

Book Chapter

Using Radical Pedagogy to Promote Social Justice in Higher Education

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Introduction

This chapter aims to show how Youth Work methodology can be applied to promote social justice in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). It will explain how informal education pedagogy (Jones and Brady 2022) can be applied as methodology to address structural oppressions through creating a bottom-up approach to action. This transformational action challenges unseen and unknown inequalities at a personal and cultural level (Thompson 2016) and offers a way for educators to promote social justice in HEIs that does not have to be led from the top down (Ledwith 2016).

The chapter will then focus on how a team of Youth and Community Work educators at Wrexham Glyndwr University (WGU) in Wales, UK, has applied this methodology in a project that serves to discover and address structural inequalities in their institution. Through Youth Work methodology, the project aims to raise critical awareness of oppressions and encourage change at a personal level for participants, and a cultural level for the University (Thompson 2017). We will start with an overview of Youth Work methodology and its theoretical foundations as an emancipatory practice.

Rationale

Youth Work

Youth Work is a defined practice determined by professional standards, values, principles, and ethics with a focus on young people (Achilleos and Douglas 2019). It is an educative process (Young 1996) that fosters learning through experience and activities, conversation, and bringing people together (de St Croix 2017). The learning process is underpinned by informal education (Kirby 2001), which, in the context of this work, is pedagogy (Jeffs and Smith 1990). Pedagogy is a process of being with others to; elicit learning (Smith 2019), promote relationships and development and, caring 'for and about' learners (Smith 2012, 2021). As pedagogy, informal education is a practice that facilitates learning anywhere, at any time, using conversation to think about, and broaden, experiences (Jeffs and Smith 1997, 2005, 2011). It is a process led by a commitment to the values of; respect and wellbeing for everyone, dialogue, social justice, participation, and empowerment (Jeffs and Smith 2005). Central to informal education, and, therefore, Youth Work, is the voluntary relationship between the practitioner, young people, and the community (Davies 2021).

Youth Work is an anti-oppressive practice focusing on transformative action (Jemal and Bussey 2018) to counteract social injustice (Crooks, 1992). As anti-oppressive practitioners, Youth Workers believe that society does not afford all people the same opportunities, creating inequalities that are exacerbated by societal institutions and structures such as traditional education settings and practices (Freire, 1970; Butters and Newell 1978). This creates a need for progressive educators, like

Youth Workers, to address the oppressions induced and enforced by societal structures to create change and equality (Chouhan, 2009; Thompson, 2016). Informal education is a vehicle for such transformative action, its focus on association and experiential learning (Smith 2013) through conversation, encourages diligence, critique, and an enquiring mind (Freire 1998) from both the educator and the learner. This is a process of 'raising critical consciousness' (Freire 1972) that brings about participation in democratic processes, promoting empowerment and social change. The voluntary relationship between educator and learner facilitates a mutual learning process and makes the work an active educational process so that the resulting transformative action and critical awareness is collective, participatory, and inclusive (Jeffs and Smith 1997, 2005, 2012).

Youth Work Methods

In Youth Work, the methods for engaging in this process are experiential learning (Ord 2012), empowerment and participation (Ledwith 2020), critical thinking and reflection (Young 1996), methods that are given agency by the 'transforming energy of conversation' (Nicholls 2012 p.141). Experiential learning is rooted in the Dewey's premise that educators are responsible for enhancing and enlarging the experiences of learners (Dewey 1933; Ord 2016) to transform society (Dewey 1963; Pérez-Ilbáñez 2018). Reflection is central to the process (Dewey 1910) and the process of learning and reflecting through experience has a history in Youth Work that extends over 50 years (Ord 2012), predominantly through use of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Young 2006; Wood et. al 2015). Whilst Ord (2016) argues that the Kolb's theory has been misconstrued in its application to Youth Work, experience and reflection remain central to practice and theory:

It seeks to go beyond where young people start, to widen their horizons, promote participation and invite social commitment, in particular by encouraging them to be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them (CLD 2019)

Conversation is the tool that initiates dialogue and reflection, it is the means of learning and transformative action (Smith 2004). Youth Work methodology as an educative process, is therefore influenced by critical pedagogy which also relies on dialogue to critically analyse the world (Smith 1997, 2002) with the intention of addressing power imbalances in society, a pedagogical approach to develop compassion and empowerment (Giroux 2010). 'Conscientisation' and 'praxis' are Freirean concepts central to critical pedagogy, the former referring to raising critical consciousness (Freire 1970, 1993) through problem-posing questions of experiences, and the latter emphasizing the importance of taking action. Conscientisation creates an epistemological shift (Achilleos et al. 2021) that then informs praxis (Ledwith 2016).

The notions of education, empowerment, and anti-oppressive practice inherent in Youth Work and critical pedagogy are supported by critical theory (Kincheloe 2012; Mortari 2015). Within the critical theory framework, power is used and upheld in society by ideologies that serve the most powerful (Steinberg 2010), and where there is critical awareness of this system of domination, action must be taken (Brookfield 2005; Given 2008). The work of Foucault (1926-1984) is significant here as his ideas about power and knowledge, in addition to his theoretical frameworks for critiquing society and dominance, provide the means to effect change (Darder et al. 2017).

For Foucault (1983), the use of power is not predestined or static but rather something that moves and acts between people, including how we create knowledge and meaning. For Foucault, power is diffused, embodied and enacted, discursive, and establishes agency (Gaventa 2003 pg. 1) which means that the domination in society can be questioned and undone; truth is socially constructed and the relationship between power and knowledge is at its core. Critical pedagogy concerns itself with the interplay between power and knowledge (McLaren and Jandrić 2017), which for Foucault, is created through discourse (Foucault 1980):

‘By discourse, Foucault meant ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historic moment... But since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect’ (Hall 1992 pg. 291)

For Foucault, truth does not exist in and of itself, but relates to history, context and power - it is socially constructed (Hall 2001). Power and knowledge are inextricable, power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) are at the heart of dominant discourses and influence what we consider to be ‘true’, they are produced and controlled by power and norms (Cherryholmes 1987) and whilst the application of Foucauldian discourse presents challenges relating to competing discourses and agency (Fitzsimmons 2011), where power is a pervading and neutral entity, it enables agency and empowerment. Power/knowledge is, therefore, a crucial premise for all informal educators and Youth Workers. As transformative educators, starting where the young person is at – existing knowledge- is where we begin and is the source of critical investigation between Youth Worker and young people.

This process of mutual critical investigation generates new knowledge and holds power because it was created by the young people and Youth Worker, it is owned by them (Beck and Purcell, 2013). This Youth Work method creates new discourses and the ability to effect change and it is empowering which, “can be defined as helping people gain greater control over their lives and circumstances” (Thompson 2007 pg. 21). It is, therefore, closely linked to the notion of power. Powerlessness, on the other hand, is central to social inequality and, according to Solomon (1976) comes from three possible

sources; the negative way in which oppressed people see themselves; the systems that prevent oppressed groups from taking action and, the experiences oppressed people have during their encounters with systems and structures:

Powerlessness corrupts in a very direct way: it changes, transforms, and distorts us. It makes us different from how we would otherwise want to be. We look at our world and our own behaviour, and we tell ourselves that although we aren't really living the lives we want to live, there is nothing we can do about it. We are powerless. (Lerner 1988 pg. 2)

Participation is also closely linked to power and is intrinsically linked to our understanding of empowerment. It leads to people having control and influence over decisions that affect their lives (Barry 1996). Participation is essential to the process of conscientisation (Freire 1972), identifying opportunity for change (Cooper, 2010) and is a result of the empowerment of people to take part in collective action to create social change (Ledwith 2020). Thus, the emphasis on creating change is interwoven throughout Youth Work methodology, through; education, pedagogy, relationship, experience, conversation, empowerment and participation, and association. The key to its success and transformative action comes from the fusion of theory and practice, the process of acting on the knowledge generated through the specific methods of Youth Work or the "link between knowledge and power through critical consciousness which leads to critical action" (Ledwith, 2020) and where "knowledge is an evolving and collective thing" (Smith and Seal, 2021). In Youth Work and informal education, praxis is an essential means to bring informed action and theory to the fore, "where there is praxis, there is possibility" (Jeffs and Smith 1990 p. 141)

A Radical Pedagogy

In the UK, professional Youth and Community Work demands the completion of a degree or post graduate diploma from a Higher Education Institute (Butters and Newell 1978). Practitioners must evidence a JNC (Joint Negotiating Committee) qualification as proof of competency in meeting Youth Work National Occupational Standards (CLD 2019). Those teaching Youth Work in Higher Education must also evidence a JNC professional qualification, and teaching programmes are subject to endorsement by professional bodies on behalf of the JNC for Youth Work.

This presents a disjunction between values, informal educators in formal education institutions where there is an historical imbalance of power between teacher and students (Giroux 1981), a structure that is inherently oppressive. Therefore, Youth Work educators in Higher Education must practice the principles of social justice and equity within their institutions, and through their commitment to anti-oppressive practice, accept and respond to the inequitable distribution of privilege in society (Russo 2001). There must be a radical pedagogy, defined by its alignment to

social change and alternative pedagogy (Fedotova and Nicholaeva 2015) – a praxis of radical education philosophy (hooks 2010; Freire 1973; Giroux 1988) and progressive pedagogy.

Essentially, this is a political venture (Watts et al. 2011) that generates agency and alters the use of power in society. Education is not a politically neutral process (Freire 2000), Youth Work educators have a responsibility to work towards social change by taking action (Park 2001) informed by the knowledge created through Youth Work methodology. As an emancipatory process through critical reflection and praxis outside of conventional politics (Hope and Banales 2019), Youth Work creates a counter hegemony (Gramsci 1978) that influences the cultures and structures in which they operate.

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire 2000, p. 34)

Thompson’s (2009) ideas of how power operates is useful for understanding how and where this education praxis can be done. The ‘PCS Analysis’ model is a useful tool for identifying how inequalities interrelate and affect each other at different levels in society (Thompson 2016). Thompson (2017) suggests that an analysis of social interactions between the personal, cultural, and structural (PCS) levels in society can provide insight into how discrimination and oppression operate. It is the interactions and influences of individual prejudice and discrimination with cultural norms and behaviours, and structural power and institutions, that uphold and maintain inequalities and oppression within institutions. It is therefore necessary that Youth Work educators in universities work to shift the balance of power within them, to act as organisational operators (Thompson 2011) with the knowledge and ability to influence their organisation to become equal and diverse, to influence the culture and a leader of change.

Furthermore, there is a commitment to leadership in professional Youth and Community Work that is required of all practicing professional Youth Workers. The Youth Work National Occupational Standards (YWNOS) (CLD, 2019) detail expectations of competence in development, leadership and management, whilst Youth and Community Work ethical conduct stipulates leadership in practice through the promotion of social justice, ethical debate, and value led organisations (NYA, 2004). Building on the premise of Youth Workers as agents of social change, it is helpful to think about leadership in terms of a relationship with others for advancement through creating a shared vision (Bolman and Deal, 1997) or as transformational leaders (Burns, 1978). This moves leadership away from classical ideas of influence using power and authority, to a mutual process that promotes

shared learning, responsibility and debate (Gastil, 1997). A process that can be liberating, empowering, and democratic, in line with the values and principles of Youth and Community Work. A behavioural endeavour (Bass, 1990), shared with others with the potential to initiate change. It is this very premise that has led to the development and delivery of a pilot social justice project in Wrexham Glyndwr University, a project where Youth Work educators use radical pedagogy to alter the use and acceptance of power to address oppression and discrimination at personal, cultural, and structural levels within the organisation.

Wrexham University has held status of 1st in England and Wales for Social Inclusion for four years and is joint first in the UK, (The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2022) However, the staff and student demographic data from the most recent Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Report indicates high levels of privilege amongst students and staff (WGU 2021):

Table 1: WGU Staff and Student Demographics

Staff	Student
60% Women	59% Women
76.5% aged 30-60	57.2% aged 30-60
88.2% report no known disability	88.2% report no known disability
94.7% White ethnicity	80.4% White ethnicity
76% heterosexual with 3.8% identifying as gay, bisexual or other	80.7% heterosexual with 8.7% identifying as gay, bisexual or other
4.3% declared non-Christian religious identity	9.2% declared non-Christian religious identity

Therefore, the Youth Work educators on campus are professionally bound to engage with the University community to raise critical consciousness and challenge oppression. This is a commitment to raise the voices of those facing oppression and to enable the privileged to hear them (Thompson 2016). Increasing the awareness that people have of power at personal, cultural, and structural levels; and by facilitating learning opportunities that raise people's critical consciousness of power in an organisation; there is the potential to create social change. Engaging all members of the University community in Youth Work methodology has the potential to do this, and for the last two years the Youth Work educators at Wrexham Glyndwr University have piloted a project with a view to seeing how it might be done.

Project Implementation, Findings and Discussion

The Project

The project is called “The Conversation: Creating Change One Voice at a Time” and aims to bring together students, academics, and professional staff to raise critical consciousness of cultural oppression by sharing the lived experiences and academic research of those immersed. It is a three-part project consisting of quarterly webinars, a narrative library and reflection. The webinars consist of speakers sharing experiences and research on topics including race, sexuality and gender, disability, and ableism. Participants are invited to ask questions and engage in conversation during and after the webinar. For the narrative library, participants are invited to partner with a stranger, or group of strangers, to listen to and/or share their experiences of injustice or discrimination. This session includes a reflection at the end, inviting participants to evaluate their experiences and share any learning with the Youth Work educators and wider University. The project is voluntary, and participants choose what parts of the project they would like to join. All sessions are hosted via the online platform Microsoft Teams.

The project employs the Youth Work methods of experiential learning, empowerment and participation, critical thinking, and reflection. These are facilitated through the medium of conversation. Essential to this process, is the relationship between Youth Work educators and colleagues. It is a relationship that prioritises a safe space, trust, and integrity (Wolfe 2001) and is formed voluntarily (Jefferies and Smith 1990). As informal educators, the Youth Work team is in a unique position start where people ‘are at’, to foster conversation and voluntary relationships, and create safe learning spaces (Scott-McKinley and Harland 2018). Reflecting on issues of oppression and positionality requires careful facilitation from the Youth Work educators to ensure that the learning environment is safe. As a pilot project, the aim was to collate baseline monitoring data and participant reflections from sessions for analysis with a view to establishing if and how Youth Work methodology can lead to transformative action and organisational change.

Monitoring Data Analysis – Participants

Table 2: Project Participants 2020-2021

		Students	Academics	Professional Services	Total
Let’s Talk Race 2020	Webinar	8	7	7	22
	Narrative Library	1	1	3	5
Let’s Talk LGBTQ+ 2021	Webinar	1	2	2	5
	Narrative Library	1	1	3	5
Let’s Talk Disability & Difference 2021	Webinar	1	1	3	5
	Narrative Library	0	3	2	5
Let’s Talk Race 2021	Webinar	14	0	3	17
	Narrative Library	3	1	1	5

Let's Talk LGBTQ+ 2022	Webinar	6	1	1	8
	Narrative Library	1	1	0	2

The monitoring data analysis of the pilot project is based on six sessions that were delivered between October 2020 and April 2022. In total, 79 people attended of which 36 were students, 18 were academics and 25 were professional services. Three senior academics have attended one session each, an Associate Dean from each Faculty at the University and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The Human Resources Organisation Development and Diversity Manager, and/or a member of their team have been present at every session. Only one student has attended from the Faculty of Arts, Sciences, and Technology, whilst the remainder are studying under the Faculty of Social and Life students, most of whom were studying on the Youth and Community Work programmes.

The first session focused on 'race' and the webinar for this event was the most attended during pilot. It took place during the Covid-19 pandemic lock down of 2020, in the wake of increased awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement following the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the USA (Carney and Kelekay 2022). Both factors may explain the attendance of Senior Leadership at this first session, including the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and an Associate Dean. Both 'race' webinars have been well attended in the 12-month pilot, however the attendance was boosted in 2021 by Youth and Community Work students, indeed all students in attendance were from this programme. The change in participant demographic may be the result of universities in Wales returning to campus (Welsh Government 2021), seeing increasing workloads for academic staff (Dinu et al. 2021), a hypothesis that warrants future inquiry.

The least well attended sessions were for 'Let's Talk Disability and Difference' and all the student participants for this subject area were from Youth and Community Work programmes. Whilst the reasons for this are unknown and research is required to offer explanation, a lower attendance was anticipated by the Youth Work educators as research by the Equality of Human Rights Commission suggests that more work is needed to determine the characteristics and extent of issues affecting disabled people (EHRC 2015), and that there has not been enough progress towards equality for disabled people in the UK (EHRC 2017)

Lastly, it is noted from the monitoring data that webinars have had more participants than the narrative libraries. The reason for this is unknown as the participants opinion can only be gauged from reflections taken at the end of the narrative library sessions. Further investigation is required to understand the barriers preventing wider participation in the narrative libraries.

Participant Reflection Analysis

Table 3: Participant Reflections

Theme 1: Relationships, Trust and Empowerment	Theme 2: Education	Theme 3: Raising Critical Consciousness	Theme 4: Allyship
“Feel like it is a safe space to have difficult conversations”	“I have enjoyed the learning experience”	“I didn’t realise how much I didn’t know”	“How can I do more”
“I feel better listening to other people’s experiences similar to mine, less alone”	“I’ve learned so much through talking to people I wouldn’t normally have a chance to speak with”	“I thought I knew about this but I realise now that I don’t”	“I want to know how to help the University do more”
“Created space to share personal experiences and have felt listened to”	“I’m surprised at learning so much, and the depth of learning with strangers”	“I didn’t realise how much Emotional labour was involved when people share their experience”	“I didn’t realise my own privilege; I want to do more with it to help others”
“There’s no judgement”	“I want to know more!”	“I was unaware of my own experiences of oppression until now”	“It’s helped me see how I can start to make changes”

Participant reflections took place after narrative library sessions and in discussions between project participants and Youth Work educators. Analysis of the discussions led to four themes seem to identify radical pedagogy and relate to Youth Work methods.

The first theme identified in analysis was “Relationships, Trust and Empowerment”, a theme that correlates with the Youth Work method of focussing on relationships that create a safe space with trust and integrity (Cooper, 2018). These relationships have been formed voluntarily and the reflections indicate that informal education values of democracy, fairness, and well-being (Gee 2020) have guided the project process.

The second theme that arose in analysis was “Education”. The pilot project was designed as a process of radical pedagogy, where informal education values and methods are employed to facilitate learning through conversation, a process defined by Jeffs and Smith as:

“the process of fostering learning in life as it is lived. A concern with community and conversation; a focus on people as persons rather than objects, a readiness to educate in different settings (Jeffs and Smith, 2005: 8).”

Participant reflections indicate that the Youth Work methods of empowerment, participation, experiential learning, and critical reflection (Brown and Nicklin 2019) have enabled learning amongst participants whilst also creating the potential for change through the catalyst of conversation (Nicholls, 2012). This is implied by the third theme identified as “Raising Critical Consciousness”.

The pilot project aimed to “raise critical awareness of oppressions and encourage change at a personal level for participants, and a cultural level for the University (Thompson 2017)”. Analysis of participant reflections suggests that the latter has taken place. Informal education draws on critical pedagogy (Smith and Seal 2021) and the participant reflections suggest that ‘conscientisation’ (Freire 1970, 1993), the process of raising critical consciousness has occurred amongst some of the project attendees. Of course, the second fundamental factor in this process of increased critical awareness is ‘praxis’ (Manojan 2019) which is suggested in the final theme identified in the analysis of project participant reflections.

Conversation is the primary Youth Work method and tool for the project, and participant reflections indicate that it has operated as a means of learning and action for change (Coburn 2010). The theme of ‘Allyship’ implies that participants of the pilot project intend to act as a result of their learning from project sessions. It suggests that the education process has identified unseen inequalities at a personal level (Thompson 2016) amongst participants, and that this critical consciousness has provoked a call for transformative action across the University community.

Indeed, the analysis of the project data available through monitoring and participant reflections, implies that Youth Work methodology could provide the means to promote social justice in HEIs as a bottom-up movement. As a pilot project, the analysis undertaken has not been subject to academic investigation but there is scope to progress the ideas presented and acted upon within this chapter. Whilst the findings presented do not suggest any immediate change in organisational culture, which by definition is unseen and problematic (McCulloch 2007), the implied personal transformation and intent to act identified as themes, suggests that radical pedagogy and Youth Work methods have generated transforming action within the University. Thompson (2016) asserts that the personal, cultural, and structural levels of power and discrimination interact and reinforce each other. When applying Thompson’ PCS analysis (*ibid.*) to the pilot project, there is the potential it to stimulate change and promote social justice at all levels of the University.

Summary and Next Steps

This chapter has shown how Youth Work educators at WGU have piloted a project that applies Youth Work methodology, a radical pedagogy, to promote Social Justice in Higher Education. The pilot was attended by 79 people from the University community, comprising students, academics,

and professional services. Comprehensive academic exploration is required to understand the attendance demographics for different areas of social inequality, and session styles.

An analysis of the reflections of the participants suggest that the project has raised their critical consciousness to bring about action at a personal level, this can challenge hegemony and influence culture in the organisation. Evidencing change on a cultural level is challenging and requires more in-depth academic investigation, as does the effects of the project at a structural level of the organisation.

Therefore, the Youth Work educators at WGU will develop the approach taken in this project to create an academic research project that adopts Youth Work as a methodology and radical pedagogy to promote social justice in Higher Education.

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