

* **Critical Pedagogy and Higher Education: 'Really Useful Civic Engagement'**

Brid Connolly

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Abstract

Civic engagement is making a very welcome debut in the strategic plans of many Higher Education Institutions, HEIs, but many senior officers are sitting at their PCs, furiously Googling to find out what it is all about. In adult and community education, we have had a long history of community and civic engagement, particularly with people who would have otherwise been outside the interest of educational institutions, except, perhaps to swell the numbers of non-traditional students. However, the social purpose of community engagement would be seriously undermined if HEIs adopted it without interrogating their own motives, and ensuring that it is a mutually beneficial co-operation.

Critical pedagogy is a fundamental process in the interrogation for social purposes. Critical HE educators have a responsibility towards creating a challenging and consciousness raising learning environment for their students, but what about the responsibility towards those, outside the institutions, who are integrally involved in civic engagement?

This article will argue that critical educators have to look at their own practice and philosophy, using the lens of critical pedagogy. It will draw on the work of Freire, with regards to adult basic education, Giroux, in the overall educational context, but most specifically, with bell hooks on her advocacy around engaged pedagogy, with its grounding in feminist and civil rights education. Thus, it will explore the potential of these approaches to underpin the community engagement visions to ensure that communities are not stripped of their intellectual assets, on the one hand, and that HEIs are open to the learning emanating from their involvement with communities.

Keywords: Civic engagement, Critical Pedagogy, Service Learning

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Introduction

As an adult and higher educator, I have a persistent anxiety about the capacity of education to address the fundamental issues in society, to distribute social dividends equally and equitably. In adult education, particularly community education, I have witnessed the capacitation and empowerment of people to tackle very difficult personal and social issues, including poverty, domestic violence and drug misuse, in various ways from improving well-being to developing advocacy and social action groups. In particular, the experiential learning within the collective has raised the awareness of students and learners of what ought to be, rather than the mere acceptance of the status quo and of canonical knowledge. In this article, I argue that a crucial key to this process is critical pedagogy, with its power to transform the work of educators and learners into a form of social activism. I have endeavoured to bring the critical pedagogy that I learned and practiced in community education into the academy, to extend the reach from the community. This ensures that the academy becomes a less alienating space for non-traditional students, but also, vitally, to broaden the experience of more traditional students and to widen the scope of the academic paradigm.

In a well-timed innovation, HEIs are beginning to awaken to the breadth of this possibility. Community and civic engagement is appearing in strategic plans of many HEIs, and officers are appointed to oversee it. In many ways, we are witnessing a tipping point, small actions and events heralding the attitudinal changes which underpin big social changes. (Gladwell, 2000). In the Department of Adult and Community Education, in NUI Maynooth, we warmly welcome these initiatives, with our record of part-time degrees, a broad Continuing Education programme, Continuous Professional Development for educators of adults, and a widely renowned *Return to Education* programme which effectively performs as the access programme for adults into the University. These programmes are underpinned by an engaged pedagogy, the practice of freedom, (hooks, 1994, p. 15), which is more demanding than

conventional pedagogy, as it emphasises well-being, empowerment and equality, in addition to intellectual and scholarly work.

With this legacy in mind, this article will review the part that this approach could take in HEIs, to fulfil the purpose of education, with engagement with the wider community on the one hand, and bringing the learning from that wider world into the academy. I will review the elements and dimensions of civic engagement as it has developed under the careful eye of key educational activists in Ireland, over the past decade or so, particularly the work of Maria Avila (Avila, 2012) whose case study of NUI Maynooth, studied the role of the University in enhancing democracy in Ireland, particularly in the civil, social, economic and cultural environs of the University. With this review, I will look at the connections between civic engagement and critical pedagogy, and argue that critically engaged educators reflect on their practice and philosophy, to enhance these possibilities within this sphere. It will draw on the work of Freire, (Freire, 2000), with regards to adult basic education but also as the key theorist in adult and community education; Giroux, (1988) in the context of critical pedagogy in schooling and higher education, but most specifically, with bell hooks (1994) on her advocacy around engaged pedagogy, with its grounding in feminist and civil rights education. Finally, acknowledging the work of Jane Thompson's idea of 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 2000) and my own ideas of 'really useful practice' (Connolly, 2008), I propose 'really useful civic engagement', that HEIs learn from their involvement with communities and civil society, and that civil society enhance the academy by including organic knowledge created in the community.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a fundamental means in the practice of freedom (Freire, 1972). The late Joe Kincheloe makes the impassioned plea for the full development of human capacity, which is ultimately neglected in the absence of the commitment to social justice and cultivation of the intellect. He positions it as the concern with transforming oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains that lead to human oppression (Kincheloe, 2005, pp. 45-47). Aronowitz and Giroux's vision of the primary task of education resonates with Kincheloe, when they claim that the education ought to create a critical democracy, not of mere participation in elections and

the like, but rather creating the space for encompassing our daily lives, within the public sphere, and enabling us to take control over our lives, and over the nature of knowledge acquisition (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 9). This language is at odds with the aspirations of our Department of Education and Skills, in the words of the Minister:

As well as helping people to achieve their full potential, a well-educated population can help Ireland's economic recovery (Quinn, 2014)

The individualisation on the one hand, notwithstanding the economic common ground on the other, sadly misses the potentiality of education for citizenship, democracy and engagement. However, in spite of the limitations of political thinking, the future of education can also be shaped in the hands of educators, and Giroux also promotes the work of teaching to the primarily intellectual engagement, rather than instrumental skills exchange, (Giroux, 1988) Critical HE educators have a responsibility towards creating a challenging and consciousness-raising learning environment for their students, and many critical educators interpret this as the scholarly engagement with critically challenging material. Higher education is a major departure from previous education for most students, with the introduction to subjects such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology and more advanced engagement with subjects addressed in post-primary and primary. This introduction is eye-opening and wondrous for many people, and it creates the environment for critical thinking and alternative perspectives. This approach to knowledge is based on the foundations laid down by the critical theorists, with the analysis of sub-cultures and supercultures in society, in order to understand and challenge domination in all its forms (Held, 1980). Thus, for critical HE educators, the exposure to the HE epistemology is the key to the critical pedagogical approach.

In adult and community education in Ireland, this challenge to domination has been fundamental in the practice, particularly since the 1970s, when liberation theologians and adult educators were instrumental in founding the adult education and literacy programme in Dublin, which culminated in the establishment of the National Adult Learning Association, AONTAS, the National Adult Literacy Association, NALA, and the only HEI academic Department of Adult and Community Education in the Republic of Ireland, in NUI Maynooth (Carey, 1979). Critical

practice is again underpinned by critical theory, particularly with regards to 'reading the world' (Freire, 1972), by investigating how dominant discourses permeate the common sense of the way in which society is structured and organised. Critical practice is about empowering people to understand the ways in which social forces oppress people and to develop their potential as agents in resisting those forces (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 30-31). This aspect of developing the power of people to become agents in the face of deep structural subjugation is central to critical adult and community education. Critical pedagogy uses the concept of *hegemony* to refer to the process of social control that is carried out by the dominant classes over subordinate groups. Hegemony is ever dynamic and changing according to the needs of the powerful, and it succeeds in preserving existing power relations (Darder, et al., 2009). The flexibility and responsiveness of hegemony entails the adoption and adaptation of new ideas and social movements, draining them of their power and changing them into a more palatable form for the ruling classes and the dominant discourses. Adult and community education faces co-option by the strongly emergent neo-liberal agenda, which attempts to channel *all* education into the service of the economy, but in particular, reaches hard-to-reach populations through adult education, draining them of their emancipatory potential, and corralling them away from unemployment statistics, to towards often meaningless training courses. However, all is not lost, as we can see from the example of feminist education.

The slogan *the personal is political*, expresses the integration of agency and structure, and highlights the micro within the macro when we look at the wider contexts in which we live our lives. Adult education has been meaningfully influenced by feminist education, particularly addressing the limitations of critical theory in taking account of tradition and history, rather than current oppressive forces. The feminist movement has had to grapple with the force of tradition and history in women's lives, and how deeply embedded they are in shaping the way women view the world. While patriarchal discourses underlie social relationships, personal relationships, and the relationship with power throughout the life span in myriad roles of women's lives, the internalised lessons of tradition and history are persistent and compelling. Feminist pedagogy has grappled with the inferences of patriarchy and tradition, and the essentialist implications that emanate from them (Crabtree, et al., 2009). Indeed, this very point

on essentialism is probably the most important quality in addressing oppression, as the wielding of power often relies on the claim that the way things are is due to nature, as if social and cultural influences did not count, a kind of biological determinism on a very wide scale.

Another focus of feminist pedagogy is that of practice, situational and deductive, as well as the body of knowledge:

Feminist pedagogy is more than teaching about women or teaching feminist perspectives. Feminist teaching is a re-examination and reimagining of what happens in *any* classroom, indeed of the relationships between teachers and students, education and society (Crabtree, et al., 2009, p. 4).

That is, feminist pedagogy fundamentally interrogates the way things are, which indisputably re-produces social relationships, in order to interrupt reproduction and propose alternative visions and possibilities, towards liberation and emancipation. It is primarily a democratic process. The main tools and processes within feminist pedagogy centre on the development of voice and identity. This necessarily entails imbuing the question of gender with equal focus on the questions of class, culture, race, ethnicity and sexuality. That is, feminist pedagogy is expansive with perhaps the danger of dissipation due to the breadth of vision. However, this also enables critical educators to encompass complexity and multi-layers within the educational environment.

A leading thinker on the possibilities of feminist pedagogy is bell hooks. She speaks of learning as paradise, and that education has the promise of redemption and liberation contained within. She advocates the development of feminist pedagogy into engaged pedagogy, with the addition of a focus on well-being and care, not just of teachers towards students, but also reflexively towards their own wellness.

Progressive, holistic education, *engaged pedagogy* is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (hooks, 1994, p. 15)

The elements of engaged pedagogy are wide and demanding. These elements include all of those mentioned in critical pedagogy: the critical theory underpinning the knowledge base, and the interrogation of power relations; all of those mentioned in feminist pedagogy: the analysis of gender oppression, the interrogation of essentialism; the questioning of what is taught and how it is taught in the classroom and the intersection of democracy, gender, class, culture, race, ethnicity and sexuality within this milieu. Engaged pedagogy focuses on the human dimension. We sometimes forget this when we are speaking about social institutions, that these social institutions are not merely systems in order to keeping de-humanised organisations running, but rather, they are for the enhancement of the human condition and for the benefit of the population. Central to this is well-being, and again, this is sometimes forgotten in the categorisations of human roles in functional groupings, instead of integrated human accomplishments. Categorisation lead to the isolation of care and consideration, into the private domain, on the one hand, to be carried out within the domestic sphere; and into the vocational in the public domain, for example, in nursing and other health and caring professions, instead of way we relate to each other in social relationships. Thus, education, with this engaged pedagogical perspective, becomes a conduit, if not a goal, of care and consideration, for the benefit not only of learners, but also of educators.

Engaged pedagogy radically transforms the perspectives or attitudes within education, from the instrumental, individualistic, economy-centred emergent orientations, to education orientated towards redistribution and equity. Within HEIs, service learning is considered to be the key way of addressing civic and campus engagement, rather than engaged pedagogy. However, currently, HEIs are experiencing attacks on academic freedom, together with pressures to bring money into the academy through funded research, such that, any extra emphasis on reaching out to communities seems just too much, which engaged pedagogy does endeavour to address. Thus, service learning is not without fundamental flaws.

Service Learning vis-à-vis Critical Pedagogy

The development of service learning positions itself as the pedagogical approach appropriate to civic and community engagement. Cress and Donahoe propose service learning as the unique approach to teaching and learning that combines academic concepts, service to the community and active reflection, with the focus on applying it to real-life situation in the community (2011, p. 6). This multi-partite approach looks as if it shares common ground with critical pedagogy. Further, service learning can also reach out to non-traditional students, as Zlotkowski claims, particularly with the HE population becoming more diverse, with many more women and people of colour now within the academy (Zlotkowski, 2011). Through service learning, students can attain academic credit for learning about their subject or discipline within a community context, and this position underpins much of the practice in Ireland (McIlrath, et al., 2009)

However, Avila reviews the limitations of service learning, with her contention that service learning can benefit students, with tangible benefits to their studies, but without benefitting the community or society. She draws attention to the power differentials between the University and community, with the HEIs with social and institutional power, while communities are quite often drained of resources and service learning overlooks this frequently (Avila, 2012, pp. 38-40). Avila's experience of community organising and campus engagement positions her in a unique vantage point, and she can see the efforts of committed educators and organisers being co-opted by the academy to the detriment of all, ultimately. And perhaps, most worryingly, service learning can promote the charity-oriented volunteerism, as Saltmarch discusses, a form of '*noblesse oblige*' (Saltmarch, 2011), that is, reinforcing the power differential between the HEI and the community, but embedding that power in individual students and staff. And if civic engagement means anything, it certainly aims to tackle that power disparity.

Educators need to understand this viscerally. Parker Palmer discusses how vital it is for educators to know their motivations and drive in their lives as teachers. In the desire to transform education, he says,

... we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom so much depends (Palmer, 1998, p. 3)

That is, service learning cannot simply be considered a by-product of the engagement curriculum; it has to be intentional on the part of educators, and they have to be committed to the overall project of engagement. This is a vital difference between service learning and critical pedagogy: critical educators are avowedly committed to emancipatory social change. This commitment does not necessarily appear in service learning. This is also an issue in the way in which civic engagement unfolded in Ireland. In many ways, this foundation is part of the problem of civic engagement, and interrogating it, is part of the response of critical educators.

Limitations of Active Citizenship

The story of civic, community and campus engagement in Ireland is, according to McIlrath and Lyons, based on the thinking about active citizenship particularly that which was proposed by the government of the time in the late 1990s and early 2000s in response to the perceived dearth of participation and involvement with the collective (McIlrath, et al., 2009). This time was a particularly turbulent time with a pronounced struggle between the progressive thinking on participation and democracy on the one hand, and the reining-in of any social action that threatened the patronage of the political party and public representative system. For example, the White Paper on the community and voluntary sector acknowledged wholeheartedly the contribution to the creation of a vibrant participative democracy and civil society (Ireland, 2000, p. 3). This contribution was acknowledged to be vital in creating wider collectivity in response to greater individualisation, and in particular, as a response to the awareness raising that emanated from various social movements, such as the disability movement; the Deaf community's cultural and identity work; the LGBT movement; Travellers and other ethnic minorities asserting their rights, and indeed, the establishment of campaign groups for people who were unemployed, had housing issues, literacy issues, education issues, and so on. It was

recognised in particular by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, as it was called at the time, that these groups were pivotal in the development of modern Ireland, in which the empowerment of the citizens was positive and affirmative. However, by the time the taskforce published its report, in 2007, the focus had changed fundamentally from participative democracy to our rights and responsibilities as citizens (Taskforce, 2007, p. 12). That is, the report of the taskforce on tacitly expressed disapproval of community and voluntary activity that empowered people, substituting almost a charity model instead. This was expressed famously in 2000, heralding this shift in perspectives, when Noel Ahern identified a wide range of community organisations as a 'motley crew' who undermined the role of elected representatives, including the Community Workers' Co-operative, the Conference of Religious of Ireland, the European Anti-Poverty Network, Focus Ireland, Gay and Lesbian Network and Community Action Network, among others (Ahern, 2000). It is vital to understand that these organisations are collective, aiming at fundamental emancipatory social change. Some of the work did and does entail reference to human and civil rights, for example in the case of sexuality and sexual orientation, housing and accommodation, and, most recently, with the recent victory of Louise O'Keeffe, the role of the state in the education; but the orientation is quite different to the focus on rights and responsibilities as if they were two sides of the one coin, rather than the responsibility of the state to support the citizenry.

However, as Magennis says, civic engagement is disputed territory (Magennis, 2009). For HEIs, this question of the social purpose of education continues to create debate around the individual vis-a-vis the collective. Key to this discussion is the understanding of civic and community engagement. For NUI Maynooth, the University positions itself within civic engagement, with the aspiration of contributing to the community and wider society, with the development of supports, including the integration of both civic engagement and service learning into the curriculum (NUIM, 2012). The University has had a long history of engagement, and in the Department of Adult and Community Education, we frame this as community engagement. This story is well known, and even acknowledged in the Strategic Plan, with the focus on the Kilkenny NUI Maynooth Campus. Moreover, the work is distinctly a mutual process, with communities and social activists having a central place in the department,

on the one hand, and the academic and administrative staff equally at home in the work with communities. This is manifested in myriad ways, from outreach programmes covering a large part of the island of Ireland, research carried out in collaboration with communities, public service as part of the work, and a large number of people from non-traditional backgrounds as students, quite often the first in their families to complete second, never mind, higher education.

Mutual Processes

Once, in a learning setting, a participant said that the problem with academic engagement is that academics go into communities, take the knowledge that the people created out of their experience and reflection, and then, sell it back to them, a kind of smash and grab process. This was a profound moment for me. It highlighted for me how the perception of the vampire university could emerge, drinking the lifeblood of the community, in order to give life to itself. If we are not cognisant of this inequality in the relationships, this will be the enduring perception. Thus, reaching out to the community, (Zlotkowski, 1998) has to be underpinned with real mutuality, and that civil society does not exist simply to enhance the careers of academics or HEI students. Further, neither ought it be used to soothe the conscience of the elite, for their role in perpetuating inequality, or reaping the dividends of privilege and class, the *oblige noblesse* (Saltmarch, 2011) of the twenty-first century. In addition, it is not the responsibility of education, either higher or adult education, to do the work of the state or the economy. To be trammelled into the role as the nursery slopes for the economic world, rather than the well-being of the citizenry and the enhancement of democracy, is to betray its purpose, even when it engages with the corporate world, as well as civil society.

Then, on the other hand, engagement ought to build the capacity in civil society to understand that education is for everyone, and that the academy is inclusive rather than exclusive. The community has to look at its own responsibilities towards the academy: creating the environment where intellectual work is appreciated alongside manual and caring work, particularly, in Irish society, where a strong strand of anti-intellectualism persists. Most

importantly, intellectual work is probably the most important weapon in the war against people (Connolly & Hussey, 2013). It is vital to argue against the status quo, in order to address fundamental oppressive forces in society, including violence against women, violence against children, sexualisation, rape, sexual assault, common assault, bullying, psychological domination and cruelty, poverty and alienation, not to mention the milder order of misinformation, trivialisation, and tabloidization, among others. Not that the academy is the war-free zone, but recognising that these are some of the elements of the inequality that pervades society, is the first step in the campaign. The community has recognised these repressions, and it can bring that knowledge into the academy. The academy can reciprocate with capacity building for emancipation. This is the most important element of 'really useful civic engagement'

Conclusion

In this article, I argue that critical pedagogy is vital in order to have truly emancipatory civic engagement, particularly engaged pedagogy as put forward by bell hooks, as a process of intellectual, emotional and cultural teaching and learning, for a new kind of society. Engaged pedagogy is founded in feminist studies, epistemologically and ontologically, with the resultant intentional outcome of liberation, the practice of freedom. Feminist education was primarily developed in order to ensure that women and girls did not learn to become passive and subordinate, and processes developed in opposition to the traditional education that served to. Higher education is in a prime position to enhance democracy and critical citizenship, in its pivotal role in the social purpose of education, and as such, can legitimise and learning from knowledge created organically in community settings, particularly around oppressions and domination. In addition, the academy personnel, staff and students, need to re-calibrate the role of civic engagement in their work, from the charity model of the *noblesse oblige*, or the less effective active citizenship, which, in its own way, is quite close to the charity model, to

genuine democratic participation. On the other side of engagement, the community needs to reappraise the role of intellectual work, so that civil society can resist the forces intent on infantilising the population. Together, with a coherent philosophy, 'really useful civic engagement' can be truly meaningful and progressive.

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