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

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?

- 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 thow 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

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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