

EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF A HUMAN RIGHTS AND VISUAL ARTS COURSE

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In this paper we present some lessons learned from our experience of designing, implementing and assessing a student-centred course as part of the ActSHEN project. The human rights and visual arts course was run as a summer course for Edda Norden collaboration including the Nordic and Baltic teacher art education universities. The course started with an online discussion, readings and reflections in June, followed by a five-day workshop in August 2015 at the Iceland Academy of Arts (IAA).

The course was framed by sustainability goals responsive to wicked problems understood as those “characterized by high levels of complexity, ambiguity, controversy and uncertainty both with respect to what is going on and with respect to what needs to be done” (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, & Kronlid, 2015). We wanted to understand how transformative pedagogy within the arts is able to support struggles for justice and human rights. Drawing on data collected from the course evaluation process, we recognised emerging ethical dilemmas that students and educators face when engaging with pedagogies that aim to respond to wicked problems.



THE CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

The two authors of this paper have been active members of the Icelandic ActSHEN team. Whilst one author explores the potential of art in education for sustainability, the other has focused on the role of human rights education to promote social justice goals in schools and its relevance to sustainability. Drawing on their respective disciplines, the authors applied the ActSHEN pedagogy principles to the design, implementation and assessment of a summer workshop held in Reykjavik in August 2015 for 40 art educators from different Nordic countries. Two additional teachers from participating countries were also involved in the facilitation of the course and provided pedagogical input.

The workshop design was informed by a relational assessment tool developed by John Woods from Goldsmith University in London (<http://metadesigners.org>). The tool is represented by a three-dimensional tetrahedron that challenges the linear approach to assessment of design and that instead focuses on a deeper ecology. In this sense we found it relevant in the context of working to address wicked problems inherent in struggles for human rights and social justice.

The relational assessment criteria was further informed by art educational principles of visible thinking developed by the Getty institute (Ritcheard, Church & Morrison, 2011). These are represented by a broad and flexible framework for enriching classroom learning in content areas and for fostering students' intellectual and social development. Key goals of the course included:

- Deeper understanding of the content of human rights.
- Greater motivation for learning through art mediums that the participants are familiar with.
- Development of learners' participatory art making.
- Development of learners' attitudes toward human rights in the context of sustainability and the local community.
- A shift in traditional perceptions of the teacher as a "know-it-all" towards the creation of a community of enthusiastically engaged thinkers and learners.

The question that we explore in this case is: *How do students experience transformative pedagogy applied in a conventional higher education learning context?*

THEORETICAL FRAME

Participatory pedagogy seeks to help transform classroom structures and practices that perpetuate undemocratic life. They aim to promote the development of a politically emancipatory and humanising culture of participation, voice and social action. Scholars researching participatory pedagogy have analysed three key elements for successful participatory pedagogy: 1) providing ample choice and flexibility in assignments and course activities; 2) navigating the balance between

challenge and risk; and 3) creating contexts for critical reflection (Simmons, Barnard & Fennema, 2011). This is in line with Freirean praxis (informed action) which refers to a dialogic process that assumes democratic participation, and collective and critical reflection upon reality that leads to transformation through further action and critical reflection (Freire, 1970). Participatory pedagogy draws on the work of critical education theorists who identify education institutions as sites of oppression restricting student autonomy and participation. Structures and systems in conventional settings reflect unequal and hierarchical power structures in which students are acknowledged as passive recipients of knowledge and in which a prescribed curriculum dominates in response to a predetermined purpose of education.

We refer to the five-day workshop held at the Iceland Academy of Arts (IAA) as a conventional learning context because of teachers and students' internalised expectations of assessment for accreditation purposes and appropriate pedagogical approaches. Transformative pedagogy that emphasises participatory approaches challenges the assumptions represented in conventional learning settings, such as the notion of the teacher as the ultimate decision maker, by applying flexible and experimental approaches. Transformative pedagogy aims to generate learning environments in which power is mutually constructed and negotiated between those involved in the learning process and in which relationships evolve during the relational pedagogical approach to co-create knowledge. Participation becomes essential to such a pedagogical process and its intention to transform the way we pursue social and ecological justice.

This approach requires acceptance of new realities and new knowledge as opposed to prescribed curricula. It responds to an understanding that there is a dichotomised standpoint of either being dominated or powerless and that this needs to be recognised in order to be prepared to act and challenge injustice. Rather than supporting the idea that knowledge of the other is needed in order to engage with the other, emphasis is placed on the multiple and unique ways that individuals come into the world and how this process can challenge the production of particular identities or subjectivities or the insertion of newcomers into an existing social order ((Arendt, 1998; Roth & Jornet, 2016).

Drawing on these theoretical perspectives we analysed student responses to questions on how they experienced the course to respond to our question: *How do students experience transformative pedagogy applied in a conventional higher education learning context?*

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

When organising the summer course we asked the students to turn in motivation letters when they applied to attend the course, based on their interest in human rights and art education. The participants were provided with a few key articles to read and respond to in the form of online dialogues before arriving to Iceland. In our feedback we highlighted the importance of personal interpretation with a strong connection to

lived experience. Online they also introduced artists that use participation in their artworks with a reference to human rights. Both local artists and internationally known artists were presented. Once in Iceland after a brief introduction we asked the students to write anonymous cards about anticipated challenges they felt they would face during the five-day workshop.

On the last day of the workshop students revisited these challenges and reflected on them during the final evaluation of the workshop. We found that the majority of the participants had gained from the workshop in terms of content and pedagogical process. However, the latter also posed a challenge in many cases in that students' learning experiences were constrained or disrupted by internalised pedagogical conventions and expectations of both students and teachers.

I feel as if in theory the students were encouraged to lead discussion and activities, but in practice we were being monitored and constantly kept on a schedule.

The experience of the course was very different in many ways than what I expected. It was more organic and unstructured than what I had anticipated. This affected my participation as a positive and negative force: on the one hand I couldn't always find a way to participate in the lecture talks but on the other hand there was space to meet the group in a very deep way. I was a teacher, an artist and a mother.

Students were asked to design the final assignment by themselves and to find a way to connect this to some of the key concepts related to human rights that had been introduced and discussed. Although teachers were involved, the intention was to work more in the role of critical friends than as experts. Students were encouraged to think beyond the university setting and to find ways to interact with the local community. However, the size of the group and a limited timeframe presented constraints to a process that was seeking to foster democratic decision making as a transformative approach.

But it would be a lot easier and more time-effective if there would have been someone who you can ask and who knows the answers.

Our point (of Walkalogy – see Emma Bolland's idea of Walking As Pedagogy <https://emmabolland.com/2014/02/24/walking-as-pedagogy-two-days-in-dundee/>) was to create an intensive situation between the working group that would be documented and exhibited only partly. We didn't mediate our ideas restrictiveness clearly enough and it didn't meet the recipient in an understandable way. It was unfortunate that the interpretation of the work got somewhat lost in discussion.

Also the fact that we all were coming from a very different backgrounds and we were so many didn't allow us to go very deep in the topic...I totally understand it wasn't even the point of the course only, but sometimes putting too different people in the same group is not the most fruitful way to work.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

What are the main lessons learned that we believe are valuable to embedding sustainability awareness and action in higher education based on our pilot experience?

We applied a pedagogical approach that sought to support the multiple and unique ways that individuals see or understand the world as a means of supporting them to collectively work towards normative justice-related goals; however, this transformative approach seemed to conflict with the multiple expectations of stakeholders (both teachers and students) who are influenced by internalised notions and external norms related to the purpose of and approach to education. This created ethical dilemmas for us in our roles as educators. When attempting to respond to normative goals by applying transformative pedagogy to address social justice concerns, we became more aware of how and why the learning context can perpetuate, contradict or constrain our pedagogical response.

For example, we faced the paradox of creating space for participants to be their unique selves when as their comments suggest, they were not ready or prepared; some students suggested that they wanted to be told what to do or that what they did was because they believed the institution or the teachers expected this of them. The creation of this space also highlighted the differences as well as the shared understanding amongst the teachers as regards teaching and learning approaches. Without time to recognise and discuss these, there is a risk that the multiple interpretations of transformative pedagogy create confusion for students, as their comments suggest.

This paradox suggests the need to come to terms with the fact that in order for students and teachers to be their unique selves, another person's sense of being is likely to be challenged because we are all impacted on by internalised notions of who has power and who does not have power, who knows what and who does not know what, and in particular when working with actors from multiple art disciplines, backgrounds and expectations. When it comes down to working towards normative justice concerns in a conventional learning setting, applying transformative pedagogy can conflict with the preferences of others.

This leaves us to suggest that the term transformative pedagogy needs to be explored further in terms of conflicting expectations and beliefs about the teaching and learning process. There may be a shared desire to respond to social and ecological injustices amongst students and teachers, but the impact of internalised notions about what constitutes sound pedagogy will impact on how we engage to address these. In other words we need to recognise that the sharing of didactic authority comes with struggles of conscience and control as we attempt to defend our ethical sense of responsibility.

Such issues of ethical responsibility when related to sustainability awareness therefore need to be linked more explicitly to the way in which we reflect on, implement, and evaluate our teaching and learning. We need to develop the ways in which we share these experiences with others in the hope that a participatory pedagogy that seeks to help transform classroom structures and practices that perpetuate undemocratic life will achieve its goals and result in positive transformations. Perhaps one of the key lessons is to recognise the strength in sharing

our stance and position as regards pedagogical expectations. Our experience suggests that critical dialogue and space for in-depth self-reflection is needed when working in learning settings with an explicit social and ecological transformation agenda but constrained by preconceptions of the most appropriate pedagogical response.

As students worked on their assignments they found more meaning in the subject matter and made more meaningful connections between art, human rights and everyday life than would have been possible with a prescribed curriculum. They displayed the sort of attitudes toward thinking and learning about human rights that we would like to see happening in their classrooms once they become in-service art teachers. Indeed, their voiced challenges reflected open-mindedness, curiosity, appropriate levels of scepticism, and an intellectual desire to challenge their ways of seeing the world. However, the opportunity to critically discuss the impact of internalised notions and expectations in a way that emphasises the multiple and unique ways that individuals come into the world and how this process can challenge the production of particular identities or subjectivities or the insertion of newcomers into an existing social order (Arendt, 1998; Roth & Jornet, 2016) was missed.

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