Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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2. A critical pedagogy for a critical time

Jane Booth

Abstract

This chapter advocates for a community-centric university model grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy. It challenges the market-driven approach to Higher Education and questions the narrow focus on employability, instead emphasising the development of reflexive, inclusive graduates who can disrupt the status quo. The chapter highlights the importance of building reciprocal relationships between universities and the voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector to ensure that learning and research align with broader societal needs. Additionally, it calls for meaningful engagement with those marginalised by the neo-liberal capitalist economy, fostering dialogue to envision a more hopeful, sustainable, and socially just future. Through these efforts, the chapter promotes a transformative approach to Higher Education that prioritises equity, collaboration, and societal impact.

Keywords: wicked problems; critical pedagogy; community-based learning; community-based research; coproduction

Introduction

Globally, we face a climate crisis, which governments are unable or unwilling to address. Nationally and globally, we see the growth and entrenchment of poverty. Nationally we face a housing crisis, a broken social care system and increasing health inequalities. Neo-liberal capitalism has brought us to crisis. In terms of teaching content, particularly for social science courses, these are interesting times indeed. In terms of humanity, we have reached a tipping point.

However, there is hope. By taking a critical approach to pedagogy, and a community-centric approach to research, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could create the conditions to disrupt the neo-liberal capitalist orthodoxy that is killing us, reclaiming education as a dialogue in which we (re)value our humanity (Freire, 1970). As this chapter will advocate, this dialogue must be inclusive, moving beyond the walls of the university, if we are to bring about social change. For education should "have a political and ethical dimension" (Wallin, 2023, p. 69), otherwise neo-liberalism will remain unchallenged, the environment will continue to degenerate, and social inequalities will persist (Booth, 2023). Knowledge is crucial to bringing about social transformation. Therefore, if academics take steps to include the knowledge of those living with a social problem, they are more likely to gain a clearer understanding of the problem and a more effective solution (Brandsen et al., 2018; Newbury-Birch, 2019), for "the questions they ask are different from the questions asked by researchers and practitioners" (Knutagård et al., 2021, p. 236).

Therefore, this chapter proposes that HEIs adopt the principles of appreciative inquiry, community-based research, and critical pedagogy as the basis of a more community-facing praxis. This community-facing "praxis" advocates that educational practitioners work in ways that are "informed, reflective, self-consciously moral and political, and oriented towards making positive educational and societal change" (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 15). This requires promoting "alternative possibilities for education" (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 17). The activities of HEIs have traditionally been dominated by the needs of "The University" (for instance, research subjects and student placements) with limited benefit to the wider community (Booth, 2021). When universities do reach out to community organisations, it is often so they can be "inserted

into large research grant bids when needed" (Parker, 2023, p. 17), enhancing academic reputation rather than reflecting the needs of that community. This perpetuates "selections of knowledge and types of discourse" that marginalise those outside of the university, limiting their "capacity [......] to develop informed and critical understanding of society's power structures and their own relation to them" (Beck, 2013, p. 182). However, it is increasingly evident that coproducing research and learning activities with the individuals and communities living with the worst aspects of neo-liberal capitalism enhances the generation of knowledge (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016), enriches the learning environment (Booth & Green, 2022), and increases the likelihood of societal transformation and democratic participation (Brandsen et al., 2018).

Dare we hope?

In the face of "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), such as the looming climate crisis and entrenched poverty, what is required is a "new approach to the conduct of research and to the decision-making based on that research" (Brown et al., 2010, p. 4), an approach that is multi-disciplinary, multi-organisational, and multi-actor. Wicked problems are complex problems that cross disciplinary, organisational, and territorial boundaries and, therefore, "cannot be addressed effectively through traditional bureaucracies" (McGuire, 2006, p. 34) and need to include the worldviews of communities and individuals living with the "ills" of capitalism.

In the neo-liberal, capitalist economy, notions of community, collectivism, and social citizenship have been marginalised; the amassing of wealth has been reframed as success; and kindness is irrelevant. However, hope lies with those living with disadvantages who often provide routine acts of kindness to neighbours, relatives, and friends: "an infrastructure of kindness" that keeps communities functioning (Hall & Smith, 2015, p. 6). This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which community and neighbourhood groups formed to provide informal welfare to respond to the crisis (Rees et al., 2022; see also Chachlani et al., 2020). Kindness, and the local knowledge that underpins it, can be transformational.

Similarly, the learning environment should expose students to the diverse voices and experiences of disadvantaged communities to prompt reflection on how different sources of knowledge might be reconciled, engaging students, teachers, and communities in a collective dialogue in the pursuit of mutually beneficial research findings. Without their voices, HEIs can (unwittingly) dehumanise the very communities they hope to benefit from the social research by recreating "relationships of power" (Kitts, 2020, p. 83). This not only relates to the economic and political power imbalances within society, but also the power imbalances embedded in university praxis, between student and academic, academic and management, and university and community. Rather than privileging the expertise of academics and managers, universities need to draw on the knowledge of local citizens, as well as the lived experience of our diverse student body, to enhance inclusivity in both learning and research environments.

By co-producing research projects and teaching activities, the knowledge generated is more likely to reflect the reality of the social world and has the potential to be both empowering and transformational for the wider community.

Community-based approaches to teaching and research challenge the power imbalance between the researched and the researcher. This requires HEIs to be more cognisant of the knowledge of the wider community by nurturing reciprocal relationships with the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE). As will be detailed below, HEIs are well placed to become "a place for collaboration" with the VCFSE sector, facilitating dialogue with the "common purpose to co-create knowledge and meaning" (Wallin, 2023, p. 65) enabling the divisive nature of neo-liberal capitalism to be challenged. HEIs have the spaces, resources, academic expertise across a range of disciplines, student hours, and the need to carry out research that has an impact on the wider community (Research England, 2022). A community-centric university that values different types of knowing is more likely to produce research findings, graduates, and citizens that do not just maintain the status quo but advocate for hopeful change.

As educators, we must challenge the neo-liberal discourse that perpetuates the hegemony of "no alternative" to capitalism, which normalises the inevitability of inequality and depletes our democracy. As

Paulo Freire (1992, p. 8) says, "we need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water". But our work is cut out. News outlets uncritically reproduce the narratives of neo-liberalism—economic growth, profits, share prices—whilst reality TV, social media, and tabloids reify the super-rich and indulge in their displays of conspicuous wealth. A new critical discourse—one more reflective of the majority, that challenges the reification of the minority who receive disproportionate economic "goods" and political influence—is needed to make visible the pathology of capitalism. For Freire (1970, p. 88) "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it". Freire's theory of "naming", through dialogue with others, creates the conditions for the transformation of our "selves" and our perceptions of the world around us.

Moving beyond employability to reflection and resistance

The marketisation of the Higher Education sector has damaged its democratic core to the point of students becoming customers rather than producers of knowledge (Neary & Winn, 2017). What is more, a "skills-based" approach to employability, measured by a series of metrics, implies that students should only "invest in education" to gain economic benefits (Suleman, 2021) and fit into the job market (Wallin, 2023). Notions such as personal growth, reflection, and citizenship have faded as education becomes a "technocratic" rather than a "moral practice that is shaped, interpreted and negotiated by the people involved in it" (Wallin, 2023, p. 56). HE has become a corporatist exercise as opposed to an "intellectual" and inquisitorial one (Kitts, 2020). Thus, HEIs are likely to produce future practitioners that simply replicate the inequity of the capitalist system, diminishing the ability to engage learners in a more inclusive dialogue aimed at creating a sustainable and fairer society.

Reclaiming the importance of "the critical" in education

What if we, as educators, resist the idea that students are "customers" and instead position students as co-producers of knowledge with the wider community? What if we facilitate students to become reflexive,

critical, and inclusive practitioners for the future? This requires creating opportunities for students, academics, and local communities to come together to co-produce "a critical political consciousness" (Giroux, 2022, p. 181), through "pedagogical flexibility" that respects local knowledge (Johnson, 2022, p. 208). To counteract the dehumanisation embedded in the neo-liberal university, both learning and teaching need to be community-facing. For, the acquisition of knowledge "will be limited if it does not include the routine, real world experience of non-academic communities" (Booth, 2023, p. 179).

In the social sciences, students often engage with the local VCFSE sector and local citizens, through placements and guest speakers. However, the impact on student learning and the benefits to the community itself can be minimal. Therefore, interaction with local community groups must be part of an ongoing process, "established through routine dialogue rather than dominated by the needs of the university" (Booth, 2023, p. 182). Universities need to invest in their local VCFSE sector, building long-term relationships through mechanisms that are not based on individual willingness or the need for research data to fulfil research funding.

Setting up a Community Hub at the University where local VCFSE sector groups can come for support with their work, such as providing students to volunteer on a specific project, or research by students and/or academics to support a project evaluation, could kick-start that relationship. Drawing on the tenets of appreciative inquiry, the Hub could usefully reflect Juanita Brown and David Isaacs' (2005) World Café model. This model takes a collaborative and iterative approach to generating knowledge, through dialogue, creating the opportunity for the "cross-pollination of ideas" (Fouché & Light, 2011, p. 28), which, in this case, would be between academics, students, representatives from local VCFSE organisations and community members themselves. Such a café format could create the conditions for a non-hierarchical exchange of information, including the identification of social problems and the generation of possible solutions, recognising and valuing lived experience and local knowledge alongside professional and academic input. In this way, non-academic participants would be able to "move beyond being recipients of knowledge transfer to having an active role in knowledge creation" (Fouché & Light, 2011, p. 28). Appreciative inquiry

resists hierarchies in problem solving, as this often excludes the groups and individuals most likely to be impacted by "the problem". Instead, the Hub would transform "those hierarchies into knowledge-rich, relationally inclusive, self-organizing enterprises", with an "openness to change" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) (see Figure 2.1). This leads to what Stavros & Torres (2022, p. 23) call, "conversations worth having", which "enliven people, strengthen relationships, unleash creativity, and move organizations forward fast". This dialogic Hub would need to be embedded in the praxis of the university. Thus, rather than being a reactive part of academic life, where academics reach out to external organisations, groups and individuals to support their research, the Hub would provide the space for regular café dialogue with local VCFSE organisations to identify what research needs to be carried out, or activities co-designed, to meet local needs.
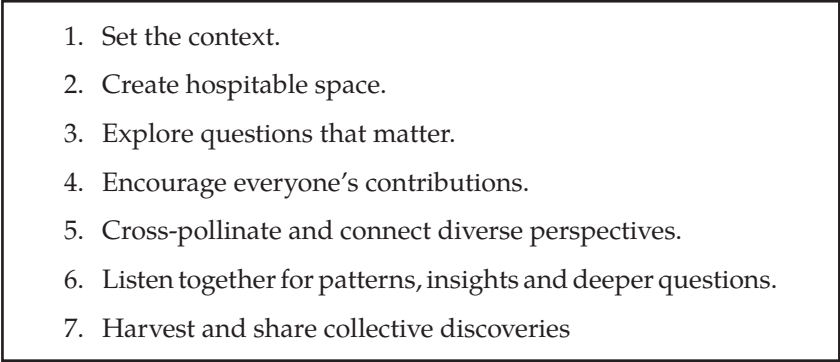
1. Set the context.
2. Create hospitable space.
3. Explore questions that matter.
4. Encourage everyone's contributions.
5. Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives.
6. Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions.
7. Harvest and share collective discoveries

Fig. 2.1 The key design principles of the World Café. Adapted from https://theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/design-principles/. Figure created by the author (2025).

However, there are barriers to the Hub. Establishing regular cafes between university personnel, VCFSE practitioners, and local residents may be difficult initially with busy VCFSE practitioners and local residents who may be distanced from the work of the university. Local practitioners and residents therefore need to be central to the co-creation of the Hub. It would require the buy-in from the top management of the university, who would need to be persuaded of the benefits of such a strategy. Therefore, it may initially have to appeal to narrow measures of

"Employability". There is the issue of time availability of practitioners, especially those who work in smaller VCFSE organisations. And, finally, there is the issue of the availability and motivation of students. These kinds of activities may be more challenging for students with additional needs or caring responsibilities or those who lack the efficacy to put themselves forward. This inclusivity is crucial, as the lived experience of more disadvantaged students could help to form "stronger emotional connections" by the university and community members working alongside each other "in a stance of empathy and receptivity" (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 16 cited in Kaukko et al., 2020, p. 52).

To enhance the participation of students, assignment criteria could be built around meeting the needs of a local community. The dissertation module is one possibility. A research project that is based on "applied" research, rather than a literature search, opens up the potential for students to have a real impact on the community. In doing so, marvellous things happen. When the student is able to work closely with an external organisation, and to co-design a community project with individuals living with disadvantage, they have the opportunity to reconcile academic knowledge with lived experience. Such projects create a space for critical dialogue, helping "to challenge traditional positions and knowledge hierarchies" (Wallin, 2023, p. 69). Not only that, but this work leaves a legacy that benefits the community, as well as enhancing the student's knowledge about social inequality, reinforcing their position as a "knowledge producer" (Neary, 2016). Such projects can also be multi-disciplinary and multi-organisational. In the module Advocacy in Action, I provided students with the opportunity to coproduce a campaign with a local VCFSE organisation. Working alongside creative writing and media students, they participated in problem-solving activities to find ways to raise awareness of, and provide services for, local residents living with mental health issues and food insecurity. This multi-disciplinary working took the students out of their disciplinary comfort zones, generating the conditions for creative dialogue between voluntary sector staff and service users, and students from different disciplinary backgrounds. Learning environments such as these are more likely to produce graduates capable of working across organisational and disciplinary boundaries in order to solve complex societal problems (Brown et al., 2010), by helping us to

"think differently about what a university can be" (Wallin, 2023, p. 67).

However, as Sanne Akkerman and Arthur Bakker (2011, p. 150) point out, interdisciplinarity requires crossing disciplinary boundaries, and the "negotiation of meaning" through conversations that are unfamiliar and challenging. However, it does not demand an abandoning of discipline-specific knowledge and practices. As Ben Kotzee (2012, p. 175) states, there is value in recognising and embracing the idea that there is "differentiatedness of expertise", rather than privileging one understanding over another. Instead, what is required is a commitment to transformation in which something new is generated in the interchange of the existing practices, precisely by virtue of their differences. What is more, a World Café approach resists any power relationship between the HEI and the local community it resides in and instead recognises the value of the knowledge and expertise offered by all "researchers" in the room.

Conclusion

In the face of neo-liberalism, humanity is struggling. The wicked problems we face globally and nationally cannot be tackled by HEIs simply reproducing skills for the workplace. To disrupt the individualistic excesses of neo-liberalism, a critical approach to knowledge generation is long overdue. To challenge the deep social, political, and economic divisions in our society, we must confront the narrative that the current economic system serves us all. Instead, we need to develop a discourse and praxis to create an economy that values "social quality", reversing "the analysis of power from macrolevel national politics to the micro-level of the workplace" (Farnsworth, 2019, p. 82). To do this, HEIs need to be community-facing, and "more permeable to different sorts of interests" (Parker, 2023, p. 13). Students can play a critical role here. By coproducing research and learning activities with the local community, we are more likely to produce critical and innovative graduates, capable of working across disciplines, organisations, and communities to access the range of knowledge that is essential for addressing these wicked problems. This is also more likely to generate a reciprocal relationship between the university and the community, where different ways of "knowing"

are shared and valued. HEIs need to resist the defence of "disciplinary excellence" as a way of excluding non-academic knowledge, untouched by "the hurly-burly of the world" (Parker, 2023, p. 29).

Critical pedagogy aims to engage students, teachers, and the community in a dialogue to counter neo-liberal narratives, moving the focus away from individualism and self-reliance, to one of social justice, community, trust, and hope, underpinned by "a moral commitment to the public good [...] and the democratizing possibilities of education" (Waldon & Schoorman, 2023, p. 7). As such, educators, particularly in social sciences, need to lead a reimagining of education in order to "dream of a different society" (Wallin, 2023, p. 57). As Lori Ungemah writes (2022, p. 87), "who created those traditions anyways? Can't we question, manipulate, break them a bit?". The university needs to reconsider "where, when and who academics are and what they do" (Parker, 2023, p. 29), so that HEIs become "complex arenas of sociocultural reproduction and resistance" (Kitts, 2020, p. 85).

It may be, as Richard Brosio (2017) argues, that capitalism and democracy are incompatible, capitalism being reliant on social inequality to generate wealth for the few, whilst democracy is based on the desire for equality and citizenship. However, there is also a hope that HEIs can be critical in creating spaces for dialogue that imagine a different relationship between the economy and society, and the economy and democracy; where the economy serves the interests of society rather than the other way around. Freire locates the human being in a matrix of hope, believing that little stories can create "the context for people to question their everyday experience in order to recognise oppression as a political injustice rather than a personal failing" (Medwith, 2018, p. 33), and that those stories need "practice in order to become historical concreteness" (Freire, 1992, p. 8). Moving the focus of university praxis away from the market and towards the community, there is the potential to produce meaningful dialogue that questions the necessity of social inequality—and it is more likely to bring about social change. However, if we frame it as fulfilling the need to engage with employers, it could (ironically) tick the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) boxes for employability. What is not to like?

Steps toward hope

- Integrate critical pedagogy into curriculum design and teaching practices to foster a more hopeful, community-oriented university culture.

- Reframe the goals of courses and programmes beyond market-driven narratives, focusing instead on developing inclusive, critically reflexive graduates who question and challenge the status quo.

- Strengthen partnerships between universities and the VCFSE sector to ensure mutual benefit in both learning and research activities.

- Ensure that academic initiatives reflect the lived realities, needs, and perspectives of wider society—particularly underserved or marginalised communities.

- Work collectively to envision and build an education system that prioritises sustainability, hope, equity, and social justice.

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