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Critical learning development and the crisis of the university: a collective consideration

Gordon Asher

Abstract

This participatory session concerned consideration of the 'critical turn in LD' (Syska and Buckley, 2023: 107), manifest through an emerging critical LD movement – as centring an academic literacies approach (Hilsdon, 2018; Asher, 2022, 2023a; Dhillon, 2023; Rooney, 2023) – as a response to 'the crisis of the university' (Bacevic, 2017). The focus is on the positionality of LD/LDers within the increasingly neoliberal university, and to this critical learning development movement. Time and space are provided for sharing experiences, worries and hopes for LD/HE and to collectively explore the contemporary realities/trajectory of LD/HE – and alternative futures.

The central cause of the crisis of UK HE, exacerbated by government and senior management responses to COVID-19, is intensifying and accelerating processes of the 'deep neoliberalisation' of the public university – reflected in industrial action concerning 'pay devaluation; pay inequality, based on gender and race; excessive workloads; and casualisation' (Hall, 2020a). The session explores where LD/LDers are positioned within the HE crisis, before considering how critically oriented LD/LDers who believe HE should be a social and public good can best respond to the crisis, while connecting such to wider contemporary societal and global crises. Specifically:

- How might LD/LDers respond to different contexts of crisis in ways that encompass LD's developmental/pedagogical ethos, emancipatory values and empowering academic literacies approach (Syska and Buckley, 2023; Webster, 2019)?
- How do we link with wider critical educational theories, practices, communities and struggles?
- What might be the role of critical Learning Development and academic literacies?

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The objective is critical reflection on contemporary LD/HE contexts – with take-aways, as thus grounded in actual lived experiences of the crisis, including:

- Developing understandings as to self, team and LD contemporary positionality.
- Considerations of possible actions and next steps, including the potential for an ALDinHE CoP focused on critical LD and academic literacies.

Keywords: critical learning development; academic literacies; crisis of the university; community of practice.

Community response

Commentary 1

Building on previous, similarly themed workshops and, of course, Gordon's contribution to *How to Be a Learning Developer* (Syska and Buckley, 2023), this was an engaging and well engaged-with session. I confess I often find discussions like this somewhat demoralising and disempowering (not that they're intended to be so, of course!). However necessary it might be to constantly (re)situate one's practice within the context of current social, political and ecological crises (and, conversely, however complacent and complicit it might be of us to fail to do so), I at least am so often left at a loss as to what might be done in response. It is to this session's credit that real time and space was given to moving beyond diagnosis and towards possible action. It felt, as a consequence, very much like a beginning of something bigger and, dare I say it, more hopeful. This was largely thanks to the second half of the session, I think, in which we were invited to think about alliances and spaces of shared struggle with others in the sector. In my experience, this vital element of the conversation has often felt lacking, so it was good to hear people thinking and talking it through.

As is often the way with such discussions, though, there was barely time to explore all this as thoroughly as many of us, I'm sure, would have liked. This is not a criticism of the workshop itself; it's merely a reflection of the complexity and multifarious nature of the questions it posed. If I had the time again, I would've liked a more self-critical conversation about precisely what it means to be 'within and against'. On one level it sounds obvious –

non-negotiable, even. Beyond that, though, the question of how far it's really is possible to occupy such a position as anything other than a necessary positional contradiction feels under-explored, in our area of practice at least.

All this points to the potential value in creating more sustained, and sustainable, spaces for critique and action, and as such the repeated mentions of forming a community of practice were especially welcome. Such a CoP would of course, face the challenge of not simply being a space where critiques of the neoliberal university were reiterated and recycled, but then the 'P' in the CoP might well help steer people away from that. I should close with a nod of appreciation for Gordon's rhetorical style which somehow manages to be utterly unflinching without ever being despairingly or defeatedly so!

Commentary 2
It's interesting to reflect on the contradictions which Gordon Asher highlighted in the session and those which Steve Rooney points to in his comments above. We work in an HE system which itself is struggling with a fundamental contradiction. This contradiction requires that universities act according to commercial imperatives on the one hand (setting fees and recruitment targets, managing costs, generating income, responding to student feedback as partially paying 'customers', performing toward rankings and league tables), whilst on the other hand institutions are also required by law (AQA regulations etc) to act as a public service / public good through their educational and assessment practices, as checked by internal and external oversight processes. Rooney rightly highlights the difficulty for individuals of working 'within and against' such institutions (the 'mess we're in' of his 2023 book chapter?), and this seems inevitable as universities are themselves working both within and against the overall HE system by systemic design.

Fundamentally, it seems that overall policy changes are required which alter the 'rules of the game' of HE if we are to meaningfully address these contradictions. It will be interesting to see how an ALDinHE community of practice could work towards influencing such policy changes – how perhaps such a group could work together with other relevant groups in the 'alliances' and 'spaces' which Rooney mentions. With the recent change of government in the UK, this prospect of HE policy change at least seems *more* attainable, if not likely, than in the past decade or so.

Editorial comment

The commentary above highlights the difficult balancing act of operating 'within and against' a university system which is perceived to be in crisis. An important thrust of the workshop is also highlighted – that of establishing a community of practice within ALDinHE which can constructively respond by drawing on critical LD/academic literacies thinking.

Next steps and additional questions

How could a potential community of practice around critical LD take a positive and agentic position, rather than fall into the trap of rehearsing over and over the acknowledged issues of neoliberal UK HE? And how might it find a voice – and ensure that voice is heard – outside of the wider LD community?

Author's reflection

Starting with critical/radical hope

I am so very glad that Steve felt there was a foregrounding of the hopeful in the session. I have become rather aware of how certain work, and mine specifically, can all too easily be received as despairing and thus demoralising and disempowering. As such, I have tried to make a conscious effort to explicitly speak to hope; indeed, I very deliberately begin and end my chapter in Alicja and Carina's book (Syska and Buckle, 2023) with reflections on and a call for critical/radical hope.

Developing critical hope – a deeply pedagogical process (Bloch, 1995) – is essential, given our contemporary contexts of potentially existential convergent and cascading crises, and, as Steve and Sunny Dhillon foreground in their chapters, our complicity in the crisis of the university and thus in HE's ongoing incapacity to meaningful respond to these societal and global crises (Hall, 2020b, 2021) and even more concerningly, its enduring role in contributing to both their formation and exacerbation (Asher, 2022; Hall 2020b, 2021). For hope is 'an ontological need' (Freire 2004, p.2), as:

> without hope there is no possibility for resistance, dissent, and struggle. Agency is the condition of struggle, and hope is the condition of agency. Hope expands the

space of the possible and becomes a way of recognizing and naming the incomplete nature of the present (Giroux, 2021: 96).

Being proactive – what can we do and what does/might that look like?

Like Steve, I was really taken with how the dialogues of the session moved us into that territory of moving beyond understandings of our positionalities, to begin to consider how we might, individually and collectively, actively respond, as LDers and LD, to contemporary HE contexts, while connecting this to wider societal and global struggles.

As Steve suggests, central is a commitment to not just *reactively* resisting ongoing neoliberalising processes, but proactively – and prefiguratively (Monticelli, 2024) – seeking to build the LD, educational, societal and global movements, alliances and struggles so urgently necessary for both creating emancipatory alternatives to such processes and engaging in that vital collective self-care which is essential in such immiserating contexts.

(With)in, against and beyond

Both commentators and the editors draw focus to a positionality they describe as 'within and against'. I think it vital to understand that as a position of (as per my session and various writings/presentations) '(with)in, against and beyond'. This is an evolution of the positionality and orientation of 'in and against' (as focused on what are often primarily reactive actions – as such, too often, a struggle to 'stand still'), most commonly associated with the London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1979/2021), through the subsequent work of John Holloway (2016) (a prominent member of that group). As such then, drawing on Holloway's framing and advocacy to think, act and work, live and relate, 'in, against and beyond capitalism': 'in', as we are inevitably within structures and institutions, processes and relations of capitalist oppression; 'against', speaking to resistances, to societal and global struggles against the tyrannical rule of money that lies at the heart of the compound crises we face (Holloway, 2022); and 'beyond', speaking to alternatives, to transformation of both ourselves and the world – to build, prefiguratively, from and within the present, an emancipatory post-capitalist, post-nation state future and thus a radically democratic world (Dinerstein et al., 2020).

I and others have applied that positioning and orientation to our responses to the crisis of the university, as 'working in, against and beyond the neoliberal university':

- 'Working' – with both staff and students, understood as 'academic labour'.
- 'In' – inevitably within the neoliberal university, to navigate, challenge, and intervene in it.
- 'Against' – to resist its ongoing neoliberalisations and oppressions.
- and 'Beyond' – to nurture, evolve, and co-create transformative alternatives to it.
- With neoliberalism understood as being capitalism's prevailing form.

Reform – non-reformist reforms – transformation

I think the second commentator raises some vitally important issues with respect to that framing and orientation, and how we might work from such a positionality – in particular with respect to their outlining of how they view this understanding '[we] work in an HE system which itself is struggling with a fundamental contradiction', and how that leads to their conclusion that '[f]undamentally, it seems that overall policy changes are required which alter the 'rules of the game' of HE if we are to meaningfully address these contradictions'.

The questions this raises inherently concern what we conceive of as education for the public/social/common good and, relatedly, how we believe democracy and eco-social justice are defined and can be worked towards (as always an incomplete, unfinished journey) – to what, in my framing above, we are 'against' (merely neoliberalism as a form of capitalism, or capitalism itself) and what we mean by 'beyond' (a reformed capitalism, or a post-capitalist world).

The tension or contradiction identified – 'universities are themselves working both within and against the overall HE system by systemic design' – is one between two different forms of capitalism broadly, and thus different forms of the capitalist university specifically (the 'neoliberal' and the 'liberal/social democratic') and rests on a notion that eco-social justice is achievable through capitalism (and the nation state), rather than capitalism (and the nation state system) being antithetical to such.

There is, then, a much more fundamental tension between a liberal social democratic understanding of the university (as such, still within capitalism) and a positionality that demands transformation (in some cases, abolition and reinvention) of the HE system (as such, a post-capitalist uni-/pluri-versity). This dichotomy might usefully be described in terms of reform vs. revolution/transformation, whether we believe emancipation is possible through reforming capitalism or not.

I hope I have been clear where I stand on that issue. Just briefly, then:

Our contemporary conjuncture represents a continuity, under evolving (neoliberal) conditions, of the university's systemic role as always having been, in significant part, to (re)produce what and whom the dominant powers in society have sought (Chomsky, 2004). It seems starkly evident that the nature of HE today – the university under neoliberalism, following decades-long iterative processes of neoliberal restructuring (the root cause of the contemporary crisis of the university) – is predominantly corporate and that its overall impacts, as a result of universities becoming competing businesses, both internally and externally at local, national and international levels, are contributing to the creation and exacerbation of crises, rather than it functioning for the public, social and common good.

It is important to emphasise that universities are not mere victims of local and global pressures in their 'restructuring […] as 'competing capitals' (Hall, 2013); they are not merely being neoliberalised, but are deeply complicit in such processes, as neoliberalising, not just of themselves and of all those who labour (both staff and students) within them, but of the wider society they shape, as well as being shaped by (Asher, 2015).

Vitally, though, there is also continuity in understanding the university as a long-contested (from both liberal and radical positionalities) terrain of liberatory possibilities and transformative potentialities, as a site of struggles from below and to the left (Hall and Winn, 2017; Asher, 2023a,2023b; Asher et al., 2022), that conceive of the university as a social and public good (Giroux, 2019). In Freire's (1972) terms, it embodies simultaneously the potential both for 'liberation' and 'domestication', for both transformation and reproduction.

Non-reformist reforms and the transitional

However, my stance is not one that rejects the very notion of reforms, for reforms are essential in ameliorating the deep oppressions, repressions and exploitations of the present. Rather, it is a rejection of reformism – where reforms are understood as the desired process and end point for struggle. It is one that actually foregrounds what Gorz (1967) and Albert (2002) have termed 'non-reformist reforms', reforms that move us towards a less unjust/fairer world and on to territory that is more promising for further struggles oriented to transformation.

The same reform may be either reformist or non-reformist in nature; it depends on the arguments made for it and its orientation. Is it the desired end-point, or clearly moving towards such (within the present system), or is it clearly a transitional move (reflecting the limitations of the present) that is oriented towards revolution (transformation of the present system – a post-capitalist, post-nation state society/world) and argued for in such terms and with such a commitment? Reformist reforms (as 'within and against') seek to make palliative improvements to and within the current system (capitalism as neoliberalism), while non-reformist reforms (as moving 'beyond') have as their end goal the eventual dismantling of that system (capitalism) and its replacement (by non/post-capitalist alternatives) and are thus understood to be steps within a larger strategy of structural (systemic/paradigmatic) transformation.

As such, much of what I think we are talking about here, and were at the session, concerns *transitional* steps, understood as non-reformist reforms, that speak to what is achievable in and from the present, but clearly oriented towards a genuine transformation of HE and education more broadly – how we might, practically and realistically, move from these contemporary 'heres', to those desirable 'theres', starting from that 'within', from the material and relational realities of the present.

Next steps – CLD, the CLDM and an ALDinHE CoP

I have been encouraged by a range of critical LDers before, and during and since the conference, to follow through on my tentative suggestion of an ALDinHE CoP, focused on critical LD and the practice, pedagogy and evolution of the academic literacies model – of the 'value in creating more sustained, and sustainable, spaces for critique and action' [that

take 'a positive and agentic position'] for considerations of theoretically informed practice – praxis, 'not simply being a space where critiques of the neoliberal university [are] reiterated and recycled'.

This would be intended to reflect and contribute to what Alicja and Carina have described as 'a critical turn in LD' (Syska and Buckley, 2023: 107) and 'a rising tide right now around criticality in LD' (something I thought was prominently evident at our recent conference), to what I have described (Asher, 2022, 2023a; Asher et al., 2024) as a nascent critical LD movement (CLDM), emerging as a response to the increasingly contested nature of LD and consideration of its actual and potential roles in the sector. Founded on concerns that LD is being subsumed within HE's neoliberalising processes (saliently, as co-opted in order to surveil and influence, discipline and control across the university), a CLDM has emerged – as a developing node within a wider critical HE movement – that seeks to resist such pressures, re-emphasise LD's critical roots (academic literacies in particular), and develop a broader, more explicitly political, critical foundation for the field. As such, it can be understood as a response to urgings from within the academic literacies/LD field, as to 'the need for a shift from the practices of individual students to the broader institutional and socio-political landscape [...] the academic knowledge-making practices of universities in a marketised higher education' (Lea, 2016: 97) and 'the need to critique the overall enterprise and context of higher education itself' (Hilsdon, 2018: 52).

Working with and learning from others – and what we have to offer and why
I have argued that (critical) LD and LDers, due to its/our positionality, reach and scope across the university, are particularly well positioned to build and contribute to struggles in and over HE, to contribute to connecting both critically-oriented students and staff, often isolated and alienated at both institutional and sector level, and critical educational traditions and fields, breaking down the insularities of a competitive neoliberal system and linking to the manifold struggles within and beyond the university.

This also speaks to the editorial question of how [LD] might find a voice – and ensure that voice is heard – outside of the wider LD community, through its focus on staff (both academic and professional services) and students (the centring of students, through LD, itself speaks to an important contribution to HE struggles) engaging in collective and

democratic processes of being and becoming critically academically literate, drawing on critical university studies' imploration to 'teach the university' (Williams, 2012), interpreting this as possessing three related meanings: that we learn and teach about what the university was, is, will likely be and could alternatively be; a 'teaching' of the institution, as a critical pedagogical process of its (and our) transformation – that, 'we need to act on the political imperative of […] remaking the critical and the university' (Petrina and Ross, 2014: 63); and that we do so critically across and beyond the university (Asher, 2015). Thus, providing an essential critically temporal focus for our struggles towards more hopeful horizons – a recognition of Stetsenko's (2014: 196) point that:

> it is impossible to imagine a possible future unless we locate ourselves in the present moment and its history; however, the reverse is also true in that we cannot locate ourselves in the present and its history unless we imagine the future and, moreover, commit to creating it.

Who better to envision and engage in such projects than critical LDers, given our broad understandings of learning and teaching and the power-laden contexts within which they occur, and our reach across the institution with respect to both staff and students.

Acknowledgements

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Licence