

On academia, critical pedagogy and ‘coming out’ as a third space practitioner

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Abstract

This opinion piece situates the practice of an experimental module I taught as an academic – Chester Retold: Unspoken Stories, Put into Words – within some theories of ‘community learning’.¹ Community learning is understood here to articulate and enact a combination of concepts taken from critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2018), experiential learning (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 2015) and learning development (Webster, 2017). It is also informed, like all teaching, by the author’s own personal life and learning experiences within, and without, ‘communities’. The practice of Chester Retold made a contribution to all these theoretical fields, but in particular perhaps a *conscious* intervention into critical pedagogy and an *unconscious* one into the third space (Whitchurch, 2013; Lisewski, 2021), beginning with learning development.

Keywords: community learning; critical pedagogy; experiential learning; learning development.

Introduction

During Chester Retold, my undergraduates studied storytelling alongside participants from the community of Chester. The module achieved excellent academic results and outstanding student feedback and one participant commented movingly: ‘I’ve learnt that I can take my experiences – even negatives – and do something expressive and beautiful and positive with them’. But did the involvement of the public, of people from Chester, make this ‘community learning’? Does that intersect with widening participation, access

¹ As its creator and module leader, I ran Chester Retold twice at the University of Chester (2018-2019).
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and inclusion? Does it foster 'belonging', the watchword of HE today? Is it the same as 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2000), a term much more widely used and understood? To frame these questions, this opinion piece will reflect on the development of my teaching practice and my recent move from academia into the third space, beginning with learning development and continually moving forwards.² For example, was what I was doing on Chester Retold actually learning development, more 'at home' in the third space? The module certainly utilised peer learning in a community setting and emphasised 'experience' over traditional notions of 'content'. The change of direction to learning development allowed me to look back at my journey differently and begin to see that I was always operating at the edges of my disciplinary margins.

Helen Webster has succinctly described the 'losing control' element of learning development sessions in an entry on her *rattus scholasticus* blog (2017). And as a new study skills tutor, I too found that the shift away from content definitely made the space for learning more democratic because the 'content' had to come from the students themselves. The power is more balanced because, as my colleague said recently, it constitutes 'turning it over to them' (Reeve, 2021). In my previous life, teaching discipline-focused content, students often took the role of more passive learners, unknowing believers in the idyll of the hierarchical learning-as-information model. The lecturer (me) would stand at the front and, as if by magic, pour the knowledge into the students (them). Chester Retold necessarily reversed this expectation and part of what interests me now is that this reversal is the premise for effective learning development too. Does this reflection therefore allow for a thinking through, not just of 'community learning' as a distinct practice, but also its synergies with widening participation and learning development? Interestingly, perhaps importantly, learning development itself has its roots in the widening of access to UK HE in the 1990s (Dearing, 1997) and therefore, in a way, it began with the 'community'.

So, what can we learn from repositioning an example of 'innovative' practice within the available theory? What kind of 'community learning' was it? And how did this practice overlap consciously with critical pedagogy and unconsciously with learning development? There are of course more questions here than can be answered in an opinion piece, but broadly I will consider how Chester Retold emerged from my previous educational and

² I have since been appointed as an academic developer, but I have chosen to publish this opinion piece on Chester Retold as it stands, capturing, as it does, my sense of the lasting impact on me of my time as a learning developer.

teaching experiences, some existing theories and frameworks to outline where it sits within those matrices, and the connection to learning development.

Where did Chester Retold come from?

Writing autoethnographically, as bell hooks explains, is a way of making yourself vulnerable, to dismantle the status of 'the teacher' and facilitate better reflection (hooks, 1994). Therefore, I will acknowledge here some of the difficult experiences in my own life that have shaped my practice. The understanding of how and why we teach the way we do can be reached genealogically (the method) and written up autoethnographically (the result). Both aspects of such an examination are present here.³

I attended a comprehensive school in a deprived, rural area and, educationally, it is surprising I have achieved all I have. My inspiration was my mother returning to education as a mature student at the age of forty when I was just nine. During half-term, I attended lectures with her. And on one occasion, during a lecture about D. H. Lawrence, a lecturer avoided saying the word 'sex' throughout the whole lecture in case it attracted my attention while I obliviously read a pocketbook on aeroplanes. My initial experience of teaching being altered depending on who-is-in-the-room! But mainly university life continued as normal around me, students wore vibrant-coloured Doc Marten boots and interesting clothes and dyed their hair – often cut short if women and grown long if men. In brief, it was a galaxy away from my oppressive experiences at school as the only 'gender queer' child in any year group.⁴ Widening access is therefore why I work in HE at all and in some ways it saved my life.

Similarly, hooks wrote of encountering Paulo Freire and how his approach to pedagogy saved her; she understood, and indeed lived, the complex synergies between education and realising freedom. Initially, my first experiences of teaching were within widening participation itself, specifically, access to literacy and books. As an undergraduate, I

³ This work also aligns with the first of Stephen Brookfield's four lenses: our autobiographies as learners (1998).

⁴ I was (and am) a tomboy. I was so androgynous, I was (and am) frequently misgendered. Throughout my twelve years at school then college, someone asked me if I was 'a boy or a girl' at least once *every single day*. I wanted the freedom of being a boy, but mainly I just wanted to be 'me' without being harassed. No teacher or adult ever attempted to stop this widespread and targeted bullying.

worked part-time as a volunteer for the Get into Reading project across Merseyside. The first reading group I facilitated was in a community centre in Kensington, a particularly deprived area of Liverpool. We read the book aloud each week so that everyone could participate, whether they could read it themselves or not. A simple approach that meant everyone could become involved in both the story and the discussion. This formative experience of 'teaching' was a key influence and had a profound and lasting effect on me as a teacher because if literacy is not a barrier to inclusion, nothing should be.

And this was also the beginning of learning-by-doing, but the truly 'experiential' aspect of my practice came through my Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) some years later, shortly after finishing my PhD. Several of the teachers who influenced me the most on that course were themselves influenced by David Kolb and Graham Gibbs. My next epiphany was Storying Sheffield, which I encountered when applying for academic jobs. It was an undergraduate module that gave students the opportunity to learn alongside people from the Sheffield community. Thus, when I was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Chester and I was encouraged to foster links with the recently established arts hub, Storyhouse, I used the Storying Sheffield model as my inspiration.⁵ I wrote a module that would be taught on campus and at Storyhouse for undergraduates and members of the Chester community: I created Chester Retold. I was asked to do it, but really it was the crystallisation of everything I had learnt and come to value about teaching up until that point.

Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom

On the front cover of bell hooks' *Teaching to transgress* there is an illustration of a ladder with the words, *la escalera*, written underneath: Spanish for stairs, stepladder, ladder, escape.⁶ The image and the words are the iconography of critical pedagogy, which is defined helpfully by Richard Millwood as: 'an educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian

⁵ I have previously acknowledged this key influence in 'Building compassion capacity: Chester Retold and Storyhouse, a case study' (Pollard, 2018). This pedagogical case study on the first year of Chester Retold explores the importance of the Storyhouse setting and the community dimension to both the innovatory nature of the module and its success. It also examines the role of the edge-of-the-seat activities utilised, since Chester Retold took an experiential, learning-by-doing approach (Gibbs, 1988).

⁶ The picture and *la escalera* is what my (Spanish speaking) friend saw when I showed the book to her.

tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action' (2013). It is of course inextricably linked to Freire's seminal, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.⁷ Yet this reflection draws on hooks' reading of Freire: know your students; make your classroom exciting; the best teachers transgress boundaries.⁸

From a political perspective, Chester Retold was attempting to achieve this kind of change, however small: change in administrative terms, as well as for access to, and within, teaching and to address inclusion and engagement – all key concerns of critical pedagogy.⁹ The module tried to educate all its students *explicitly* about inclusion, inequality, social breadth, privilege and power, by bringing together groups with differential access to the means of freedom. It was dialogic and co-operative and not based on either a paternalist model of me 'telling' the students how to be or indeed the students 'telling' each other.

In this sense, the module itself, its existence and teachings, constituted a form of constructive action, potentially even social justice on a tiny scale, by enabling the forming of these relationships and bonds. But genuine learning development opens minds and hearts in just this way too because learning to study is not about *knowing* it is about *being*. And because it does not sit neatly within disciplinary or institutional structures, learning development *has to exist* within a space where it is always necessarily, 'a movement against and beyond boundaries' (hooks, 1994, p.12). This is exactly the sort of teaching that hooks celebrates as enabling transgression, and therefore change. And as a result, what I am doing now, and what began with my venture into learning development, is what hooks would call 'self-actualization'. Unconsciously perhaps, I began this work, this shift outside the parameters of academic teaching with Chester Retold, but I only *recognised* it as such when I stepped-out-of-my-lane and started to teach as a learning developer. Being in the third space allows for a consideration of all the many silos of academic life; practitioners operating at or in the margins like this cannot always comment explicitly on what they see, but it will always nonetheless inform their practice – and their story.

⁷ Although, as Catherine Bovill (2020) points out, it was Henry Giroux who actually 'coined the term *critical pedagogy* for a major critique of existing approaches to teaching' (p.12).

⁸ I first came across hooks' *Teaching to transgress* when I was preparing a TEDx on Chester Retold, which was entitled 'Teaching English Using Compassion' (Pollard, 2020).

⁹ I had to really fight to be allowed to have 'community students' enrolled on the module with a waiver for the standalone module fee. It involved going higher and higher up the administrative hierarchy, until I was dealing directly with the registrar. Standalone modules are prohibitively expensive, even when they are 'taken without credit', as was the case on Chester Retold.

Becoming a learning developer as a 'recovering academic'

In July 2021, I left academia and began what I playfully refer to as my 'recovery'. Taking up a post in learning development helped me reflect on how my background and affinity with critical pedagogy were always leading me here. As mentioned at the beginning, Webster, herself an ex-academic, wrote of the equality affected by the loss of control needed for learning development classes. And when I produced a podcast on critical pedagogy as a learning developer (Pollard, 2021), I also realised how obscured my values were from those in my life when I had been an academic. People listened to my podcast and declared how pleased they were with the direction my work was taking now: I both did and did not know what they meant. It had been the direction my work had always taken, but moving into learning development, for me at least, spotlighted my own egotism and brought instead a more democratic approach to the fore – allowing others to see for the first time where I was coming from, all along.

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