

Higher Education Pedagogy for Social Justice: Critical Pedagogy Under the Radar

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Abstract

Universities around the world are striving to create a better world through their research and teaching, yet pedagogies to address issues that are centrally about social justice have yet to become mainstream. Developing pedagogical approaches that could imbed social justice in the classroom is essential to providing all students with the opportunity to become change agents and to achieve universities' supposed aim of creating a better world through education. This paper draws on data on pedagogical practice and decision-making collected with ten self-identifying critical pedagogues in English universities through participant observations and reflective dialogues. One significant theme was that many participants felt they had to practice critical pedagogy 'under the radar' or 'on the margins'. However, if universities are to 'change the world' through their work with students, a more open approach to critical pedagogies is needed where staff can have more autonomy rather than needing to strategically compromise.

Full paper

Universities around the world claim to be striving to create a better world through their research and teaching, yet pedagogies addressing issues of social justice have yet to become mainstream. Campus initiatives focusing on world-wide societal issues attempt to draw attention to sustainability, global health, justice and equality, and transformative technology; while smaller scale initiatives might encourage students to get involved in student-staff projects to improve their community. While these initiatives, in conjunction with other unofficial forms of student activism, are positive additions to the university experience, creating space for students to be more active and critical change agents, they are typically situated outside the classroom or involve the few and not the many (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam & Reid, 2019). Developing pedagogical approaches that could imbed social justice in the classroom is essential to providing all students with the opportunity to become change agents and to achieve the aim of creating a better world through education. This paper will draw on data focusing on pedagogical practice and decision-making collected from ten self-identifying critical pedagogues from eight English universities through participant observations and reflective dialogues. One significant theme that emerged was a sense that many participants felt they had to practice critical pedagogy 'under the radar' or 'on the margins'. However, if universities are to 'change the world' through their work with students, a more open approach to critical pedagogies is needed in which staff can have more autonomy rather than having to strategically compromise (Skelton, 2012).

All ten of my participants mentioned feeling that they needed to do critical pedagogy in the margins or under the radar. Indeed, several of them found ways to make small changes to their curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that allowed them to create a more active, critical space in the classroom that was hidden away from their colleagues and managers. Providing the students didn't fail or the student satisfaction surveys were positive, they could 'get away with it'. For example, Lena had rules about student numbers on her module and who these students were – they all had to be practicing teachers. She was unwilling to compromise on these, but commented that she struggled to maintain this as student numbers expanded, despite the active classroom she facilitated and the high level of student satisfaction. Christine was nominated for an outstanding teaching award for her module on democratic education. When this was announced not a single colleague asked her what she did on her module or why she won the award. This led Christine to say "it is quite isolating. But I also feel like I'm slightly...working under the radar—like I'm just doing what I do, and I can keep getting away with it as long as the students keep passing." Other participants, like Louisa, found it harder to make changes within the existing system to teach in a way that was congruent with their values. She reported "I mean, that is a problem, right? When you're trying to do something critical and radical but you're in this framework that is very standard and traditional...it's a bit artificial to think we can create this little space of critical pedagogy...but I think we're all living with those tensions in universities..."

This relates to Skelton's (2012: 266) concept of strategic compromise – "accepting structural constraints beyond one's control whilst... focusing on aspects of practice where they felt values could be realized". This highlights that values are central to this clash or strategic compromise (Kuznetsova & Kuznetsov, 2019) – and that often the values of academics are at odds with their institution, leading practitioners to abandon their values altogether, strategically compromise or actively resist against the values of the university. While many of my participants strategically compromised in small impactful ways, Arthur argued that "We still have a lot of space. We have space to be doing a lot more than we are doing...sometimes I think we use it as a bit of an excuse. We could be doing so much more—there are spaces there." These small acts of resistance often occurred in the classroom, but I would argue that if academics want to change the university, these acts need to become more visible – on the picket line, in leadership meetings, assemblies or town halls. More research is needed to draw out the impact changes to the university (governance, funding, staffing) have on staff and ultimately to the university's ability to affect change in society, creating more space to do things differently.

References

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