Chapter 3.6: Teaching for Transformation: Higher Education Institutions, Critical Pedagogy and Social Impact

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Even the briefest of glances at the mission statements emerging from British universities indicates an increasing emphasis being placed on the role of academic institutions within society. From universities aiming to contribute to or be responsive to local communities, benefit or make a real difference to society, to our own university's mission to 'transform lives locally and globally through the creation, sharing and application of knowledge' (University of Dundee 2014), the gaze of higher education institutions has broadened significantly beyond a traditional academic focus. While we welcome this widening of universities' missions, there are many reasons to be cautious. This broadening of the academic horizon has come at a time when universities across the UK are being quality assessed; a process which now includes impact as a measurement of research quality. The introduction of the research assessment category requiring evidence of 'demonstrable benefits to the wider economy and society' (HEFCE 2015) has encouraged universities to recognise and value how 'knowledge' can move beyond and between traditional academic boundaries. Yet this has

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also resulted in a covert pressure on academics to focus their attention on achieving social impact through research and the potential to be impactful through teaching and scholarship is currently overlooked. This contradicts one of the basic values upon which universities have committed themselves: the 1988 Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental University Values and Rights was signed by 776 universities from 81 countries with the aim to promote and reinforce the basic values of higher education, the second of which is the inseparability of teaching and research (Magna Charta 1988). The current focus on social impact through research and lack of recognition of both the potential impact of teaching and interrelated nature of the academic role fails to recognise this inseparability.

Further, the emphasis on research impact effectively reinforces the false hierarchies placed on the various aspects of the academic role. Writing over 20 years ago, hooks (1994) highlighted her concerns that the dominant discourse on teaching portrayed it as the dreary underdog of academic practice, with research being the jewel in the academic crown. She demanded a shift in perspective then; indeed warned that without a sea change we were unlikely to inspire students into critical thinking. When relating this to the current emphasis on research impact, it raises questions over the value placed on teaching and scholarship and indicates a lack of understanding of pedagogical approaches that can achieve social change.

Yet conversely, universities are also now charged with undertaking innovative approaches to teaching to cope with the changing student profile, increasing numbers and demands of an ever changing employment market (Leadbeater 2008). Laurillard's (2002) analysis remains valid today, highlighting the power of market forces and suggesting that if universities are to succeed in an increasingly competitive market they will need to undertake a drastic move away from transmission methods of teaching to approaches that inspire scholarship and critical thinking. This is an interesting point, as despite the perception of teaching and scholarship as underdogs to academic research, it is through our teaching that we are expected to meet changing needs and expectations of students and of future employers. Therefore our teaching and understanding of our scholarship is crucial to universities' survival. While it is inevitable

that we need to adapt our pedagogy to meet these new demands, it is essential that we do not do so uncritically.

We believe that as educators our ontological and epistemological perspectives underpin our teaching in the same way that they underpin our research. This means that our ontological positions inform our understanding of historical, economic and social structures and, for us, determine how we view our role as both researchers and as educators. Our ontological commitment to social justice affects not only what and how we research but also what we teach, how we teach and how we approach and interpret the space of the classroom. Our ontologies are continuous; they inform who we are as humans and determine what we see, how we see it and how we choose to interpret it. In the same way that there has been increasing recognition within the social sciences of the need to examine how our ontologies influence, direct and alter our research, we must do the same with our teaching to ensure we avoid reactionary scholarship that is unduly influenced by societal and structural changes.

We propose that by examining our ontologies in this way we can not only ensure that we avoid reactionary changes to our scholarship as a result of the shifting expectations of students and employers but we can meet the demand for social impact through creative, critical pedagogies that recognise the potential role of educators in social transformation.

Impactful Pedagogy: Critical Pedagogical Approaches

Our premise is that critical pedagogy is one approach by which teaching and scholarship can contribute to universities' social agendas. Critical pedagogy is 'theoretically based scholarship, grounded in the understanding of the origins and underpinnings of power within society and in the fabric of schooling' (Steinberg 2007: ix). Critical pedagogy has transformative intent; it creates space for democratic process, critical dialogue, and political debate and for ongoing questioning of dominant discourse (Giroux 2007). This however presents us with a series of complex dilemmas. We find ourselves teaching in a formal higher education setting that

is still operating in a formal context of modular provision initiated in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Race 2010). Adopting a pedagogy that has clear transformative intent or in ways that ask students to examine their values and attitudes, analyse the structures of society and to consider how to influence them for the better while seemingly responding to university mission statements is potentially very challenging. Critical pedagogy requires a belief in the power of learning approaches that encourage truth, critical thinking, reflection and collaboration with students through a strong focus on critical reflection and a questioning of society's norms. Through viewing education as a collaborative endeavour between teacher and student the nature of learning and knowledge is changed, moving away from banking systems to a more dynamic approach that allows for 'authentic thought-language' to develop in the classroom (Shor and Freire 1987: 9). In this way an empowering process of remaking knowledge comes into play. Importantly, Shor relates this to transformative social impact suggesting that remaking knowledge in a classroom allows for a process of students and teachers together 'asserting their power to remake society' (Shor and Freire 1987: 10). However this raises a key dilemma: whilst universities are highlighting their commitment to social change, whether they are prepared to embrace collaborative education with the potential challenges to accepted power hierarchies is far from clear.

Another challenge is that critical pedagogy requires an authentic engagement with students. Ledwith's (2001) premise is that the educator-student relationship requires much more than skill and technique, rather a commitment to absolving the power vested by society in the educator. Brookfield (2006) agrees and advocates working towards democratic classrooms through dialogue and conversation, and it is through dialogical education that Freire suggested we can 'illuminate[s] reality' (Shor and Freire 1987: 13). An education based on dialogue requires that we engage emotionally as well as intellectually. hooks (1994: 13) describes being inspired over the years by such teachers who 'had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning'. For hooks while such an approach can be learned, it comes easier to those who believe teaching is much more than knowledge exchange. The key is a commitment to a holistic

approach to teaching that embraces a shared, spiritual and intellectual growth with the will to work towards building relationships of mutual recognition as far as the context allows. There is however a question over how formal education in the UK views its engagement with the emotional and spiritual growth of students. Zaki Dib (1988) offers a definition of formal education that remains valid today, describing the approach adopted by universities as one that strictly adheres to a programme, requires student attendance and formal assessment, finally leading to the conferring of degrees. He suggests such a system does not take account of students' values and attitudes with no emphasis on personal growth.

A further challenge is that critical pedagogy asks educators to recognise the iterative nature of the learning process. It not only requires an engagement with students' personal growth but with our own. Within critical pedagogy we are, as Freire succinctly described, 'unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' (Freire 1996: 65) and therefore are all in constant states of learning. This means that an honest, open dialogue is required. McLaren and Tadeu da Silva (1993: 67) stress that critical pedagogy requires a recognition of power, status and societal relations as well as an honesty and openness by the educator of their own socially determined status. This requires an education that recognises the power of pedagogy to either challenge or reproduce dominant structural relations:

> The literature based, passive curriculum is not simply poor pedagogical practice. It is the teaching model most compatible with promoting the dominant authority in society and with disempowering students. (Shor and Freire 1987: 10)

Evidently, critical pedagogy is a deeply challenging approach. Yet the challenges also present an opportunity to genuinely enter the socially-engaged landscape that universities now find themselves and recognise the full breadth of the academic role. Critical pedagogy requires an ontological commitment to social justice and comes with a commitment to transformative social change. Crucially, the question centres on whether universities are subscribing to a definition of social transformation that embraces education for social change or one that is really about education for status quo.

Impactful Pedagogy: Examples from Practice

By drawing on our experience of teaching in formal education settings, we explore two possible approaches that bring a critically engaged pedagogy into the university classroom. Using formally gathered student feedback, this section will explore our experiences of informal and experiential learning to engender an environment of critically engaged discussion. A key aspect of informal learning is that the educators go with the flow (Jeffs and Smith 2005). The evidence of this in the classroom setting is where discussion moves with the learning experience in different directions. Thus the role of educator becomes facilitative, presenting opportunities for dialogue, holding the relevant focus with questions and allowing space to develop critical thinking. It is a very active, dynamic approach. Similarly, experiential learning is based on the understanding of learning as a process that requires experience, as opposed to a rationalist emphasis on knowledge acquisition, in order to gain knowledge (Kolb 1984). Unlike informal learning, experiential learning is an approach more widely used in formal learning environments but it is important to highlight that while the objective for the experiential learning experience may be 'inspired, or even ordered by others, … they can only guide the learner by setting an objective or attempting to guide a process of reflection' (Moon 2004: 23). Therefore the role of the educator is again facilitative, guiding a continuous cycle of reflection and experience to deepen knowledge and understanding.

A key aspect of both approaches is to develop a learning environment that is conducive to discussion, dialogue, and developing critical thinking. This is a complex task which involves using critical pedagogical perspectives in class, encouraging students to consider their learning against a backdrop of structural inequalities, political perspectives and a macro analysis (Fassett and Warren 2007). In experiential learning this is achieved through a cycle of reflection and action (Kolb 1984) while in informal learning Ledwith (2001) suggests this can be achieved through presenting codifications such as poetry, music and pictures and to using them to ask skilfully crafted questions to facilitate dialogue for critical connections. This potentially not only allows for the development of transformative thinking and action but interestingly in our experience, it also inspires student reading:
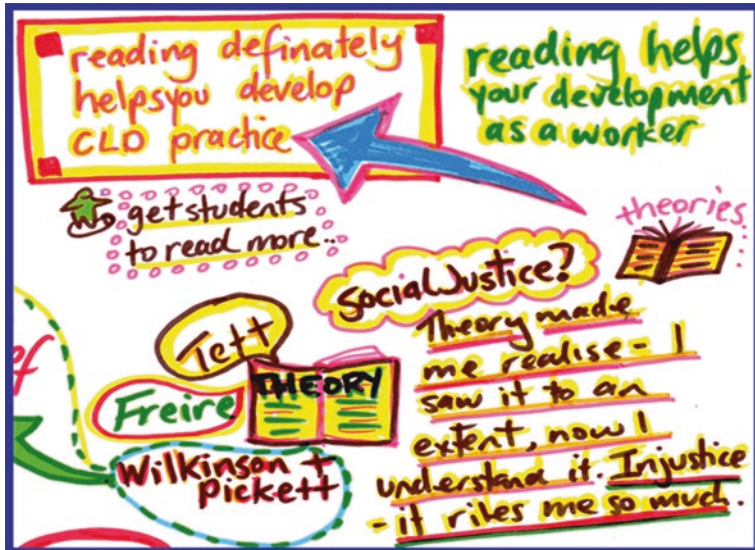
Fig. 1 Student Feedback (McEwan-Short 2011)

Further to this, as one student highlights the space for reflection and time given to engaged discussion creates a different atmosphere and this too impacts on student reading:

> *… it [experiential learning module] didn't feel rushed, like some of the other modules they just felt so rushed and so painful that all you wanted to do was just get the assignment done… you just had time to think, time to reflect and you had time to discuss, and that was really, really, it just gave you the space to do that, and perhaps that's why the reading was enjoyable.* (Jupp Kina 2012)

Jeffs and Smith (2005) suggest informal educators are like teachers because they cultivate learning opportunities but crucially what makes them different is 'where' they do it, for example: social settings, the arts, community projects, meeting spaces. In other words informal education takes place in everyday life situations. Informal educators, they continue, do not follow a curriculum, they have to think for themselves, use wisdom in relationships, pick up on issues, be open to developing them and to responding to issues presented; all the while holding the wider political

context, the will to foster democracy and to enable people to live to their full potential. There is a real challenge to bring this into the formal classroom setting but it is possible and interestingly our experience is that students are inspired by this approach. Formally collected programme feedback over recent years has highlighted the value that students place on the emphasis on being critically aware and the impact of this approach as a positive, facilitative learning process:

The informal learning approaches worked really well (2009)
   Class discussions on self and society were really good, they were challenging but very positive (2011)
   The discussions and debates on social justice will always influence my work (2015)
   You just drop these questions into our discussion that just open everything up and make us, force us to think! (2011)

Interestingly, student feedback has also highlighted how the emphasis on critical awareness has had a longer term impact, encouraging the development of critical thinking as a skill to be used beyond the limits of the classroom:

I think it [experiential learning module] did help me to be reflective about my experience. Because in that module I learnt about writing a reflective diary, learnt about how to be critical during the work that I've done every day, and it's not just thinking about the work itself, about the task to learn how to do it but to think critically about it, every day… So it's really, not like the direct knowledge what I've learnt, what I apply directly it's the skills. (Jupp Kina 2012)

The importance of 'how' informal educators engage people is crucial. The frequency and depth of discussion and dialogue are important; this is an ongoing process that requires commitment. As the Horton and Freire dialogue highlights, critical education requires us to start 'from where people are, to go with them beyond their levels of knowledge without just transferring the knowledge' to encourage 'a much deeper reading of reality (Bell et al. 1990: 157–8). Scales (2008) supports this and advocates discussion as an effective teaching approach in working to develop active, critical, constructivist learning; indeed he espouses its

excellence in facilitating higher-order learning. This is of further import if we acknowledge Field (2005), who highlights the critical nature that social relationships play in people's ability to learn. Co-operation or collaboration in learning becomes a crucial ingredient and dialogue between the students and tutor becomes a collaborative venture, a pedagogical encounter. Once again, student comments are worthy of note:

> *Having the freedom to express yourself in class time… allows you to realise your own values and how these have been influenced and changed throughout the year.* (2011)
> *Freedom to express our views… made us think.* (2011)
> *The ability to open up in class, voice opinions, no wrong or right answer…* (2011)

Our experience indicates that the way we engage with students can itself be transformational in terms of challenging preconceived notions of hierarchy. As a student highlighted reflecting on her experience in an experiential learning module this challenges preconceived notions of who has knowledge and encourages a 'cultural shift':

> *… I just really feel like I want to say something that is going to make the teacher happy, you know? Because that's what we're trained to do, make the teacher happy! … but going to university and trying to work in groups, and trying to formulate ideas that the tutor's really going to be interested in and that could challenge them on what they say, it's very, very difficult. So I think, I'm not recommending anything practical, for use, but just to say that sometimes when there's a huge silence or reluctance or whatever, it's just people trying to make this cultural shift.* (Jupp Kina 2012)

In terms of social impact, this shifting of understanding about who has knowledge and who has the right to question is powerful. The classroom therefore can present an invaluable space in which to make visible societal barriers and begin to explore how these affect our everyday experiences. What this student also effectively highlights however is the gradual nature of critical pedagogical approaches and the central role of trust in developing dialogue. We suggest the level of engagement within the classroom is indicative of how far an environment conducive to truth, dialogue and

conversation has been developed. Students choosing to offer their opinions, with more and more engagement and discussion developing over time, is indicative of an environment that has succeeded in making the cultural shift towards a dialogical, critical education.

Such a depth of conversation and dialogue in a formal class of students presents a challenge; they of course can be frightened about being open and truthful about their values and opinions and their understanding of literature and research. Here the importance of relationship, democracy and voluntary association cannot be overemphasised and needs to come into classroom practices. This involves working hard to demonstrate a commitment to the students' learning and a valuing of their experiences and opinions. It involves a dynamic process of inviting opinions, responding, eliciting further opinions, different or opposing opinions, empathising, questioning, smiling and laughing, responding, challenging, milling around the room, giving opinions, referring to theory. It involves working to build relationships, knowing students' names, some of their concerns, some of their values and aspirations, it is about being open to humour and fun.

All of this however requires us to engage with and welcome emotion as fundamental to our pedagogy. Through sensitively and supportively encouraging students to engage with their own experiences, their own insecurities and preconceptions as well as the emotions that this engagement will engender we can create an environment that has transformative potential. As one student powerfully commented in her feedback: '*I'm so angry! I've been reading about health inequalities and I think my parents wouldn't be so ill if they weren't living in poverty!*' (2011). As noted by Steinberg (2007), anger can be a fuel for critical pedagogy and social change and therefore it is important to recognise the central role of emotional engagement in the classroom. If universities are serious about having a role in social transformation then this more emotional engagement with students, and with staff, is important. The challenge is whether universities are prepared to embrace critical pedagogy as a tool with which to engage with students both within and beyond the classroom and to acknowledge the potential for pedagogy to contribute to achieving social change.

Conclusion

Giroux (2007) challenges educators to ensure a more socially just future and Butcher (2007) reminds us that this requires much more than the use of logic, academic thinking and strategizing around issues of inequality. It requires sophisticated levels of emotional intelligence and the ability to use feelings in expressing abhorrence for social injustice and a desire for social change. However there is, of course, a danger in advocating this approach to teaching as being the way all educators should approach the classroom. We acknowledge that our chosen pedagogical approach is underpinned by our ontological commitment to social justice and the challenging of neoliberal driven inequalities. Ontological perspectives will of course differ and therefore so will interpretations of the educator's role. Clearly, our understanding of the social impact agenda is that it implies a shift towards social justice and a recognition of the negative impact of structural inequalities; critical pedagogy therefore provides an appropriate pedagogical response. While critical pedagogy is itself not new, the wider understanding of the role of higher education in society presents an interesting, if challenging, opportunity to explore the potential of this approach to meet the new demands. Indeed, if this is the kind of transformation we are expected to work towards then Ledwith's (2001) premise that critical thought leads to critical action highlights not only the role of critical pedagogy in our teaching but also as a means by which to widen the ability of universities to make societal impact.

Our position is that we should advocate for a much wider discussion of the ontological underpinning of the new social agenda and what this means pedagogically. In our view this would not only help to overcome the emphasis placed on research for achieving the new social missions but also encourage a much deeper reflection on the role of educators as either instigators of social change or maintainers of social norms. Yet we recognise that this also presents a dilemma: as critical educators, should we challenge our institutions to examine their ontological interpretation of this new social role, recognising that the response may reflect a form of social change that does little to challenge structural inequalities? Or should we view the opaque nature of the new agendas as an opportunity

to utilise our academic freedom to interpret the shift towards social impact as a call for a critically engaged education, developing creative, critical curriculums and engaged, trusting relationships with students to build transformative environments within our classrooms? While we recognise the risks, we believe that critical pedagogy requires open dialogue and we should therefore seek to engage openly not only with our students but with our institutions. In our view, the new social agenda provides a key opportunity to begin this conversation.

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