

Spaces and Pedagogies



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LOOKS LIKE A CLASSROOM TO US

JOHN STANSFIELD



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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal ideologies, with their emphasis on the rule of markets, and community development, which promotes ground-up collective social change and human rights, stand in stark contrast to each other. In a social practice school, teaching tomorrow's social change-makers the theory and practice of community development, we experiment with what authentic out-of-classroom learning experiences might be – by, for example, engaging students in a union picket, a protest march and a policy breakfast – and reflect together on how these might inform a deeper discussion of community development using a Freirean lens. The risks, logistics and outcomes of this work-based learning are explored as well as the potential for this innovation to illuminate further the paradox of educating change-makers in a neoliberal institution.

INTRODUCTION

“Looks like a classroom to us” is the strap line in a Unitec advertising campaign which promotes the institute as a provider of unconventional and industry-relevant education. The campaign promotes Unitec's marae wharenuī as an invitation to discuss the importance of architectural history, and the waves at Piha Beach as an ideal place for learning exercise physiology, the surfboard the perfect tool to learn it with.

In the Bachelor of Social Practice (BSP), a registerable qualification in social work and community development, students embark on almost 1000 hours of work-based practical learning in social work and community development agencies. Aside from this, opportunities to learn outside the classroom can be more difficult to manage.

In this paper I discuss three case studies of students from the programme engaging in social action: a union picket, a protest march, and a policy breakfast all 'look like a classroom to us'. Creating relevant, real-life learning experiences for these students and future social change-makers can be fraught with risk, hard to control and potentially hard to resource. The risks, logistics, and outcomes of these three case studies are explored and critically evaluated using Freirean pedagogy.

The central premise of Paulo Freire's body of work is that no education is neutral – it can be used for domestication or liberation. Fundamental to Freire's educational philosophy is the notion of collective action and continuing struggle on the part of the oppressed to liberate themselves from all forms of domination. The oppressed are active subjects in their own struggle.

The understanding gained from this research will be valuable for those challenged by creating authentic learning opportunities for change-makers, particularly in a contemporary, marketised, privatised and globalised or neoliberal tertiary environment (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Apple, 2006; Lakes & Carter, 2011).

Work-based learning has become a significant priority strategy for tertiary institutes (Benefer, 2007). At Unitec, this is reflected in a promise of relevance with the institute working closely with industry to ensure it stays relevant to their changing needs and workforce requirements. (Unitec, 2017).

I teach in Social Practice on an undergraduate social work programme which often finds itself at odds with institutional hierarchy. To begin with, the discipline of social work itself is disruptive: it seeks to change the balance of power in favour of the powerless, and such intervention is not always appreciated by the powerful. The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) presents a definition of its work which should strike fear into the hearts of those who would order our society along market lines with a neo-liberal reductionism that values all life in transactional terms:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective

responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014, para. 1)

If we are to educate social workers we must equip our graduates to recognise the flaws in our social order, and to challenge and overturn that order. We are educating social change-makers who need skills in policy analysis and public advocacy. Activism is one method of policy advocacy which has a long history in social work, and social work education is likely to increase graduates' commitment to activism (Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). Ricketts defines activism in the following way:

Activism is also a very broad term which refers to actions and activities intentionally designed to exert influence within democratic processes. In this sense we could see democracy as the process and activism as the specific actions and activities taking place as part of that process. (Ricketts, 2012, p. 7)

This activist strand of the work is often strongest and most consistent in the community development approach (Plant, 1974). A community development approach is a rights-based, bottom-up practice to identify and achieve community aspiration.

Balancing the institutional commitment to authentic work-based learning and teaching activism as an out-of-classroom experience can be challenging in the context of education practice, which both preserves a social order and seeks to overthrow it (Dorling, 2014), whilst embracing a liberation pedagogy within an environment of conservative neoliberal professionalism. Beyond this, the social justice discourse has, in the contemporary academic environment, the potential to be seduced by an appropriation, which places the discourse at the service of the neo-liberal push for competitive and competing economies (Singh, 2011).

Paulo Freire is arguably amongst the most influential educators of the twentieth century. Certainly, Freire has had a profound impact in the community education movement, amongst progressive schools and teachers, and in the radicalising of education as a force for social change. His seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), transforms education into a weapon for social change; learning becomes the means by which we can understand and see, criticise and transform the world around us. As an educator working largely with relatively poor students (by New Zealand standards) in a social practice department with a strong commitment to social justice, Freire is a very relevant pedagogical resource .

Social Practice, the department where I teach, has a long and proud tradition of teaching and research, as well as community development practice. Community development is another discipline profoundly influenced by Freire's work. Charlie McConnell, the immediate past president of the International Association for Community Development (IACD), mapped the Freirean influence and concluded that it informed the critical rights-based pro-poor approach (McConnell, 1977).

Freire's criticism of neoliberalism, and its impact on higher education, is also important (Escobar, 1994). The neoliberal understanding born in the early eighties in Thatcher's Britain was significantly advanced from 1984 in the New Zealand context. Freire visited New Zealand in 1974, where he raised challenging questions about colonialism, race relations and oppression in contemporary New Zealand.

While Freire's critical analysis and pedagogy have had a significant impact on community development teaching, the universal application of a pedagogy developed in vastly different circumstances is not without its perils (Choules, 2007). Freire's pedagogy does not fit well with the ideology of current tertiary education in New Zealand as there is some tension in maintaining a strong critique of the neoliberal agenda within an institution which has embraced it so thoroughly (Giroux, 2002). However, two Freirean tools which have proven very useful in community development teaching are dialogue and possibility, methods which enable conversations without baggage or blame to explore difficult issues and solutions which appear unreachable when constrained by predetermined ideas. Veteran community activist Vivian Hutchinson refers favourably to dialogue when she says, "In learning communities we get to remember that conversation is the way the world is remade. Conversation is the work" (Hutchinson, 2011, p. 68).

A second tool, Freire's notion of viewing history as a possibility (Freire, MacKinnon, Fraser, & Macedo, 1997), invites communities to critically deconstruct the discourse around them.

The following three case studies describe providing a shared experience for the development of the dialogue with students. These events were an exploration of creating relevant, out-of-classroom education for change-makers:

CASE STUDY ONE: UNITE UNION AND THE MCDONALD'S PICKET

Bursting with enthusiasm but devoid of experience, a group of the year one BSP students are desperate to get into social action and seek help for their own out-of-classroom learning experience.

Context A: BSP students – year-one Inequality class, semester one

This class is typical of BSP classes in terms of its demographics: it has an older profile than usual for Unitec classes, Pākehā students are a minority, and previous academic success is uncommon. A particular challenge in teaching this group is the high number of students with marginal literacy – reading is both uncommon and unpopular for a significant number of these students.

Inequality, the year-one course, introduces students to the notion that an unfair and unequal society is the engine for most of the social problems their professional practice will address. Most first year social workers just want to help people, and the idea that to be of any practical help they will have to address and change a political and economic system can be quite challenging.



Context B: World

The progressive de-unionisation of the workforce and attacks on collective bargaining since 1991 (Ryall & Blumenfeld, 2014) have led to a rise in contracts which would have been considered unconscionable in an earlier age. The poster child for these were the so-called 'zero-hour' contracts. These contracts required workers to be available for work at all times, but gave no guarantee or security of hours. A worker might be engaged for 30 hours one week and none the next. Zero-hour contracts became associated with exploitative practices in the workplace (Turner, 2013) and were used as a mechanism for disciplining workers who sought to exercise their rights (Kelly, 2014). The Unite union, which works almost exclusively with low-paid and casual workers, led a campaign against the giant multinational fast-food company McDonald's, to draw attention to zero-hour contracts in a campaign to drive these out of the industry.



Event description

A group of half-a-dozen BSP students wanted to learn more about how change can be made utilising the principle of solidarity, and were seeking experience in direct action. The students had determined that they would lead a protest march against the axeing of a popular current-affairs show on television, *Campbell Live*. In order to support

their initiative, I arranged for the students and myself to join the Unite Union zero-hours picket. The picket was a noisy blockade in Auckland's Queen Street, designed to prevent customers from entering the store. Police were in attendance and the picket was managed by a Unite union official, well experienced in these actions, with the aid of a megaphone.

Risks

The picket was in a busy thoroughfare, so there were some risks of minor injury and also of arrest. This risk was mitigated to some extent by the presence of experienced union and teaching staff.

Logistics

This activity was very low cost as pickets are free and participants got themselves to the location with either private or public transport. A friendly community lawyer was also briefed, in the event legal assistance might be required.

Learnings and outcomes

Participants learnt some useful strategies to maintain the picket and avoid arrest. The experience and professionalism of the picket leaders was discussed, and students determined to invite the leaders to do a workshop with the class, which took place some weeks later. As a result of the workshop, students began to question why the CEO had received a pay rise, increasing his salary to \$440,000 while the cleaners were not able to be paid a living wage.

In July 2015, just months after the picket, legislation to ban zero-hour contracts was introduced and, following some negotiation, was passed in early 2016.

Freirean education

Using Freirean principles, I am teaching by questioning and encouraging students to draw out their own learnings. This addresses Freire's critique of the banking notion of education where students are treated as empty vessels to be filled. The educational experience is dialogical and an expression of the Freirean principle of cooperation and unity for liberation, as well as a good platform for the discussion of authentic organisation. In some instances, Freire's notion of cultural synthesis is compromised by the asymmetries of experience between the students and leaders, and the need to act unilaterally to prevent arrest and ensure safety.

CASE STUDY TWO: THE CAMPBELL LIVE SHOW, A PROTEST MARCH

A breathless and wild-eyed student bursts into my office, she is panting and visibly agitated. "I've ... well ... well, I've done something." She thrusts her mobile phone towards me saying "Look." She has opened a Facebook page, she has posted an event, she is organising a protest march to the television studios. "That's great" I responded, but the student was not to be comforted. She wrung her hands and announced, "I've never even been to a protest, how will I know how to lead one?"

Context: BSP students – year-one Inequality class, semester one

This case study uses the same group of students as case study one but takes place one month later. Every week the class examined inequality in the news, from stories students brought to class and discussed. In a neoliberal environment with a highly commercialised media and a relentless reduction in quality, independent journalism, sympathetic stories challenging the economic orthodoxy are rare (McChesney, 2001).

Context: Outside the classroom – the media world

For many years a popular programme in current affairs which was unafraid to challenge this orthodoxy was the prime-time show *Campbell Live*. Somewhat paradoxically, this show was produced and delivered by a privately-owned broadcaster rather than the state channel. All of New Zealand's major non-state media groups are foreign-owned, and controlled by finance industries (Myllylahti, 2016). The programme aired Monday to Friday at 7pm on TV3 from March 2005 to May 2015. Clips from the show are regularly used in the class to promote discussion. Midway through the semester the owners of TV3, MediaWorks, announced that the show would be ending.

Event description

Utilising tutorial time and social media, which included an event Facebook page, the students planned a protest march against the pending cancellation of *Campbell Live*. Following the zero-hours picket, they decided to partner with the Unite union again, utilising their organising capacity and greater direct-action experience. In the process of gathering support, they also joined with a Christchurch-based activist who had begun a nationwide petition. The development of these partnerships led to significant learning discussions in the classroom and the corridors, and negotiations of competing interests with the positions of other stakeholders. For some the protest was about preserving a critical voice, for others about supporting a programme which had exposed the zero hours issue. In activities of this nature we do not always garner complete consensus of purpose before moving to action.

Risks

There are significant risks in protest (Alinsky, 1971). Taking on a media giant (Myllylahti, 2016) with a small group of enthusiastic but inexperienced students carries with it both a reputational risk and the risk of reprisal. There is also the risk of injury, and potentially the risk of arrest. The exuberant protest clearly did not have any insurance cover for these eventualities.

Logistics

After discussion with Unite union, other activist groups and teaching staff, and following their own enquiry, the students decided not to apply for a protest-march permit, which is required when marching on the road, and also necessitates a police escort for traffic-control purposes. Promotion of the march was to be by word of mouth and social media, so there were no associated costs. Participants made their own way to the assembly point using private or public transport. Banners and placards were made in the institute's department, using scrap materials and some leftover house paint, so this was a low-cost but high-impact affair.



Learnings and outcomes

The students managed all of the organising themselves, including developing the communications platform, identifying leaders, spokesperson and marshals, and calling for advice and support from teaching staff when needed. Emboldened by their experience at the zero-hours picket, the students and other protestors showed a healthy lack of respect for the security, breaching the security cordon and succeeding in presenting their petition to MediaWorks management. In an act of spontaneous organisation worthy of the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta, the students invaded and occupied the media building, locking security out and rapidly changing the power relations in the

demonstration. However, TV3 did end *Campbell Live* and the station's and replacement-offering's ratings plummeted. In January 2016 John Campbell was reinstated as a popular news and current affairs presenter in the multiplatform programme *Checkpoint*.

Freirean education:

The dialogical concept of cooperation is tested in this case study, where relatively young and inexperienced students must negotiate with union leaders and activists to garner support, while not losing the thematic integrity of their protest. The case rests on the learnings arising from the praxis of the previous case. What Freire describes as the emerging 'conscientisation', provides rich ground for discussion and debate in and out of the classroom. The experience is almost the opposite of the banking concept of knowledge criticised by Freire – a model of education where knowledge is seen as a gift to be bestowed by the knowledgeable to those they consider know nothing (Freire, 1970).

CASE STUDY THREE: THE CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP BREAKFAST

Small classes of senior students are an opportunity for less-hierarchical teaching and learning, where a student's experience of childhood poverty and a parent's fear of inability to provide, are as valid and powerful as the economists' analysis.

Context: BSP students – year-three Advanced Community Development class, semester one

The Advanced Community Development class focuses on the work of Freire and the application of critical theory. The class is small, with only four students, and they have wide and varied life experiences to draw on when examining social problems, critically analysing these, and learning and theorising how change might be made. The inclusion of studies into poverty is essential to the education of social workers, but is often overlooked (Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, & Monnickendam, 2009).

Description

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is the pre-eminent policy advocacy group concerned with child poverty in New Zealand. Its members include prominent academics, church and community-sector leaders, and campaigners. The CPAG breakfast is held the morning after the annual national budget is delivered. Overnight, researchers and policy analysts prepare briefing papers on the impact of the budget on child poverty, and compare the child poverty commitments made in the budget with competing stakeholder and policy objectives. For many years the Unitec social work department has sponsored students to attend the breakfast in the company of one or two members of staff.

Risks

This is a relatively risk-free event, although given the audience has a reasonably sophisticated understanding of both the budget and macroeconomics, there is potential for students to be excluded should language and concepts be unfamiliar to them. There are no legal risks in attending.

Logistics

The logistics for this exercise are relatively simple. The breakfast begins at 6.30am, and students make their own

transport arrangements. The breakfast is completely organised by the CPAG group and the department meets the costs of student attendance.

Learnings and outcome

In 2017 the students' major assignment was an essay analysing child poverty with a Freirean lens, and answering the question, "What would Freire do?" The first thing students at the breakfast learnt was that even brilliant economists can produce poor-quality presentations. However, the level of detail and analysis in the presentations enabled all participants to engage in a lively debate about the budget, and who was being

best served by it. The experience of senior economists validating the lived experience, both as children and parents, of the students was enormously powerful for both the lecturer and the students, and provided a platform for rich discussion in the subsequent tutorial. Students became adept at analysing policies for their impact on child poverty, and the policies of tertiary institutes were not exempted.



Freirean education

The generative themes of individualism and unquestioned obedience to the market that provide the foundations of neo-liberalism, and which have suppressed the discussion of child poverty, were exposed and discussed in the class and the process was conscientising in the Freirean sense. Yet, managing the asymmetries of understanding between the analysts and practitioners (who do not have the same critical awareness) can be challenging. The students were aware of the power imbalance inherent in the expert forum of the breakfast, but did not feel that power was held over them, or that the authority of the presenters is exercised in a manner which might preclude the mutual trust which Freire believes is essential for transformative education (Freire, 1970).

CONCLUSION

Out-of-classroom education for social change-makers can be fun, active learning but the sought social change may not necessarily align with the values of the education provider. Students who learn to effectively resist and challenge injustice may be less tolerant of this in their own educational experience. Teachers who seek to utilise real-world learning in change-making may face potential conflict with the values of contemporary neo-liberal institutions. Both teachers and students will position themselves in a partisan position in relation to power, either aligning with or opposing the powerful.

Education is not neutral inside or outside the classroom – it domesticates or liberates. In following a Freirean pedagogy we commit to standing with the poor and oppressed as part of their struggle. Educating social activists in the Freirean tradition positions the educators in opposition to the pervading neoliberal tradition and may highlight very different world views. When we carry this education outside the classroom to the streets, the dichotomy is further exposed. Relevant education in solidarity with social change will require courage when a protest or picket line looks like a classroom to us.

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a manual for elites on how to hold on to power. Social practice teaching and learning should instead follow the works of Freire, or Alinsky and Ricketts, all of which should be a manuals for the have-nots – an education in how to seize power.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Opportunities for further research in the education of activists should be encouraged. Protest plays an important part in balancing power in democracy and it would be interesting to learn more about how we best educate for this purpose. Longitudinal work might inform how these learning experiences inform practice in the field of social change-making.

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APPENDIX A

Resources for case study one: Zero hours picket.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/11/zero-hour-contracts-banned-in-new-zealand>
http://www.unitec.org.nz/the_real_heroes_of_the_end_to_zero_hours
http://www.unitec.org.nz/how_unitec_took_on_the_fast_food_companies_over_zero_hour_contracts_and_won
<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/addressing-zero-hour-contracts>

Resources for case study two: March for Campbell Live

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzLBJn_wY3M
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/tv-radio/68022219/john-campbell-greets-save-campbell-live-marchers>
<https://thestandard.org.nz/campbell-live-day-of-action/>
<https://thedailyblog.co.nz/2015/04/10/save-campbell-live-end-zero-hours-protest-this-wednesday/>
<https://thedailyblog.co.nz/2015/04/09/save-campbell-live/>

Resources for case study three: CPAG breakfast

- <http://www.cpag.org.nz/>
<http://www.cpag.org.nz/news/budget-2017-a-trickle-not-a-tide/>
<http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/2017%20CPAGBudgetAnalysis%20Summary.pdf>

Resources for studying Freire

- <http://www.reflect-action.org/freire>

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