another and from the established curriculum, and identify with one another as part of an environmental justice movement. This effort was not sustained for long enough for an indigenous leadership from amongst these communities to emerge, so when FoES started to scale back its emphasis on environmental justice, the momentum for this movement was lost.

Since moving into full time university employment I participated in a research project on learning in environmental justice struggles (Crowther et al 2008). The communities in which two of the agents were active were included in a study of how activists learn through participating in the movement, especially the role played by information and communication technologies. Our research suggests that much learning takes place through activism, especially by those in leadership positions in the campaigns (as our agents were), but in a rather haphazard form. These activists report the importance of accessing particular kinds of knowledge at certain times, the value of access to academics, environmental campaigners, trades unionists or professionals of various kinds, identifying sources of information on the internet and the conjuncture of particular circumstances in which connections are made and insights emerge. Within this range of learning situations, the academic environmental justice course featured little.

This research raises interesting contradictions. At the end of each presentation of the course, an external researcher conducted independent evaluation of the student/agents' experiences. When asked about the course, students generally reported that they had found it useful and positive, albeit with helpful criticisms and suggestions. However, our later research suggests that when asked about their learning experience in the movement, the course was of less value than the unsystematic support given by sympathetic intellectuals at particularly crucial times. These insights can be compared with the findings of Johnston (2005) who, investigating the political activities of academics involved in popular education, discovered that where these academics are active in social movements or protest groups it is seldom as educators. They are asked to conduct literature searches, interpret others' data, access and digest policy documents, write briefing papers

etc, but seldom provide explicit education. Protest groups do make use of the expertise of sympathetic academics but not necessarily on the academics' terms!

This is not to dismiss the possibility of popular education in the university, but to contextualise it. The point of popular education is that those engaged in struggles against oppression set the terms of their own learning, but popular education is more than supporting haphazard learning. There were certainly occasions during the environmental justice course in which the content of the curriculum was resisted as irrelevant by students at the point of delivery and then valued retrospectively later. Popular education involves a dialogue between academic knowledge and engagement in struggle, which requires a sustained commitment from the academic, which may come in the form of an accredited course but may also come in other ways. At the same time academics who sustain a commitment to movements of struggle may be required to serve different functions whilst others – campaigners, trades unionists, other movement activists - with more relevant knowledge, may be recruited as 'teachers'.

Ettore Gelpi's (1979, 1985) conception of lifelong education identified the source of the curriculum in the social conflicts exposing the underlying contradictions of society. This is the point where people demand learning to achieve dignity, freedom or survival. Lifelong education is therefore an attempt to systematise the provision of learning at those points of conflict. The source of the curriculum makes the education relevant, not its deliverer, how it is accredited, or the pedagogical methods used. Popular education may play an important role in this, but so may formal or informal education. Educational provision may become the function of non-academics whilst academics may take other roles in support of movements for justice. What is important however is for the academic to be both able to respond to the learning needs of those in struggle and responding to social contradictions through political action; and to discern opportunities for education in this context.

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## 11. In the age of stupid: A call for popular education and critical pedagogy both inside and outside the university

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*“It is a farce to affirm that men [sic] are people and thus should be free, yet do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality.” (Freire 1972:26)*

As I write, the première of ‘The Age of Stupid’ is just about to take place. This is a film showing in mainstream cinemas that is asking why, in the light of the evidence, we are not taking more action on climate change. How does this question relate to our ‘highest’ establishments of education, the universities? Whilst there are increasing amounts of student led political action (e.g. Royal Bank of Scotland actions co-ordinated by People and Planet, Gaza solidarity occupations and various autonomous student groups), these remain a marginal extra-curricular activity and the student population as a whole has not got the collective power that it used to have, or it now has in other places such as Greece or Italy or France. This is not, I imagine, because students and staff are not aware of the need for change. In the early years of the twenty-first century it is surely impossible to study the world and not be aware of the great problems that we face. From stark global inequality and poverty, to the war on terror and climate change, global issues are of increasing prominence and within the university disparate disciplines must all interface with the same big issues. However, over the past 30 years and with growing momentum, the UK government agenda for higher education has been an increasing drive for skills for ‘employability’ and students are increasingly seen as consumers, preparing to sell their labour on the market. Research agendas and curricula are increasingly determined by the needs of the economy and critical voices and thinking are squeezed out as the university is restructured by and succumbs to the over-arching neo-liberal agenda. So where does this leave the university as a space for critical thinking and action that can challenge the dominant logic of a society that is heading towards the brink?

Whilst there is clearly some excellent research and teaching within universities that are well attuned to the scale of the social, environmental and economic crises we face and are doing very important work in a range of disciplines, I argue that universities are predominantly concerned with producing a string of qualified individuals who are prepared to participate in an economic model that is increasingly irrelevant and is certainly unsustainable. During the past 30

years, ever higher numbers of graduates have been buying into the myth that a degree leads us to a good job, allowing consumer choice, ever higher standards of living, and being part of the endless economic growth miracle, which is fuelled abundant cheap energy. It seems that this bubble has now burst. Many who had been arguing for decades that this model was inherently contradictory on a finite planet and only benefited a small proportion of the world's population, would say that it was long overdue. So where does this leave the present neo-liberal model of higher education, and what are degrees preparing students for exactly? In the current context of global recession and urgent need for a more just and sustainable system, I argue that the university could reassert its critical role in society by fostering a participatory, popular education that empowers them to both understand and be prepared to try and change the structures of the world they live in. Whilst I recognise the important distinction between academic understanding and political action, in the current context all educational endeavours should have at least some element of practical purpose. I also believe that the pedagogical approach that is taken when teaching about global issues plays an important part in determining the outcomes. Listening to a catalogue of doom and disaster and yet doing nothing about it, can easily lead to disempowerment, apathy and depression. Combining participatory methods with concrete planning for action could develop the urgently needed critical thinkers who are prepared to engage with the world and all its challenges. I will describe some of the key features of popular education and where it has been used with the hope that lecturers may experiment with this sort of approach.

### **Trapeze and the popular education model**

Outside of the university, there are many educational projects that are using a popular education methodology. One, which I am involved with, is Trapeze, a small collective that was set up in 2004 in the run up to the G8 summit in Scotland. Our aim was to bring groups of people together to understand the global economy and to discuss the big issues of climate change and poverty and debt that many people in many different countries face. Throughout 2004 - 2005 Trapeze facilitated educational events with over 100 different groups — community groups, student unions, groups, refugee and migrant organisations and many public meetings. Our methods aim to build collective knowledge and understanding of the issues using time-lines, short films, jargon busting, role plays, quizzes and also providing information about the political context and mobilisations (Trapeze Collective 2007). Thanks to the hook of the G8 summit and, over time, a reputation for workshops that were both stimulating and fun, the levels of engagement and interest in these workshops was overwhelmingly positive. Since then we have continued to promote and facilitate popular education in a wide range of projects and settings. We use a dialogue-based approach which rejects telling people what the problems are and what the solutions should be and instead uses participatory activities that allow people to explore their existing knowledges and responses. This is based on our belief in society organising collectively through the practice of self-management, mutual aid and direct democracy. We argue that meeting contemporary social and environmental challenges will require a broad level of participation rather than a

few experts or activists and that popular education is an important step towards achieving this aim.

Trapese is also involved with trying to bridge the traditional academic/activist divide, attending various academic conferences and running seminars on participatory methods and popular education with lecturers inside the university. We have also given lectures within the university, for example at the University of Leeds to 60 second year Geography students just before the G8 summit. Despite the tiered seating we tried to weave in participatory methods, for example, inviting students up on to the stage, getting them to stand up or sit down if they agreed with things, working in small groups to discuss questions, translating the G8 communiqués into everyday language and for their homework they were asked to analyse the different demands of the various G8 critical mobilisations. In short they were asked to participate directly in debates of global significance. The students enjoyed the sessions and produced good assignments. But more importantly they had an opportunity to develop their analytical skills, meet 'real live political activists' and understand the significance of the summit and the counter mobilisations. This in the light of the aims of the course to understand political processes and social movements was invaluable and hopefully inspired at least some of them to get involved in some way.

Quite apart from the moral imperative of developing the university as a critical site of engagement with the big issues of our time, participatory methods are student focussed, build confidence and, most importantly, can be fun and so keep students engaged. Another key principle of popular education is that of breaking down the divide between teacher and learner. This should also be of benefit to overworked lecturers, to foster the idea that students can take responsibility for their own learning. Although not necessarily most efficient in capitalist terms, popular education for a positive and liberatory education rejects what Freire called the banking model or 'mug and jug' approach to education, where the student is an empty vessel to filled with knowledge by the teacher. Instead the teacher questions and encourages critical thinking whilst challenging hierarchies and the status quo. It is important to meet people where they are at and build up collective understanding and co-operation rather than result focussed competition, because if we are to achieve meaningful social change we will need to move forward together. This is a consensual model which recognises the importance of minority opinions whilst also seeking to discover and nurture common ground. This model presents an important alternative to the adversarial way that so much of our society is organised.

A further significant distinguishing feature of popular education is that it does not just stop at the point of understanding but provides non-hierarchical forums for discussion that also have an explicit focus on taking personal and collective action. It is not the popular educator's role to determine what this action may be; on learning about climate change. for example, some people may decide to change to energy saving light-bulbs, others may decide to get involved with the local Transition Initiative or campaign against airport expansion. Rather, the educator aims to provide practical tools, resources, networks and trainings as well as inspirational examples of change. In subjects such as climate change, the

facts can be alarming: statistics of extinction, extreme weather events such as flooding and hurricanes, etc. For this reason, we must allow time to explore peoples' emotional responses to these facts before asking how to incorporate this knowledge into our daily realities and what action we can take to respond.

By using this methodology Trapeze draws on the history of popular education in social movements around the world. I will outline three examples of popular education in action; in each of these examples there was a pressing injustice that was challenged to strategic success.

### *1. The US civil rights movement*

Rosa Parks, who sparked the desegregation movement when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in 1955, had previously attended the Highlander School in Tennessee. Myles Horton, one of the founders, argued that ordinary people have the ability to understand and positively change their own lives. At Highlander, along with Martin Luther King and other activists, Parks had been part of a programme which had taken literacy classes to poor black communities, teaching them to read and therefore enabling them to register to vote. They started classes by reading the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; the powerful language of all being equal encouraging those who attended citizenship schools to demand much more than the right to vote.

### *2. Argentinian neighbourhood circles, 2001 onwards*

When, after 30 years of neoliberal policies, the economic crisis now hitting the West hit Argentina in 2001, Roundtables for Autonomous Discussion and open platforms in neighbourhood assemblies became common features where people came together to talk about the roots of the financial crisis and possible solutions. These processes gave birth to an impressive array of autonomous projects including collective kitchens, re-occupied factories producing essential goods and community gardens, as people pulled together to pool their resources as the old order crumbled (Gordon and Chatterton 2004). Latin America has a rich history of popular education, most famously the work of Paulo Freire with illiterate peasants in Brazil. Freire argued that educators' role is to help people to analyse their situation so that they might improve it. Thus literacy programmes centred around the daily reality of the participants lives such as not having access to land, and looked for the causes of these problems and how they could try and achieve change. Latin America today stands as an impressive example of standing up to oppression and constructing alternative visions.

### *3. Climate action movement in UK, 2005-present*

Climate change is increasingly identified as the greatest threat facing us today. The evidence suggests that there must be rapid and radical action to curb emissions. As well as several high profile Climate Camps in the UK and hundreds of direct actions, the climate action movement has given rise to an enormous amount of popular education. Thousands of workshops and talks have spread the word about this threat and activists are engaged in an ongoing process of

self-education that tries to keep up with the complex realities of climate science, to critique proposed solutions and to develop the skills needed for sustainable alternatives. This is just one example of many where grassroots activism develops alongside self-and collective education to build important and timely analyses of complex issues.

## Conclusion

The dangers of the current time are that our social and cultural institutions and behaviour are unable, ill-equipped or unwilling to instigate the sort of radical change that is needed in the time frame required. Almost monthly the rate of climate change, economic downturn and social breakdown seem to be increasing, according to various academic reports. These are challenging but potentially exciting times. Our entire society will need to co-operate to meet the challenges of adapting our economy and lifestyles to achieve the necessary cuts in emissions to avoid catastrophic climate change and the potential resulting social meltdown. A rapid and broad range of responses to these impending crises are required and universities can and should one of the arenas where this will be played out. Alone, governments are unable to solve the problems at hand firstly because they are committed to endless economic growth and maintaining the status-quo. But secondly to address climate change requires a social revolution which changes many of the ways we live, from how we produce our food to how we organise our energy. These changes will only come from strong networks of solidarity and action and bottom up efforts. We will need everyone's genius and creativity and everyone must be involved for it to work, it cannot be merely legislated or imposed. The ethos of Transition Towns is illustrative here:

If we collectively plan and act early enough there's every likelihood that we can create a way of living that's significantly more connected, more vibrant and more in touch with our environment than the oil-addicted treadmill that we find ourselves on today. (TransitionTowns.org)

In this context what more appropriate preparation for life than for universities, or at least elements within them, to throw their resources and knowledge behind these positive movements for change, to prepare students to deal with the realities of the world that we are living in and come up with just and sustainable alternatives? I am not arguing that all formal teaching be abandoned or that this approach is appropriate to all topics. However, I call for academics to contribute to helping solve the problems by opening their doors and minds to the issues at hand. By doing so, they might explore with students possible links that relevant academic insights might have for developing a greater appreciation of current problems—and perhaps work with others to create solutions? Through popular education, the knowledge that is produced could be open source; popular educators would argue that it is not created for individuals to claim as their own or to achieve high grades. Some knowledge and understanding is far too important to remain in the inaccessible domain of the university library or in the university's coffers due to Intellectual Property Rights. Whilst previously the question may have been at what point and how we move from discussion and debate into action, in the current context the cycle of knowledge-action-

refection should be a constant throughout our learning process. Indeed, at what stage will we know that we have enough knowledge, sufficient research and intellectual backup to take the leap to action, and to be confident that is the only intelligent response?

### Notes

For more information on Trapese see [www.trapese.org](http://www.trapese.org). Also see *Do It Yourself, A Handbook for Changing Our World*, edited by the Trapese Collective and published by Pluto Press, 2007. This book covers nine themes from food to popular education and combines theoretical analysis with concrete resources and how to guides for ethical and sustainable living. We have been told that it is a great teaching resource! See: [www.handbookforchange.org](http://www.handbookforchange.org)

The MA in Activism and Social Change at Leeds University is directed by Dr. Paul Chatterton, also a member of Trapese Popular Education Collective; see [www.activismsocialchange.org.uk/](http://www.activismsocialchange.org.uk/)

### References

- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
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- Trapese Collective (2007) *Do it yourself: A handbook for changing our world*. London: Pluto Press.

## Other C-SAP Publications

As part of our ongoing research into teaching and learning within the social science disciplines, C-SAP has maintained an interest in publishing scholarly monographs, often led by our academic coordinators and drawing upon a wide range of contributors from the academic community. From our ninth monograph, *Teaching Race in Social-Science and Humanities Higher Education* (ed. Emily Horowitz) we have been using an online service for printing and distribution. This will offer a number of advantages to our publication strategy in future:

- **benefits for C-SAP** - improved sustainability and more effective ordering service (move away from bulk ordering and distribution to directed requests via our website);
- **benefits for authors** - wider distribution of work internationally; greater promotion amongst search engines and other online collections; other promotion tools including social networking;
- **benefits for readers** – extra facility for reviews of books; PDF versions of manuscript free to download;

We envisage that our *Why Social Science Matters* series will follow this model of publication and distribution. Full details of our monographs, and PDF copies of individual chapters, are available from the publications area of our website: <http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/publications/>. Remaining copies of our monographs can be requested from [enquiries@c-sap.bham.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@c-sap.bham.ac.uk), or chapters can be downloaded from our publications web link.

## ELiSS – Enhancing Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences

ELiSS is C-SAP's online journal, and will produce a series of regular and thematic issues. However, its main focus is on articles/digital records and commentary submitted by all who work in higher education with an interest in the social sciences. The journal uses Web 2.0 technologies and particularly encourages contributors to use such opportunities. The editorial board encourage a wide range of submissions and seek to attract the following:

- a critical analysis of teaching and learning which takes account of national and international developments;
- reflections on practice which can inform and support others;
- exemplars of innovations which are theorised and supported through scholarship;
- engagement with theoretical debates within the social sciences which inform learning and teaching;
- exploration of the dynamic and changing processes in teaching and learning.

More information on how to submit papers, and to read the current and past issues, please visit the website: <http://www.eliss.org.uk>

## **About C-SAP**

C-SAP is the subject network for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics. We are one of 24 subject networks which were part of the Learning and Teaching Support Network, funded by the UK Funding Councils for Higher Education, and now part of the Higher Education Academy (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>). Based at the University of Birmingham, we aim to promote a scholarly and disciplinary-specific approach to the innovation and reform of learning and teaching in the social sciences.

C-SAP provides a unique opportunity to draw on the different strengths of the three disciplines to analyse and shape current practices and debates in higher education. We engage with staff, departments and students through a wide range of activities including our publications, annual project funding, events and workshops, special interest groups, C-SAP Associates, as well as our annual conferences.

For more information about our work, or to find out how to get involved, please see our website or contact our enquiries line:

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