

# STORIES OF HOPE

## REIMAGINING EDUCATION

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## 26. Co-creating networks of hope in an interdisciplinary degree for mature students

*Catherine Bates, Tracy Campbell, Colin Webb,  
and Lucy Yeboa*

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### Abstract

This chapter, co-authored by a university programme leader and three students, explores the transformative learning that emerges within a Higher Education programme tailored for adult learners returning to education. Through collaborative reflection, the authors examine how a community of hope is cultivated via interactive teaching practices that foreground shared life experiences and co-constructed knowledge, supported by contemporary case studies and critical theory. Drawing on the radical pedagogical insights of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Kevin Gannon, alongside Tara Yosso's concept of aspirational capital and Sarah O'Shea's notion of "ripples of learning", the chapter conceptualises the learning environment as one rooted in radical hope and collective empowerment. Readers are invited to engage with this hopeful pedagogy and consider its potential to transform not only educational experiences but also lives and communities in profound, material ways.

**Keywords:** adult education; transformative pedagogies; aspirational capital; social change

## Adult education, transformative pedagogies, aspirational capital, and social change

In the “Opening Words” to *Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire talks about the need for hope in the fight for social justice, but also the need for fight and activism to sustain and substantiate hope. He says:

Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope (Freire, 2004, p. 3).

This chapter contends that the formation of a responsive, sustainable community is a necessary prerequisite for this education of hope. We are a group of students and staff on the BA in Professional Studies, an interdisciplinary degree designed specifically for mature students (those over twenty-one when they start their studies), at the Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC), University of Leeds, UK. Many of our student community come from groups that are underrepresented in university settings; the degree recognises the value that students coming with different perspectives and a drive to learn can bring to the institution, and in providing the opportunity for all to return to study.

This chapter has been written collaboratively between Catherine—the degree’s Programme Manager, two current students (at the time of writing)—Tracy and Lucy, and one graduate—Colin. For reasons of expediency, Catherine has taken the lead with the writing, but with the strong inspiration of emails and conversations with Tracy, Lucy, and Colin. All three tell powerful stories of hope developed from the curricular and extra-curricula community-building activities, which are an integral part of our overall pedagogical and support strategies. Professional Studies makes space to build community and hope for social change through: an alternative entry, strengths-based approach to admissions (in which we recognise the skills, knowledge, and experience mature students are bringing to their studies beyond traditional qualifications); an interactive approach to teaching, which focuses on students sharing their experience and learning from each other; and an attempt to make assessment authentic and flexible, to enable students to engage with it in ways that are meaningful to them.

We have worked together to provide three stories of hope through our collective experience of transformational education. By transformational, we refer to the way students go through a continual process of transformation through learning; and, the way students transform the degree, their tutors (me), and potentially the institution and HE more generally, through the invaluable contributions they make through sharing their experiences, stories, and knowledges.

### Radically hopeful pedagogy and aspirational capital

Higher Education (HE) in the UK is an increasingly challenging, and often demoralising, place to be. Students and staff are subject to a neo-liberal ideology that sees HE as transactional and about instrumental value. The UK government have said they will “crack down on rip off degrees” that “fail to have good outcomes” (Department of Education, 2023), these being defined in relation to employment prospects. Arts and Humanities degrees (in particular) are being closed or threatened with closure across the country. Students pay high fees and have to withstand a public discourse that continually questions the value of a degree—and mature students have the extra difficulty of being invisibilised in the discourse, as government officials, journalists, and Vice Chancellors refer to “bright young things” (Jenkins, 2023; Buitendijk, 2023). As Kevin Gannon (2020) discusses, for HE educators it could be tempting to fall into a “jaded detachment”, in which they become resigned to going through the motions, teaching in a didactic, cynical way. But this would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, bringing cynicism to pedagogy and teaching using the banking model (which conceptualises students as containers to be filled with knowledge—Freire, 2018), leading to a silencing of students, with no real possibility for new perspectives to be produced. To teach in a dialogic way in which tutor and students reflect and act together is to allow for the possibility of a co-produced hope through which we can collectively work to create positive change.

bell hooks, Freire, and Gannon all write about this notion of active or “radical” hope within pedagogy, which involves and is produced by action; they highlight that it is not an idealistic passive notion of waiting for a better future. Freire (2004, p. 3) insists upon the necessity of hope as a condition for continuing to participate in the struggle for truth and



justice, asserting that: “One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope”. Influenced by Freire, hooks (2004) advocates an engaged liberatory pedagogy which involves tutor and students learning in dialogue with each other—as a community—as a way to unveil these opportunities. Gannon (2020) argues for the radical nature of this teaching approach, outlining its transformative nature in a way that chimes with the work we do on Professional Studies. He says:

Teaching is a radical act of hope [...] The very acts of trying to teach well, of adopting a critically reflective practice to improve our teaching and our students’ learning, are radical, in that word’s literal sense: they are endeavours aimed at fundamental, root-level transformation. And they are acts of hope because they imagine that process of transformation as one in which a better future takes shape out of our students’ critical refusal to abide the limitations of the present (Gannon, 2020, p. 5).

## Hopeful acts of change and networks of hope on Professional Studies

Professional Studies starts with a module, *Exploring Diversity*, in which we look together at the theoretical and material realities of our socially-constituted identities, discussing issues—as hooks (2004, p. 8) lists—of “imperialism, race, gender, and sexuality”, as well as intersectionality, structural oppression, and representation. We consider research, theories and key concepts within interactive workshops in which the students and I—as the facilitator—consider and raise questions, share and interrogate our experiences and learn from each. Smaller seminars give us the opportunity to zoom in on particular cases studies (such as memoirs, documentaries, legal cases and public lectures) to further explore the theories and concepts and to compare them to our own lives. Both workshop and seminar provide opportunities for consciousness-raising and sharing—they become intimate spaces in which we learn about each other’s continuing stories of identity, using concepts such as microaggressions, gender performativity, institutional racism, white privilege, unconscious bias, and social identity. Together, we apply these concepts to the struggles we face in our lives, using the case studies as a jumping off point. The learning becomes one of praxis, “reflection and

action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2018, p. 52), as together we discuss examples from our lives, which help us to think and act differently.

### Lucy

Lucy was particularly affected by the discussions in the module about patriarchy, binary notions of gender, and heteronormativity. These prompted her to interrogate her family relationships and to question the embedded gender roles. She shared her experience and found connections with other women (especially mothers) in the group, who recognised the extent of the burden placed on them for domestic labour, as well as the comparative lack of respect they received in their households. Lucy emailed me at the end of the module, sharing its impact on her:

I just wanted you to know that your lectures have been so eye-opening and also "food for thought". It has been a life-changing journey. We are having the "talks" at home and trying to instil "feminism" into the men at home (email 6.12.2021).

Lucy and I have continued to have conversations about gender relations in the home and I have learnt from her persistence and strength. This has given me hope—and made us both realise that learning and hope are intertwined and processual. As Sarah Ahmed (2017, p. 2) says, in *Living a Feminist Life*:

Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible.

Lucy's hope of the possibility for change at home animated her struggle to create change. It continues to be a struggle but it is carried through by a collective hope, which is shared with me and her course mates—together, we are generating a space and time for change. Lucy's sharing of her learning experience and the actions she has taken as a result have generated the hope in me that teaching can create change; they have given me my own "food for hope".

## Tracy

Tracy's consciousness was raised on *Exploring Diversity*, in relation to the intersections of race and gender, in particular—and she brought in her experiences of being a parent at her young son's county football matches for us all to think through and learn from. She talked to me about the importance of learning the language of oppression in order to recognise the power relations; to then recognise what and how to fight it. Tracy shared in seminars the unjust, oppressive treatment her son's football team regularly experienced from the referee. He was abusive to the young players and then to any parents who objected. Tracy started to recognise the implicit racism in how he was treating the players from her son's team (who come from an area which has a large percentage of people of South Asian, Caribbean, and African heritage) in comparison to the teams they were playing. She also observed the sexism in the way he responded to the mothers on the sidelines, in particular. Empowered by our module discussions, she challenged him, and worked on how she could lodge a formal complaint. She used the skills she was building as a first-year student to focus her second semester literature review research on racism in county football. She used this research, as well as the concepts she had learnt through *Exploring Diversity* (particularly microaggressions, unconscious bias, oppression and institutional racism) to fight for the referee to be formally disciplined. Her determination eventually led to success. This is how she put it in an email to me:

I'd like to share with you the outcome of the hearing [...] in which I reported the referee at my Son's football match. With the knowledge and education I gained this year as a mature student it gave me the confidence to make this complaint and rally support from other parents and the club. It was also the right thing to do; behaviour like this (institutional racism/inequality) in Football has a long history.

Historically, complaints by the football team against referees have not been upheld meaning that referees have never had to appear before a hearing to be made accountable for their actions.

Not only was the complaint upheld, but the referee was also found guilty, fined, and ordered to engage in an online course, and for the first time in twenty years they had a diverse panel at the hearing.



*Thank you for your support this year, looking forward to more learning* (email 29.6.2023—NB: some words have been changed to anonymise the football team to protect the individuals concerned).

Tracy used the teaching sessions to reflect on what was happening at the football matches and to find a way to precisely articulate the injustice; this enabled her to take action. She noted that her use of conceptual language, such as unconscious bias, was what prompted the officials to listen to her. This has converted the hope Tracy brought into the degree, in the form of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), into her active role in materially changing her world. As Dale Jacobs (2005) highlights, hope is not about individualistic ambition, it is about the possibility of collective change and so is necessarily relational. Sarah O'Shea (2016) talks about the "ripples of learning" that flow bi-directionally between home and the HE institution for first-in-family students. Tracy's learning has rippled multi-directionally: there is the hope the referee will now learn from the experience; and the local football association has been significantly impacted by it and are changing their practice; Tracy's son now knows that education can lead to a power shift and potential change; and Tracy's tutors and course mates have now also learnt from and been inspired by this story. As well as "ripples of learning", networks of hope have been created, which work as a sort of fuel to keep us all going.

### Colin

Colin, as a graduate of the Professional Studies degree, has stayed in touch and become an active member of this network of hope and an integral part of the degree experience for current students. Tracy and Colin met each other at one of our Research Conversations events, in which a staff member and a student (or graduate) shared research they had been undertaking with other staff and students from the LLC community. He discussed his current PhD research about human trafficking and his aim to be part of important social change and consciousness-raising. For this chapter, Colin has reflected on the transformative experience of the whole degree on his identity and learning; he shared his thoughts about the value of lifelong learning in building hope for mature students:

The belief in the intrinsic value of learning and the pursuit of personal fulfilment through education establishes a strong foundation of hope for mature students. The attainment of a degree also fosters self-confidence, empowering students to embody their aspirations and break free from imposed limitations. My personal journey, transitioning from a career as a large goods vehicle driver to completing an undergraduate degree in Professional Studies, followed by a Master's qualification in Human Rights Law and Practice, and now pursuing a PhD is a testament of the boundless possibilities that await when one believes in their potential (16.07.23).

Colin reflects on the importance of being believed in—as a returning student—and of being given the opportunity to return to study. Furthermore, when he presented his research this inspired Tracy; she could see where doing the Professional Studies degree could take her, and what research could do. Colin felt empowered by his ability to have this impact on others. This mutual inspiration and empowerment are the binding agent that brings the community of hope together.

### Conclusion: Bringing you into our network of hope

We conclude this chapter with the hope we can include you, our readers, within our network of hope. This is what is needed to continue the struggle for much needed change in HE. What our communal reflections have taught us is that *returning to learn* is a radical act of hope; the transformation and search for a better future is there in a mature student's decision to start a degree. This is part of the aspirational capital that Tara Yosso discusses, when critiquing and building upon the deficit nature of Bourdeusian capital. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Framework (2005) proposes six forms of cultural capital that students from diverse backgrounds who are underrepresented in university settings bring. Aspirational capital is an individual's ability to "maintain hope and dreams for the future" despite "real and perceived" obstacles and involves "nurturing a culture of possibility" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Yosso helps us to see that the pedagogy of hope necessarily involves a relational and mutually-affirming learning process, which is not uni-directional. While Gannon focuses on teaching as the act of hope, Yosso reminds us to recognise the acts of hope students bring to the

situation—by returning to study and by entering the learning situation in a transformational way with their own fresh perspectives. This is a good reminder that, as Jacobs (2005) highlights, hope is social and relational in nature, just as pedagogical spaces are places of “liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership” (hooks, 2003, p. xv). The aspirational capital from the students, together with the building of radical hope brought in by a liberatory pedagogical perspective, is ultimately what constitutes the degree in a continually transformative way.

### Steps toward hope

- Foster transformative learning by building a community of hope through interactive teaching, where students and staff share life experiences and build knowledge together.
- Utilise contemporary case studies and critical theory to create a learning community with transformative impact on individuals and their lives.
- Draw on the ideas of radical hope, aspirational capital, and “ripples of learning” to conceptualise and create a supportive learning environment.

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