
On practising what you preach

David Ridley and Ana Ines Salvi discuss a radically democratic approach to conference workshops

On Friday 18th September, Coventry University UCU branch hosted a one-day conference entitled 'Beyond the Neoliberal University: Critical Pedagogy and Activism'. The idea of a conference was to bring together people interested in critical pedagogy with UCU and other trade union activists and student activists who are engaged practically with the effects and consequences of the ways universities have changed. The aim was to have not so much the same old academic conference with 'experts' speaking to/at a passive, increasingly sleepy audience, but to host a participatory event that brought together the experience, expertise and ideas of all those people attending. How far the event achieved this aim is a matter for those attending to decide, but in this article we wish to reflect on the success of a particular workshop that formed a part of the conference, one which was 'facilitated' by the authors of this piece, and was concerned with 'Working in, against and beyond neoliberal education'.

In this workshop, it was of particular importance to us to make sure the format was as participatory as possible. As the entire day centred on 'critical pedagogy', we really wanted to make sure we were 'practising what we preached'. How many academic conferences with 'radical' or 'critical' in the title have you been to where no attempt was made to make the conference itself radical in terms of its design and structure? Well, we wanted to buck this depressing trend, and for the workshop, we scrapped the idea that any of us were experts, and designed the whole hour around a democratic

process of knowledge production. But before we describe the 'plan' of this process and the results, we want to briefly outline some of the theories that this design was based on.

One major theoretical influence on the design of this workshop is the work of John Dewey. Dewey was a late 19th century philosopher who wrote extensively on the philosophy and politics of education. For Dewey, 'democracy' is a way of life, not just an abstract concept or a hollowed-out formal procedure of voting every five years – democracy is 'primarily a form of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (1). What this means is that democracy is something we do when we communicate, socialise and, most importantly, when we work out together what and how we want social life to be. Education, therefore, is something that teaches us how to be together democratically, how to speak and be with each other so that we can grow as individuals and as society as a whole.

From Dewey, the workshop took the important point that all people are capable of taking part in democratic social life, and that taking part in democratic social life allows us to express our innate capacity for social intelligence. A democratic model of knowledge production is one that creates the conditions for this social intelligence to be expressed, and makes full use of all the intelligence available. However, Dewey was a lifelong critic of student-centred education, and, in the context of an adult workshop, the role of the facilitator is still of paramount importance. For Dewey, as has already been mentioned, the facilitator must create the right

environment for learning, which includes the materials, physical space and also emotional atmosphere of the learning environment.

Another important influence, who in some ways complements Dewey but in other ways challenges his focus on the role of the facilitator, is Jacques Ranciere, especially his major critical work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (2). In this book, Ranciere describes the story of Joseph Jacotot, an early 19th century French teacher who accidentally stumbled across the realisation that one didn't need knowledge to teach. Jacotot was asked to teach a group of Belgian students French. However, they only spoke Flemish and he only spoke French – there was no language in common. By chance he had a bilingual edition of a French book recently published in Brussels, and he used this to teach this group. Unexpectedly, when he asked the students to write about the book in French, the result was as good as anything he had seen from students taught didactically from first principles. As we have said, this taught Jacotot, against traditional pedagogical wisdom, that you don't need knowledge to teach.

The point for Ranciere of resurrecting this eccentric story of a 19th century language teacher was to resurrect the principle and practice of radical equality. As Kirstin Ross neatly summarises in her introduction, 'All people are equally intelligent. This is Jacotot's startling (or naïve?) presupposition, his

lesson in intellectual emancipation' (3). Why do we need someone to explain to us the conditions of work in post-16 education when we all experience them on a day-to-day basis? And are we not all intelligent enough to work out what these mean and discuss them in a workshop? By assuming we must explain the conditions of work to people that work we are assuming that they lack the capacity to understand and explain to themselves and each other – we are reintroducing the kind of structural inequality that we are trying to move beyond in a conference on critical pedagogy.

In Deweyan spirit, then, the 'environment' of the 'Working in, against and beyond neoliberal education' workshop was set up as follows. The workshop was focused entirely around discussion, with the pure minimum of input from us, the facilitators. It was therefore important to set up the room so that participants would naturally organise themselves into small groups by sitting at pre-prepared tables (five in total). Before the workshop, discussion points were sourced democratically from participants via the event mailing list, and these were edited and consolidated into six main areas for discussion: Neoliberalism and Academic Labour; Time/Workloads; Managerialism; Precarity and Casualisation; Health and Prejudice; Pedagogy.

Here is an example of one of the discussion handouts:

Neoliberalism and 'academic labour'

- What is your understanding of neoliberalism?
- How far do you think it is correct to refer to academics as 'workers'?
- How does academic labour differ from other forms of labour in further /higher education?
- How far are academics 'part of the problem' of neoliberalism?

In the interests of covering all the issues, one topic was given to each group, with the understanding that a new topic could be selected when they had finished with the topic given. Furthermore, each group had to select one member to take notes and report back at the end of the discussion. At the end of the twenty minute discussion (with five minutes at the beginning for introductions), one of the facilitators would make anonymised notes on GoogleDocs on the projected computer screen based on the results of

discussion, which would then form the basis of a plenary whole-workshop discussion for ten minutes at the end. These notes would then be edited and sent around the participants of the conference as a whole as a record of the discussion.

On the day the discussions went very well and produced some interesting and important results. Two major and recurring issues centred on the importance of linking academic labour with student activism and of the 'double-edged sword' of measurement and surveillance within the neoliberal

university. Surveillance and measurement were seen as key problems within the New Managerialism of neoliberal higher education and, interestingly, this surveillance and measurement can be seen as both good and bad – bad because it comes with increasing pushes towards ‘efficiencies’, good because it makes visible some of the invisible problems concerning prejudice and inequality in the higher education workplace.

Another important issue that came up was health. We have probably all experienced unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety working in post-16 education, and some of us may have unfortunately also experienced bullying. The major problem with this issue is that it is dealt with on an individual level, in terms of coping, but also in the way that it is approached as a workplace issue. Individualising these issues, however, hides the systemic and structural causes of them. For example, much of the stress of working at university comes from unrealistic expectations on academic staff to manage huge teaching loads as well as engaging in ‘grant capture activities’ and research. For casualised staff, these stresses are intensified as they do not know if they will have any work from semester to semester.

Overall, we felt that giving participants space and time to engage with their own thoughts, ideas and opinions via dialogue with others was both useful and important. It is through dialogue within an open and safe environment that one’s thoughts and opinions become articulated. Very often it is through dialogue that one realises that actually initial thoughts that one held were faultily formed, or conversely one develops and refines those views in the light of what other participants say. Furthermore, participating in small groups is usually easier and less threatening than doing so in front of a whole audience. It also gives everyone a chance to voice their views.

However, it goes without saying that discussing topics in small groups has its challenges too. In some cases, dominant speakers in the group prevented other less dominant participants from speaking up. Thus making sure that everyone in a group participates is crucial. Perhaps, even though it might sound prescriptive, in the future we might like to consider asking participants to choose one person in the group whose job was to ensure that everyone in the group has a chance to speak. This might involve: interrupting a group member who is exceeding their time; actively encouraging another member who has been quiet; or being proactive in asking questions if necessary.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges the format presented in this article allowed for greater

participation and is more in line with the principles of critical pedagogy and activism that informed this conference. It is hoped that by describing the methods and advantages of a radically democratic approach to organising a workshop, this approach can be successfully adapted by others wishing to do something similar in the future.

If anyone would like to discuss this approach or the article further, please don’t hesitate to contact either David Ridley (ab1955@coventry.ac.uk) or Ana Ines Salvi (ab154@coventry.ac.uk)

References:

1. Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press, p87
2. Ranciere, J. (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
3. Ibid. pxix.

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