
Northern College and the Philosophers of Praxis

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ABSTRACT Since 1978 The Northern College, Barnsley has provided an education focused on the transformation and empowerment of individuals and communities. The demands of an instrumentalist system bite deep and even the most authentic mission might struggle to hold firm against a neo-liberal onslaught which privileges the qualification of economically productive 'units' over the education of questioning, thinking humans. This case study of The Northern College's 'TeachNorthern' teacher education programme, which layers a digitally blended, social purpose curriculum over conventional initial teacher training qualifications, suggests that a pedagogy focused on developing self-agency has the potential for social change; but that the act of curriculum subversion has limits.

Over the four decades of Northern College's [1] existence, the political landscape has shifted locally, nationally and globally. In 1978, few would have predicted that the college's surrounding communities would be quite so devastated by Thatcherite policies of de-industrialisation (Ball & Hampton, 2004 p. 1). The Internet was twenty years in the future and the global rise of fundamentalism belonged to the pages of dystopian fiction. That a college founded as the 'Ruskin of the North' should still be in existence today is testament to its tenacious hold on an independent existence, which this article argues is maintained via critical pedagogies and an approach to learning which is rhizomatic in nature. In rhizomatic learning (Cormier, 2008), 'the community is the curriculum'; learning is not designed around content but is a pro-social process, which uses social media to dissolve the boundary of classroom walls and provide spaces where students, graduates and teachers critically educate one another. The botanical metaphor suggests organic growth, which can be fertile, messy and unpredictable.

This article considers the case of The Northern College's teacher education programme ('TeachNorthern'). At its heart is a model of social

purpose education grounded in the realities of practice. Students of the programme are adult educators working across the broadest range of contexts. They might work for social enterprises or charities, be community adult educators, trade union educators or dual professionals: health, addiction or family workers. Less typically, they might work in further education colleges or schools, or for private training providers. They are drawn from across the United Kingdom by the social purpose pedagogy of the course, finding little to reflect their world in the 'dominant discourse' of conventional teacher education (Freire, 1972). Interestingly, since the Lingfield Review (2012) deregulated post-compulsory teacher training, recruitment at the college has soared. Untypically for college-based teacher education, the social purpose pedagogy brings in fees from outside an already impoverished sector; the approach contains within itself the programme's financial sustainability.

Graduates notably remain engaged with the programme via the 'Community of Praxis', an unfunded [2], rhizomatic, autonomous network of tutors, students, graduates and critical friends (nationally and internationally) who are interested in education for social justice. We have reclaimed Gramsci's term, 'Philosophers of Praxis', to describe ourselves (Gramsci, 1999). In addition to timetabled sessions, rhizomatic learning opportunities might include 'teachmeets', practice groups, online 'pop-up' courses in response to demand and student/graduate-led live Twitter chats. This 'nomadic' approach means that everyone is welcome to attend everything, which proves surprisingly manageable since everything possible is shared online. Diverse networks also ensure that additional project funding opportunities are brought to the notice of the college; they feed the programme's innovation, which in turn raises its profile.

Against the tide, we have embraced pedagogical alternatives to the mainstream, dealing efficiently with the practical imperatives of learning to teach, to clear room for an approach which grows agency through its emphasis on reflexion, teacher identity and the development of praxis (Cole & Knowles, 1999; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Mycroft, 2016). The fundamental purpose of the programme is conscientisation (Freire, 1972); training educators to be critical thinkers, to take hold of the education philosophy of the future in order to influence policy and practice. As they graduate with influence in their own areas, their support and continued engagement in the Community of Praxis enables the thinking of subsequent students to deepen and diversify. Naturally, this flies in the face of a neo-liberalist education paradigm, which privileges the delivery of 'employability' and where students are units of productivity contributing to the country's economic growth (Coffield & Williamson, 2011).

Thus far, the programme has been able to find creative solutions to the tensions between critical pedagogy and delivering on a syllabus which has emerged from an 'exam factory' model (Coffield & Williamson, 2011). The college survives via a combination of tight housekeeping and curriculum subversion, but as Hafez (2015) argues, subversion has its limits.

There are some signs of hope. Three recent quality assurance inspections under three different frameworks have affirmed the balance between critical and 'skills' education, not without some admiration from individuals caught up in the same system. This still leaves the college at the mercy of political ideologies which do not recognise, value or indeed desire state-funded transformational education. In addition, the constant striving for 'enhancement' at the heart of inspection drives a negative concept of perfectionism, which has a detrimental impact on the well-being and self-worth of those involved (Brown, 2015).

The Northern College's mission is focused on the empowerment and transformation of individuals *and* communities. Since state money available for adult education in the United Kingdom is now entirely focused on the skills agenda, and since even this reduced budget is under threat (Keep, 2014), questions are raised around how the college can repurpose its income stream to perpetuate critical and collective pedagogies. It seems Utopian to claim that the college could survive outside of any state funding and the practical possibilities of this continue to be elusive. Yet as the number of 'Philosophers of Praxis' grows, year on year, taking critical pedagogy out into differently funded charities, social enterprises and private sector organisations, creating new rhizomes of critical thinking, this is still a movement of hope and affirmative possibilities (Braidotti, 2011).

Given the college's mission and history, income diversification will need to navigate unconventional waters. In these near-impossible times for the traditions of liberal and radical adult education, innovative approaches that engage with current themes and trends could be supported.

First, the affordances of the digital age have made the Community of Praxis possible. The use of freely available social media is not without democratic challenge in an era of data-mining and digital exclusion (Onwurah, 2016), but it provides platforms accessible to the majority, which can deepen critical thinking as part of a blended learning programme or professional development. Price (2013) talks about this as 'open education', and developments such as community-owned 'COOCs' [3] and Linux-programming offer alternatives to the major players, who will always want a return on investment in a neo-liberal world. We are exploring how we can provide lower cost or even free modules via these means, to sustain and refresh the community.

Second, one consequence of effective digital work is that it frees up classroom time for dialogic connection (Longden et al, 2016). Pro-social processes such as Thinking Environments (Kline, 2009), Community Philosophy (Tiffany, 2009) and Restorative Practice (Restorative Justice Council, 2016) offer opportunities for independent, critical thinking and for learning to disagree with respect. These approaches have increasing value in a politics where the structural oppressions of the status quo are beginning to be challenged by many individuals and organisations (Mason, 2015). These dialogic pedagogies require a room, a facilitator and open-minded delegates; they need not be expensive and they make possible the opportunity of developing new thinking, affordably.

Third, as educators become increasingly turned off by the institutionalised 'democracy' of political organisations (Daley et al, 2015), the opportunity to self-organise outside traditional political structures grows in appeal. This ranges from movements such as Occupy, via the 'sharing economy' and the anti-#whitecurriculum projects of Media Diversified (Peters, 2015) to Twitter-seeded professional development networks such as #ukfechat. None are immune from healthy critique; all are vulnerable to predation: offers of funding and 'support' to guide them safely to port in established neo-liberalist structures. But movements such as these, the Ragged University (Ragged University, 2016) and Tutor Voices (Petrie, 2015) try within limited means to create effective and sustainable spaces for critical thinking.

As neo-liberalism tightens its hold, possibly its death grip (Mason, 2016), the pace of educational change is quickening in a manner that has not been seen in the United Kingdom since the Industrial Revolution. As educators, we can seize this, or we can let it happen to us. We can offer pedagogies of love, hope and resistance (hooks, 1994), which need not carry a fee and which enable us in dialogue to scan the horizon for new possibilities beyond capitalism. As philosophers of praxis, we believe that there can be a future for education, which is co-created, rhizomatic and less dependent on what the government of the day chooses to fund.

Notes

- [1] The Northern College for Residential Adult Education, Wentworth Castle, Barnsley S75 3ET, United Kingdom. www.northern.ac.uk
- [2] Except by the 'gift hours' of its volunteers.
- [3] Community Open Online Courses.

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