

Critical Pedagogy, Popular Education and Transformative Learning in Higher Education

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On 27 and 28 November 2008, teachers, researchers, activists, adult and community educators and other community members came together in a conference at Monash University to share experiences and debate issues in critical pedagogy, popular education and transformative learning in higher education. The conference began as a collaboration between the International Development and Environmental Analysis Program of Monash University, the *oases* Graduate School at the Borderlands Cooperative in Melbourne and the Research Centre for Cosmopolitan Civil Societies at UTS. We wanted to bring critical teachers, popular educators, community educators and others together to share knowledge and experience of *praxis*, of putting transformative education and critical pedagogy into practice with students in the university and the community, and to learn from each other. We set out to achieve that in a range of ways. The conference was addressed by prominent keynote speakers such as Mike Newman, Daniel Schugurensky from the Transformative Learning Centre at the University of Toronto (Canada) and Peter Taylor from the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University (UK). We also heard some short but lively papers from academic researchers and community workers.

The heart and soul of the conference consisted of a series of interactive workshops in which critical teachers, popular educators and community educators set out to engage participants through dialogue, learning by doing and other participatory methods. These included a participatory art workshop facilitated by our 'artist in residence' for the conference, Eleni Rivers, and a session of Playback Theatre presented at our conference dinner, facilitated by Shani Quiddington, performer and community educator. These workshops and interactive activities reflected the dialogic and participatory principles of critical pedagogy and participatory learning and were our attempt at making the conference process congruent with our topic and content. It is these participatory workshops and interactive activities that we summarise and reflect on in this special edition.

Very little has been written about how to plan and run 'participatory' workshops or conferences and even less writing describes actual examples of participatory conferencing in practice. This special edition, therefore, aims to document and reflect upon our experience of facilitating a participatory conference in the hope of stimulating broader interest in participatory approaches to sharing and creating knowledge. We also believe that the practical strategies and methods employed in the workshops and described here will be useful for critical teachers, popular

educators and community educators in their educational practice. But we aim to do more than simply offer an overview of methods. Combined, the papers presented here give an insight into some current thinking and approaches to critical pedagogy and transformative education in the higher education sector in Australia, and – in addition - reveal their relevance and worth. I suspect they remain largely on the margins of educational practice in higher education, but seem to be enjoying something of a resurgence nonetheless.

The authors in this special edition come from a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds and, hence, bring different understandings of and approaches to concepts such as 'popular education', 'critical pedagogy' and 'transformative education'. In each of the papers, the authors outline the particular intellectual traditions that provide the context for their workshop and shape their approach to praxis.

Popular education here refers to education which seeks to support organising or activism for social justice, equality and democracy (Crowther, Galloway et al. 2005). It is a form of radical adult education and, hence, usually takes place in non-formal educational contexts and is deeply influenced by Freirian approaches to dialogic education (Kane 2001). Popular educators regard the community as the key source of knowledge and the starting point for learning (Arnold 1991). Popular education sees empowerment and 'transformation' as necessarily a collective process and explicitly aims for learning processes that lead to collective action for social change (Westerman 2009). This is epitomised by Mike Newman (1994, 2006), whose keynote address begins this special edition. Although a plenary address rather than an interactive workshop, Mike's speech foreshadowed many of the themes of the workshops to follow. He posed problems, challenged us all with a 'mission' and set forth practical ideas to accomplish that mission. Mike wove all this together with stories – engaging, sometimes morally challenging stories that called for deliberation, ethical decisions and commitment to action, especially for us as educators. Mike's address sparked a mood of enthusiasm and a desire for action that remained throughout the two following days.

Transformative education appeals to origins in "*ancient wisdom*" and theorists, such as Jack Mezirow, Carl Rogers as well as Paulo Freire and Myles Horton (*Journal of Transformative Education* 1, 1, p. 4). Transformative education places more emphasis than popular education on individual consciousness and transformation, as well as spiritual and religious dimensions of experience and social change. For

example, the *Transformative Learning Centre* at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto speaks of it in the following terms:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world.

This shift includes our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations and our relationships with other humans and with the natural world. It also involves our understanding of power relations in interlocking structures of class, race and gender, our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living, and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy.

In sum, transformative learning makes us understand the world in a different way, changing the way we experience it and the way we act in our day-to-day lives. Transformative learning has an individual and a collective dimension, and includes both individual and social transformation. tlc.oise.utoronto.ca/index.htm

Transformative education also tends to focus on adult and non-formal education contexts, such as our collaborator in organising the conference, the *oases* Graduate School in Melbourne. *Oases'* Masters Program in Integrative and Transformative Studies aims to create individual transformation through transformations in relatedness to community, relatedness to nature (environmental sustainability) and relatedness to spiritual knowledge (see www.oases.edu.au).

Critical pedagogy is both a radical critique of conventional formal education and an approach aiming to radically democratise educational processes and empower students for progressive social change (Darder, Baltadano and Torres 2009). Like popular education, it is deeply influenced by Freirian ideas of dialogue and problem-posing education. But critical pedagogy concerns itself with radically transforming *formal* education and educational institutions and argues that education for democratic social change requires an explicit awareness of the power relations and inequalities built into schools and universities. It sets out to match goals of radical social change with formal educational strategies to achieve such goals – in other words, to make process coincide with content.

There are no precise boundaries between these three perspectives – popular education, transformative education and critical pedagogy – as they overlap in their theoretical influences, critiques of formal and adult education and goals of individual and social change. Indeed, participants and workshop presenters at the conference paid more attention to commonalities and shared goals than to boundaries and differences.

As Giroux (2009: 452) writes, critical pedagogy sees "schools as social and political sites involved in the struggle for democracy". A specific aim of the Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Learning For Social Transformation conference was to see universities as similarly critical sites in the struggle for democracy and democratising education. Considering that universities and other institutes of higher education (e.g. TAFE) are key sites for educating trainee teachers, community workers and community educators, for employing academic popular educators and critical teachers, and for research and publication in these fields, it is surprising that more attention has not been paid to the critical pedagogy of higher education. As Crowther and his colleagues (2005) argue, popular education has remained marginalised in institutes of higher education as discourses of individualism in learning, technical rationality and the commodification of higher education have come to dominate. Certainly at our conference, many academic educators and researchers spoke of their frustration with the overt marginalisation of critical pedagogy and popular education in education faculties in Australia.

Common themes across the workshops

Sharing stories and engaging with lived experience

Mike Newman spoke of the power of storytelling in learning and teaching and in posing problems to learners. Presenting and sharing stories was a common and powerful approach throughout the conference. Presenters often invited participants to share their own stories and experiences in response and to build collective analysis and insights from them. For example, Jane Pearce, Barry Down, Nado Aveling and Anne Price presented a series of real scenarios derived directly from their individual experiences as teacher educators in order to raise dilemmas and pose problems to participants about doing critical pedagogy in Bachelor of Education courses. Keiko Yasukawa told a fascinating and humorous story of her career as a researcher and then teacher in the field of mathematics, weaving her workshop dialogue and activities into her story. Peter Willis presented what he called "mythopoetic stories" – stories that speak to fundamental issues of life, death, relationships with community and environment – from popular films to engage participants in a pedagogy of social ecology. The stories were funny, frustrating, insightful, revealing, honest, engaging, risky, emotional and brought some speakers close to tears. This was personal.

Group facilitation methods

Critical Pedagogy has been very good at elaborating a detailed and theoretically sophisticated critique of conventional schooling and education, but has had much less to say about how to *do* critical pedagogy in formal education classrooms. Some critical pedagogy writers, like Joe Kincheloe (2008), explicitly say they avoid explaining applied strategies and methods as trainee teachers and critical teachers need to find ways relevant to their own specific contexts. The work of Ira Shor constitutes an important exception to this and Shor's (1992, 1996, 2000) work is often of particular interest to critical teachers in higher education institutions, as much of it focuses on university classroom contexts. Kaufman's (2006) edited collection *Critical pedagogy in the Classroom* is another useful resource here as it also focuses on higher education contexts.

What the work of Shor, Kaufman and the critical educators included here reveal is that good critical pedagogy and popular education requires carefully planned and effective facilitation. In this regard, workshop presenters at the conference employed a wide range of facilitation methods and strategies to engage participants. Citizen's Juries, small group discussions, scenarios to stimulate analysis and discussion, story telling and personal histories, cartoons, photography, art, drama, games and energizers were all employed and are described in greater or lesser detail in the articles that follow.

Dialogue and problem posing

Dialogue and problem posing are well known techniques associated with critical pedagogy and popular education and workshop presenters creatively employed the range of facilitation methods mentioned above to implement them in the workshops. The extent to which 'content' was pre-determined and delivered by the presenters varied a great deal across the workshops. Most presenters had a story, methods and experience they wanted to share, but also sought opportunities to engage participants in dialogue or draw out problems from the content to 'pose' to participants and provoke discussion and analysis. Jude Cooke and Patricia Kenny's discussion of their experiences in community and popular education in the TAFE sector and Tony Webb's account of PhotoVoice are good examples.

Other workshops were more open ended and developed 'content' out of the problems posed and dialogue generated within the workshop,

thus drawing on the knowledge and experience of participants. So, for example, Holly Hammond, Pru Gell and Anthony Kelly from the Change Agency explored definitions and concepts of critical pedagogy by starting from participants’ own experience and understandings of transformative teaching and learning and facilitating a ‘classic’ spiral process of popular education (see Arnold et al. 1992). Susan Goff with Max Hardy facilitated a citizens’ jury process to assess citizen’s juries as a method! In workshops like those, process was much more important than content.

Collaborative construction of knowledge

Dialogic and participatory approaches ensured that in virtually every workshop, knowledge was created through collaboration between presenters and participants, not as a one way transfer from presenters to audience. Problems and thoughtful questions generated discussion, analysis and learning. Participation in games, art, drama, role plays, small groups and other activities created opportunities for learning by doing and active engagement in critical and transformative educational strategies that, I’m sure, many of us will apply in our own approaches to critical teaching.

The conference generated an optimistic feeling that universities, TAFE colleges and other institutes of higher education have a great potential for practicing and expanding critical pedagogy, transformative and popular education. Partly that optimism emerged through simply carving out our own space over two days to share experiences, ideas and practices. Partly it emerged through the risk taking and creativity that informed the interactive workshops, the participatory art, Playback Theatre and impromptu performances during the conference; partly it was expressed through a desire to develop our networks and come together

on occasions to share ideas and practice and partly it was sparked by a spontaneous and informal ‘vote of thanks’ to the conference from a small group of student activists from the University of Newcastle. We hope we have managed to catch some of that creativity, excitement and optimism in this special issue and contribute in a small way to keeping those feelings – and those practices! - alive. 🍏

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