

Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Practices of Transformative Political Education

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Preface by The World Transformed

The World Transformed (TWT) first drew thousands of people to Liverpool for four days of debates, discussions, workshops, performances and social events, one year on from the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the Labour leadership in 2015. Since then we have hosted a further five festivals alongside but independent of the Labour Party's Annual Conference, as well as a digital festival during the height of the pandemic in 2020. From the beginning it was, and still is, an attempt to create space for the breadth of our movement - trade unions, campaigning groups, academics, social movement activists, artists and the Labour left - to come together and build relations across struggles, as well as develop ideas and strategies for building a socialist movement in the 21st century.

For TWT there has always been an acknowledgement that people learn and develop their ideas in different ways, and so we have always made an attempt to include a variety of different pedagogical approaches and formats in our programmes. We never simply saw the task as just getting a progressive government into power or creating public support for a shopping list of new policy ideas. The broader aim is to build a new political hegemony - theoretically coherent and rooted in people's everyday experiences - that can outlast any one politician or parliamentary term. Popular political education is undoubtedly an essential aspect of achieving that aim. It not only helps activists better understand the context they're working in and supports them to make more informed tactical decisions, but also shifts power away from Westminster and into the spaces in which we meet, strategise, and develop relationships.

In 2018 we started to think seriously about how the organisation could contribute to building a stronger culture of popular socialist education beyond simply running an annual festival. As part of gaining a better understanding of what we could do and how we could support others, we started to investigate other existing left-wing political education projects. In 2019, the Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust generously supported a year-long research fellowship hosted by TWT, which Fiona Ranford was appointed to undertake. The aim of this project was to better understand what projects were already happening and to identify successful approaches and common challenges. We are pleased to present the findings of this research in this report.

Arguably the high point of activity within Corbynism was in 2019, when this project began. The more fragmented nature of our movement today makes the publication of this report even more important. The unifying role of a quest for state power has been replaced by serious challenges in aligning our work during environmental and economic crises. While these crises can feel overwhelming and our movement fragmented, the stories in this research of creative and committed comrades who participate in and deliver life-changing political education are inspiring.

The report is an extensive 150 pages. We would encourage anyone with an interest in socialist and emancipatory politics to read it, and we feel it will be particularly useful for:

- Individuals or groups already organising or looking to start organising transformative political education projects;
- Funders interested in better understanding how they might support projects and help sustain a disproportionately underfunded part of movement building;
- Academics or researchers with an interest in better understanding how theories of political education and pedagogy relate to concrete practices and initiatives.

The question of how to **reach and maintain certain audiences** is a consistent theme throughout the research. While we would argue that almost no intentional socialist political education is unhelpful, there are significant issues we need to look at as a movement if we are consistently failing to engage with the people whom we need to engage. While the specifics of these challenges will vary across different groups and places, the broadest omission is a lack of engagement with working class people. Alongside this is the task of developing political education that both appeals to and supports the development of younger activists who are increasingly on the left but who are consistently excluded from or underrepresented in key institutions. The two case studies are incredibly useful resources for thinking through how we might engage these (not necessarily distinct) demographics.

Relatedly, we consider the theme of **belonging and building communities through education** to be particularly important. It is impossible to separate social relations and trust from action and reflection - our praxis needs to engage with issues and experiences relevant to those taking part, and our facilitators need to be trusted. At the same time the research demonstrates the important role political education spaces can play, not only in supporting people to reflect on and develop their ideas and theories about social change, but also in feeling part of a bigger movement. This sense of feeling part of something bigger and spending time with other comrades in person is essential for strengthening a sense of solidarity and empathy, as well as generating the confidence needed to commit to consistent action.

We were particularly interested in the discussions in the report around **how participants understand the learning process**. This salience of providing learners with meta-cognitive skills is clear: we need to address both content and the politics of knowledge and learning, and how this relates to and differs from their experience of state or formal education. Perhaps most excitingly, we think that a focus on the politics of knowledge production within our spaces could have particularly far-reaching implications when it comes to organising against reactionary education policy and for a more transformative and democratic model of education in society at large.

Unsurprisingly, accessing adequate **funding** to both start and sustain leftwing education projects is identified as a key obstacle by many projects. We understand this issue well. Sustaining the festival as well as running projects all-year-round has been incredibly difficult, particularly in the post-Corbyn era when funding for explicitly leftwing political education has become scarcer. The report provides deeper insight into this pervasive challenge (including quantitative and qualitative analyses of funding sources) that we think could be a useful resource for those seeking to build the sustainability of education in the movement.

Finally, we appreciate the report's close look at **the role of participation**, which as many of us instinctively know, is not always as empowering as it might sometimes seem. We need to move beyond the sometimes superficial opposition between top-down or 'expert'-led forms of education (vertical) and those that are more explicitly 'participant'-led (horizontal). We would advocate instead for a form of political education where the goal is not to bring participants into the conversation for the purposes of superficial inclusion, but to bring participants into the conversation for specific, considered reasons, and in ways that are careful, curated, intentional. Demand the Impossible and Trademark Belfast are both projects that take a unique and incredibly thoughtful approach to questions of pedagogy, facilitation and curriculum design, and so we would refer anyone with a specific interest in these aspects of political education to the case study sections.

These are of course a small sample of some of the many themes and issues discussed in the following pages. We would invite you not only to read the report, but to engage with us and with other political education facilitators in a discussion of its methodology, findings, and relevance to your own work. If you would like to organise a reading group or find out more about the research, please do let us know – research@theworldtransformed.org.

We want to thank Trademark Belfast and Demand the Impossible for their involvement in this research. We see both of these organisations as two of the most exciting and effective contemporary political education projects. We have learnt a huge amount from working with them and feel that, in different ways, their approach to organising political education offers an example to us all going forward.

As has already been noted, there are very few funding sources available for explicitly socialist education projects and research. This was the first substantive piece of research that TWT has developed, and we are incredibly grateful to the Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust for funding and supporting the research fellowship, and for the patience they have shown given that it has taken longer than expected to complete. We would also like to further thank them for the funding they have awarded to the festival over the years, without which it is unlikely TWT would've managed to develop and expand in the way it has.

Finally, we would like to give a huge thanks to Fiona Ranford for her work in carrying out the research. Fiona has brought a wealth of preexisting knowledge and experience to the project, as well an unwavering curiosity for the topic. Her knowledge of pedagogical theory, particularly feminist and decolonial framings, alongside her experience as a political educator and organiser has been invaluable- ensuring that the research bridges the theory/practice divide and engages with a wide ranging set of ideas and initiatives. Due to a number of reasons, not least the Covid-19 pandemic, the research has taken longer than originally planned. We are incredibly grateful to Fiona for her perseverance and for the huge amount of time and thought she has dedicated to the project.

We are using the findings of the research across our work, particularly to inform our festival, our courses, and the work we do with local Transformed groups. As an unexpected result of this project, we now also have an active Research Working Group who lead on the evaluation of our festival among other things. We think that research is a critical aspect of political work, in part because it generates a slightly slower space for thinking and discussion and also because it offers a space in which we can critique ourselves. There have been many lessons to learn from Corbynism and to move towards the transformative futures we seek, we need to keep examining these issues and contradictions using all of the tools at our disposal, including research.

If you would like to know more about the work of TWT please send us an email on info@theworldtransformed.org

Introduction & Method



Introduction

When this research began in June 2019, there was a lot of hope that the unexpected rise of the left within the Labour Party, spurred on by a new generation of socialist-minded activists and accompanied by emboldened feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and environmental social movements, presented a moment of possibility for the prising open of the neoliberal consensus, a “radical rupture with the broken status quo” (Berry and Guinan, 2019). As Christine Berry and Joe Guinan described in their book *People Get Ready: Preparing for a Corbyn Government*:

“Something extraordinary has been happening below the surface of British politics. The ground is shifting beneath an exhausted political and economic model. The resulting shocks—from Jeremy Corbyn’s two leadership campaigns to the stunning outcomes of the 2016 EU referendum vote for Brexit and the 2017 general election—have shaken our politics to the point where it now feels as if anything could happen.”

There was hope that finally, after 40 years where capitalism had “seamlessly occupied the horizon of the thinkable” (Fisher, 2009, p8), the left might finally be winning “the battle of ideas”. In this context calls were made for a new culture and infrastructure of political education within the Labour Party and far beyond it, which could sustain a leftwing government (see for example Northrup and Mahony (2019), Blackburn (2018)). Against the odds, a socialist leadership had been elected in a party where the ideology of labourism had left a complete vacuum of socialist thinking (ibid), and in a wider context of the dismantling of working class institutions and their educational functions. For some, the purpose of political education in this context was to ensure that a leftwing Labour government could be elected, sustained and held to account, while for others it was at the heart of a much broader political project.

Following Labour’s electoral defeat and the purge of the left from the party, a sobered Labour left has returned even more vociferously to the question of political education, which is now widely understood as an essential yet sorely neglected part of the socialist movement. Political education projects have continued with vigour even during the Covid pandemic, especially for those who have been able to adapt to online forms.

A series of questions arise as this work gets under way: What forms of political education are up to the huge task ahead of us? Who should it be for? What should the content be? What kinds of pedagogies are necessary? Where should it take place, who should organise it and how should it be funded? What conditions are needed to nurture this kind of education? And what should its relationship be to the wider organising strategies of social movements and institutions of the left?

The aim of this research is to share learning that might strengthen the culture of transformative political education in Britain and Ireland through engaging with some of these questions. It proposes to do so by taking a closer look at a wide range of projects already underway, and placing

them in the context of multiple histories of radical political education and pedagogical thought. While organisers and educators have drawn inspiration from historical examples across social movements, including feminist consciousness raising groups, the Black Panther breakfast program and the Plebs' League, references to present day political education on the left can frequently take a more limited view, with the same projects being cited as "rare examples" to draw inspiration from, and without in-depth studies of such projects to enrich thinking¹. I have also noticed that there can be a heavy reliance on particular theorists and theoretical traditions as reference points, often in used in cursory and quite contradictory ways².

Yet, despite the dismantling of traditional spaces of working class education, Mayo (2020) highlights how significant popular education interventions have still taken place within adult education institutions and in and around the trade union movement. As a trainer and educator involved in feminist movements, transnational social and environmental justice organising and community-based interfaith solidarity work, I have been surprised by how invisible some of the transformative educational work that takes place in these spaces has been in recent conversations around political education, not featuring either as a source of learning and inspiration, or even understood as part of the ecosystem of progressive or transformative education. Coming from a theoretical grounding in transnational anti-capitalist and anti-colonial feminism, I hope to bring these intellectual traditions into the conversation about what transformative political education might look like.

Through this process I hope this research might contribute in a small way to the process that Northrup and Mahony consider essential to building a "contemporary culture of radical progressive political education", which is:

"dependent on us being able to collectively create the practices and spaces through which a greater plurality of progressive voices, and, vitally, a much wider range of ways of knowing and being can work with each other on a more equal and relational basis" (2019).

In this context, a whole new range of questions are illuminated: who should be learning from or with whom? Which ways of knowing and being are currently valued and which are marginalised? And crucially, in what ways do we draw boundaries around what counts as political education, and how does this limit or expand the kind of transformation we are working for?

This research seeks to offer a contribution at a moment where many people are being inspired to organise their own political education

¹ For example, Northrup and Mahony (2019) discuss how examples of political education are "few and far between" despite growing interest in political education, citing NEON's Summer School, Demand the Impossible and Economy's work as rare examples.

² During the course of this research there have, however, been some more sustained discussions amongst political educators about the significance of Paulo Freire's work, such as an event organised by the Left Book Club in February 2021, and the establishment of a reading group on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* within *The World Transformed* in October 2020.

initiatives and organisations are looking to scale up their approaches or identify new strategies for political education. There is a sense that what is happening is too small and fragmented, and that what is needed is a much larger, more sustained and more connected culture or project of political education³.

This research seeks to contribute to developing a better understanding of what is happening and where, in order to help inform strategic thinking around where to focus resources. It aims to broaden our collective understanding of what political education is taking place, situate this work in multiple histories of political education and intellectual traditions, explore in depth some of the approaches being used, and offer suggestions for fruitful directions for those looking to nurture cultures of political education and develop the infrastructure needed for it to flourish.

Research questions, methodology and methods

The research was designed with the aim of exploring the following questions:

- What transformative political education is taking place across Britain and Ireland, who is organising it, what are the organisers' objectives, who is it reaching, what is the educational content or curriculum, and what pedagogical approaches are being taken?
- What kinds of impacts is this political education having, what challenges or obstacles are organisers facing when doing this work, and what has enabled them to make progress?
- What kinds of support might organisations such as The World Transformed, and funders such as The Amiel and Melburn Trust offer to nurture and strengthen this transformative educational work?

Methodological approach

Throughout the research process myself and my co-researcher Charlie spoke about ourselves as “activist researchers”. We understood this to mean several different things, and throughout the duration of the research my understanding of what this might mean continued to develop.

Primarily we understood it to indicate that our research had an explicit activist aim. We did not seek to take a neutral or distanced stance from our object of study but aimed to explicitly and unapologetically contribute to strengthening the culture of transformative political education in Britain and Ireland, to the

³ For example, Northrup and Mahony (2019) argue that “although interest in political education is growing across the movement, from the leader’s office to organisations like London Young Labour and The World Transformed, this has yet to translate into programmes on anything like the scale needed.”

end of dismantling social relations of oppression and rebuilding a more just and liberatory society. My commitment to decolonial feminist politics led me to have a particular interest in bringing feminist, decolonial and faith-based organisations and perspectives into a conversation I have often found to be narrow in its understanding of the nature of social transformation we should be seeking in our political education.

By extension, we wanted not only our research findings but also the process of our research to contribute to the strengthening of this culture of political education. Thus the design of our project was guided by our aims as organisers and activists to create stronger relationships and opportunities for sharing knowledge between those involved in political education. In particular we sought to use the research process to expand spaces within The World Transformed (from hereon TWT) for research and reflection on the organisation's practice in the longer term. We set up a research working group for those interested in discussing the themes of the research, which soon became a reading group where we reflected together on theories and practices of critical pedagogy and political education. Over time this group and the activists involved became essential to TWT's internal critical reflection processes and the development of new areas of research.

We also sought to continue our research alongside our organising, education and activism, both working part-time on the research and part-time in other roles both within and outside The World Transformed, hoping that being embedded in the kind of work we were researching would strengthen both our practice and our critical reflection, or our "praxis". We continued to design and deliver political education workshops and events in numerous spaces, as well as contribute to the strategic development of TWT. At times it was very difficult to balance the competing demands of research and activism, and in particular to hold open the space for critical reflection necessary for praxis. As the project developed and the fast pace of organising rubbed up against the reflective space required by the research, it became more important for me to define that doing activist research did not mean simply doing "rough and ready" research. There were times where it felt like the main requirements of being an activist researcher were speed and responsiveness, in order to ensure that the research was having impact in an ever changing context. Balancing the desire to influence with the desire to be rigorous was a continual challenge, and the growing research community within TWT was a source of crucial encouragement and solidarity whilst I grappled with this.

In this context, I found the theory and approaches of feminist popular educators helpful and affirming. In particular I found Walter and Manicom's (2012) description of their approach to compiling a collection of writings of feminist popular educators resonated with my decision to seek a rigorous approach which might allow the "nuanced pedagogy and politics of knowledge production" to be illuminated:

"We encouraged personal narrative that sifted through experience and ventured grounded analysis and theoretical engagement.

We discouraged triumphalist versions of feminist education and organising, seeing these as rhetorical narratives necessary for mobilising support, celebrating achievements and persuading funders, but less useful in illuminating the nuanced pedagogy and politics of knowledge production that today raises difficult, uncertain and sometimes irresolvable issues (Brydon-Miller, 2004). We sought rather to build a supportive context for discussing the ambiguities, doubts and dangers that lie in this work, the potential for reproducing dominant logics and colonialist relations, as well as the possibilities for revealing and dislodging them to let imaginations fly in surprising directions” (p5).

Methods

In order to answer the research questions we wanted to collect primary data about a broad range of political education projects across Britain and Ireland, as well as carry out in-depth research into a handful of projects. While we hoped that the survey would give us a broad picture of current or recent political education projects, we wanted to carry out some in-depth case studies to help us understand more about the contexts in which political education projects were emerging, the pedagogical approaches organisers were using, as well as what kinds of impacts the projects were having on participants. To this end we carried out a qualitative and quantitative survey of political education projects as well as in-depth case studies drawing on multiple methods to collect data. In response to initial findings from the survey, we also carried out a series of informal interviews with organisers of political education projects whose work didn't fit comfortably into the framework of the survey we had developed.

Qualitative & quantitative survey

The survey sought to answer the following research questions:

- Who is organising political education in Britain and Ireland, and where is it taking place?
- What are the objectives of transformative political education projects in Britain and Ireland, and to what extent are they meeting them? What are the obstacles they are facing?
- What is the content/curricula of this education and what pedagogical approaches are they using?
- What are their funding sources?
- What do these projects want or need from organisations like The World Transformed and the Amiel and Melburn Trust?

While we set out with an intention to “map” political education projects, it quickly became clear that the sheer range of spaces in which political

education takes place made this goal impossible. Instead, we hoped to identify a sample of projects that cut across different contexts and traditions, since the research aimed also to build connections and facilitate learning between those approaching political education in different ways and with different audiences. We also hoped that the research would contribute to the strengthening of relationships between organisers and educators across Britain and Ireland, which continues to be a priority for TWT.

We began by building a list of projects to survey, drawing on a number of existing lists gathered by TWT, which included projects in and around the Labour left and the labour movement. In particular we drew on organisations identified through a survey completed by 600 Momentum members in summer 2018, which asked them to identify political education projects in their local communities. We then broadened these lists by drawing on our own knowledge of political education in contexts such as feminist movements, radical faith-based organisations and pedagogical arts projects. This list was then extended further through desk-based research as well as informal interviews with organisers, with the aim of increasing representation in two areas: ensuring a strong geographic spread across Britain and Ireland, including regionally and locally-based projects, and ensuring a broad representation of spaces or traditions.

To strengthen the geographic spread of organisations in our sample, we divided Britain and Ireland into 6 regions and identified educators and organisers working in each of these regions. We then carried out a number of informal interviews with these organisers in order to gather information about projects of interest, as well as speak to them about their experiences as people involved in political education in their region.

To ensure a greater spread in the sample across a range of spaces and traditions, we loosely classified projects and organisations into different traditions, drawing on shared knowledge of the landscape of political education as well as an initial literature review on the past and present of political education encompassing the overlapping histories of radical, critical, working class, popular, feminist, anti-racist and environmental education. We mapped our existing lists against this system of classification and sought through desk-based research and networks of organisers to ensure we were sending the survey to a number of projects across each of these areas.

We developed a pilot survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions which was sent to a number of political education project organisers, and we made significant edits based on their detailed feedback. The final survey was sent out in late December 2019. In mid-January we reviewed the spread of submissions by tradition and geographical location, and followed up with groups who were absent or under-represented, including groups from Scotland, Ireland and Wales, as well as projects organised by, or working primarily with, marginalised groups. We gathered a number of final submissions this way, and began analysis in April 2020.

Despite the work done to build a broad list of political education projects and “correct” the spread of the survey sample, we faced challenges translating the breadth of our initial list into survey responses. It wasn’t a surprise that those we approached cold or without a prior relationship were less likely to complete the survey. Additional barriers that some organisers faced in completing the survey included a lack of time or a sense that their project or organisation was too informal or not well established enough to be of value to the project. A more unexpected challenge was the difficulty we faced in trying to persuade some of the organisers we had identified that their work *was* political education and should be included in the project. Some were uncomfortable calling their work “political” as they were nervous, sometime for funding reasons, to have their projects framed in these terms rather than, say, in terms of social justice or youth empowerment work. Others, particularly arts-based projects, were resistant to calling their work “educational” since education was not a primary objective for them. One organiser described how the term suggested an instrumentality which they did not associate with, even though they believed that participants developed their critical understanding of the economy as a direct outcome of their involvement in the project. While some of these were persuaded to complete the survey, others were invited to discuss their work with us informally instead.

Significantly, many of these barriers to participating in the research worked to re-marginalise the kinds of projects that often fall outside of projects counted within the category of “political education”, a term perhaps most comfortably used by the Labour left and the trade union movement. We took various steps to address this, including diversifying the language in the survey to use terms familiar to other movements (liberatory, transformative, popular political education), offering phone calls and conversations with organisers for whom the survey felt restrictive, too formal, too time-consuming or even irrelevant. The challenges we had engaging arts-based practitioners and educators led to the development of a further piece of work in collaboration with Jess Adams, a PhD student at the University of East London and volunteer organiser at TWT, looking more in depth at the relationship between political education and the arts through a series of semi-structured interviews and a workshop with artists who incorporate pedagogy into their practice or work in the field of arts education. Nevertheless, these experiences highlight the significant limitations of the survey sample and method and have implications for the ways in which the findings can be interpreted and applied.

Case studies

We developed a sampling framework for case studies drawing on the initial taxonomy and themes emerging in the literature review (see appendix), and created a longlist of possible projects identified through the survey process. We consulted with the research working group and key partners to prioritise the factors identified in the sampling framework in order to narrow down the longlist. These factors included geographic location,

results of the 2019 election, who the organisers were, the intended audience/participants and format/pedagogical approach. Through conversations with a number of organisations on this list, four projects or organisations were selected: Demand the Impossible, Mansfield CLP's political education programme, Trademark Belfast's political economy courses, and Common Wealth Theatre. This final decision-making was shaped also by the possibilities that were available for attending educational activities at the time of the research. This process was significantly hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the majority of educational activities being cancelled for the remaining period of the research fellowship. As a result, this report draws on the organiser interviews from all four projects, which enrich the survey findings, whilst two are included as full case studies: Demand the Impossible and Trademark Belfast's political economy course.

Due to the pandemic, the two case studies were significantly different in terms of methods used and volume of data collected. Demand the Impossible ran prior to the pandemic, and our prior relationship with the course facilitators and geographical distance meant that we were able to attend the full course between us, carry out five semi-structured interviews with participants, carry out a baseline and endpoint survey, facilitate a focus group as well as participate in planning and reflection sessions with the facilitators and contribute our ideas, all of which took place face-to-face. In the case of Trademark Belfast, we developed a relationship with them during the course of the research, and planned to attend as participant-observers at a two-day version of the course they were facilitating in London as well as a full-length course in Ireland in spring 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was able to attend only one day of the London course. I carried out semi-structured interviews with two participants on this course and a further two on a previous course, as well as two course facilitators and an organiser and trade unionist who was involved as a partner on the previous course. I also drew in my analysis on content from their podcast which included conversations about their approach to political education, as well their political analysis which overlaps with the content on their courses.

Analysis and dissemination of findings

In line with our hopes to build TWT's ongoing capacity for research and critical reflection on political education, the research working group established for the project was involved in numerous ways, including at the analysis and dissemination phases. The qualitative survey data was coded independently by myself and Andrew Jeffreys, and then codes were compared and strengthened through in-depth discussion. The quantitative survey was analysed both independently and in collaboration with Matteo Tiratelli, who brought significant expertise to the project in its final months. Emerging findings from the case studies were also tested with the research working group as part of a reading group, while interim findings from the survey were tested during a network meeting of political



educators. Findings from the survey relating to arts-based organisations were analysed further in collaboration with Jess Adams, and then tested and strengthened through a series of interviews.

The research working group went on to organise a series of events and further activities both inspired by the research findings and drawing on their own specific areas of interest and expertise, including an extension of the research project focussed on political education within arts-based organisations.

Learning from the research has been presented internally through a number of presentations and summary documents aimed at influencing TWT's strategic direction, organising and educational work. In particular, the findings have influenced the programming of TWT's digital festival in September 2020 (especially through a series of events on political education and pedagogy), contributed to the development of the organisation's latest strategic plan, and significantly shaped the development of a five-part pilot course for political educators on critical pedagogy, which ran from May-June 2021.

The research working group established to support the research fellowship has now become a fully functioning working group within TWT and is taking forward a series of important projects influenced by the research findings, including a project focussed on understanding how to reach new audiences, with a focus on young people.

Literature Review

Introduction

When searching for literature on transformative political education I was first confronted with the challenge of what language to use. While urgent calls for more political education have become commonplace in leftwing spaces and commentary, an online search for political education tends to deliver results focussed on school or university education and on politics with a capital P – that is, the functioning of Westminster and formal political processes. As one participant explained whilst contrasting his perceptions of political education with his experience of Demand the Impossible, he had previously understood that “it needed to be in a formal setting and give you thorough knowledge of how motions are passed or how the House of Commons or House of Lords, what their relationship is”.

What we were looking for instead were the many practices and traditions of education, extending far beyond the walls of schools and universities, that have sought to understand the conditions of oppression in the broadest sense, in order that they might be transformed. And while some recent writing on political education on the left has drawn primarily on the fields of Popular Education and radical adult education and its roots in working class educational movements⁴, the less well known histories of youth and community education, feminist education and Black and anti-racist education are essential to the conversation if we are to adopt an expansive view of the ‘political’ in political education and any worthwhile understanding of what it means to transform society for the better. Carpenter and Mojab articulate this with necessary clarity:

“Let us be unequivocal on this point: Marxist scholarship on education that ignores important debates in feminism and anti-racist scholarship is itself sexist, racist, and, at this historical moment, deeply inadequate to address the conditions of life on this planet” (Mojab & Carpenter, 2017, p4).

This literature review then puts recent calls for political education in the context of multiple histories of political education variously referred to as radical, transformative and liberatory. I use the term “transformative” because, for me, it emphasises the desire for the cultural, social, political and economic transformations shared by these many histories that marks them out from the education they have come to critique.

I will begin with the well-rehearsed history of working class education and its evolution into adult and trade union education. I will then discuss some key ideas emerging from Popular Education theory and practice, a movement which has had a significant influence on the educational approach of a wide range of social movements, as well as mainstream education, and is most often associated with Latin American social movements and the work of Paulo Freire. I will then outline some of the work of decolonial, anti-racist and feminist thinkers in education, which

⁴ See for example Blackburn’s piece Waking up the Giant: political education and the Labour Party (2018).

draw on long histories of resistance in education and counter education. Both offer distinct sources of transformative educational praxis, and provide a critique of the largely white and male field of critical pedagogy. I will then draw on these multiple strands to highlight some key ideas, concepts and ongoing tensions that have informed the theoretical framework of this research.

It's also important to acknowledge the distinct contributions of other social movements to the theory and practice of radical education, such as youth movements, environmental movements and disability rights movements. However, given the time limitations of this research I have chosen to focus on decolonial and feminist contributions as a starting point, since these movements have shaped my own thinking and practice around transformative education and have convinced me of their urgency. In particular, my experience of working with environmental activists in the global south has taught me that any environmental justice education must be rooted in a critique of colonialism. I have also found in my own practice that decolonial and feminist critiques of Western patriarchal thought and practice around education expose dualistic and hierarchical ways of thinking about mind/body and human/nature, reaffirming the significance of the body, spirit and nature in education⁵, which overlap with the insights of other social justice movements and provide a very useful starting point for developing a more holistic understanding of transformation or liberation.

Before moving on, it is important to acknowledge the innumerable ways in which revolutionary learning takes place, as is evident in histories of social movements and as attested to by the participants in this research – for example through families and friends, formal education, self-study, and participation in struggle. While much has been written on the importance of these educational forms and processes, I will be confining the scope of this research to histories and current practices that have taken place as organised and intentional interventions in a group context, rather than more informal learning or autodidactic learning (self-education).

Histories of working class education

Many historians have written on the emergence of working class education, which is frequently traced back to the activities of socialist and non-conformist religious movements in the 1830s and 40s. Armstrong references the chartist Ernest Jones, who advocated for independent working class education and argued that “a people’s education is only safe in the people’s hands” (1988, p45). Lovett describes the existence of a popular radical education tradition in this period that was “sharply oppositional” to all provided and centralised education (1988, pxxi). It was undogmatic in its character, being rooted only in people’s experiences,

⁵ See for example hooks’ chapter on Eros, Eroticism and the Pedagogical Process in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994).

and consisting of newspapers, communal readings, discussion groups and travelling scholars. Radical educational initiatives were developed through secular Sunday schools, corresponding societies and co-operative societies linked to campaigns for political reform (Fieldhouse, cited in Mayo, 2020). For Fieldhouse, this movement stood in contrast not only to state education but also to the mechanics institutes established from the 1820s to provide education to working class men. While they included independent working class enterprise, they largely sought to provide “useful knowledge” to enable people to cope with rapid change of the industrial revolution, but without any implication that “the existing order could be changed” (ibid)⁶.

Although by the 1850s working class education was very much “improvised, haphazard and ephemeral”, Armstrong argues that it constituted such a risk to the state that the government attempted to suppress it. Armstrong cites a *Times* newspaper article from 1851 that recorded an argument between the church and the state over who should provide education to the working classes, in order to prevent them doing “evil teaching” for themselves (1988, p45).

Horton, in his forward to Lovett’s 1988 Reader, describes the emergence of the Workers’ Education Programme in the second half of the 19th century, which drew on the mechanics institutes, the chartist movement and the workers’ college, and consisted of lectures on Marxism and “preparing members for taking power” (1988, pxiii). However, as the socialist movement waned and the possibility of taking power became less imminent, numbers dwindled and the programme was replaced by residential colleges, including Ruskin college in 1899. The colleges, which sought to provide independent working class education, were also a response to the failure of the movement to win access to university education for the working classes, which Armstrong argues had become a middle class social movement (1988). While the movement for working class education did see success in the 1870s education act, which promised literacy to the working classes, for Armstrong this amounted to the “seduction of the working class” and must be seen as a contributing factor in the erosion of working class consciousness through formal education.

Four years after the founding of Ruskin college, the Workers Educational Association (WEA) was established, a federation of educational and working class interests offering university level courses. It emphasised reform, democracy and objectivity in education and, in Armstrong’s words, “had little to do with revolutionary socialism” (ibid, p46). Mayo (2020) describes how the WEA had its roots in the failed university extensionist movement, was strongly backed by Christian Socialists, and was certainly a movement organised “from the top down” (p24).

⁶ Armstrong describes how the mechanics institutes were established in the 1930s by working classes due to a growing dissatisfaction with the education of both secular and religious institutions. But Fieldhouse is more critical, describing them as “a mixture of autonomous working class enterprise and paternalistic middle class provision”(cited in Mayo, 2020, p23).

This brings us to one of the most frequently recounted moments in histories of radical education in Britain. By 1908 a debate was raging within Ruskin college about the ideological influence of Oxford University on the college, the mixing of working class and middle class students, and the courses' focus on "objectivity". Fisher's history in *Trade Union Education* (2017) describes how at one point the largely Marxist student body was boycotting almost all lectures to organise their own study groups, and in 1909 striking students established the Plebs' League and then the Central Labour College (CLC), which was to be independent of state funding and the university (2017). Over subsequent years the CLC accused the WEA of being a "wolf in sheep's clothing, weakening the movement through the dissemination of bourgeois ideology" (p25) for its acceptance of state funding and promotion of liberal education. Meanwhile, the WEA accused the CLC of simply being "class-war propaganda and not education at all" (Pollins, 1984).

For Armstrong, this rivalry set in motion an ideological polarisation between liberal impartial education and independent working class education. For Fisher, this ideological split involved distinctly different understandings of the purpose and strategy of working class education – between emphasising the importance of individual betterment, on the one hand, or collectivism on the other. However, he explains that in practice the difference between the two organisations may have been overstated, with some tutors working in both organisations, although the WEA tended to have more university and professional tutors (ibid). They also shared similar syllabuses with a focus on academic social sciences to make up for working class students' lack of formal education (Barratt-Brown, cited in ibid, p35). This made them much less practical than other radical education colleges that were emerging around the same time in Europe and in North America, such as the Highlander Institute and Antigonish (Lovett, 1988, xxi).

When the WEA set up its Workers Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC) in 1921 to support trade union education, the CLC responded by forming the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), but it was the WETUC that received support from the TUC and all but a handful of unions. For Armstrong this support confirmed the ideological marginality of the NCLC (p51). In 1929, it lost support of the National Union of Railwaymen and closed its only residential college. Its waning influence and eventual collapse is well-documented, with historians suggesting various factors in its demise – an increasing detachment from the working classes and limited reach⁷, the unpopularity of its rigid Marxist teaching and conservative methods (which stood in contrast to the WEA's liberal approach and space for seeking practical solutions to unemployment

⁷ For example, Armstrong highlights that the radical leaders of the independent working class movement were still only engaging a small minority of people, and argues therefore that it cannot be said that they were speaking on behalf of the working class. Interestingly, he describes how the WEA in Yorkshire retained control by workers, who themselves argued that they chose their liberal ideology rather than being "forced to by the ruling class to contain proletarian political power" (p53).

[Lovett, 1988, pxx]), as well as the growing anti-communist feeling in the post-war context. It was in this context that, according to Armstrong, the NCLC shifted ideologically to the right and became indistinguishable from the Trade Union Congress (TUC). But it was a further 30 years until it was incorporated, along with the WETUC, into the TUC.

Trade union education

Fisher's (2017) history of trade union education continues the story of the ongoing debate around the purpose of working class education as it evolved within the strengthened labour movement following the Labour Party's 1945 electoral win. He describes how the subsequent nationalising of industries boosted the trade union movement and led to a significant increase in demand for training for representatives. The WEA struggled to keep up with demand in the 1950s, despite trying to develop a standardised approach in partnership with unions. But trade unions also began to take teaching into their own hands, using active learning methods – in contrast to the more “talk and chalk” approach of WEA, with an “expert lecturer and passive students” – and focussing on the specific objectives of unions, rather than on those of an educational body (p56).

Following the industrial training act of 1964, which allowed day release for workers, and the subsumption of the WETUC and the NCLC into the TUC, which had been mooted decades earlier, the late 1960s saw a significant rise of standardised day release courses. Meanwhile the Health and Safety at Work Act allowed further time off and “set the scene” for a huge expansion of worker education (p58). Fisher describes how these courses lacked political content, with the focus being on practical “role education”, and it was this shift – alongside the argument put forward by the TUC that training in collective bargaining would “improve industrial relations” – that paved the way for state funding of trade union education. This funding continued even throughout Thatcher's assault on the unions, on the condition the courses contained no political content. Fisher also argues that the fact the courses were made up of members of widely different unions, including those not affiliated to the Labour Party, contributed to their depoliticisation, as it meant participants didn't necessarily share the same objectives of changing wider society and contributing further to the consignment of the “idea of a trade union *movement* to the margins” (p59).

Fisher identifies Manchester University's John McIlroy as one of the most outspoken critics of the TUC's approach to union education following the subsumption of the WETUC and the NCLC. He argued in the Labour Studies Journal in 1979 that the TUC's narrow focus on skills, at the expense of theory, left unions ill-equipped to carry out their political mission, asking:

“What is the ‘end’ of trade union education for the educators and the students? Is it the provision of the preconditions for social change, as many of us believe, or is it, as the Code of Practice prescribes, ‘improved industrial relations’?” (Fisher, 2017, p28).

He also criticised the wide adoption of student-centred learning approaches – which were widely argued to be more democratic – that encouraged participation independent of any wider “learning strategy”. He argued instead for a curriculum that can ask crucial questions about the very purpose of unions and union education (p29). While defences of the TUC’s participatory learning came from various parties, including the TUC’s Head of Education, Fisher outlines how some TUC practitioners drew on their experience and the theoretical work of Freire to argue that their methods were themselves “a political and developmental process”. They argued against the division between content and method, and stated that “knowledge is ‘created’ by the process of learning – not by memorising someone else’s questions” (Nesbit & Henderson, 1985, p5, cited in Fisher).

The WEA and adult education

While the WETUC was subsumed into the TUC, the WEA still operates today. Literature on the development of the WEA and the field of adult education more broadly paints a picture that parallels the fate of trade union education within the TUC described above – that of an increasingly narrow and instrumentalist agenda and a shrinking space for critical education, coupled with an increasing reliance on state funding.

In *Adult Education for a Change*, published in 1980 (Mayo & Thompson eds.), the contributors describe the development of increasingly individualised curricula and learning methods in adult education, as well as a focus on the educational “deficits” of individuals, without any acknowledgement of how structural injustices shape people’s lives. Westwood’s chapter draws on the Marxist contributions to the sociology of education to argue that adult education was now focussed on shaping the individual to the needs of capitalism, and had become as alienating as school (1980, p35). While this direction – mirroring tendencies in school and university education – is often associated with the emergence of Thatcherism, Westwood highlights how this thinking was already present in Labour Party thinking on adult education, and particularly evident in James Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin College in 1976, in which he advocated that adult education must meet the needs of industry. At the same time, Yarnit (1995) describes how leftwing critiques of adult education during the 70s and 80s fell short of challenging the underlying rationale that was guiding its direction, and instead ended up promoting access courses to Further Education and Higher Education “as if these would provide an answer to a fundamentally elitist system”.

As in the context of trade union education, alongside the critique of a narrowing curricula there has been a critique of the depoliticisation of learner-centred methods in adult education, which had become central to adult education inspired by Tawney, Freire and the “60s anti-authoritarian spirit” (ibid). For O’Rourke (1995), the wide use of learner-centred education was mainstreamed across adult education for the purpose of cost-saving, rather than any commitment to democratic pedagogical approaches, and the increasing size of classrooms completely undermined

their radical potential (p121). For Edwards, the survival of these approaches into vocational further education has exposed their fatal weakness, in that they privilege the individual “educational consumer” over the collective (Edwards, cited in Yarnit, 1995, p73).

Marjorie Mayo's book *Community-Based Learning and Social Movements* (2020) demonstrates how this trajectory in adult education has continued, with the WEA still facing pressure to demonstrate impacts on employability “as the price of continued public funding” (2020, p27). Yet Mayo is also keen to highlight examples of where WEA initiatives have nevertheless managed to support movements for social justice in this context, citing for example Hartley's research into citizenship education in South Yorkshire (2010). This possibility of carving space out for radical education in otherwise mainstream or depoliticised spaces and institutions is also something I encountered in conversations with adult educators about this research project.

Summary

Here, I have traced the history of working class education from the social movements of the 1830s to the establishment of the WEA and Labour Colleges in the early 1900s, through to the demise of the Labour Colleges through the 30s and increasing popularity (and funding) of the WEA. For some, this marked the triumph of liberal democratic approaches of education over those of the Marxist movements. With the post-1945 growth of unions and the subsumption of trade union education into the TUC in the 1960s, worker education moved away from a focus on social sciences and towards narrower “role education” and, with state funding, became completely ill-equipped to confront the 1980s attacks on the unions. The 1960 and 70s “heyday” of adult education outside the trade union movement was quickly eclipsed by a view that positioned education as individual advancement and preparation for the world of work, on which state funding became increasingly conditional. At the same time, it has been argued that both trade union and adult education saw the radical potential of participatory methods neutralised as they were taken up as a cost-cutting exercise, and were stripped of any accompanying political analysis.

It is in this context, with the continued erosion of working class educational institutions and spaces for revolutionary thought, that we find ourselves with calls for a resurgence of political education that can rebuild class consciousness and ignite social change. Seal (2017), for example, calls for a revitalisation of trade union education rooted in Popular Education principles, while Blackburn (2018) has argued for a reawakening of the socialist education tradition within the Labour Party, inspired by Freire and Gramsci as well as the recent work of Carpenter and Mojab. Others have called for a revival of old Marxist independent working class education spaces, such as the Plebs' League, and articulated what they might look like today.

However, in addition to providing a source of inspiration, accounts of the history of trade union and adult education lead us into a whole set of interrelated questions around what constitutes radical political education and the conditions it requires to thrive. In particular, the histories of the WEA and of trade union education under the TUC beg the question of the possibility of sustaining radical political education under the conditions of funding from the state, and even from institutions more broadly, even when this funding can ensure sustainability. For Fisher, however, a preoccupation on whether or not working class organisations should have accepted state funding is a distraction. He understands the NCLC's refusal to accept state funding in order to retain independence as one that misunderstood the nature of hegemonic power, which operates in much more insidious ways than simply through state funding (2017). Mayo argues that it is possible also for civil society organisations to affirm the status quo, and that the "overlap between market, state and civil society" makes the question of whether to accept state funding or not to some degree a moot point (2020). She proposes instead the need for educators and organisers to carve out spaces both "in and against the state", while remaining hopeful about the opportunities posed by the "more open situation created by the disappearance of state funding".

Another question this history raises is around the relationship between immediate educational needs in the current system (such as the need for vocational training to get work) and the spreading of revolutionary ideas – what some have termed "really useful knowledge". While vocational training in adult education, which for many represents the surrender of education to the needs of the market, and role-based trade union education have replaced courses that at one time provided space for critical and revolutionary thinking, some historians have equally attributed the failure of the Marxist political education of the NCLC to its narrow dogmatic approach and refusal to engage with the everyday experiences and struggles of workers. This suggests a tension that needs exploring further, and asks that we consider how "survival" education and political education might not be opposed to one another but be combined to create educational spaces that support people to both survive and transform oppressive systems. Radical ESOL groups that support language acquisition to enable people to access rights and jobs (whilst exploring the social conditions that make society so hostile for migrants), and the work of trade unionists to incorporate an analysis of capitalism's impact on mental health into health and safety courses, could be considered examples of this.

A related theme emerging in this literature is the way in which adult education, trade union studies and vocational education have become increasingly isolated from each other (Yarnit, 1998). As well as potentially disturbing the polarisation between "useful" and "really useful" knowledge, greater collaboration could provide new funding opportunities. For example, Lazarus argues that trade union funding of community-based radical education could "turn fragile projects into stable organisations and experiential processes into exciting models for adoption and adaptation"

(2017, p127). Facilitating the blurring of demarcations between these spheres of education might allow us to “push at the boundaries of what might commonly be understood as constituting either informal education or trade union activity” (Smith, Smith and Trelfa, 2017, p78)

Another series of questions emerge from the apparent incorporation and neutralisation of once radical approaches to political education, namely democratic and participatory approaches, in both trade union and adult education. As well as providing a warning about doing political education that pays attention only to either curricula or to pedagogical approach, it also requires that we look more closely at the terms that have become mainstream in pedagogy – such as participation, dialogue and inclusion – and develop a clearer understanding of which pedagogical approaches can take us towards the dismantling of oppressive social relations. In particular, the notion that a format can simply be “scaled up” or moved easily between contexts is called into question, and we are forced to think about what it might look to “translate” and adapt between contexts, as well as the limitations of thinking about critical education in terms of models (see for example Manicom and Walters, 2012). This demands a return to the theoretical underpinnings of critical or radical educational approaches, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

Popular Education, critical pedagogy and its critics

Recent calls for a revival of political education frequently reference Popular Education principles as well as Freire (see for example Seal, 2017, Northrup and Mahony, 2019, Blackburn, 2019) as theoretical starting points for doing transformative political education in practice, highlighting the importance of participation and democracy in educational spaces. Yet, as mentioned above, historians of working class education have been concerned about the depoliticisation or neutralisation of participatory educational approaches within adult and trade union education. Equally, Manicom and Walters write in the context of feminist radical education about the “prevalence of organising methodologies and methods that resemble political education but are ambiguous in their political effects” (2012, p8). Therefore, I would argue that there is a strong case for educators to examine literature on Popular Education and, in particular, return to the work of Freire and those who critiqued and developed his ideas further.

The term Popular Education is often used to describe a world-wide educational movement which has its roots in Latin American social movements, and is commonly associated with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. His work was, and continues to be, hugely influential in academia (particularly in the field of critical pedagogy), and alongside his own extensive body of work sits a huge volume of literature exploring the relevance of his ideas to different fields (Mayo, 1999, p20), including works by other influential critical pedagogy theorists and educators

such as Giroux, bell hooks, Ira Shor and Peter McLaren. It has inspired and deeply influenced social movements and educational movements across the world, and as mentioned above, was a strong influence on the development of participatory approaches to radical adult education in Britain, as well as community and youth work, and mainstream education. It has also influenced art theory and practice, and Jeffers (2017) describes the significance of Freire's influence on the community arts movement that emerged in the late 1960s.

My own encounters with Freire's ideas demonstrate some of the breadth of his influence, spanning activist and academic spaces across the world. I first encountered his ideas studying liberation theology at university, then via Dutch facilitation collective LABO, then from The Glass is Half Full (who draw on the South African anti-apartheid Training for Transformation approach), next from a Cuban community development organisation, and, finally, at The World Transformed.

But some writers have used the term Popular Education in its broader and more literal sense – as in education that is “popular” or for “normal people” – and argue that its seeds are to be found in the history of radical social movements I have traced above (Mayo, 2020). Crowther (1999), for example, writes that:

“Although the term has come to be associated with relatively recent developments in Latin America, it has strong resonances with both the radical tradition in British adult education and the distinctly Scottish interest in promoting democratic access to the exploration of ideas and to the debate about what counts as worthwhile knowledge” (p5).

These writers then use the term as shorthand to describe the current and historical practices of education that share in the critiques and radical practices of the movement emerging in Latin America and its accompanying theory, and seek to use Popular Education as a framework to interpret local histories and practices⁸. In this section, I will seek then to outline some key concepts and ideas emerging from the history of Popular Education in Latin America as articulated in the work of Freire as well as those who build on or critique his work (including those belonging to a the wider field sometimes referred to as ‘critical pedagogy’), in order to identify these “strong resonances”. In particular, I hope they might help illuminate some of the ways in which critical pedagogy has sought to address some of the challenges and tensions arising in the first part of the literature review.

It is crucial to note that this history of thought and practice did not emerge in isolation, and Freire drew on numerous thinkers and traditions in his work, including liberation theology and postcolonial theory (particularly

⁸ While many practitioners in the UK use the term Popular Education to describe what they do, Seal (2017) is keen to point out that there are many educators in the trade union movement who are taking a Popular Education approach “but may not have a name or structure to frame their approach” (p51).

the work of Fanon), and dialogued with other educators including hooks and Torres, who influenced his work. In my reading I found that these intellectual influences are underexplored in many contemporary writings on political education that reference Freire, although he is often mentioned in tandem with Gramsci, with whom he shared many insights despite their work developing independently in very different contexts (Mayo, 1999).

Popular Education's critique of mainstream education

Popular Education theory and practice is rooted in a challenge to the assumption that education is neutral. Friere's work is rooted in a critique of the "domesticating" effects of mainstream education, which prevents students from acquiring the consciousness necessary to "intervene in the world as transformers of that world" (1973, p47) and shores up their position as the oppressed.

For Freire, education-as-domestication is made possible through the relationship established between the teacher and pupil, whereby the teacher is understood as the one with knowledge, and the pupil as the one without, an "object rather than a subject of knowledge" (Mayo, p56). In this formulation, education is "an act of depositing" into the empty head of the pupil, or what Freire calls the "banking concept" of education (1973, p45-46). This in turn stifles their "creative power" and serves the interests of the oppressors "who care neither to have the worlds revealed nor to see it transformed" (p42).

Crucially, Freire extended his critique beyond state education to the work of revolutionary leaders whom he argued borrowed the tools of their oppressors, using propaganda to try to convince them of the need for struggle, and positioning them as objects rather than subjects. Freire warns that "they cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become men".

At the same time, Freire was full of hope for the possibility of transformation and did not believe that humans were completely determined. Au argues that Friere's dialectical materialist approach means that he understood that "we are not only *in* the world but *with* the world", which means people can both adapt to it and have the "critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality" (Friere, cited in Au, 2017, p176).

Education as the practice of freedom

Set in contrast to this vision of domesticating education, Popular Education theory and practice articulates a new purpose and process for education at the service of liberation. Freire argued for education to be the "practice of freedom" instead of a site of domination, a practice through which the oppressed come to liberate themselves and in turn the oppressor (1973, p21). This liberation requires that the oppressed begin to perceive the world differently, not as something fixed but something that can be

transformed, and in which they are agents. But this change in perception must also lead to action:

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression, not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is necessary, but not a sufficient condition by itself for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action” (ibid, p26).

Thus for Freire it is only by simultaneously objectifying reality and acting upon it that we are able to “confront reality critically”, and without it the oppressed cannot transform their situation:

“The oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality. A mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality – precisely because it is not a true perception” (ibid, p29).

Taken together, the process of critical reflection, and taking “purposeful transformative action in the world” defines Freire’s conception of praxis (Au, 2017) and involves a process of conscientisation (Mayo, 1990). Freire describes conscientisation as the “deepening of coming into consciousness”, the ability to take distance from an object and learn to “perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (ibid, p63). However, Mayo describes how Freire stopped using the term after 1974 as he was concerned its meaning had been lost (ibid). In an interview with Torres he instead speaks about the need for educators to take a “conscientising posture”, which required that they:

“Search with rigour, with humility, without the arrogance of the sectarians who are overly certain about their universal certainties, to unveil the truths hidden behind ideologies that are more alive when it is said that they are dead” (p64).

Carlos Alberto Torres himself describes conscientisation more specifically as “the development of critical consciousness as class knowledge and practice” and understands this to be the subjective condition of social transformation (ibid). Yet the notion that Popular Education primarily seeks to transform class relations under capitalism has come under fire, and Freire has been widely criticised for his failure to engage meaningfully with other social relations that structure oppression, a point I will return to later.

A new teacher-pupil relationship

Freire proposes that education for freedom begins with a reconciliation of the relationship between the teacher and student in the banking concept of education. Instead of a relationship where the teacher imparts information and the student receives it, they must both become students *and* teachers (1973, p46), or “teacher students with student teachers”

(p53). He goes on to say, “the teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students who in their turn while being taught also teach” (ibid).

Freire’s proposed relationship goes further than having a democratic teaching approach but requires a change to the fundamental relationship between the teacher and pupil, where the teacher grows with, and is “in communion with the group” or, to use the Gramscian term, has an “organic relationship” with the group (Mayo, 1990, p68).

In his earlier work, Freire considers how this relationship requires a diminishing of the differences between the teacher and the group, and draws on Vabra’s work to explore whether intellectuals should “commit class suicide” in order to counteract the domesticating force of an educator’s cultural capital, a notion that has generated a lot of debate in relation both to feasibility and desirability (ibid). In his later work he moves away from a focus on diminishing difference to acknowledge that there is a need for a directive role on the part of the teacher, conceding that the educator has more knowledge and knows the “horizon that he or she wants to get to” (Freire, cited in Mayo, 1999, p67). It is this knowledge that gives the teacher their authority, an authority which is essential to the freedom of the students, but this must never deteriorate into authoritarianism” (ibid).

The nature of this teacher-student relationship is of great importance to Freire. In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire describes how, for the teacher and student to “join in a critical search for something”, they must be connected by “love, hope and mutual trust” (2013, p42). It is essential for this transformed relationship that the teacher learns to trust in the student’s ability to reason, as without this, the banking model will re-emerge:

“Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiques, monologues and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger” (1973, p41).

The relationship also puts a demand on the students to trust themselves as a subject in the educational process, a co-producer of knowledge. Freire argues that the teacher-student contradiction itself has created these conditions of distrust:

“Almost never do they realise that they too ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves” (1973, p39).

As a co-producer, subject rather than object, the student must then begin to take responsibility for the learning process. hooks speaks to this theme of building a “learning community” where it is the responsibility of everyone, not just the teacher, to make the class “work” (1994, p153). She describes that there is an equality between teacher and pupil “to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context” (p153). Seal (2017) describes how the new role for the student in Popular Education

requires students to unlearn the ways in which they have come to engage with education through schooling, including passivity and a tendency to engage with education as consumers by, for example, claiming an entitlement to their individual opinions or ignoring ideas that don't resonate or are difficult. Rather than ideas being commodities to which they "have a right", students have a "right and duty to create new knowledge" (p46).

A new process of dialogue

This transformed relationship provides the conditions for a new process of education for critical consciousness through dialogue. In dialogue, the object of knowledge is no longer understood to be the private property of the teacher, but "the object of reflection by himself and the students" and the educational process must facilitate this co-investigation (Mayo, 1999, p65). For Freire, the students and teachers "all become learners, assuming the same attitude as cognitive subjects discovering knowledge through one another and through the objects they try to know" (ibid). For Freire this object of reflection is not external to the student – it is the student's relationship with the world and experiences of oppression, and their perceptions of it.

"Accordingly the point of departure must always be with men in the 'here and now', which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they interweave. Only by starting from this situation –which determines their perception of it – can they begin to move" (1973, p57).

But for Freire, to come to critical consciousness through dialogue, this relationship between them and the world must be presented as a problem. In this "problem-posing" approach, a "problem-situation" is presented or raised by the students, which represents a perceived totality, and is broken down or "decoded". It is then reconstructed "through making more systemic, relational connections – making new sense of the problem within a new relational context" (Au, 2017, p180). Within this dialogue the teacher "draws their attention to points that are unclear or naive, always looking at them problematically. Why? How? Is it so? What relationship is there between the statement you have made and that of your companion? Is there any contradiction between them? Why?" (2013, p109).

As they reflect, they "increase the scope of their perception" to other elements of their experience and "previously inconspicuous phenomena" become a part of their collective study (Freire, 1973, p55). Since the full lived experience of the students is the object of study, over time the "culture of the learner increasingly becomes the basis of the learning process" (ibid). As such, the curriculum cannot be predetermined but is developed in collaboration with the students.

While Freire wrote extensively on the the details of his educational methods in practice, he also cautioned against his pedagogical practices beng "frozen and fetishised", arguing instead that they needed to be renewed and adapted as they emerged in new contexts (Manicom and Walters, 2012, p6).

Feminist Popular Education

Shortly after the publishing of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire was widely criticised by feminist scholars and activists for his use of the masculine pronoun as the universal subject of his work, as well as the failure of his analysis to include other social relations such as patriarchy in his understanding of the oppressed/oppressor relation (see Tett, 2018; Weiler, 1991; Manicom and Walters, 1996). Similarly he has been critiqued for his insufficient attention to racial oppression (see for example Haymes, 2002; Leonardo (ed), 2005). Later Freire acknowledged some of these shortcomings, though insufficiently for many, and sought to make it clear that his intent was to provide “the possibility for the educator to use my discussions and theorising about oppression and apply them to a specific context” (Freire in Au, 2017, p188). In many cases, both feminist and anti-racist scholars and educators upheld these critiques of Freire yet also took inspiration and hope from his work, meaningfully “pushing on the boundaries and edges of Freire’s liberatory pedagogy” (ibid, p189).

In the case of feminist critical educators, Freire’s work, and the growth of the Popular Education movement internationally fed an already lively field of scholarship and practice. While there were significant areas of feminist pedagogical thought within Women’s Studies departments and within the field of education which focussed on classroom-based teaching and learning (Gore, 1997), there were also multiple strands of of community-orientated feminist pedagogical thinking and practice, including streams in radical adult education, as well as streams emerging within social movements and participatory research, particularly in the fields of gender and development and community development (Manicom and Walters, 2012).

Manicom and Walters are keen to distinguish a distinct field of feminist Popular Education (FPE), an “imagined community” of educators who trace a legacy to Freire’s work but whose work is deeply rooted in feminist scholarship⁹. This field is distinct from some of the other strands of feminist pedagogical thought in its focus on education outside of the classroom, in particular within “social activism and democratic organisations of civil society” (p11) as well as a conscious internationalist leaning (p11). In their first book on the field, published in 1996, they describe it as focussed initially on work with women and “re-negotiations of gender relations” but argue that feminist educators were also working to consider gender’s interaction with race, culture, age and social class to “integrate all aspects of power inequalities” (p15). In their 2012 Reader, in the context of the burgeoning of multiple feminisms, they are more cautious to define a primary political agenda for this field, but instead foreground feminist Popular Education approaches that build on extensive decolonial feminist thinking (in particular the work of Chandra Mohanty) and are firmly rooted

⁹ In their book *Gender in Popular Education: Methods for Empowerment* written 16 years earlier, Manicom and Walters sought to gather together an area of work under the umbrella of “Feminist Popular Education” following the Women’s International Council for Adult Educators in 1990s (Manicom and Walters, 1996).

in Freire's anti-capitalism and the often underemphasised anti-colonial analysis in his work. I will outline a few of the key themes or features that Manicom and Walters identify that distinguish this theory and practice, since I believe they are important examples of what it might mean to "push the boundaries" of Freire's work (Au, 2017, p189).

Firstly, feminism's concern with challenging the disembodied, rational male subject of political thought, and the way in which this devaluing of the body is materialised in patriarchal social relations, has led to a serious engagement within FPE (and other strands of feminist pedagogy) with what it means to take account of the body in transformative education and move beyond thinking about education in terms of "rational verbal dialogue" (Manicom and Walters, 2012, p8). Envisioning an embodied subject that is "complex and composite" rather than rationally-bound has also served to bring "spiritual life, a material life, sexuality, a psychic life, and the unconscious" into the learning space. hooks' call for attention to the body in pedagogy, for example, leads her to examine the significance of pleasure and the erotic in education (1994). Acknowledging this range of human capacities significantly extends our understanding of the site of transformative learning, and brings into the field of Popular Education questions that might be "more commonly associated with psychology, spirituality, healing and other forms of therapeutic practice" (Manicom and Walters, 2012, p8). For hooks it also asks that in education we take these fields as starting points for critical study, including "how capitalism informs the way we think about love and care, the way we live in our bodies, the way we separate mind and body" (1994, p103).

Following from this, FPE has entailed a critique of simple or unidirectional understanding of how political education works to "empower", and questions conventional understandings of political action or organising as the immediate and desired "outcome" of Popular Education. Hooks describes this as the "phallogocentric paradigm of liberation – wherein freedom and experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same" (1994, p49). Instead, FPE's attention to the complexity of the subject and of relations of oppression leads to a more complex model of social transformation, where "outcomes" might be multifaceted or uncertain, and are contingent on where the education is taking place and who is in the room. For Manicom and Walters, this means that intersubjective engagement and the co-production of knowledge become particular concerns for FPE, and that education can become a place for the discovery and/or rehearsal for "different ways of relating to others and to self" (2012, p8).

Finally, this attention to intersubjective engagement has required FPE scholars to consider seriously the place of difference in educational spaces, including a return to Freire's core concern of the relationship between teacher and student, but this time in the context of multiple relations of power and complex and composite subjects. This has involved theorising what it looks like for the teacher to be in solidarity with the students, entailing an exploration of the politics and ethics of working

across difference in the context of “complex social and psychic relations of power” shaped by race, ability, sexuality, class and colonialism (ibid).

Critical pedagogy and race

While some anti-racist educators have drawn fruitfully on Freire, including bell hooks, the relationship between anti-racist theorists and educators and critical pedagogy at large has been more difficult. In *Critical Pedagogy and Race*, Parker and Stovil describe how, even as African American educators have borrowed from critical pedagogy, and critical pedagogy scholars has sought to engage with racism in the classroom, there remains an “African/American ambivalence toward critical pedagogy” (Parker and Stovil, 2005, p159). Writing as an educator in North American universities, hooks (1994) describes how her own active engagement with critical pedagogy via Freire had been met with suspicion by other Black educators. Parker and Stoval describe it as a field taken up largely by white male scholars and debated with white women, and quote Wright who describes it as featuring an “unremarked whiteness” (ibid, p164).

The contributors to *Critical Pedagogy and Race* articulate a number of reasons for this ambivalence or rejection amongst scholars of colour, including the primacy the field gives to class as a determining factor of social relations and its failure or refusal to engage with critical theories of race, which posit race as a central factor to the shaping of our world. As such it has failed to interrogate the white supremacism of some of its core concepts such as the notion of democracy.

In his contribution, Leonardo argues that even where critical pedagogy scholarship has attempted to address the lack of attention to race, it has failed to address white supremacy and has approached racism from the perspective of white people and tended towards discussions of white privilege rather than relations of domination, failing to acknowledge Freire’s or Fanon’s call for “oppression as best apprehended by the oppressed” (2005, p41). Allen (2005) argues that while scholars such as Giroux tried in the 1990s to address the omission of an analysis of race from the field, they failed to interrogate why the field had neglected it for so long, and draw learning from this.

Reclaiming the “critical” in critical pedagogy

I have sought to outline some of the core concepts of Popular Education as articulated in Freire’s work, as well as indicate some of the rich ways in which theorists have “pushed the boundaries” of his approach. I have highlighted some contributions from the field of Feminist Popular Education, which has highlighted the limitations of traditional and masculinist ways of understanding the “outcomes” of Popular Education, arguing for the inclusion of intersubjective impacts in political education spaces as meaningful forms of social change. The field has also exposed the limitations of the disembodied and detached understanding of the

subject in much Popular Education theory and practice, pushing for methods that take seriously the body, affect and spirituality.

Returning to this extensive body of work enables us to engage with the question raised in the previous section that emerges from the ambivalent relationship between working class education and participatory methods. The increasing uptake of participatory methods and mainstreaming of Popular Education terms such as “dialogue” has, for some theorists, occurred in tandem with an ever-shrinking space for critical thinking and action, raising questions about what value these approaches still have in radical education, and whether paying such attention to the process of radical education has contributed to the erosion of any political critique (McIlroy, 1997). Advocates of Popular Education and critical pedagogy have approached this question in numerous ways. For some, it is the act of placing participatory approaches in mainstream institutional contexts that strips them of their radical content. For others, this history of co-option is the result of a theoretical failure to hold together two key components of critical pedagogical thinking: the instructional or pedagogical element or method, and its political objectives or vision (Gore, 1993). For Mayo, the conceptualisation of Freire’s work as a “method” risks divesting his pedagogy of its radical force, by focusing on his techniques while obscuring his politics:

“My use of the word ‘approach’ is deliberate. Some prefer to use the term ‘method’ in this context, which I am wary of since this might convey the false impression that all Freire’s pedagogy involves a set of techniques. To reduce Freire’s work simply to a method – the cause of much liberal misappropriation and dilution – and thereby divest it of its radical political thrust is tantamount to adulterating his work” (1999, p74).

For Au, Freirean pedagogy is built with three goals in mind – the development of more conscious, systematic understandings of their relationship with the world, the formation of subjects of education or “critical agents” in the act of knowing, and societal transformation – which are all inextricably linked through dialectical materialism (2017, p177). It is Freire’s dialectical materialism which is essential to his work, and in its absence “anti-Freirean” strands of thinking emerge in the field of critical education. Carpenter and Mojab also argue for the urgency of returning to the roots of Freire’s critical pedagogy in dialectical materialism in *Revolutionary Learning: Marxism, Feminism and Knowledge* (2017). They identify a tendency among educators seeking social transformation to articulate critical consciousness as being composed of “particular sets of ideas or patterns of belief” that express “oppositional ideologies” (p19). Here critical consciousness comes from replacing “false” systems of thought with “radical ones”, far from Freire’s understanding that it develops from the process of critical reflection and action. They argue that critical educators have left learners:

“With the language of critique but no ability to embody the critical ontologically or extend it beyond its particulars. It is focussed on

the outcome of analysis rather than analysis itself and in this way is deeply instrumentalist” (ibid).

They argue that critical or revolutionary educators should interrogate the conditions under which people come to understand the world, and be wary of promoting the “ideological thinking” which is inherent to capitalism. They describe this thinking as a political project that, following Marx, involves the “pulling apart of the social world” in order to obscure “the relationships between various social phenomena” (ibid, p15). Instead of focussing on the content of ideas or on “the absence or presence of particular beliefs”, attention must instead be turned back to the process of building knowledge through engagement with the limits of our experience and processes of abstraction” that prevent us from seeing the social relations that are constitutive of life (p20). In this way, knowledge is no longer a set of ideas but is itself a tool we can use to “delve deeply into reality” (ibid). What’s more, they quote Allman, who argues:

“It is a tool that we constantly test in order to ascertain whether it is enabling us to develop a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the world and our existence and experiences within it” (Allman, cited in Carpenter and Mojab, ibid, p20).

Carpenter and Mojab also argue that re-centring Freire’s historical materialist approach to education challenges critical educators who would collapse everything into analysis of capitalism since race, class, gender, sexuality are all materially grounded and mutually constitutive relations of patriarchal and imperialist capitalism.

Decolonising education and articulating Black feminist pedagogies

In this section I will explore the critiques that decolonial scholars and educational activists have levelled at mainstream education, and strategies of resistance. Focussing on Black feminist resistance and educational activism, I will highlight some of the core features of pedagogical approaches that have taken seriously the operation and effects of patriarchy and colonialism on educational systems and spaces. Learning from this literature is an essential step in addressing the whiteness and maleness of much critical pedagogy literature and the invisibilisation of Black women in the sphere of radical education (Perlow et al, 2017, p2).

Movements to decolonise education

As indicated above, Freire’s work was influenced by Franz Fanon, whose work laid bare the economic and psychological impacts of colonialism. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire draws on Fanon’s understanding of the colonial subject to flesh out the conditions of the oppressed subject that is so central to his work (1973). Yet as we have seen, both Friere and critical pedagogy at large have been accused of failing to engage fully with the

work of race-radical scholars such as Fanon, leading to the loss of “many moments of possible racial solidarity” (Allen, 2005, p66), and the failure to address education’s role in reproducing white supremacy.

The recent swelling of anti-colonial and anti-racist social movements have, however, forced conversations about education, pedagogy and racism into the mainstream, with students and staff in universities across the world organising around the demand to decolonise education. These movements have been inspired by multiple histories of anti-colonial struggle and draw on the insights of decolonial and postcolonial thought, in particular their critiques of Western knowledge production. Postcolonial thinkers such as Said, Bhabha and Spivak challenged European thought’s claim to universality, a claim sustained through the exercise of material power, and have exposed the Eurocentrism of the idea of modernity in Western discourse (Bhabra, 2014, p120). Bhabra explains how postcolonial thought emerged from diasporic scholars from South Asia and the Middle East with reference to 19th and 20th century European incursions, while decolonial scholars such as Mignolo emerged from South American diasporic scholars with reference to colonialism from the 15th century onwards (ibid, p115). Mignolo argues that, contrary to the claims of universality of European thought, knowledge in fact has both a geopolitics and a body-politics, which calls for an epistemic shift that “enables the histories and thought of other places to be understood as prior to European incursions” (p118). For Mignolo, the decolonisation of knowledge “occurs in acknowledging the sources and geopolitical locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practises of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms” (ibid).

This critique of Western knowledge production and its material relation to colonial power is at the heart of the contemporary transnational movement to decolonise education. These movements seek to “question the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production” and aim to “provincialise forms of European knowledge production from the centre” (Bhabra, Gebrail and Nişancioğlu, 2018, p10). In Britain, this movement has argued that schools and universities continue the legacy of British colonialism through their white Eurocentric curricula and exclusion of scholars of colour and non-Western thought (through, for example, the Why is My Curriculum White campaign [El Magd, 2016]). By perpetuating the modern/colonial geopolitics of knowledge, some have described this as a form of epistemic violence (Icaza & Vazquez, 2018, p110). Activists have also highlighted how this curricula fails to acknowledge the role of colonialism and racism in the production of Western society at large, including in the establishment of British universities themselves, with money and resources extracted from colonial atrocities (Gebrail, 2018, p27).

Despite facing a significant backlash from white institutions including the media, these campaigns have successfully forced universities to set out agendas for how to decolonise their curricula and pedagogical

approaches¹⁰, along with addressing systemic racism visible in the dominance of white teaching staff and in the attainment gap between white students and students of colour¹¹.

But what the decolonisation of the university actually looks like is very contested. In relation to the curriculum for example, some have called for a greater plurality of perspectives in order to decentre European thought, while others have challenged Eurocentrism while advocating for a “new universality” (Bhambra, Gebrail and Nişancioğlu, 2018, p5). At the same time, many have been concerned by the ways in which demands for decolonisation have been met by superficial responses which have failed to disrupt institutional racism or redistribute power and resources within universities. Gebrial (2018) argues that demands for decolonisation have been met with “the administering of welfare and representation grievances” in place of the “laborious work of structural change” that is necessary (p30).

While much attention has been on decolonising higher education institutions, Makuyana (2019) argues that that the co-option of language around decolonisation by the university has been made possible or exacerbated by the failure of contemporary decolonising education movements to connect with the broader history of Black organising around school education. Makuyana argues that these movements have failed to sufficiently make the connections between the colonial legacy in universities and institutionalised racism in schools and colleges, describing the British education system as a whole as “a site in which those ideas of white supremacy are enacted on Black children” (ibid).

Seeking to address this limitation, Makuyana’s article charts the history of the Black Parents Movement, which grew out of the move in 1967 to segregate Black children into schools for the “educationally subnormal”, a concept which could be traced to racist colonial ideas about the Black mind. Rather than being tailored to Black children, these schools acted as “dumping grounds” that institutionalised disadvantage (ibid). Though they were shut down in the early 1970s, the Black Parents Movement continued campaigning against the ongoing ways in which racism was institutionalised in the education system. Crucially, it also made the connection between police brutality and the exclusion of Black children from schools, and campaigned against institutional racism in the police¹².

While Makuyana argues that this analysis has been marginalised in British-based movements around decolonising the university, this analysis is central to the work of US-based critical race scholars in education, who

¹⁰ For example, staff and students at The University of Westminster have produced *Pedagogies for Social Justice*, a toolkit on decolonising the curricula (*Pedagogies for Social Justice*, 2021).

¹¹ See *Decolonising the University – a new student guide to campus activism* (Pells, 2020).

¹² Groups continuing this work today include the Black-led anti-racist organisation *No More Exclusions* (*No More Exclusions*, 2022) and anti-racist youth activist group *Education not Exclusion/No Lost Causes* (*Education not Exclusion*, 2018).

have argued that for the need to take account of school segregation, the exclusion of people of colour and the school-prison pipeline (Lynn, 2005), when formulating a vision of a critical pedagogy that takes racism seriously. Ladson-Billings (2005), for example, argues for the need to pay attention to school funding and desegregation as well as to curricula and modes of instruction. Examining this history can help flesh out what it might look like for white transformative educators interested in critical pedagogy to avoid missing the moments for racial solidarity that Allen (2005) argues have been glaringly absent in the field.

Grassroots Black educational movements and pedagogies

Makuyana describes how, in addition to organising against a racist school system, the Black Parents Movement initiated Black Supplementary Schools as a form of radical self-help. Raey and Mirza (1997, 2000) have written extensively on supplementary schools, describing how they were established to address the multiplicity of failings that parents had identified, including their lack respect for Black children who were considered a “nuisance” and their consistent failure to address Black under-achievement (1997, p495). For Raey and Mirza, these schools were not only a response to educational exclusion but a “radical and subversive” grassroots educational movement (2000, p521).

These alternative educational movements, alongside the practices of Black educators working with students of colour within mainstream education, have been a rich resource for the articulation of alternative Black, decolonial and anti-racist pedagogies. Lynn (2005) examines the counter-hegemonic practices of African American educators in the US when working with racially subordinated students in order to articulate a “critical race pedagogy”. Where critical pedagogy scholars have limited their attention to addressing racism in the multicultural classroom, Lynn’s emancipatory strategies are far broader, including educational practices that maintain cultural identity and foreground an understanding of the interaction between class and race. These strategies are enacted as a liberatory pedagogy that incorporates dialogical engagement, acts of self-affirmation, resisting or challenging “hegemonic administrators” and teaches children the importance of African culture (p128).

Lynn outlines how practises of race-conscious critical pedagogy in the US, as enacted by African American educators, draw both on Afrocentric theoretical frameworks as well as Critical Race Theory (p128)¹³. His project builds on the work of Ladson-Billings, who attempts to “cojoin fundamental

¹³ For example, Lee (1992) explains that an effective African-centred pedagogy “legitimises African stores of knowledge, positively exploits and scaffolds productive community and cultural practises; extends and builds upon the indigenous language, reinforces community ties and idealised service to one’s family, community, nation, race and world; promotes positive social relationships, imparts a world view that idealises a positive, self-sufficient future for one’s people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of others, and supports cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness” (pp.164-165).

aspects of critical pedagogy with culture-centred teaching” (ibid). Situated in the British context, Raey and Mirza’s research on Black supplementary schools similarly illuminates the importance placed on Black culture, history and literature, through which the whiteness of mainstream schooling is displaced. Raey and Mirza’s 1997 study of the practices of Black supplementary school educators, however, additionally places them within the framework of women’s activism. Established primarily by women, they describe these schools as forms of Black women’s activism, and a gendered new social movement which aims to “subvert racist expectations and beliefs” through educational inclusion (p497). The pedagogical practises Raey and Mirza identify share commonalities with the anti-colonial and anti-racist pedagogies of Black women educators working in other contexts, including those of bell hooks (1994) and the diverse practises described in Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea and Scott’s reader on *Black Women’s Liberatory Pedagogies* (2018). It is to this body of work that I will now turn.

Black feminist pedagogies

In this section I will indicate some themes and insights emerging from the anti-colonial and anti-racist feminist pedagogies practiced and articulated by Black women educators. Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea and Scott (2018) argue that Black women have been at the forefront of movements for liberation through formal and informal educational activism – in homes, churches, community centres, libraries, museums and on street corners – designing liberatory pedagogies that can “transmit oppositional knowledge to counter white supremacist and patriarchal hegemony, and create positive, deep, structural shifts in the ways of being, worldviews and actions of those under their tutelage” (p2).

Their work seeks to draw on a “river of Black foremothers whose pedagogies not only served as resistance to white supremacist and patriarchal domination, but as healing and empowerment particularly for Black community members”, but whose work remains invisible (ibid). It combines this knowledge with their own, gained from addressing white supremacy and patriarchy in educational spaces. This body of work is essential to any thinking about the nature of transformative pedagogy as well as the purpose of radical education.

Voice and experience

Mirza and Reay describe how Black women educators in British supplementary schools have developed a “pedagogic response that aims to overturn the processes of silencing and marginalisation by restoring the child to centre stage”, in a context where Black children are not listened to or respected in mainstream schools (1997, p493). The necessity of creating educational spaces for the voices of those who have been silenced is a strong thread in Black feminist pedagogical scholarship, as a way of addressing the marginalisation of non-white experience and ways

of knowing in Western thought. Here, challenging colonial ways of knowing that claim universality, goes hand-in-hand with challenging the white European's claim to being the universal knowing subject. As hooks argues in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), "accepting the decentring of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (p40).

This emphasis on who is speaking leads to conversations about the importance of creating and defending educational spaces – such as Black supplementary schools – designed for people of colour where their voices are centred. It has also led to a rich body of scholarship on tackling the centring of white voices and the silencing of people of colour in multicultural educational settings by addressing patriarchal and white supremacist cultures and relationships of power. hooks (1994), for example, describes how tutors at her university struggled to work across difference in their lessons as classes began to admit more students of colour, with tutors struggling to navigate rooms of vocal white male students alongside women of colour who worried they would be judged as intellectually inadequate (p39). In this context, hooks argues for a pedagogy that begins with building community, in contrast to a tendency to think in terms of safety, and describes how she uses tools such as reflective journal writing and sharing in order to make everyone in the room visible - an "exercise in recognition" (p41). She also warns against unhelpful ways of "managing" this diversity, such as the tendency for teachers to assume that a student's experience of racism makes them an expert or authority on a subject and so position them as "native informants" who can speak on behalf of a wider group (p44).

Addressing this relationship between marginalisation, experience and authority of voice in educational spaces is crucial for hooks' anti-colonial feminist pedagogy. Affirming the experiences of women and people of colour as sources of knowledge has been central to the development of feminist and anti-racist activism and scholarship. For example, building on the feminist critique of patriarchal knowledge which, while presenting itself as neutral, excluded women's lives as sources of truth, the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s centred women's experiences as sources of knowledge about patriarchal oppression. As a Black woman in largely white feminist classrooms, hooks describes how she had to speak from the knowledge that arose from her experiences as a Black woman since there was no body of theory that could be used to substantiate her claims (p90). This has significant implications for critical, liberatory pedagogies:

"Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process" (p89).

Yet this focus on experience has also been critiqued for leading to essentialist “appeals to experience” in the classroom on the part of marginalised groups, which “dead-end” the discussion” (Fuss, 1989). Confronting these critiques, hooks (1994) highlights how the very claim that marginalised groups appeal to the authority of their experience fails to acknowledge the authority granted to white men for example through their position within white supremacist patriarchy, and obscures how everyone brings experiential knowledge to the classroom:

“The politics of race and gender within white supremacist patriarchy grants them this ‘authority’ (to speak) without having to name the desire for it. They do not attend class and say, ‘I think that I am superior intellectually to my classmates because I am white and male and my experiences are much more important than any other groups’ and yet their behaviour often announces this way of thinking about identity, essence, subjectivity” (p82).

Hooks affirms the importance of experiential ways of knowing alongside analytical ways, and understands them to be most critical as a way of connecting concrete reality with abstractions. However, she also seeks to create a space where, rather than speaking from the “authority of experience” students might speak from a privileged standpoint that comes from the “*passion* of experience” (my italics) or “passion of remembrance” (p90). This kind of speech draws on knowledge that comes from suffering and is often “expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience”. In this reconceptualising, hooks’ feminist and anti-colonial pedagogy again refuses to leave the body outside the classroom.

Carpenter and Mojab (2017) also raise concerns that feminist and anti-racist educators’ pedagogical reliance on the voice of experience risks reifying experience rather than situating it within the material social relations that condition it. They argue:

“Reflection cannot stop at the acknowledgement of shared experience and cannot fast forward to political action. Analysis has to go beyond experience itself and into the social conditions that determine experience and the forms of consciousness we have used to interpret our experience. These conditions and our relation to them have to be interrogated as a source of knowledge, and the conditions have to be historicised and understood as relations” (p87).

Therefore, they call liberatory educators to take a historical materialist approach to revolutionary learning that demands a dialectical mode of thinking. This is the same approach they identify in Freire’s work, but one that explicitly challenges critical pedagogy’s tendency to make class the determining social relation, and instead pays attention to the multiple and co-constitutive relations that condition our experiences. In this context, if race is a “salient characteristic of our experience” then liberatory education requires a dialectical articulation of race that “expands beyond race to ‘race in relation’” (p87-88).

Embodiment and healing

Another theme emerging in hooks' work and wider Black feminist pedagogical thinking is the importance of taking a holistic view of the teacher and student as embodied and spiritual beings, providing a direct challenge to the disembodied and secular subject of Western modernity. Hooks draws on the work of Thich Nat Hanh, who she argues, unlike Friere, stressed the importance of a teacher being concerned not only with the mind of the student but also playing a healing role that affirms the union of mind, body and spirit of the learning subject (1994, p14). Without this, transformative learning cannot take place:

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p13).

In Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea & Scott's 2018 Reader, the relationship between learning and healing is a complex one and is theorised in diverse ways. While for some healing enables students to fully engage in the learning process and consequently in the struggle for liberation, others describe healing and self-love as the *outcome* of an anti-racist feminist pedagogical approach. Taliaferro Baszile writes about counter-storytelling as a redemptive pedagogical strategy through which “loving Blackness or Black self-love is made possible and sustainable” (p279). For Lakeesha Harris, this healing is the result of the remembrance and reclamation of ancestral knowledge made possible through a pedagogy of innate wisdom and spiritual connection (p1). Here the pedagogic process is not primarily aimed at the production of new knowledge but the reclamation of ancestral knowledge and affirmation of different ways of knowing that recognise the unity of mind/body/spirit.

However, the idea of the Black woman teacher as both healer and educator is also not an uncontroversial one. Toni King (2018) highlights the “hidden curriculum” that Black women often carry out as educators such as mentoring and preparing Black women students for “change agency”, constituting a “whole-person curricula approach that transcends the bounds of the traditional classroom”. While she acknowledges that this work might be draining in a context where Black women already encounter this well-documented “extra burden of service”, she writes a performance ritual seeking to “relay the costs, risks and rewards of living out the core pedagogical values of the hidden curriculum” (p22). This work seeks “restoration of self-hood infusing students with the belief in their capacity for agency” despite epistemic violence, as well as enabling them to “apply their academic knowledge in easy that reflect womanist or Black Feminist goals” (p35).

While healing is both the outcome of, and essential to the process of holistic transformative learning for these scholars, maintaining a connection between mind/body/spirit in education also requires an affirmation of the presence of emotion in the classroom. Demanding that the fullness of human experience becomes relevant to education when conceived of as the practice of freedom, hooks (1994) describes how

excitement and pleasure were important elements in her pedagogy:

“The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring... neither Freire’s work nor feminist pedagogy examined the notion of pleasure in the classroom” (page 7).

Summary

The recent wave of student activism to decolonise education has forced questions around historical colonialism, racism and knowledge production into the mainstream, initiating innumerable campaigns and programmes across schools, universities and beyond into wider activist and educational spaces. While these campaigns have led to significant wins, such as the restructuring of curricula to de-centre Western knowledge, at other times campaign demands have been neutralised or co-opted by universities, failing to win significant shifts in power or redistribution of resources. Following Makuyana (2019), situating these struggles within a longer and wider history of resistance to white supremacy in education, and particularly in the school system, highlights the scale of the challenge and indicates the kinds of strategies that are necessary if decolonial and anti-racist educational movements are to achieve structural and transformative change. Critical race theorists in education in the US also have much to contribute to thinking through what the key features of an anti-racist educational movement, or a “critical race pedagogy” might look like, even as there remains “no fixed and finished rule book” (Gillborn, 2005, p112). This would include the re-valuing of non-Western knowledge and culture, as well as addressing questions around educational exclusion and its relationship to incarceration, extending conversations around violence in the education system to include not only epistemic but other forms of violence.

Situating contemporary decolonial movements in education in a wider landscape of Black counter-education or education-as-resistance, and particularly the praxis of Black women educators, who have been at the forefront of much of this work (including the Black supplementary school movement) also broadens our theoretical resources for thinking through what anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal pedagogical approaches may look like. Drawing on hooks, Raey and Mirza, and Perlow et al’s work, I have teased out some key themes, including the importance of voice and experience in education. Complicating notions of the authority of experience, hooks proposes a reframing through which people are supported to speak from the passion of experience, and Carpenter and Mojab remind educators of the importance of situating an emphasis on experience or voice in a dialectical materialist framework, arguing for revolutionary education that seeks to understand the social relations, including race-in-relation as well as patriarchy and capitalism, that condition our experiences. For them, it is this dialectical method in education that defines the “critical” in critical education, and it can only be critical insofar as it interrogates the current race formation.

As a result of a refusal to engage in the hierarchical body/mind split of Western patriarchal thought, healing, spiritual (re)connection and the body emerge as significant themes cutting across the work of decolonial and feminist educators and pedagogues. This work demands that the fullness of human life is acknowledged and becomes a resource for transformation in educational spaces.

Conclusions

A number of educators in the field of working class education have called for the need to break down the barriers between the distinct fields of trade union, vocational and adult education (as well as to push the boundaries of these fields) to enable truly radical political education to flourish (Yarnett, 1995; Smith, Smith & Trelfa, 2017, p78). In this literature review I have extended this challenge further, seeking to draw more broadly on literature around transformative education, including histories and contemporary practices of radical education in anti-racist movements, as well as Black and feminist pedagogies.

To conclude this review I will briefly sketch some of the key themes and remaining questions arising in the literature that are pertinent to the call for a renewal and nurturing of transformative political education that motivate this research. These themes will help to situate and guide the analysis of contemporary practices of political education identified in this research through the survey and case studies.

A critique of education

The argument that education and the knowledge it produces is not neutral sits at the heart of the strands of thought and educational resistance explored here. Education can establish and maintain the status quo, serving particular social groups and systems of oppression. Movements for working class education have fought against the power of mainstream education to reproduce existing class relations, fighting both for educational inclusion as well as for spaces for independent radical education that can serve working class movements. Decolonial, anti-racist and feminist theorists and educators have demonstrated how schools and universities are able to shore up colonial, white supremacist and patriarchal systems of oppression, through reproducing knowledge that is partial – coming from particular geographies and particular bodies – yet claims it is universal. They have argued and fought for both for the transformation of mainstream education spaces, such as the decolonisation of the university and the changing of the school curricula, and carved out their own educational spaces for healing, learning and organising. Importantly these thinkers, educators and activists have critiqued social movements and institutions of the left for their role in reinforcing some oppressive relations even as they try to expose others. They have also noticed and critiqued the way that radical educational

movements – including independent working class education and most recently movements to decolonise education – have become depoliticised or co-opted in their encounters with institutions.

In the current context where calls for a renewal of radical, critical or popular education are increasingly common across the left, these multiple histories and theories of political education help us flesh out what might make this education critical or transformative, not only in the face of mainstream education but also where its political potential has been neutralised. Here I will suggest three themes this literature calls us to consider.

Unifying method and social vision

Firstly, educators mapping the history of working class education warn against the separation of radical methods – understood variously as democratic, participatory or sometimes explicitly associated with theorists such as Freire – from a political vision and commitment to social transformation. The political vision that motivates action is one that, as Carpenter and Mojab emphasise, seeks freedom from all social relations of oppression including class, race and gender, rather than collapsing everything into an analysis of capitalism, since “race, class, gender, sexuality are all materially grounded and mutually constitutive relations of patriarchal and imperialist capitalism” (2019, p20).

At the same time, feminist and decolonial educators urge us to consider how the nature of this social transformation needs to be understood in terms that do not simply align with patriarchal and westernised notions of the disembodied liberated subject but require bodily and spiritual transformation, individually and intersubjectively. This includes the “restoration of self-hood, infusing students with the belief in their capacity for agency” (King, 2018, p34). For Baszile (2018), a truly radical pedagogy is one through which “Black self-love is made possible and sustainable” (p267). The relationship between restored selfhood, repaired social relations, and collective transformative action in the world is, in this understanding of transformative education, inextricable.

Transforming the social relations of the educational space

In terms of pedagogy (the “how” of critical or transformative education) a crucial thread running through decolonial, feminist and critical pedagogy is the importance of beginning with, not a set of techniques, but a transformation of the relationship between the teacher and student. The importance of a relationship marked by love and trust is found in the work of feminist, Black and decolonial pedagogues as well as in Freire, while the healing potential of this relationship, which is spiritual in nature, is a theme among black feminist pedagogues. It is this relationship that makes true dialogue possible, and without it social movements are at risk of “superficial conversions to the cause of liberation” (Freire, 1970, p41).

Considering the conditions of possibility for relationships of genuine trust, love and even healing has led to the question of whether there needs to be shared experience between the educator and student. While Freire and critical pedagogy scholars have explored the idea of minimising “difference” between educator and student, feminist pedagogues have, with much more nuance, considered this relationship in terms of the possibility of establishing solidarity in the context of complex interplay of “social and psychic relations” of oppression in educational spaces, shaped by race, ability, sexuality, class and colonialism (Manicom and Walters, 2012, p9).

Across the strands of thought I have sketched here, it is in this context of transformed relationships that collective knowledge-making and action can take place. For pedagogues arguing for a return to a Freirean dialectical materialist approach (Carpenter and Mojab, 2017; Au, 2017), this is not a matter of replacing one set of ideas with more radical ones, thereby replicating the banking model of “domesticating” education. Neither is it a call for participatory education that begins and ends with people sharing their experiences and having their voices heard (although this is essential). Instead it is about dialogue that enables people to build a fuller understanding of the social relations that condition their experiences, countering the ways that the ideological thinking inherent to capitalism pulls the social world apart. Feminist and decolonial pedagogies demand attention to the essential and multifaceted role that experience plays in transformative education, and the naming of shared experience has played an important role in liberatory education. Experience can be theorised however not as a place of authority to speak from, but as the starting point for developing more complex understandings of our social lives through dialogue as well as a place from which people can speak with passion (hooks, 1994), something which itself can have a transformational impact on the speaker and listener.

The difference in the experiences of participants is something that also raises complex pedagogical questions which feminist and anti-racist educators have grappled with, providing both opportunities for critical dialogue as well as challenges as oppressive relations of power play out in the classroom. In this context, hooks’ call for a framework focussed on building communities rather than one focussed on safety in diverse spaces remains deeply relevant and challenging. A related discussion, prompted also by the histories of independent working class, women’s and black social movement education in Britain, is the vital role of spaces for transformation led *by and for* particular groups. The importance of these spaces are self-evident within each of these movements, as spaces for healing, the nurturing of selfhood, the building of collective knowledge around a shared position within social relations of oppression, and as powerhouses for organising. The felt need for these spaces is evident today in the emergence of, for example, the Free Black University. Radical Black and decolonial educational movements also challenge the notion that critical knowledge is always “new” knowledge, fighting also for the need to reclaim ancestral knowledge and ways of knowing (see for example Perlow et al, 2018).

Equally, when considering critical education as that which sees the transformation of interpersonal relations in educational spaces as inseparable from transformation at the societal level, the question arises of the role that these spaces might play in reconciling or healing past harms, and creating the conditions for solidarity and collective action across difference, through for example, rehearsing new ways of relating (Manicom and Walters, 2012).

Reasserting and reframing praxis

It is clear throughout this literature that transformation of social relations in the classroom cannot be teased apart from the transformation of society which, for critical educators, must be the aim of transformative education. Returning to Freire's work reminds us that action must not be separate from critical reflection on the world, but that the two are united in praxis, and a refusal to sever this link is a common theme across transformative education. The work of critical race educators and the history of anti-racist educational movements in Britain demonstrate how this action must not only take aim at the epistemic violence of educational institutions which produce knowledge that shores up patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy, but also at the ways in which the education system enacts violence against children of colour, from exclusion and segregated education through to incarceration. This work demands that transformative political educators are involved in the struggle against this system as an integral part of critical pedagogy.

The contributions of feminist educators and FPE theorists have also complicated masculinist notions of praxis, where 'action' in the world is perceived only as action in public, or 'on the street'. They have also warned educators against triumphalist narratives of the transformative impact of political education that fail to acknowledge the ways in which it can reinforce as well as disrupt oppressive power relations. By complicating the subjects of education through bringing the body and spirit into the classroom, and attending to the complex dynamics of power between participants and educators, they challenge critical educators to seek a greater understanding of the unintended and contradictory outcomes of their work, demanding a rigorous praxis that is also marked by humility.

Understanding the conditions necessary for transformative political education

Finally, these bodies of literature on critical education raise questions around the social conditions in which transformative education can flourish, charting the waning or shifting of radical educational movements over time. For the independent working class education movement, historians have sought to understand these shifts through charting the opportunities afforded by the wider political context as well as the developing relationships with middle class educational movements and institutions. They have also assessed the role of government funding



on trade union and adult education, largely arguing that it has had a neutralising and depoliticising effect. In contrast, Raey and Mirza outline how independent anti-racist education in the form of black supplementary schools has remained insulated from local authority funding, being sustained by black church networks (2001). More recent writing on adult education and trade union education has sought to demonstrate how transformative education has been able to flourish in the cracks of spaces that have otherwise lost their critical force and been incorporated into the neoliberal agenda (Mayo, 2021). There has also been a questioning of the idea that there is an inherent antagonism between “useful” and “really useful” knowledge – as exemplified in the historical accounts of the schism between the NCLC and the WEA – with the development radical ESOL schools providing an example of how “survival” education might accompany or provide a starting point for critical education. This possibility dramatically diversifies the spaces in which transformative education might take place, and the people who might participate in it.

Political Education Survey

Introduction

The survey sought to address the following research questions:

- What are the objectives of transformative political education projects in Britain and Ireland, and to what extent are they being met? What are the obstacles they are facing?
- What is the content/curricula of this education and what pedagogical approaches are being used?
- How are they resourced and what do these projects want or need from organisations like TWT and Amiel and Melburn Trust?

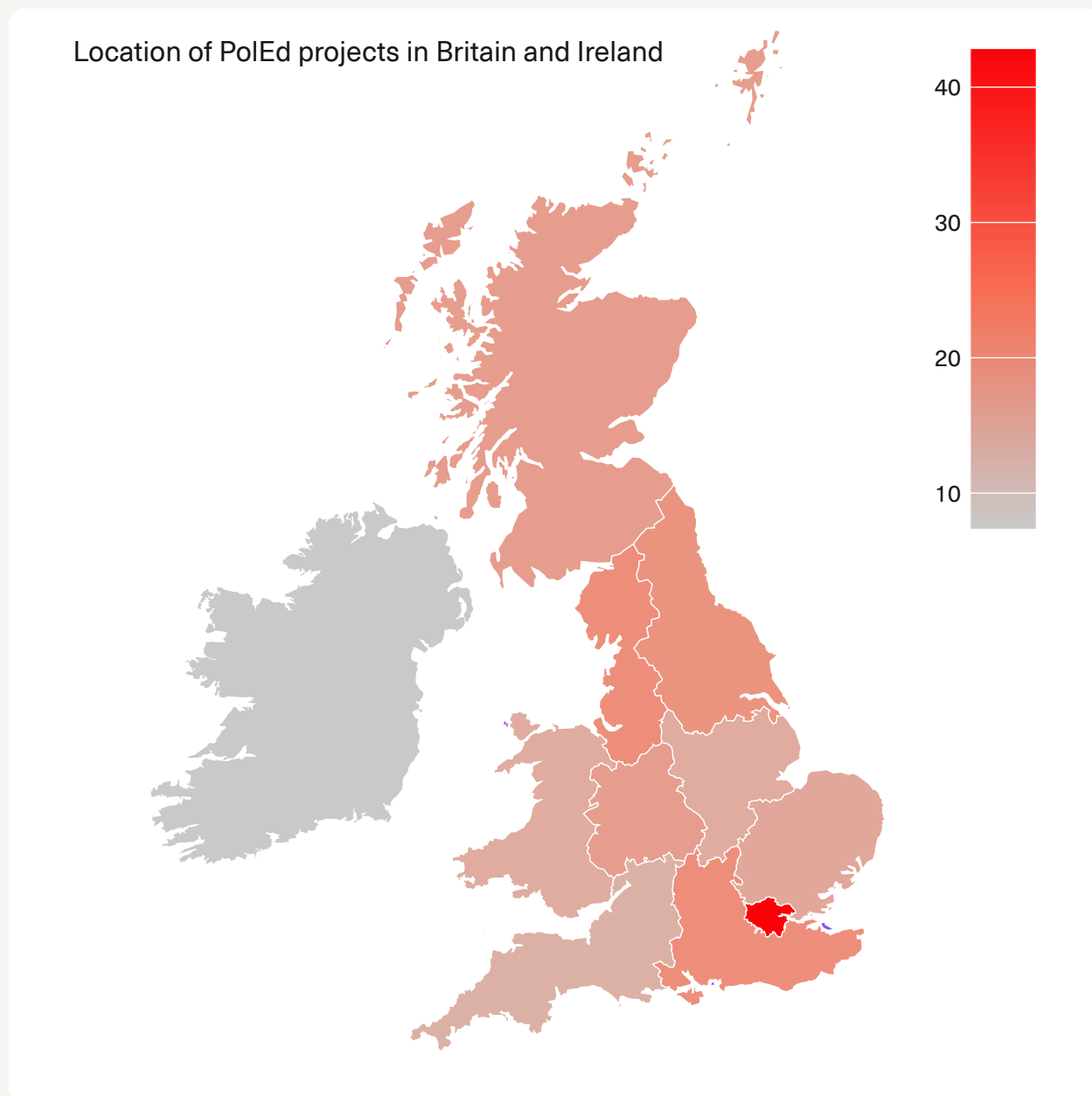
We received a total of 105 survey responses for political education projects from 87 organisations. Respondents were invited to submit information for up to 3 projects, and the majority submitted information about one political education project, with 13 organisations submitting information about either 2 or 3 projects¹⁴. Eligible projects were those that had been active since 2017, were primarily face-to-face (rather than online) and involved group-based learning.

As outlined in the methods chapter, a number of projects we approached wanted to contribute but preferred to have an informal interview rather than complete the survey. This was particularly the case with groups who understood education to be a secondary aim of their work, didn't see their work fitting into the framework of a "project", or simply couldn't find the time to complete the survey. These groups tended to be those who didn't have previous ties with TWT, those working outside the Labour left, or those using creative approaches to political education, and as such we were keen to learn from them. These interviews were incorporated into the qualitative data where possible.

The quantitative data was then cleaned and analysed collaboratively, and the qualitative data was coded independently by two coders, who then compared, discussed and re-worked them.

¹⁴ There were a handful of responses completed by people from the same organisations or projects. Because some of these answers differed and it was unclear whether they were reporting on the same or different projects, I included this data as separate responses.

Survey sample



There was a strong weighting in the survey sample towards projects operating in Greater London (40%). There were however a significant number of projects operating in north-east and north-west England (17% and 18% respectively) and in Scotland (15%). However, the figures for projects operating in different regions in England include organisations who also work nationally. Accounting for these groups, the sample was skewed towards national organisations and those headquartered in London. For example, of the 18 projects working in the north east of England, 10 were operating across Britain, while only 8 were solely working in the north east. Of those operating across Britain, 5 were headquartered in London and only 3 in the north east of England. These results also show an under-representation of projects in Wales and particularly Ireland (where only 7 projects were operating, and most in the North). While this could be interpreted as reflecting the geographic spread of political education in Britain and Ireland, it is more likely to be indicative of the organisations we were able to reach through our sampling process (see methods).

The survey sought to capture projects that had been active in the previous three years (January 2017-December 2019). The majority of the projects (64%) had been launched since the start of 2017. A quarter were launched between 2010 and 2017 and only 10% had been running prior to 2010. Of those initiated since 2017, only 30% were still active at the time of the survey in January 2019.

Needs and context

Participants were asked to describe the need or problem that their project was designed to address, and here I have summarised the key themes emerging.

Addressing a lack of knowledge or understanding

The most substantial theme emerging was around a lack of knowledge or understanding among a particular audience or within a particular organisation, including audiences such as “young people”, “the Labour Party”, “activist groups”, “the left”, as well as geographically-defined communities. Some projects did not mention an audience but suggested a more generalised lack of knowledge or understanding.

► *Historical understanding*

Within this broad area, 12 organisations identified a lack of knowledge of history, with the majority referring to a lack of knowledge around the histories of radical movements, including deportation resistance, the history of municipal socialism, working class women’s activism, British civil rights history, colonialism and the history of the Labour Party. For example, Culture, Power and Politics, who run free courses on cultural theory, cultural studies and contemporary politics, described a “low level of theoretical and historical literacy on the activist left, especially in England”, while another project sought to “engage younger Londoners with the history of Municipal socialism, which most had never heard of”. Others identified a lack of place-based radical history, and a number sought to address the marginalisation of particular groups in mainstream radical histories. For example, Spectrum Derbyshire’s “Deeds not Words” project was set up to increase awareness of “women’s social and political activism and role in working class history”, and another identified “the under-representation of women worldwide” in accounts of radical struggles.

Some organisations with historical knowledge as a primary aim hoped that these histories would enable people to develop a better understanding of the present. As an organiser with the multidisciplinary show Three Acres and a Cow explained: “People don’t know their history – this has a huge effect on how they perceive the present and form political consciousness”. One of the most long-standing respondents had been working with trade unions since 1973, and described how they were set up to “familiarise

workers with the history of their predecessors, and also to draw out from that history key learning points relevant to contemporary struggles”. Another organisation hoped their archive work would generate debate about anti-fascism, refugees and international solidarity today, through telling the history of the Spanish civil war.

► *Understanding the present moment*

A number of groups were concerned about gaps in collective understandings of the present moment, in particular neoliberal capitalism, with one project describing how they hoped their reading groups would “provide participants with an analysis of neoliberal capitalism, and offer case studies of alternative ways to build economies that value people and planet”. A couple of projects mentioned Brexit, with one seeking to build understanding about different perspectives on Brexit, and another emerging “as a reaction against the 2016 EU referendum result”, hoping to counter xenophobia by building “an understanding of the role migration has played in the wealth and health of the city”.

A handful of projects were connected to campaigns and sought to address a lack of knowledge about particular policies or political processes. For example, Global Justice Reading described how their educational work, consisting of stalls and street theatre, aimed to engage people in a campaign against TTIP, while another organisation described their project as part of the campaigning to change UK law around sex work.

While many of these projects sought to reach a general audience, a number of projects had identified knowledge gaps within their own organisations or on the left more broadly. Three projects for example aimed to address antisemitism and racism in leftwing spaces. One CLP described how its workshop on antisemitism for its members aimed to:

“Provide fact-based education and information, a chance to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding of the issue of antisemitism and within the Labour Party. To explore personal experiences and attitudes and political practice.”

One group who had been organising residential courses focussing on collective liberation described how their aim was to address racism both as an issue in society and *within* activist groups, with the hope that their courses could enable people to “practice anti-racism from the perspective of solidarity rather than allyship”.

Making connections between issues

A handful of projects described how they aimed to strengthen awareness of how different issues are connected. One project – a series of courses being run by a faith-based organisation – was designed to address a “lack of intersectional understanding of justice”. They went on to explain:

“[Our project] is founded on the idea that oppression is connected and that to tackle oppression, we need to address the multiple ways a person and a community can be subjected to oppression.”

One organiser was frustrated by the fact that issues such as housing and climate were addressed on the left as crises for the city, whereas increases in sexual assault weren't, and hoped to use the framework of the “critical city” in his political education work to make space for this multiplicity to be addressed. Another organiser described their series of seminars and workshops as attempting to tackle a failure within the Labour Party to see the interconnections between culture and politics:

“we believe that our specific tradition, rooted in the new left and the liberal strand of eurocommunism – which focuses on the importance of culture to politics, issues that class on its own does not allow you to understand, awareness of intersectionality, and commitment to dialogue – is under-represented in the Labour Party, but that these ideas greatly assist political understanding and strategy.”

Addressing democratic deficits and failures in knowledge-building

Several projects sought to address a perceived “democratic deficit” within institutions, including within the Labour Party, NGOs, trade unions or within local or national politics processes. For some, a lack of participation was linked also to a failure to build knowledge or produce ideas. Projects sought to resolve this through building understanding of democratic processes, up-skilling and increasing confidence, as well as making space for knowledge-building, either within these organisations or by creating new ones.

A number of CLPs were concerned that new people entering the Labour Party under Corbyn's leadership were unable to influence or “use” the party. One attributed this to their “poor understanding of how the party works locally or nationally”. These CLPs sought through their educational events to give people the practical knowledge and skills about party structures so that they could participate more fully.

“To interest members in actively being involved in the Labour Party, develop their political understanding, equip them with campaigning skills and encourage more members to stand for elected office.”

For some it was clear that the lack of active participation in the party was affecting the party's role or space as a producer of knowledge or ideas:

“I find that there is a real dearth of us engaging members. There are not enough events for members to get involved and it diminishes the ideas that come out. I wish that all CLP officers had to do an event every quarter as a way of engaging members.”

Others emphasised problematic cultures in Labour Party spaces which meant that meaningful participation and important conversations were difficult. One group described how they sought to address this by

establishing Monday meetings where people could “talk freely”, while another aimed to create opportunities for conversation in a “safe, secure environment”.

Others were more sceptical about working within these institutions, choosing instead to create alternative spaces to train and support people. For example one local Transformed group¹⁵ described their role as “putting on interesting events that would not be put on by the Labour Party”. Rather than struggling within the CLP to make this space, they set up their own space where these activities were possible. Another organiser explained that their project sought to provide an independent space for political education because they felt that the broad audience they wanted to engage would be put off attending if their events were organised by the Labour Party.

Similar themes emerged in other spaces beyond the Labour Party, where organisers criticised the cultures of social movements and leftwing organisations and sought to create spaces where people could “disagree well”. They also sought to address deficits in the leadership of social movements or institutions, arguing that curricula or cultures that weren’t attuned to the needs of particular groups had facilitated their marginalisation. One organisation aimed to tackle the way in which “campaigning in NGOs is often led by privileged people with no direct experience of what they campaign on”, and hoped to remedy this through training grassroots campaigners up with campaign skills. One migrant-led project explained how existing community organising trainings were either “too theoretical, lengthy, jargon heavy and/or not attuned to the experience of migrant organisers”, so they had set up their own project.

A trade union described how their activist education sought to bypass the “vested interests” that had led to an internal failure in democracy, in order to allow the nurturing of new activists:

“To counter the democratic deficit in structures, some of which are democratic in name only, allowing newer activists to develop their confidence away from the vested interests of those who might seek to block activity.”

Those seeking to address a democratic deficit in local and national political processes included Wimbledon CLP, whose project addressed the marginalisation of adults with learning difficulties in democratic processes by enabling them to “get more involved with politics, ensuring their voice is heard and encouraging and enabling them to vote in general elections”. Others referred to a lack of “democratic literacy” amongst particular parts of the electorate, including young people or “disadvantaged” people.

Problems were also identified in broader processes of knowledge-making in relation to policy-making, stating a need for greater collaboration between “the public” and decision-makers or academics, appealing for the inclusion

¹⁵ Local Transformed groups are groups inspired by The World Transformed festival and supported by TWT to organise local political education events

of marginalised groups, or calling for the need to recognise and skill-up particular groups as producers of knowledge. For example, Green New Deal described themselves as a “bridge between experts, politicians, and the public” while Economy’s aim to create a generation of “citizen economists” at the heart of communities spoke to the need to democratise knowledge-making around economics, taking it away from the domain of “experts”.

Addressing and injustice or claiming rights

A number of participating organisations were running educational projects that sought to help participants claim their rights or directly address an injustice. For example, one organisation had set up a programme supporting people affected by the Windrush scandal to understand their rights and help them make claims to compensation. A couple of organisations linked this kind of rights-based or “survival” education with education and training around collective action. For example, one sought to support people with experience of the hostile environment to understand their rights and find work through English language classes and practical skills-building, while also building political understanding and skills around organising and campaigning. London Renters’ Union described how their work involved addressing housing problems faced by their members through 1:1 coaching and support, as well as supporting them to take collective action through organising skills, while an arts-based project focussed on supporting a group of people affected by immigration controls to create an educational podcast for others on navigating housing issues.

Building or spreading an alternative vision

Several respondents described how their educational projects intended to build or articulate a socialist vision. A number of groups saw the “rise of Corbynism” in particular as an opportunity to do political education around socialist ideals or “Corbynomics”. For a couple, this involved “platforming” socialist ideas or the need to “spread” or “popularise” these ideas. In contrast to this language of dissemination of ideas, Red Plenty Games Collective described the need they had identified as one of articulation of a “nascent political common sense”.

Failures in mainstream education

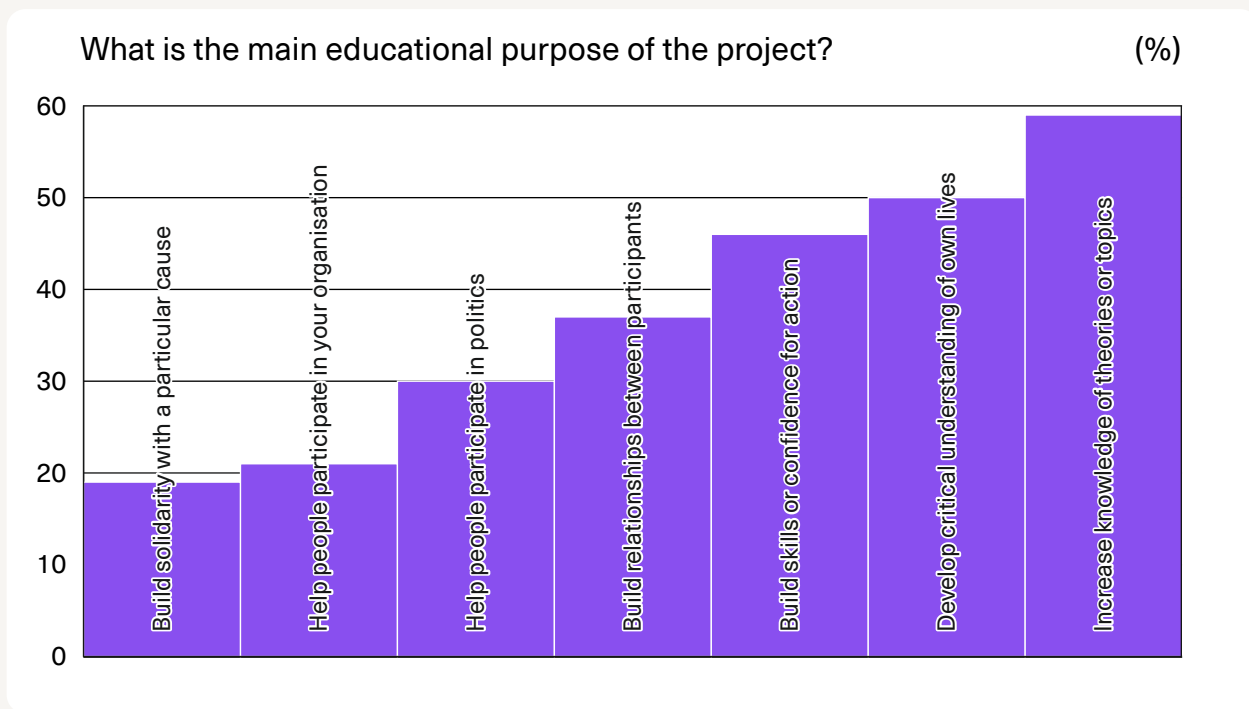
Several projects sought to address educational failures in schools, universities and the youth sector. These projects identified gaps in the curriculum, citing in particular a lack of space for discussing race, politics and radical history. They also described pedagogical failures in mainstream education, with one project describing how they wanted to offer a space that would “centre student knowledge/discussion rather than boring lectures”. Others explained the ways in which people are excluded from higher education due to “tuition fees, government cuts, and

the marketisation of universities”, and hoped that their projects provided alternative models to accessing education. While most of these projects focussed on the way in which mainstream education failed young people, one project sought to address the poor quality of socialist education in the informal youth sector.

One arts-based project cited the difficulties in accessing arts education but also went further to describe “the dwindling of civic socio-cultural facilities”.

Whilst I have teased out these themes for analysis, several projects understood and described the ways in which these particular problems were connected and exacerbated one another. For example, as outlined above, a couple of those seeking to address immediate gaps in knowledge around rights or provide “survival knowledge” considered this knowledge as deeply connected to the need to understand experiences systemically.

Project objectives and outcomes

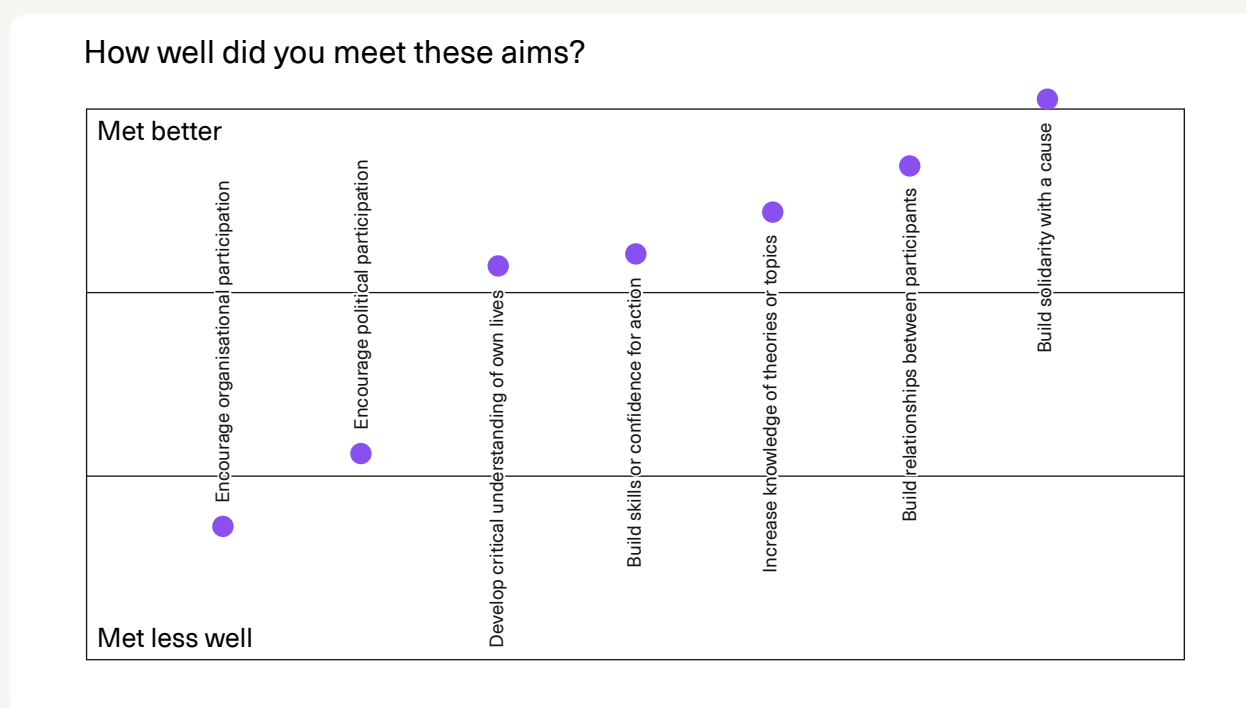


Participants were asked to select the main purposes of their project from a list of 7 identified objectives, with a maximum of 3. The most frequently selected purpose was “increasing knowledge about theories or topics” (59%), followed by “developing a critical understanding of their own lives”, which around half of the groups chose (51%). Building skills or confidence for action was selected by just under half of groups. Less common objectives, but still selected by 1 in 5 groups were “building solidarity with a cause” or “helping people to participate in an organisation”. Overall 1 in 5 didn’t select one of the two explicitly knowledge-based aims, with a significant number conceptualising their work primarily in terms of enabling action, with education as instrumental to it rather than a goal in itself.

Those who selected “other” helped to flesh out and also complicate the distinction between the goals. For example, two organisations described their objectives as enabling people to understand their activism in historical context. This exposes an assumption in our initial categories around “action” as associated with acquiring “skills and confidence”, rather than also requiring other kinds of knowledge and understanding, or involving praxis (reflection and action). This splitting of skills-based from knowledge-based outcomes was also reflected in the data, which indicates a slight negative correlation between them: groups selecting knowledge-based outcomes were less likely to select skills-based ones and vice versa. It was also a tendency that one organisation articulated in the survey, and also emerged in a couple of interviews with organisers.

In the interviews with some organisers involved in arts-based or youth empowerment projects, conceptualising their work in terms of “educational” outcomes was uncomfortable, as they were more interested in creating group processes where for example the outcomes might be decided by the group.

Project impacts



Participants were then asked to rate how successfully they felt they had met each of these objectives, on a scale of 1-10. There was a marked difference between the various objectives, with participants indicating the greatest success in objectives related to building solidarity, either with a cause or between participants. Aims around building knowledge, skills and understanding were considered to be met reasonably well, but those relating to participation scored less well.

This data could be interpreted as indicating that projects are more confident that they are meeting objectives relating to solidarity, knowledge and skills/confidence but less confident that their education is actually

translating into organising objectives, where this is a key purpose of the project. It is possible that these longer-term objectives around institutional change are more difficult to measure once someone has “left the room”. Equally it might speak to an over-confidence in meeting objectives around solidarity, knowledge and skills/confidence because of challenges of measuring these more subjective outcomes, whereas it is much easier to identify when objectives around participation are not being met.¹⁶

People were also asked in an open question to describe what difference they thought their project had made. From these I identified the following themes:

Increased understanding, transformed thinking and dissemination of knowledge

A number of organisers described how their projects enabled people to “grasp”, “understand” or “appreciate” certain ideas, or become “better informed”. The organiser of a course designed for young people described how they felt it had a “massive impact” on the students’ understanding of race and class as well as the ability to “make connections”, attributing this impact to the length and frequency of the course which ran over the duration of two years:

“Honestly because it runs every week I think it has a massive impact. The students grasp incredibly complex ideas about race/class/racism etc. and are able to make connections that a lot of masters students I know can’t make. They also develop their speaking skills and grow in confidence.”

In contrast, the organiser of a two-day course focussed on racism, which was run for an activist audience, felt like they may have helped shape people’s understandings of racism, but was more ambivalent about whether this wouldn’t have been the case for everyone.

“I think some people will have deepened their understanding of racism and how they perpetuate it – others I would guess haven’t.”

Others described a change in the *kind* of thinking people were able to do – for example, they talked about how people were able to “apply a historical event to a current situation” or “use Marxism as an analytical tool”. One organisation explained how their project equipped working class people with “tools to think critically about the system and to dissect the narrative being presented by the right”. Another described how their project enabled people to “think more strategically”, and Unite described that their political education work led to a “raising of political consciousness”. Others spoke in terms of enabling activists to “situate their struggle” by putting their experiences in context:

¹⁶ Thanks to Matteo Tiratelli for sharing his insights around this particular trend in the data

“We were largely successful in working with a large number of community and trade union activists, many of whom had no party political affiliations, to help situate their struggle and lived experience within broader social, economic and political processes.”

At times the ability to think critically was connected to an increase in confidence, such as the case of an economics reading group where participants developed “more confidence in critiquing orthodox economics” and were “less cowed by orthodox economic language”.

For other organisations, the knowledge participants acquired was focussed on meeting immediate needs (or “survival knowledge”) – for example knowledge about their rights (such as renter rights or migrant rights), or language skills. In this second case, language skills were a precursor both for enabling people to understand and claim their rights as migrants and for them to participate in collective organising. This range of different kinds of knowledge were also visible in the way for one arts-based project:

“The actors have learnt lots more about themselves, their own rights and way to vote and expand their knowledge and interaction with politics.”

A few groups referred to knowledge-based outcomes using distinctly different language. Rather than speaking about the impact on the understanding or “consciousness” of the participants, they described their successes in terms of a spreading or dissemination of ideas around particular issues, or in terms of “raising awareness”. In contrast to these outcomes, a handful of groups spoke about the knowledge as something *produced by* the group itself. For example a Forum Theatre project organised by a CLP described how it “helps us work together to provide the best answers in a clear and pragmatic way, while a local Transformed group described how it aimed to work with participants to develop priorities for local policy.

Finally, a couple of organisations spoke in terms of building understanding and empathy between people with differing viewpoints, including the Forum Theatre project which described how it helped “increase empathy with people who don’t think like you”.

Enjoyment and a sense of being part of something bigger

Some groups highlighted that people had enjoyed their projects. For example one Transformed group said that their work “made political solidarity enjoyable”, while one CLP-based project described their events as a “refuge from the tedium of branch meetings”.

There were frequent references to people gaining a “sense” of being part of something bigger. Several groups described a sense of being part of a history of resistance, with some connecting this to a sense of solidarity or strengthened conviction:

“It has given them a sense that they can learn from the past, given them a sense that when they act they are carrying on a political tradition.”

“A stronger sense that deportation resistance has been going on a long time and we need to see our current work in historic context.”

“For the period that the campaign was active, we helped to instil confidence among activists that their mobilisation was necessary, justified and indeed historic.”

Others discussed an increased sense of belonging to a place, such as finding a “sense of place in the city”. A sense of “comradery” or solidarity was also mentioned several times. For example, one Transformed group explained:

“We’ve only just started, but there is at least a strong sense of comradery amongst people who have attended events.”

More activists and more successful organising/action

A significant number of respondents described ways in which their projects had enabled people to take action, or to “become activists”.

“We have secured a group of around 10-20 very dedicated activists to various different causes now.”

While some spoke in general terms, others described particular activities people had gone on to do: this included enabling people to organise their own events, join campaigns and go canvassing. Some specified that they had enabled people to take action for the first time, such as those “who had never canvassed before”. Others didn’t specify that actions were taken but described how their activities had increased people’s confidence to take action, such as Spectrum Derbyshire, who described “increased confidence among women to become more active in civil political life”.

A few groups linked their educational work directly to changes in policy or to campaign “wins”. While some of these groups were campaigning groups – where their educational work was understood in the context of a campaign (such as the campaign against TTIP) – others were groups with primary goals of education or claiming rights, where organising or campaigning had emerged more organically from this work.

In contrast to those who connected their projects to campaigning or organising outcomes, others reflected on the limitations of their projects in relation to “concrete action”. One group described how they felt there was “more of a shift in mindset and a thirst for more learning, rather than concrete actions taken by participants.” Another was clear that while the campaign that the educational project was part of turned out to be ultimately unsuccessful, those who had been through their educational programme continued to be politically active:

“To a large degree, we were successful in cultivating a radical community, trade union and political activists who momentarily posed a potent threat to the political establishment in Ireland. That moment came and went, but many of those people remain politicised and active in different spheres.”

Democratising and strengthening organisations

Some respondents shared changes that their projects had initiated within their organisations, on other organisations, or on the wider culture of the left. Several described how their projects had led to a more active membership or greater participation. One union described how their work had led to an increase in strike turnout and attributed this directly to their training for workplace representatives:

“In our recent strike ballot, workplaces without a rep got a 24% turnout, workplaces with a rep got a 34% turnout, workplaces with a rep got a 44% turnout. It was the only statistically significant variable.”

Some CLPs described how their educational work was attracting new members:

“We started with an attendance of 4 after a break with no meetings or activity whatsoever. We have branch meetings with about 25 members plus more at our public meetings. We have 75 members who deliver leaflets or telephone canvas on a very regular basis. Our educational work has resulted in [the branch] having more activists than the other nine branches in the CLP put together.”

Beyond an increase in active members, CLPs also reported how their events led to the development of new motions, such as an antisemitism motions.

Other organisational shifts included the engagement of new audiences for the first time, and wider changes to organisational approach or strategy. For example, one youth organisation described how their project had changed the organisation’s wider approach to education, refocusing it on values and socialist theory. Beyond their own organisations and institutions, people described how their educational work had impacted the left more broadly, particularly in persuading other organisations of the need for political education, or of the value of a particular educational approach. One organisation working in the field of migrants rights described how their work had made it clear to the wider movement that a “singular focus on casework wasn’t enough”, while another organisation described that its work was instrumental in persuading the left to develop an understanding “that the way we do education matters”.

Forging new relationships

Several of the respondents spoke quite broadly around how their project had helped to “build” or “forge” new connections. This included connections between those who wouldn’t have usually worked together. One organiser described how organising political education events outside of the Labour Party had enabled Labour activists and activists from local community and environmental groups to have new conversations.

Another organiser reflected on the challenges of building relationships in their project, describing that while they had succeeded in forging

relationships between the younger activists, they had struggled to build greater social interaction between younger and older participants.

For some, this forging of relationships was impactful because it created the possibility for people to take action or to work together afterwards. As one organiser described:

“It has given many groups and individuals a network and framework to take action.”

Developing leaders

A handful of organisations described how their work had enabled people to take on leadership roles within their organisations or communities, or to become teachers or peer educators themselves. One described how, following their course, participants were paid to deliver workshops themselves building on their learning. A couple of organisations spoke more generally about the impact of those involved in their activities “carrying ideas” back into other spaces, such as workplaces, Labour Party branches or sectors. One course designed to support union activists described:

“The feedback we have received is that trade union activists who participated in the pilot courses have carried the ideas and discussions into their workplaces, trade union structures and into Labour Party branches, positively impacting on their respective activities and encouraging action on the part of those around them.”

New spaces and new conversations

Several project organisers described their impact in terms of the unique space that they were able to create. A couple focussed on the kinds of conversations these spaces facilitated. For example, one described how they were able to create a place for “open and comradely discussion” and a place where people were able to “speak without judgement”. In their educational workshops on antisemitism, one CLP described how they were able to create a space that “allowed people to engage with the issue, Jews and non-Jews”, while another arts-based project stated that it had “opened conversations between politicians and people with learning disabilities”. One project described how they were able to create a “neutral” space which was attractive to those put off by other leftwing spaces:

“We were able to act as a space to bring together different groups and link up organisers and venues. While we consider [it] to be an anarchist project, this is not explicit or exclusive, we are not affiliated with any particular group and are considered relatively ‘neutral’ within the autonomous left, which means we can attract many more people into political activities than the more explicitly anarchist (or even socialist) groups.”

Ambivalence, non-linear and multiple impacts

While many projects spoke confidently about the outcomes of their project, some were more ambivalent about their impacts. Some described them as partially successful, or said that it was too early to really know. One artist-organiser raised the issue of the possibility of measuring educational outcomes in their work, explaining that “education is something you can’t evaluate then and there on the spot”.

It is also worth stating that most projects described multiple interdependent impacts, reiterating the qualitative findings in the case studies around how multifaceted political education projects can be. For example, one project described how their monthly events led to participants getting involved in a successful campaign, as well as built relationships and laid the ground for future work, built understanding and developed “activists” in the sector:

“We helped pile the pressure on to Spotlight (the casting directory) to provide a non-binary/gender non-conforming option for actors’ gender. But in less tangible ways, we’ve definitely helped people forge connections, and built a solid base so that we could make the more ambitious sessions... It has helped us build connections and knowledge and understanding of ourselves as workers. The most significant thing I think is that we have secured a group of around 10-20 very dedicated activists to various different causes now.”

Sometimes these multiple impacts were described as primary impacts and those that were achieved “on the way”. A couple of organisations were unsure whether they had achieved their primary aims focussed on knowledge or strengthening activism, but were more confident that relationships had been built, that people felt a sense of solidarity, or had “enjoyed themselves”. These accounts reflect insights emerging from feminist popular education around the ways in which the relationship between education and social change is “non-linear”, and challenge instrumentalist accounts of transformative political education and narrow understandings of social change (see literature review).

Audiences

Participants were asked who was the target audience or participant for their project, and were able to select multiple audiences. Around 70% stated they were open to anyone, although 40% said they had a primary focus on “internal” political education within an organisation. Around 1 in 4 were directed at people affected by a particular issue, and a similar number were targeting people based in the area they lived in. 1 in 5 were targeted at students and/or young people. Only 1 in 10 were aimed specifically at workers. What these figures don’t speak to is the numbers of each audience reached by these projects, which vary significantly in terms of scale and who they reach. Whilst fewer projects were targeting workers, some of these projects were very large-scale union programmes.

Projects that selected “other” described how they were targeting grassroots campaigners or those involved in specific campaigns and social movements. A number specified particular internal audiences such as trade union reps, or newer members in CLPs. A couple described how they were working with those who hadn’t had access to university education, and one described their audience as those “who are less heard” in discussions around economics.

Participants were also asked whether their projects were focussed on working with a particular marginalised group, and 11 participants responded “yes”. Named marginalised groups included people affected by the Windrush scandal, adults with learning disabilities, Muslim young people, working class people and communities, migrants, residents on estates, queer people, and people of colour.

In addition, participants were asked if there were audiences they hoped to reach with their political education work. Among the wide array of answers, young people emerged as a strong theme, being mentioned by 11 organisations. Another theme emerging was the desire to engage more with people living locally, or build an audience that was “more representative” of the area in which they were based (and in particular less white and middle class). Others spoke in terms of reaching working class audiences. Several talked about wanting to reach “unengaged” people – those who are “not politically active” or “not already committed to socialist ideas” – either in their local area or beyond. This seems to suggest a sense among some groups that they were ‘preaching to the choir’.

Another cluster of projects wanted to reach people who had had fewer educational opportunities or hadn’t been to university. One project described a struggle to get beyond the “academically gifted” whilst running a project in schools:

“It still doesn’t always reach who I’d want it to. Many people who come are already very academically “gifted”. That being said, there are still a range of levels and most people are black/brown/working class.”

A couple of unions described their struggles to reach bigger numbers of workers in general, and mentioned the challenges they faced in doing this:

“We would always like more attendees – barriers are around time/ release from work/ability to commit to ongoing activity/anti-union sentiment from employers.”

Several organisations talked about wanting to reach people of colour, with a couple describing that they had more people of colour at their events now than previously, and one complaining that despite this shift their spaces were still ‘dominated by white people’. One project working with Muslims was particularly keen to reach out to Black Muslims.

A handful of organisations described wanting to reach those who were impacted by particular policies. For example, one organiser reflected that the space they created was still “quite an activist/educated space”

despite attempting to reach people personally impacted by the themes of the project:

“The event was well attended and I think the people who came got a lot out of it but there were very few people who are themselves personally at the harshest end of the border regime – so it was still quite an activist/educated space.”

Another group of projects were hoping to reach those inspired by Corbyn – or, as one organiser described, “the newly emerging left constituency”.

These results speak to a widespread anxiety around who is and isn’t attending political education. There was a sense that people wanted to reach beyond people who shared their political ideas, and potentially also beyond those who shared their socio-economic experiences. Further analysis into the identities of the organisers of each project would have helped tease this out. The desire to reach more young people interestingly came from a wide range of organisations, including those already working with younger audiences. This perhaps points to a sense of urgency or opportunity around working with young people. Interestingly only one project sought to engage older people, and another had sought to make a space for intergenerational learning.

Curricula and formats

Themes addressed



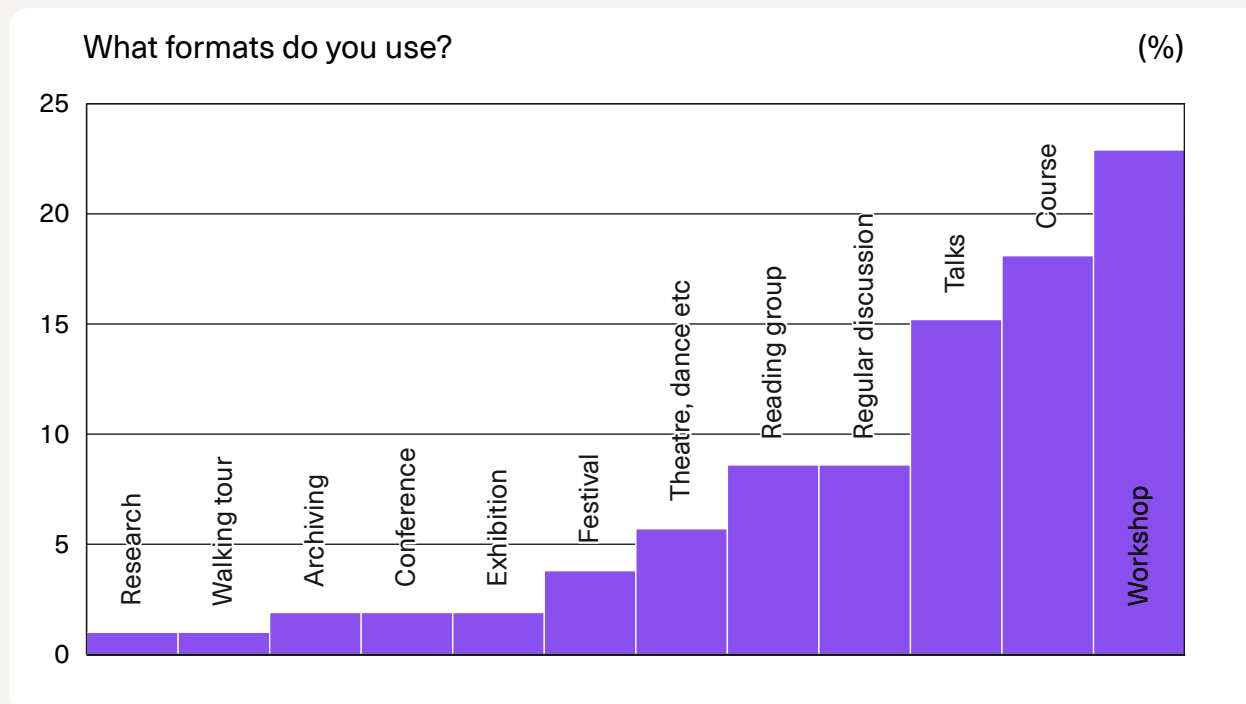
Participants were asked to select from a list of 28 topics that they explored in their project, and could select as many as they wanted to. “Capitalism, neoliberalism and/or austerity” was the most frequently addressed theme, named by 59% of participants. This was followed by “campaigning and activism skills” (46%), closely followed by “political institutions and

democracy” and “work, trade unionism and/or labour history” both selected by 45% of projects. The next two most commonly cited themes were racism and/or anti-racism (42%), and feminism, women’s rights and/or patriarchy (41%). Those that were selected less frequently included anti-religious prejudice (10%), anarchism (10%), criminal justice (14%), LGBTQI liberation (16%), disability rights (16%) and mental and physical health (18%). Further analysis of the data also showed that those selected least frequently were also selected alongside a larger number of other themes, suggesting they were not a significant focus of many of the projects.

This analysis of the data also showed that the content most likely to be selected independently of others was “campaigning and organising skills”. This seems to support the data around project objectives above which showed that projects with campaigning and organising skills-based objectives were less likely to also have objectives around building knowledge or understanding.

The prevalence of projects with a focus on racism and patriarchy (over 40% for both) is significant, and might reflect the success and current visibility of anti-racist and feminist movements. The data doesn’t show, however, the weighting given to this content compared to others, and given the frequent criticisms of the ways in which leftwing spaces include discussions around white supremacy and patriarchy in a siloed way, an important avenue of enquiry would be to explore further the ways in which these themes are incorporated and discussed in relation to other themes. This is a subject that I will return to in the case studies.

In the interviews with organisers it was clear that speaking in terms of a “curriculum” was difficult where group process or group empowerment or voice was a key part of the project. This was the case, for example, with some arts-based projects, and projects focussed on emboldening working class young people. One described how the primary aim of their youth project, which was “definitely leftwing” was about “wanting them to be themselves”, while an artist described how they were “not offering a course on x or y” but that the content of the project was directed by the group. Here the methodology was primary, and curriculum secondary. It’s likely that some of the projects that ticked every topic in the survey were similarly projects where the content of the course was defined by the group rather than pre-determined and so couldn’t be defined in advance.



Participants were asked to select the best description of their project from a list of 14 different formats. Almost a quarter of groups described their project as a “workshop or series of workshops”, while 1 in 5 of projects were “courses or programmes”, which were defined as those in which a series of events were hosted for the same group of participants. 15% described their format as a talk or series of talks. These three accounted for 56% of all projects. Less frequent formats were those which were more informal (discussion groups and reading groups), as well as performing and visual arts-based methods (festivals, theatre, dance, exhibitions). In the case of arts-based projects, this might reflect the challenges faced in engaging some artists and arts organisations in the research, related to a discomfort around describing their work as “educational” (see methodology).

The entries described as “other” demonstrated the lack of clarity around the distinction between “workshop/s” and “talks” in the survey, and the difficulty that people faced in categorising projects that crossed over categories and consistently drew on different educational tools. For example, one project described their format as “talks followed by open space”. Others flagged educational spaces that had been omitted from the survey, including advice surgeries, street stalls and online resources. While these didn’t fit within the eligibility criteria we had outlined for participation in the survey – projects that have a face-to-face component and are group-based – it was a reminder of the ways in which education is embedded particularly across social movements and the difficulties in, and limitations of, teasing out educational spaces from campaigning or organising ones.

Additionally, participants were asked to select educational methods they used in their project from a list. Discussion between participants about ideas and talks/presentations scored similarly highly, each being used by

70% of projects. Almost 60% involved discussion between participants about their lives and experiences. The figures also suggested a significant use of more experiential and arts-based approaches, with over a quarter using learning or strategy games, and the same figure for use of role play and/or theatre. Almost a third incorporated the arts to initiate discussion and/or involved making art to explore ideas (e.g. films, zines or poetry), and 20% involved learning a skill by trying it out. Methods outlined by those selecting “other” again emphasised the use of educational approaches outside of formal group-based learning such as one-to-one conversations, street stalls and oral histories.

Pedagogical approaches

Organisers were invited to “share any further information on how people learn”, and 59 organisers added more detail.

Several of them took the opportunity to explain the variety of different tools and approaches they were using within one project. Sometimes these elements had developed from one another as needs or opportunities emerged, at other times they had been planned simultaneously as a part of a project working with, for example, multiple audiences. One group described how their project began with a podcast and from that emerged a series of panel discussions, consciousness-raising workshops and other “innovative participatory workshops”. Another organisation, which shared information on three projects with different audiences and areas of focus, described their approach to one of these projects:

“Our project involved the creation of an online exhibition drawing on our archive collections, curating a series of workshops aimed at families and young people which included storytelling, scrapbook making and a Q&A session with a surviving refugee.”

In relation to another project, they described how their courses combined face-to-face learning with supporting online resources which allowed broader access to a national and even international audience:

“Our courses each comprise four classes. These take the form of an initial presentation and then a group discussion drawing on participants’ experiences. Reading lists and online resources are provided. An online course on moodle runs alongside these courses to facilitate access nationally and internationally.”

The use of further resources accompanying face-to-face activities featured several times, as did comments on adaptations made to the original format to make them more widely accessible or to reach a wider audience. One described the importance of audio recordings of seminars which significantly expanded their listenership, while the organiser of East End Walks described how they had given “illustrated indoor talks based on the walks for groups less able to do the walks”.

Participation

Many groups took the opportunity to articulate the ways in which participation was supported or encouraged in their sessions. This included integrating Q&As into panels or seminars and making space for discussion among participants in small groups.

“This was a one day seminar with a series of guest speakers and the audience could ask questions at the end of the presentations and during the break.”

Conversely, another project described how the session began with a discussion about what participants knew, with the facilitator adding theory and further questions to build up a bigger picture:

“Session one is ‘what is colonialism?’. We start with students having five minutes to discuss that question in fours, from there we work round the issue. What do they know? Why do they know so little? I thread in a bit of theory/some examples and ask more questions of that nature as we go. Student perspectives are centred and they’re encouraged to throw ideas out and test them against one another in a kind and non-confrontational way.”

A couple of organisers emphasised how they sought to minimise “didactic” approaches:

“We try to maintain a pedagogically rigorous approach with minimal didactic “telling” and lots of learning through doing and discussion.”

While several people used the word “discussion” to generally describe interaction between participants, others detailed the specific purpose of the discussion. One organiser described how their approach sought to recognise that migrants on their course were already experienced organisers, so the focus of discussion was to facilitate the sharing of this experience and knowledge:

“Many have arrived as political exiles precisely because they were politically active in their countries of origin. Much of the training, therefore, has focused on supporting people to speak about their experience, methodology and the traditions they come from, whilst also gaining an understanding of the British political system and what is taking place in the UK.”

A few projects described the role that the sharing of experiences played in their discussions, with one describing how participants were encouraged to draw on their lived experiences “to learn about problems in the economy and the reasons for these”. Other projects that referred to the sharing of experiences included a couple that used approaches informed by the work of Augusto Boal such as Forum Theatre¹⁷. In one, the group developed a piece of theatre drawing on real-life experiences of healthcare which both

¹⁷ Augusto Boal (2019) developed a series of techniques under the banner of Theatre of the Oppressed that sought to allow participants to imagine and enact social change through the use of still images, movement and theatre.

enabled the participants to work out what policy changes they wanted, and advocate for them. Another project which drew on Boal's approach also explained how they incorporated approaches from Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire, and described their pedagogical process as moving from experiences to planning and taking action, whilst simultaneously learning language and literacy skills:

“Classes often choose a generative theme like health or housing and stick with it for a number of sessions moving from sharing experiences to planning and taking action. Language and literacy learning is weaved into each session.”

An important part of this approach was for the class to “choose” the theme. This notion of the content or curricula being directed by the group – where the group aren't only “participants” but also curators – emerged in other responses. For one project, the first half of their events involved peer-learning and listening speakers, and the second half involved an “open space”¹⁸ where participants could “suggest their own topics if they want to learn, impart knowledge, or further discuss something that was discussed in the first half”. Another organiser described the formation of their study circle, through which participants discussed themes they wanted to explore and then found information on these themes to bring to the group for discussion:

“We met and discussed the concerns people had and information they wanted to have emerged. So individuals went away to track down info on one aspect of the issues and we circulated this and met to discuss etc.”

This approach was a key part of a number of the artist-led pedagogical projects I spoke to who, as outlined above, were primarily committed to supporting a community or group process, from which themes or content would flow.

Others projects had developed train-the-trainer programmes, which sought to skill up people to deliver pre-planned workshops, and a handful described how they had produced resources such as reading lists and workshop plans to support people to self-organise their own peer-led workshops or reading groups:

“We produced seven booklets and eight workshop session plans for people to use in structuring reading groups focused on the topic, with an aim to build knowledge that leads to local actions.”

These varied understandings of participation and its role in education also indicate varied understandings of who holds knowledge or expertise and where it comes from (for example, its relationship with lived experience), how critical understanding is produced, and what the role of the educator is in this process.

¹⁸ Open Space Technology is a widely used method for organising events that allows participants to take leadership over the content.

The significant focus in the qualitative data on describing kinds of participation might reflect an increasing shift towards a culture of participation in leftwing spaces, and an increasing scepticism around the 'panel' as a format, which has come under fire for being both unengaging and undemocratic. The wide-ranging responses to this question demonstrate the limitations of understanding the processes at play within an educational space based on an understanding of format alone (e.g. discussion group), and even by descriptors such as "participatory" or "participant-led". As outlined in the literature review, terms such as "participatory" have been widely adopted without any challenge to the status quo around who is producing knowledge and to what end. Considering that "participatory" education is not synonymous with "transformative" education, this requires that we pay more attention to the processes of knowledge production and other intersubjective processes in the room. It also helps us move beyond calls for fewer panels or for more "creative" or participatory approaches and demands that we turn our attention to the kinds of processes of knowledge production we want to encourage and to the social relationships they require. For example, as an organiser at the Ragged University described, their projects used all kinds of different methods, but they were all underpinned by a particular social relationship. One artist organiser I interviewed described how enabling relationships of "reciprocity" was at the heart of their pedagogical approach.

Importance of social space

Another theme emerging was the importance of social spaces. Some organisers had formally incorporated social elements into their projects, while others reflected on the value of the informal discussions that took place between sessions/workshops. These spaces were opportunities to build relationships and to discuss ideas emerging in the sessions. An organiser for Christians on the Left described their residential weekends as combining skills workshops with "time for reflection, shared meals and socialising". Another project organiser explained the role that the pub played after their sessions:

"I always feel like the drinks in the pub afterwards are the most important part – when people get to know each other better and further discuss ideas and solutions to problems, and sometimes set things in motion."

Learning in/through activism or struggle

Other organisers described ways in which participants "learned through doing" or through participating in campaigns or struggles:

"We also run stalls at festivals in the town centre. Our members learn from explaining the issues to the general public, as well as imparting some information to others."

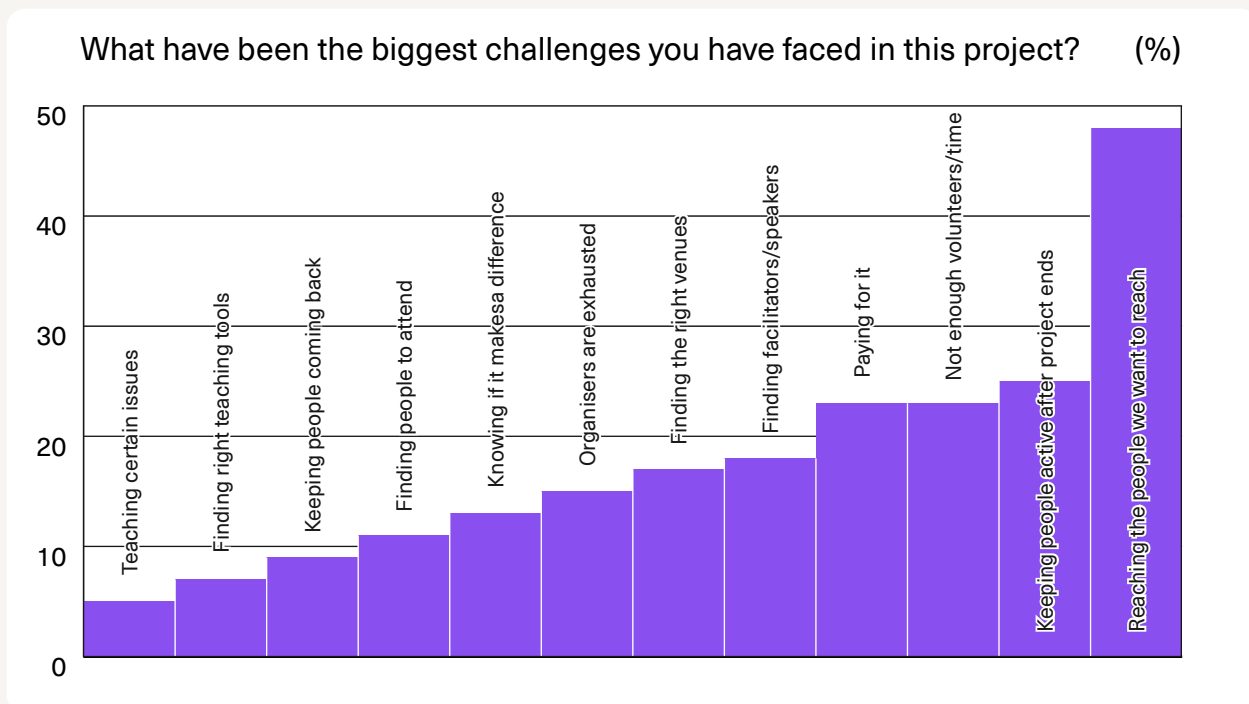
“A lot of training occurs throughout member solidarity struggles. Renters learn how to collectivise and campaign effectively this way. We also do a lot of one-on-one training/coaching with our membership.”

Once again these challenges point to the ways in which informal learning happened through the process of organising and struggle. Similarly, some of the arts-based programmes described learning as occurring more diffusely through participation in multi-faceted projects with multiple aims:

“They learn in many ways –through articulation in citizen led action research, collective theatre making, street performance, schools work, making a publication, developing a songbook and exhibitions for public display.”

Some of the arts-based projects and organising projects knew that learning was taking place, but these processes were embedded in wider work and were harder to demarcate. In these instances, learning was one of many goals, a means to an end or even part of a cycle. One particular group struggled to decide which part of their work to report on through the survey, since they understood that the most significant learning taking place was through reflection on action and therefore was indivisible. They ran training events but the organiser explained how these didn’t make sense when separated from the context of their members’ activism. Interestingly, this Freirean understanding of pedagogy as praxis – the cycle of action and reflection – didn’t emerge in a significant way in responses to this question, and wasn’t a clear option in our own multiple choice questions, although it might have been implicit in “sharing experiences” or in “learning-through-doing”.

Challenges faced



Participants were asked to choose the most significant challenges they faced from a list of options, with a maximum of three choices. Almost half of respondents stated that they were struggling to reach the audiences they wanted to reach. This was the biggest challenge identified both by organisations working with their internal audiences (e.g. working with their own membership or staff) and those working with audiences external to the organisation. This was in contrast to reaching more attendees in general, which only 11% of participants identified as a main challenge. Other problems identified by over 20% of participants were “keeping people engaged after the end of a project”, “not having enough time or capacity”, and funding. Notably, “teaching about certain issues or ideas” and “finding or making the right learning tools or teaching methods” were only selected by 5% and 7% respectively.

Dividing organisations by those working with internal or external audiences showed that those focussed internally were more likely to identify funding or “finding the right speakers, facilitators and educators” as a challenge, while those focussed on external audiences were more likely to cite exhaustion as a problem. In the interviews, a few organisers spoke about the challenges of finding facilitators or speakers with the right expertise and political views, particularly when trying to do political education on a larger scale. One union-based project spoke about how the quality of their trainers varied dramatically, while another spoke about the challenges of finding trainers who both had the right expertise and could also “connect” with workers.

Of those who selected “other”, several organisers described bureaucratic challenges or political resistance to the work within their wider organisations. A few organisers within CLPs described finding it difficult collaborating with other officers and carving out opportunities for political education. Another described the broader challenge of overcoming a “culture of non-participation in the local party”. In the context of trade unions, a couple of organisers felt that internal resistance to political education was connected to an assumption that their membership were not radical enough or “too bigotted”.

There were also anxieties across a range of contexts about navigating political divisions or differences within groups. One cited difficulties in addressing widely differing opinions in their group over trans rights, and another described how some people in their organisation were resistant to political education because of a caution around how to approach contested topics. Another organiser described the challenge of managing “ingroup-outgroup” behaviours within their political education projects, and another described how they were struggling to create informal intergenerational conversations in a multigenerational project.

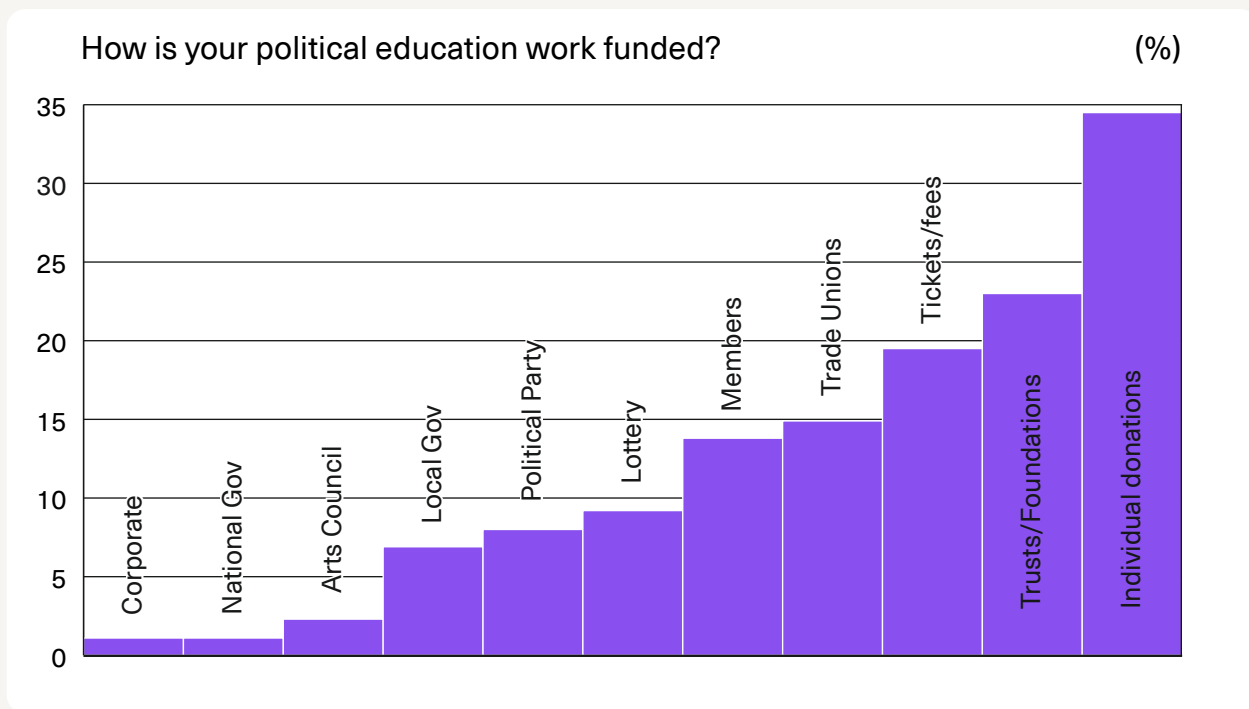
Others raised difficulties around “pitching” talks or workshops to diverse audiences, including one organiser who described the difficulty of designing their anti-racism workshops to suit the breadth of knowledge and diversity of needs in the room:

“The work is challenging and finding ways to make it relevant and accessible to a wide range of people is hard.”

Another group described the challenge of developing the content for their radical history project given the structural racism that erases Black women from history. Finally, some groups fleshed out more details on the problem of a lack of capacity, with one describing how canvassing for the 2019 election significantly delayed their project.

I took these results to a meeting of around 15 political educators to test the extent to which they resonated, describing the top 5 most cited issues and including the additional problems of lack of support from wider organisation and of internal political divisions, since these had emerged in the survey comments. All problems resonated, but those that resonated most strongly were lack of funding, followed by lack of time/capacity, reaching the right audiences, and, lastly, internal organisational resistance.

Funding sources

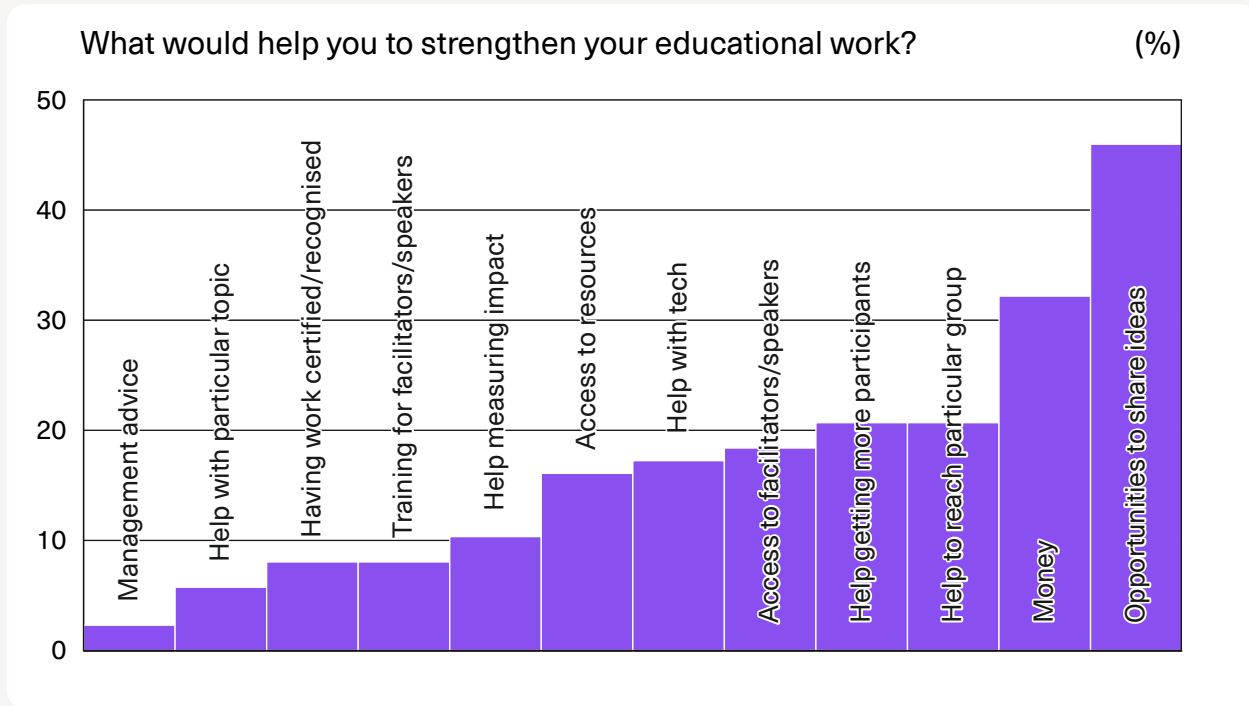


Participants were asked where their funding for their political education work came from. The most frequent source of funding was individual donations (31%), followed by trusts and foundations (20%). Only 15% stated that they were trade union funded (which excluded trade unions themselves), but these projects represented quite a wide range of groups from CLPs to local Transformed groups, a radical ESOL network and an archive-based project.

Six organisations were funded by political parties (these were labour CLP-based projects, but not all of the CLP projects were party funded), and a handful were receiving local government funding. These included archive-based projects at a museum and a library, as well as a community

arts project and an ESOL group. Elsewhere in the survey, and also in my informal conversations throughout the research, it became clear that groups were finding creative ways to access funding for their work where funding streams were very limited. One described how they managed to get funding through a friend running a project aimed at teaching science to “underrepresented groups”, while one organisation described how they managed to access a greater funding pool by framing their work as “peace-building” and downplaying the educational component.

Needs



Nearly half of respondents (46%) wanted more opportunities to share ideas with others doing similar work. Some described a desire to share experiences and techniques, while others mentioned wanting to collaborate. One explained how there appeared to be a “handful of separate projects” focussed on political education that should be working together.

“Not masses of info – we’re all busy. Perhaps pairing up with another group to share ideas and experiences.”

“Would be great to collaborate with precarious arts workers to make a bigger session, not just for theatre workers.”

Almost a third (32%) wanted funding or support getting funding for their work. People remarked on the desire for easier access to funding not hampered by internal bureaucracy, as well as funding to pay speakers or organisers who are currently volunteering. One explained that having previously rejected funding they are now seeking to become more sustainable:

“We always refused/rejected funding but we need to find a more sustainable model. At the moment co-organisers work for free for around 3-4 months per year.”

Around 1 in 5 wanted support reaching a particular audience (see section on ‘audience’ for elaboration on this) and a similar percentage said they would value support with using online technologies, with some wanting support developing websites and others wanting to consider how online technologies could be used to increase access to their events:

“For many young people group settings and events are exclusive. We would welcome an opportunity to explore how to reach young people through online technologies.”

20% wanted support reaching more people in general, and people identified internal bureaucracy, lack of commitment to political education in the labour movement, and GDPR as factors that made promotion more challenging:

“Getting through to Labour Party and Trade Union bodies to assist promoting events is difficult.”

18% wanted support getting particular speakers or facilitators, including trade unionists and those with “specific political knowledge”, with one describing that external speakers were essential for getting people on their courses involved in campaigning. 16% wanted support creating educational resources to use in their political education work, and only 9% requested training for their own facilitators, educators and speakers. The types of training mentioned included educational theory and training on “how to have difficult conversations respectfully”.

There are interesting differences between the extent to which people identified something as a challenge, and identified it as a need. For example, while they were less likely to request help reaching particular audiences (20%) than to identify it as a challenge (48%), they were more likely to request support reaching general audiences (21%) than to identify it as a challenge (13%). While teaching on particular issues or around learning tools were the least significant challenges, a higher number of projects felt that receiving support designing educational resources on particular projects would benefit their project. This included “a central training pack on types of UK politics e.g. left & right”. The language around “educational resources’ might also reflect people’s interest in getting support for using online technologies. While it wasn’t made explicit in the question about needs that these were needs TWT was seeking to fulfil, it is possible that this gap reflected the kinds of support they perceived TWT or a national network could or couldn’t offer. The fact that “opportunities to share ideas with other groups” scored so highly might reflect a sense that challenges such as reaching the right audiences would be better addressed through more tailored peer-to-peer sharing, rather than generalised support. The gap between reaching audiences as a challenge and selecting it as a need in particular might also suggest that people consider the failure to reach the “right” audience as related to intractable or systemic challenges, such as the challenge union educators face in reaching workers whose employers won’t grant them leave.

Conclusions

The need for political education

The survey painted a complex picture of the landscape within which political education interventions are taking place. Organisers sought to address what they saw as lack of knowledge or understanding across a wide range of topics as well as a lack of understanding around how our present moment is situated in histories and geographies of struggle. While some focussed on the need to get a better understanding of issues ranging from migration to antisemitism, disability and neoliberal capitalism, others identified failures in thinking in leftwing spaces, such as failures to think strategically and failures to understanding how issues are connected, in particular “cultural” and “economic” issues. It was evident too that the kinds of conditions deemed necessary for developing understanding – particularly to build understanding and empathy around other people’s perspectives or ideas – were considered severely lacking in many leftwing spaces. Furthermore, this kind of knowledge and understanding wasn’t to be found in mainstream educational institutions, which several groups criticised for their failure to make space for critique of the status quo both pedagogically and in their curricula.

Other groups, in contrast, talked in terms of the urgent need to build or spread a socialist vision through political education, particularly with the opportunity provided by a generational shift towards an interest in socialist ideas and by Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party.

For a small number of groups, their projects had identified particular injustices – for example, those relating to the hostile environment for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants – and sought both to provide the knowledge to survive these injustices as well as to develop understanding and skills necessary to address their systemic causes.

There was also a keen sense that political education was necessary in order to address significant issues around democratic participation and knowledge-making, and the marginalisation of particular groups in leftwing organisations, the labour movement and other social movements. For some, participation required the development of skills and confidence of hitherto marginalised groups while others were more sceptical about this strategy, instead seeking to create spaces outside these structures to nurture new leadership. As well as avoiding significant bureaucratic challenges, this also presented an opportunity for projects to develop approaches that centred the needs of those marginalised in mainstream leftwing spaces. Failures of organisational democracy or marginalisation of voices were also associated (though less frequently) with failures to build shared knowledge or the “best ideas”. Some projects hoped their educational spaces would allow better knowledge to be produced, either by enabling particular groups to be involved in knowledge-making, or by facilitating relationships between these groups and those considered to “know” or to be “experts”, including academics and the public.

Objectives and outcomes of political education projects

The majority of projects were interested in building critical understanding or increasing knowledge amongst attendees. When describing impacts on knowledge, some groups focussed on the kind of knowledge gained – for example an increased understanding of a particular theme or a particular part of history. Others, however, focussed on the new ways of thinking their projects had enabled. These included the ability to situate struggles in historical context, to make connections between phenomenon or experiences, to take account of other people’s opinions, and think strategically. These contributions together create a rich understanding of what it might mean for people to develop “critical understanding” or “critical consciousness”.

Different understandings of the process of knowledge production were also evident, with some groups talking about the “dissemination” of knowledge or understanding, while others spoke in terms of knowledge as being co-produced by those present in the room, reflecting the two contrasting approaches to education in Freire’s seminal text (see literature review), one of “propaganda” and one that is liberating. While the language in the survey suggested groups were taking different approaches, the case studies provide more space for engaging with the question of the relationship between organisations’ description of their pedagogical approach and how this manifests in practice.

For a few groups, what was significant was the kinds of conversation and interaction that had been possible between participants, rather than a particular “outcome” of knowledge. The majority of projects understood their objectives and impacts as extending beyond a focus on developing or disseminating knowledge, to include aims around building skills and confidence to take action, building solidarity, and strengthening or democratising institutions and social movements. While for some these aims were secondary, for others they were primary – for example where political education was a constitutive part of a campaign or was taking place to cultivate new leadership or activists in stale institutions.

When evaluating successes in relation to aims around increasing participation and increasing activism, some identified significant changes to organisations – such as increased numbers of more confident activists or active members – or connected the political education with a campaign outcome, there were others who were more tentative about the impact of their work, emphasising that it was too early to tell, or emphasising the affective impacts that they “felt” in the space while being unsure or downplaying others. The quantitative data also showed that overall groups were least confident that their work had enabled participation in political processes or institutions.

“I don’t know if it made a difference but it was fun!”

In contrast, there was a lot of confidence amongst groups that their projects had been impactful in terms of building relationships with people and building solidarity with a cause. The qualitative data echoed these

findings and also helped elaborate on both the relational and affective roles that political education plays. An emerging theme was the role of political education in giving people a “sense” of being part of something bigger or historic, through drawing connections between the present moment and history, or with other people’s experiences.

The ambivalence among some organisers around making causal statements between political education and political action, and the emphasis on more interpersonal or affective impacts such as empathy, also calls to mind the critiques of feminist popular educators around the uncomplicated and unidirectional relationship that critical pedagogues establish between education and traditional forms of collective action, while failing to attend to the subjective and interpersonal transformations that take place (see literature review). This challenges us to think more holistically about the kinds of transformation we are seeking through political education projects, and also to seek a greater understanding of the relationships between knowledge, subjective and intersubjective transformation, and wider social change.

Curricula and pedagogical approach

The curricula of the courses surveyed was quite varied, with popular themes including capitalism, trade unionism and labour history, organising skills, political institutions and democracy, feminism and anti-racism. The distribution is likely to reflect the sampling approach, which sought to identify projects emerging from different social movements and with different histories, such as the labour movement, anti-racist movement and feminist movement, but might also reflect the success of the feminist and anti-racist movements, in particular, in forcing gender and race onto the left agenda. However, the ways in which these themes are incorporated needs further exploration.

For a number of projects, including some arts-based projects and one focussed on youth empowerment, it was difficult to speak meaningfully about their curricula, since they worked in an emergent way, with ideas emerging from or in discussion with a group, rather than being pre-planned. In these projects, pedagogical approach took primacy over a set curriculum.

Projects tended to rely heavily on discussion groups and talks, although creative or experiential methods such as theatre, visual arts, role-play or games were quite widely used. Many were using a number of different methods within one project in order to meet different objectives and/or to enable them to tailor their projects to different audiences (for example combining face-to-face and digital). When describing their approaches, there was a sense of an emerging consensus around the importance of participation and a recognition – in the words of one organisation, that “the way we do education counts”.

Participation or discussion seemingly fulfilled distinctly different roles in the different projects. For some it was an opportunity to interrogate or

question speakers; for others its intention was to allow people to talk about their experiences; and in other projects its purpose was to harvest the existing expertise about a subject from participants. For some projects participation meant that attendees set the agenda or curricula of the sessions themselves. Often, however, participation was spoken about in very general terms without clarity on its purpose. This suggests that it may be fruitful to move beyond questions around format or calls for participation, and towards seeking greater clarity around the subjective and intersubjective processes at play in transformative educational spaces, with formats or methods as secondary considerations. In this re-arrangement, it would be possible to explore how a panel might serve a transformative function, or how a discussion group might serve to reinforce the status quo.

Another theme to emerge was the significance of longer courses and of smaller group sizes. The implication was that these courses allowed for greater engagement with the themes of the courses, and created a particular “safe space” or group dynamic that strengthened the project outcomes. The importance of informal and social spaces was also mentioned by several projects, and while this wasn’t elaborated on in depth, it is a theme that the case studies provide greater opportunity to explore.

The low number of explicitly arts-based projects in the sample, despite intentional outreach to artists and arts-based organisations, reflects the anxiety we encountered amongst some radical arts organisations and artists to think about their work in the the framework of political education, which seemed too restrictive to allow for the full subjective and intersubjective processes they were interested in facilitating. Since it was clear that these processes were at play in (and essential to) the political education projects that did participate, there is a significant opportunity for the translation of learning around transformative political spaces across arts based and non-arts based projects and disciplines.

Challenges and needs

Reaching the “right” audience was a significant challenge for many groups, and cut across a broad range of projects and organisations. A significant number of groups were particularly concerned about reaching young people, and there was a sense that groups wanted to reach people who weren’t already “converted to the cause” in order to grow movements and strengthen their own organisations. There was also a recognition amongst many groups that participants in their projects weren’t “representative” of wider society, their communities, or of the localities where they were based, and instead reflected and perpetuated wider processes of marginalisation. This varied significantly depending on the project and audience. While, for example, in a project with a high proportion of working class students of colour, it was less academically “gifted” students who weren’t taking part, in a project with mainly white and middle class attendees, it was people of colour and working class

people that organisers wanted to reach. This theme raises difficult questions for political educators around how to avoid replicating within their own projects the relations of oppression that marginalise people in wider society.

At a time when much offline education has been shifted online, those hoping to reach more representative “local” audiences face a new challenge. For example, as part of the research process, I attended a couple of political education events organised by CLPs in the north east of England that had been moved online and, for the first time, had participants joining from London, and I also spoke with organisers who said that they had reached an international audience for the first time with their political education events. The geographies of emerging online political education events and what role they can play in helping or hindering attempts to work with particular audiences is an area that will require further exploration in future.

Despite the fact that reaching the right audiences was a key challenge for almost half of those surveyed, organisers were far less likely to identify support with reaching different audiences as a key need, which might reflect groups’ opinions around TWT’s expertise. Instead, the biggest area of support groups identified by a significant margin was having opportunities to exchange with other organisations doing similar work.

Other significant challenges included keeping people engaged once the project ends, as well as lack of time and lack of funding, which all speak to groups’ struggles to resource their work in the long term. Only 20% of projects were funded by trusts or foundations, and only 15% were receiving trade union funding. Funding or support with accessing funding was also an area of need identified by one in three participants.

A significant number of projects were concerned about finding the “right” speakers, and the qualitative data suggested that what made them “right” was complex and varied, including expertise in facilitation, having the right politics, and being able to connect with an audience.

A further challenge emerging in the qualitative data was bureaucracy and internal resistance to prioritising political education in organisations such as CLPs and trade unions, demonstrating both the need to continue make the case for political education in these organisations, and the importance of creating spaces for political education outside of these institutional contexts (“in the gaps”). From the interviews it was clear that people were finding creative ways around these bureaucratic and institutional limitations, and further research and sharing of approaches to this would be valuable for organisers. It was clear also that *independence from* these institutions was an important factor in enabling certain projects to reach their intended audiences. This highlights the importance of nourishing a rich ecosystem of projects across different sites.

While very few people selected that they needed guidance on measuring the impact of their work, a number of organisations expressed uncertainty about whether their project was having the impact they hoped it would.

Similarly, while training for facilitators or speakers was one of the least frequently selected areas of need, it was clear that some organisers were facing challenges when facilitating political education or supporting others to, for example where there were areas of strong disagreement between participants or significant disparities in levels of understanding. Anxiety around navigating disagreement was also an element that contributed to institutional resistance to political education projects. Challenges such as these could be prioritised for discussion in peer exchange and networking activities between organisers of transformative political education.

Case Study: Demand The Impossible

Research process

We participated in Demand the Impossible (DTI) in winter 2019. Since The World Transformed was a supporting partner on the course we were invited to be involved in the development of the course as well as to take part in the full course as participant-researchers. While we were involved in initial planning meetings, due to other commitments and the general election, this involvement was less substantial than we had hoped. It did mean, however, that we were able to get a good sense of the organisers' process and the challenges of organising a course of this scale alongside full-time jobs.

We discussed with co-founders Ed and Jacob our research objectives and their own interests in the research, which included a hope that the process could contribute to the creation of resources to share with other educators interested in organising similar courses. This objective took a back seat as the pressures of the general election, competing paid work commitments and the Covid-19 pandemic took hold. However, we did later return to this idea of resources, reflecting on the challenges of promoting DTI as a ready-to-go 'model', as it relied in many ways on Ed and Jacob's particular skills and expertise as well their networks.

Our methods included participant observation, beginning and end-point surveys, an informal focus group and five semi-structured interviews with participants that took place at the end of the course. We also occasionally went to the pub with participants after the session and canvassed with them. We carried out two interviews with the course organisers, one after the course and one following the presentation of initial findings where the organisers responded to and critically reflected on the analysis. We also had a number of informal discussions with them throughout the duration of the course. We both attended and participated in the majority of sessions, and at least one of us was present at each. After each session we debriefed with each other on our experiences and/or took notes of our own observations.

In this case study I have drawn on data gathered through these different methods to build a picture of the course, how the participants experienced it and what impact it had on them, as well as the intentions of the organisers, the challenges they faced in meeting their objectives and how they were working to address them. I will begin with a brief history of the course – its objectives, audience and approach – before describing the objectives of the 2019 course. I will describe the profile of the 2019 participants and their reasons for taking part. I will then outline the format and pedagogical approach of the course as described by the facilitators, before moving on to describe the participants' experiences of the course and how it impacted them with a focus on impacts relating to knowledge and understanding as well as capacity for action. I will then explore some of the factors and aspects of the course's pedagogical approach that supported the development of critical understanding and effective action, as well as some of the challenges and obstacles faced by the facilitators in working with the group to meet these objectives.

The course in context

Demand the Impossible was in its eighth year by 2019, and in that time the demographics of its participants, its objectives and pedagogical approach had all shifted. The first programme was launched in 2012 by co-founders Ed and Jacob, both secondary school teachers at the time and activists involved in trade union, global justice, anti-austerity and anti-gentrification campaigns (among others). Ed describes how he would talk about them being “frustrated teachers and frustrated activists”. As teachers they described how the curriculum for teaching politics was, in Jacob’s words, “ironically depoliticised” – there was content around voting systems, constitutions, and political parties, but it wasn’t clear why any of it was relevant to the students’ lives. They wanted to run a course on politics where they could instead talk about political ideas “in a way that matters, that brings home their significance”.

As activists they were frustrated that the leftwing social movements they had been involved in preceding and emerging from the 2011 student protests were predominantly white and middle class. They could see that protests around the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance in England had strengthened and broadened the left movement in some ways, but felt that the movement was being led by young people at the whiter, middle class schools rather than the students they taught. They reflected on the attempts of sixth formers in their own schools to get involved:

“I had some of my sixth formers, clearly getting very politicised by that, but struggling to know how to participate. They failed to organise a walkout. It fell apart in embarrassment. Meanwhile, naturally, inevitably, I guess, it was like students at UCL in London who were leading the way and SOAS and what not, but even at school level, it was kids from Camden School for Girls, so basically it was a bit of, the activist world is too white and middle class.”

The first DTI course – a five-day summer school – was aimed at young people from Ed and Jacob’s schools, who were lower middle class and working class, and sought to engage them in radical ideas and activism. They were particularly keen to engage people who didn’t show any interest in politics or activism. However, they described how they quickly learned that the sort of transformation of consciousness they had hoped to see in the young people was not possible in a five-day course. Some participants made intellectual U-turns – “I thought capitalism was good, and now I’ve decided it isn’t” – but Ed and Jacob felt that some of the young people’s understandings were, by the end of the summer school, still quite contradictory, particularly when turning their learning into concrete ideas for change. When invited to apply their learning to campaigns at the end of the course they described how “a lot of what came out was not very radical at all. It was a real mixed bag and it was really contradictory”. Ed concluded:

“It brought home how the shift and development of your thinking and your capacities to act politically is, as we know, a really long and slow

process, and a single course is really just a small moment in that process, basically. I think we probably overestimated what we might be able to achieve.”

Alongside this learning curve, other factors began to shape who was attending the course. In the third year, they were offered a free venue at the University of East London through a speaker who had contributed to the course, who then suggested that students at the university would also benefit greatly from participating. This led to an increased number of higher education students attending, largely from post-92 universities including the University of East London. While initial courses were targeted at students with little or no knowledge, the facilitators began to identify a need among a slightly older audience who were also further along in their engagement with leftwing activism, but could still “really benefit from a course like DTI, to take a further step”.

After the fourth course the format changed from a summer school of five consecutive days to an evening course, as a result of the facilitators’ changing work commitments. This in turn made the course feel “more adult and like a university”, and it appealed to a more committed audience who would show up over a period of months.

Another factor influencing the shift in audience was an understanding that they didn’t have the resources to run the more intensive course that was necessary to nurture activism among the kind of cohort they initially intended to work with. They described how they weren’t in the position to do a year round “advocacy academy-style” programme¹⁹. Instead, supporting young people who had already done a bit of action felt like a good use of their limited capacity:

“It started to feel like it was a bit more useful to participants and also to the movement if we worked with people who were a bit closer to getting more active who still wanted to work through loads of ideas and it’s not just a case of they need some more skills and some confidence. There’s still lots of thinking to be done.”

Over eight years, the course had significant success in supporting young people – particularly those from marginalised backgrounds – to become actively involved in leftwing social movements. Participants on previous DTI courses, including young people of colour and working class young people, have gone on to play leadership roles in groups such as Global Justice Rebellion, Momentum, Right to Remain and London Renters’ Union. The success of the courses in engaging young people from working class and marginalised backgrounds is documented in *Now We Have Your Attention: The New Politics of the People* (Shenker, 2019), which profiles the experiences of a number of participants in DTI including those who had been through the asylum system, and a young man who had been street homeless prior to joining the course.

¹⁹ Advocacy Academy runs a 400-hour long ‘Social Justice Leadership Fellowship’ for young people aged 16-18 in South London over 6 months (The Advocacy Academy, n.d)

Course objectives and audience

The 2019 course was supported financially by two partners – Global Justice Now and The World Transformed²⁰ – who were involved in shaping the initial aims and objectives of the course and fed into ideas for the curriculum. An initial proposal for the course, developed collaboratively by staff at all three organisations, articulated its rationale:

The long-term prospects for a radical transformation of the Britain requires the continual generation and development of new leaders who can bring a radical analysis of society and a strategic orientation to their activity. The collapse of the neoliberal consensus and the rise of Corbynism has opened up a great deal of space for radical politics, but in its current state the left remains limited in several ways. Most relevant here are the following:

- Although more socially rooted and representative than just a few years ago, the left remains much too white and middle class.
- There is a relative dearth of strategic thinking across left institutions and groups.
- Much of the Labour movement, reflecting British political culture more generally, remains relatively parochial, as opposed to benefiting from a truly internationalist outlook.
- There is too often a culture of misunderstanding and mistrust across the Labour movement and the wider left/social movement sphere, rather than a productive relationship of critical friendship.

In this way the course continued the analysis and objectives of previous DTI courses, but with a particular interest in the relationship between the Labour movement and wider left in the aftermath of the 2017 election. Ed and Jacob had become involved in the Labour Party during the Corbyn era as part of the influx of social movement activists who had been previously suspicious or even hostile to the party and electoral politics, understanding it as a rare opportunity “to expand the audience for radical ideas and push for concrete legislative and social changes that would strengthen the hand of those committed to egalitarian, anti-oppression, socialist politics”. They identified that the political views of some young activists inspired by Corbyn had shifted since the 2017 election, with increased disillusionment with electoral politics and a growing interest in movements such as Extinction Rebellion and F*ck Boris, reflecting an “energised wider left movement”. This provided a unique opportunity to open up important discussions around strategy – the role of the state, and macro politics, beyond the limitations of simply talking about tactics for example. This overlapped with TWT’s aims of creating opportunities to develop and

²⁰ TWT had previously been involved in a DTI course in 2017 as one among a number of organisations who offered placements to DTI participants, supporting them to organise a one day youth focused event in East London as part of a UK-wide series of events called ‘Take Back Control’.

critically access an ‘in and against the state’ strategy, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the Left movement as an ‘ecology’.

On top of a lack of strategic thinking, the organisers felt that some parts of the “Corbyn left” were lacking an internationalist perspective, and so were keen to include an internationalist element in the programme. This was also a key objective for one of the course’s funders – campaigning organisation Global Justice Now.

With this broad understanding of the context in mind, the guiding aims and objectives of the course, initially developed in collaboration with TWT and GJN, were described in these terms:

- To build a diverse community of future leaders on the left.
- To embed effective strategic thinking and reflection on political practice.
- To foster constructive relationships of mutual learning between those in the Labour movement and those beyond it.
- To embed an internationalist outlook.

Recruitment

As described above, Ed and Jacob designed the course for young people who already had an understanding of leftwing ideas and some experience of activism. These priorities were reflected in their recruitment strategy, which included a focus on tapping existing youth activist networks, as well as flyering during the student climate protests of Summer 2019. As partners, TWT and GJN were also given the opportunity to propose a number of participants from their volunteer or staff networks.

As part of the recruitment process, participants completed a form where they described their political ideas. The aim was to build a cohort representing a range of perspectives in relation to the Labour Party and Corbyn in particular, including those who were more sympathetic and engaged in Corbynism, as well as those who were more sceptical. At the same time the organisers described how it was important for them to ensure enough shared ground among participants to avoid the course simply becoming a “debating club”, which might lead to a narrow, adversarial space for conversation. Instead they wanted a group with enough agreement on a broadly leftwing set of principles that they could explore finer details and “have some progression”. These factors were taken into account during their selection process.

Building on their objectives around diversifying movement leadership, the course also sought to reach out in particular to working class young people and young people of colour, and the organisers’ historic links with post-92 universities in London played an important role in this. The course’s publicity and application form made it explicit that the course was aimed at those from less privileged backgrounds, and widening participation

criteria²¹ were used to help with the selection of participants, although, in the case of the 2019 course, most of those who applied were offered places, as there was less competition than on previous courses. Another selection priority for the organisers was to recruit those lacking networks or confidence in leftwing activism, rather than those already immersed in activist spaces.

Participants

A total of 60 participants were offered a place on the course, and of those, around 45 attended one or more sessions. 41 attended the first session, and numbers levelled off to 25-30 attendees per session for the remainder of the course. The vast majority were aged 17-25, with exceptions being made for two who were slightly older and more experienced. They were offered places in the capacity of mentors who could play a role in supporting less confident participants.

83% percent of participants who completed the baseline survey stated that they had been involved in activism of some kind, ranging from volunteer work and awareness-raising campaigns to protesting, direct action and union organising. When describing their political ideas, about 30% used the word socialist, and almost 75% of those remaining used the word “leftwing”, “left”, or “leftie”. These words were often accompanied with an array of other descriptors, including “feminist”, “anti-racist”, “environmentalist” and “anarchist”. The interviews and focus groups also painted a picture of significant diversity within this group, particularly around opinions on the Labour Party and about the place of electoralism in social change.

The recruitment survey indicated that almost 75% of participants recruited met the widening participation criteria, and almost 70% of those attending during the first four sessions met these criteria, which were related to likelihood of participation in further education. However, these statistics did not necessarily align with participants’ own sense of the makeup of the group. One participant in their interview described how they felt the majority of people participating were university educated and another participant who had attended the first course in 2010 described that they felt the course had fewer people from a working class background compared to the earlier cohort. The profile and perceptions of the group in terms of class, ethnicity and political opinions were present in people’s reflections on the course, as I will return to below.

Participant objectives

²¹ These criteria focussed on young people with no immediate role models with experience of higher education, those eligible for school meals or pupil premium, those who were care leavers and those living in areas where fewer people progress to further education (University of East London, n.d).

Participants were asked about their motivations for taking part in the course in an initial survey and during interviews. While everyone I interviewed described multiple reasons for joining, it was interesting to note that there were varying levels of commitment to the course when people signed up and attended the first session, and for some, anxiety about whether it would provide what they needed. While some described how the course seemed to have come fortuitously at the right moment, others, like Oli, were more tentative. He explained how he “just applied on a whim, thinking, if I apply for it then if I can’t go or don’t feel like going when it comes along, I can just say no”.

Taking action

Many participants described how they had signed up for the course because they wanted to get involved in activism. Some wanted to get clarity on what change they actually wanted to see, like Saba who wanted to get a “refined idea of what issues I actually care about, and what social change I can personally identify with”. Wazir described how he wanted to “maybe see if there were some solutions [he] could get behind”. He explained:

“Cos I think I wanted to get a better feel for maybe what I wanted? ‘Cos I think it is too broad to just say I want the world to be equal, fair and just, and it’s like – well what does that look like?”

Others had more clarity on what they wanted to take action on, or what kind of world they wanted to create, and named issues they were passionate about such as the refugee crisis, prison abolition and climate change. Oli expressed how, after several years of thinking deeply about climate change and taking action on a personal level, he found himself “in the frame of mind where I needed to do something, I needed to take it from the personal to political”.

Several participants described how they were hoping to find the “tools” they felt they needed to get involved in activism, or felt they were lacking in knowledge of the local political or activist “scene” to do this. The interviews gave an interesting insight into the challenges that participants faced in navigating the activist landscape, and which they hoped the course would help them to overcome.

One participant described her sense of anxiety after finally finding her way into an activist group after having a long-term desire to get involved, but struggling to understand how the group operated or what her role could be in it. She hoped the course would demystify how activist groups work, give her confidence to “speak with new people in an activist context” and help her find a way in. She explained:

“I kinda like got involved with [activist group], but it’s a bit opaque and basically I’m not sure how I fit in there, and it was making me feel a little bit anxious. And then I was like ok cool then there’s this course that will basically, empower me to do that that, that someone else

will [pause] like, I've always felt a little bit like I just need someone to hold my hand like a tiny bit and then i'll be fine, but like, [laughs] that's all I want!"

Libby had struggled to know how to get involved in the climate movement because "there's not really a structure to it" and she hoped DTI would help her to work out what to do.

"One of my friend's friends is really involved in the student movement and I was like to her – what does he do? How did he get involved? Because I want to do more than just walk in the street, I wanna do something. And she... was a bit clueless and was like – "I dunno!" – so I was like, let me look it up. But I didn't really know what to research because obviously I've never really been in that position."

Libby's desire to "do more than just walk in the street" was also evident in other people's reflections on the limitations of certain kinds of visible activism and hopes that the course might enable them to do something more effective. Saba talked about how her thinking around activism had changed over the last few years and that she was at a point where she felt that there was a "time and a place" for marches but wanted to do something more meaningful. Others described how they wanted to gain particular areas of knowledge or skills in organising and campaigning in order to increase the effectiveness of their campaigns, including an understanding of how to collaborate with other groups and organisations, and the ability to engage and motivate people to take political action. They referred varyingly to skills, knowledge and confidence as the factors they believed necessary to enable them to strengthen their activism and hoped to gain.

Building relationships and being in community

Meeting people and building relationships were also very common reasons for participation in the course. Some described how they wanted to meet or "network" with other "like-minded" people, while others emphasised how they hoped to meet people who they could take action with in future.

Others were primarily interested in finding a group of people to learn with. Oli described how:

"A lot of people came on and said they were keen to meet people, to take things to another level. And I ended up doing that, but initially I came on because I was keen to learn as part of a group."

He had considered going to Labour Party meetings to learn, but felt like he didn't know enough about "the party or its policies" and worried he wouldn't be welcome if he couldn't contribute. Oli and Saba both described how they had really missed the learning environment they had experienced at university, which Oli described as "formal group learning". Saba described how being at university required a different level of engagement with the material than self-study, and said she wanted to be immersed again in a learning environment where she could discuss ideas with others, but couldn't afford the time of a university course.

Broadening understanding and articulating ideas

When describing the kind of impact on knowledge around politics that participants hoped for from the course, they overwhelmingly talked about the desire for a more expansive view. Participants talked about their hopes that the course would help them “broaden”, “widen”, “deepen” or “expand” their understanding of politics. Some expressed how they wanted to get a greater understanding of “other issues”, while several talked about wanting to hear other people’s opinions and perspectives, or “gain exposure to views other than [their] own”. Oli described how he wanted to gain a deeper understanding of “how issues intertwine”, and hoped that this clarity would enable him to “feel less overwhelmed by what is needed”.

The desire for confidence to talk with others about politics or articulate political views was an important theme in both the surveys and interviews. For example, Saba described how she had lost confidence in speaking about politics since leaving university, feeling like she no longer had the language to discuss it.

People’s reasons for taking part then varied, reflecting their previous experiences (or lack of experience) of activism and their confidence in their political opinions. They were closely aligned with the facilitators’ objectives, including the development of political understanding, cultivating of strategic thinking, taking next steps towards action, creating encounters between young people with different political perspectives, and becoming part of a community.

Course design, format and pedagogical approach

The course ran over 9 weeks from mid-October to mid-December 2019, on Thursday evenings from 7–9pm. It began with a panel discussion on the theme of the “Disunited Kingdom”, exploring hope for change in a situation of multiple crises. Speakers included Lowkey who discussed neoliberalism, a climate striker who spoke about climate change and its relationship to colonialism, and Becka Hudson, an activist from F*ck Boris. The panel was preceded by a “spectrum line” activity, where participants were asked to stand on an imaginary line according to how they felt about the prospect of social change. It was followed by small group discussions where people discussed what they had heard and discussed questions they might have for the panellists. The session was open to anyone, with around half the attendees having previously signed up to the full course.

In the second session, Ed and Jacob invited four speakers from different activist groups to give short talks in parallel, and participants had the opportunity to move between the groups. Several of the remaining sessions shared a common format. They were focussed around a particular theme (environmental justice, trade unionism, the Labour Party, neoliberalism and feminism, and housing) and featured two or more speakers who talked for 10-15 minutes each. Rather than beginning

with these external speakers, sessions usually began with food and the opportunity for participants to chat with one another. The facilitators would then introduce the theme or topic and invite the group to reflect with each other on a relevant question in pairs or small groups, or by using tools to elicit opinions such as spectrum-lines. Following each speaker there would be a discussion in small groups and an opportunity to pose questions to the speaker, and there would be at least one break for food and informal discussion.

One exception to this format was a social session in a cafe which had no invited speakers but involved food and informal time for socialising, as well as an element of group work. This session was not initially in the plan but was integrated after feedback from participants who wanted more opportunities to get to know each other. The announcement of the 2019 general election during the course also led to various changes to the planned programme, as a result of our conversations as a loose organising team and through a discussion and vote with participants. A session on Corbynism and the election was developed, involving a talk from Leo Panitch on socialism within the Labour Party and a canvassing training from Momentum, and the final session of the course, which took place just after the election, became a space for a group reflection on the election outcome and on what the next steps for the left might look like.

When speaking about the design of the 2019 course, Ed and Jacob described how it had been affected by significant capacity challenges, and had almost not gone ahead at all. In previous years, circumstances had allowed for much more time to be spent on planning – either voluntary time during the facilitators’ summer holidays when they were teachers, or paid time when the programme had been incorporated into Ed’s role at Global Justice Now. In the run up to the 2019 course, unexpected work commitments meant that they had less planning and preparation time than they had hoped. Their ability to pull together a course in the limited time available reflected their years of experience in running similar courses and their access to a significant network of speakers and activist groups that they had developed over the years.

Ed and Jacob explained how they were very discriminating when choosing speakers for the course, and described how their decisions were based on a variety of factors that went far beyond the “quality” of someone’s ideas:

“The quality of someone’s ideas are important, but their ability to express them in a simple way is more important. Sometimes you want someone who will appear as a good role model for whatever it is, what form of activism or thought that you’re showcasing. And you have a sense of what the participants will make of someone.”

They referred to their choice of Lowkey for the initial panel, whose talk I found hard to follow because of its density, explaining that it was his presence and passion rather than clarity of ideas that was important:

“He has a clear, really palpable, political radicalism and passion. That alone, I think, was powerful for people... Some of the participants

were like, that was amazing, I'm so inspired. Not sure they'd be able to break down the content any better than us. It was just the presence that was powerful for them."

When asked about their pedagogical approach, Ed and Jacob described how it reflected their politics and had evolved over years of teaching in schools and facilitating the course, rather than being rooted in any one particular theory. They described how their sense of their role as facilitators had shifted away from the discovery learning model they had encountered in teacher training, where the ideal role of the teacher was one of a neutral facilitator. Instead they had decided to talk more openly about their own politics with participants:

"We started to be a bit more open about our politics and our reasons for wanting to do the course, where we were strategically, the kind of activities we thought were useful. We'd be open about the fact we were in Labour, at the same time as allowing there to be debate and encouraging there to be debate. That changed the vibe a bit because we were fellow activists mentoring each other – arguing, discussing –rather than teacher/student."

Jacob described how he felt this honesty was actually less authoritarian than taking the approach of a supposedly neutral facilitator:

"I think it's more honest. There can be something quite authoritarian about saying 'what do you think?', when you're actually directing it to the ends that you want. There is something more honest and egalitarian about saying, look, this is what we think, here's some ideas, make of it what you will."

They understood that being explicit about their beliefs led to a tension because of the position of authority they held as course leaders, but believed this tension was possible to manage. They described how at times they might be more focussed on presenting ideas (for example when Jacob spoke about London Renters' Union), and at others they would feel more like they were facilitating discussion.

Jacob likened his approach to that of facilitating seminars at university, which he thought should be very fluid, "even if you are pushing ideas and stimulating debate". He went on to describe it as an act of modelling:

"You're modelling a form of analysis and argument you want them to do and provoking them to do the same, even if that's to disagree with you. That's how I've come to think of DTI."

They were also wary of the risks of putting too much weight on the format or design of a session, and instead stressed the importance of the relational context in which learning took place, including the relationships between teacher and student, and the relationships between students themselves. This understanding reflects the critiques of the reduction of critical pedagogy to "method" explored in the literature review. As Jacob explained:

"I think there is an extent to which one can get a bit too concerned about the format of sessions... The networking and community thing

is important because a lot of learning goes on outside of the formal sessions... it's not just the design of the sessions. There are other factors like the relationship between us and them and how much they trust us."

As well as providing the context for dialogue, this community was also something that the organisers understood as essential to enabling people to get involved in activism, as well as something that played an essential, prefigurative role in progressive politics:

"People don't stay involved in political struggles unless they have positive relationships with others, and plenty of people, especially if they are under-confident or inexperienced, won't go to a meeting or event on their own. And of course, community itself is a value for the left – building nourishing spaces reflects our vision for the world we want to create."

While avoiding valorising formats, they were cautious about the length of spoken contributions, whether from themselves or from speakers, and generally limited them to less than 20 minutes, with the intention of keeping them accessible to people from a wide range of backgrounds. Another core element of their pedagogical approach throughout the lifetime of the course was a focus on learning through reflecting on action. They understood this approach as essential to enabling participants to engage in the kind of strategic thinking they wanted to cultivate. While this had manifested in different ways throughout the eight courses they had organised²², in the 2019 course they hoped that, by bringing in activist groups to speak in the early stages and again halfway through, participants might have time to get involved in actions across the 10 weeks and be able to reflect on these during the course. In the end the second session didn't materialise, but participants did receive training in canvassing, and they were invited informally to join Ed and Jacob canvassing for Labour over several weeks.

Their intended approach then shared much with the critical and liberatory pedagogies outlined in the literature review. They aimed to destabilise the hierarchy between the teacher and student and create a space where people, in Freire's words, could be "co-investigators" of knowledge. While they sought to do this through enabling dialogue, they also believed that a relationship with participants marked by honesty was important, and that this required them to bring their full selves as activists into the space. This allowed them to showcase ideas they found inspiring, rather than attempting to occupy a place of neutrality. In this way they shared a critique of tendencies within some participatory or democratic educational

²² As noted previously, TWT had in 2017 been a "placement" organisation for DTI. In this iteration of the course, participants were invited to get involved in the activity of a leftwing group or organisation for several weeks (and in some cases they stayed involved for months or years); Ed and Jacob worked with the "placement" group to ensure they would be able to involve new and relatively inexperienced young people in a supportive way. Later sessions of the course were then used for participants to reflect upon their experiences.

approaches to valorise particular methods or formats, and were instead more interested in a pedagogy focussed on the transformation of social relations. Their commitment to creating a space where people would develop understanding through taking action and reflecting on it also resonates with the concept of praxis in Freirean critical pedagogy.

Impacts on knowledge and understanding

Participants were asked during semi-structured interviews about what they learned from the course, which sessions were particularly impactful and why, and whether the course had enabled or encouraged them to take action. Here, I will describe three key ways in which participants described the course's impact on their knowledge or understanding.

Encountering new ideas and new common sense

A number of participants described how they encountered ideas from speakers that were new or surprising to them, with several naming Jacob's talk on neoliberalism, the housing crisis and London Renters' Union (LRU). Wazir described how the content of the session was new to him but "made sense":

"I think Jacob's talk on the housing crisis was really good because there were a lot of things I've just never considered... And I was like – it makes sense but until someone explicitly says it's like – sometimes that's all you need to just narrow your mind on it."

For Libby the course provided a space for her to learn about trade unions, a subject that she and her peers wouldn't have otherwise had the chance to learn about:

"When we had the session about trade unions, obviously I'm still just in school. I like, I work in the hairdressers, I don't need a union for hairdressers assistants... so I don't really know too much about them. So it's opened my eyes to a lot of kind of topics that I don't think a normal person, a lot of my friends wouldn't know what a trade union was."

Oli was particularly impacted and surprised by the session where a speaker talked about Rojava, as it challenged his perception of where and how democratic structures might emerge:

"I found it really interesting learning about Rojava... because it's something I had virtually no knowledge on and it was really interesting hearing about a democratic structure that could emerge in such an area of conflict that seems to work so much better than what we have established in so much of the world."

This sense of having expectations challenged and imagining new possibilities for the first time was evident in several of the interviews, particularly the talk on Rojava and on the work of LRU. Saba described

how the LRU talk got her really excited about joining a union that wasn't organised around a workplace, and explained that the talk allowed her to "step outside" herself in order to think about possibilities for the future.

Framing and connecting

In other accounts of the learning process, participants felt that the knowledge itself wasn't necessarily new, but that what they learned helped articulate or provide a framework for ideas or beliefs they might already have had. Wazir and Oli described it similarly:

"They'd said something where... you could feel that that's what you were trying to say for a long time but you just couldn't articulate [it] and they had the words for it, and they had the actual solution."

"I struggled to explain what socialism was, but I knew I believed in tuition fee abolition, or the potential to re-nationalise a few key industries. [The course] just sort of affirmed to me something I think I believed for a long time, I'd just never had the framework to discuss it or know what it was that I wanted to believe in."

Libby described her experience as a process of "connecting thoughts" rather than learning new things:

"It's not like this is the stuff I heard on the course and this is the stuff I thought before, it's like intertwined more, and kind of connecting my thoughts a bit more."

The experience of having thoughts "connected" was one that several people described in relation to Dalia Gebrial's talk on climate justice. While Saba described how the discussion helped her to better understand "deep-rooted" factors of imperialism and capitalism underlying climate change, it was something that she was conscious of before, and she had been discouraged by the absence of this analysis in recent climate protests. For her, Dalia's talk provided a space to have a conversation that she "really needed". For Cameron, Dalia's discussion of ecofascism helped him to see the connections between fascism and particular strategies for addressing climate change.

Oli, however, reflected that overall he felt overwhelmed by "issues", because things that once seemed interlinked felt deep-rooted in their own way. In particular he couldn't get a sense of how the different activist groups working on different issues might connect to effectively change society:

"While being inspired by these people doing these things, it's still hard to see how there are so many small groups doing small batches of work and in some way they need to link up if they're gonna create that better base for society. So, for me it feels like such a massive challenge and it's hard not to be daunted by that. The more I've learnt the more I've realised you don't know basically."

Challenging assumptions and complicating beliefs

Another way people talked about the experience of learning was in terms of having assumptions challenged or pre-existing beliefs or ideas destabilised. Oli's reflections on the Rojava talk above carry this sense of having his assumptions challenged around where in the world new approaches to radical democracy might be found. One participant spoke about how she felt "more enlightened" after a talk that explored the ways in which neoliberalism connects with contemporary feminist discourse, as it had forced her to confront her assumptions about what being a feminist looks like:

"I've always thought like yeah everyone can be feminists and like feminism really broad and great, and I do stuff cos I'm confident. But actually, like, it doesn't take everyone with it, or like, a lot of streams we see like in like popular sort of like media, whatever, doesn't take everyone with them. Like, for example if you are a shy girl or if you are a not stereotypically Western world pretty girl you're not gonna be taken with that necessarily, unless you really speak out. But why do you need to speak out? That like, caused a lot of thought in my mind which was really good, and I'm glad cos I was just a basic feminist before, and now I feel a bit more enlightened."

Laura, who described her politics as anarchist, talked about how her beliefs had shifted throughout the course around the extent to which she felt she should engage with the election. She described the change in her thinking as an "unhardening", and explained how she felt less judgemental towards others who put greater faith in electoral politics:

"I went canvassing for Labour as a result of this course... and it, it was, that was a serious political decision I had to make for myself... cos I got to the point where I was like, alright I should vote in this election and then I was like, well, I live in Diane Abbott's constituency, so [voting Labour] doesn't do anything! So if I'm willing to vote then I should be willing to canvass right, cos you know, if I believe in it enough... so that definitely was... like an unhardening in general was the kind of thing that took place, and yeah, just being a bit less judgemental as a result of my own insecurities!"

It is clear then that participants' understandings of the world were shifting throughout the course. In particular, they described how they encountered new ideas that "made sense" of the world around them, and began to see relationships between issues that had previously been unconnected. This, for example, enabled them to see the limitations of feminism disconnected from an understanding of neoliberalism, or environmentalism disconnected from an understanding of racism and fascism. They also found their pre-existing ideas challenged, resulting in an "unhardening" or complicating of their beliefs about the world. Examples included the shifting of opinions around the place of electoral politics, and a challenge to Eurocentric understandings of democracy.

Factors shaping the development of critical understanding

Drawing on the interviews and participant observation I will suggest three aspects of the course's pedagogical approach that contributed to participants' development of critical understanding as outlined above.

Hearing multiple viewpoints and engaging in dialogue

As described above, Ed and Jacob intended to disrupt traditional teacher/student hierarchies and create a context where they, as fellow activists, introduced ideas that could be discussed together. In Freirean terms, their approach sought to facilitate students becoming "co-investigators" of the object of knowledge. The format of the sessions outlined above reflected this commitment to critically reflecting on ideas as a group. The emphasis on group discussion (both before and after speakers) and plenary questions after each speaker created a sense that ideas were up for interrogation.

The facilitators also used tools that sought to tease out the multiplicity of viewpoints in the room. Often these discussions preceded the speakers in a way that emphasised the importance of participants' pre-existing knowledge or experiences relevant to the subject. One example was the use of spectrum lines, where participants were asked to line up according to their level of agreement with a particular statement. As a tool, it helped to draw out the opinions of those who might not otherwise have shared them with the group, as one participant reflected:

"I like those exercises where you have to walk around the room cos at first it's like, uh, I don't wanna get up! But then once you are up it is, I dunno, I feel like it's more kinda dedicated to listening... I don't know if it's just me but I like it when you don't have to raise your hand and they just ask you cos I think... there's a lot of hidden voices in the group that maybe are just a bit shy. But I think they've got a lot to bring to the group and it was interesting, like, hearing different people, you know."

In one session, Wazir had a very different opinion from the majority of the room around the extent to which he felt personally responsible for climate change. While initially reluctant to talk about it, he was pleased that he was able to share his understanding, and described how Ed and Jacob's facilitation style worked to create a space where people could express differing opinions.

"[They] did a good job at like picking out the people they thought hadn't had a say yet. And they were also good at not jumping down people's throats if they said something that was clearly controversial."

Informal spaces for dialogue

The interviews suggested that the informal and social aspects of the course were an important space for knowledge production for several participants, where they could digest ideas and hear each other's opinions on the topics that had been raised. Several participants described how the one-to-one conversations they had with the facilitators before or after the sessions helped the development of their ideas. Saba described how she had been unimpressed with what she had seen in the media about the Labour Party, and as a black woman had found herself unable to trust white institutions. She reflected on a one-to-one conversation with Ed where he was able to "break down" the idea of tactical voting, and said that it had made her feel a bit more comfortable to do her own research into the Labour Party and ultimately to vote for them.

The significance of going to the pub after sessions featured in several participants' accounts, as it provided them an opportunity to have "more of a back and forth" and to share their reflections on the course content. Wazir's description of these conversations, including with one participant who fell out of the political mainstream of the group, indicates that they might have played an important role in facilitating his continued participation on the course:

"But I do think the anti-communist guy wasn't that dissuaded from participating and I think we had a lot of conversations outside of the group setting, like after the sessions where I feel like we did have a bit more of a back and forth, that was quite productive. Cos I do think generally despite it having a leaning towards a certain left agenda, er, nobody was kind of put off from having their say."

Connecting ideas to experience

Participants often described how they were impacted most when connections were made between ideas and lived experience. Several mentioned that they learnt most from the talks that connected or "resonated" with their own lived experience. For example, Wazir described how the talk on the future of work resonated with his own experiences:

"It highlighted a lot of things that I disliked about my experience in work – the past two years I've worked in an office on a grad scheme in Manchester – and I think the things that Will [Stronge] was talking about – they just kind of resonated with me personally."

Several participants commented on the talk by LRU and how it made them reflect on and re-assess their situation as renters. One described how it felt like this was a session everyone could "relate to":

"The guys from LRU were so passionate and it felt like something that everybody in the room had experience of and could comfortably relate to. There were some other issues that were closer to some people than others, but because of the makeup of the room, all young people, all of us have rented or were renting."



For Wazir the session on climate change that addressed racism was most impactful because it resonated:

“I think the one around race... I think that would have been the one that got me... because I’ve already done some stuff around it... and it’s more a personally relatable cause to me.”

Wazir described how he liked the variety of different issues covered in the course because it meant that everyone was able to find an issue that “actually resonated” with them because they “see that kind of stuff in [their] daily life”.

Several others mentioned the impact of hearing speakers talk explicitly from the position of their own experience. Libby described how she struggled with the “official lecturers” who spoke on the course who she felt “just waffled” and compared them to the session on the future of work, where a speaker from the Ritzy cinema strikes talked about their experience of unionising:

“I think it’s good when there’s like anecdotal kinda parts to it because then it kinda like, makes you wanna listen.”

For Wazir, talking from a place of their own experience made speakers more accessible. He described how the talk by LRU struck him because it wasn’t coming from a place of “preaching” or “ideology”:

“They used... examples to really highlight how the ideology and Marxist approach helps them as people, rather than preaching it, cos it’s like they were talking about what they’d actually done, as opposed to what they think people should be doing, and I think that was a key distinction.”

The fact that they were talking about “what people had actually done” not only then made it accessible but, for Wazir, added to the speakers’ credibility. Hearing the personal experience of one of the speakers also helped him to empathise with people who might hold a different opinion to his, even though it didn’t change his own beliefs around the issue:

“The journalist at Novara Media did quite well to relate her own personal journey which made it more relatable to me, even though I still don’t feel personally culpable for that movement, but I can now better understand how you could.”

At the same time, speakers who it was understood lacked direct experience of the kind of issues they were speaking about, or who did not refer to their experiences, were described by some participants as less credible or trustworthy. For example, Saba felt that while some of the white speakers spoke about racism and other issues that particularly impacted people of colour, she wished that there were more speakers of colour who could speak for themselves about the issues that impacted them. Instead it made her suspicious of white speaker’s motives and wonder whether it was part of a “performance of allyship”. Another participant described how some of the speakers presented their topics in a way that was too “cerebral” and would have liked to have heard more from activists who were campaigning on issues that affected them:

“I felt they were all a bit cerebral in that there’s a problem and we solve it in this way, and while some of the groups are exciting like the London Renters’ Union, a lot of issues require different perspectives, different communities, and I didn’t think there was enough of that. I personally would have liked to have seen like Disabled People Against Cuts or some group like that.”

Experience then, as something to speak *about* and a place to speak *from*, was significant for participants when it came to engaging with subject matter and developing understanding. People were particularly impacted by speakers who talked about experiences that resonated with their own, and even when they spoke about experiences that were unfamiliar, the reference to experience created opportunities for empathy as well as lending credibility to theoretical points the speakers were making.

Impacts on capacity for action

Many of the young people joined the course because they were hoping it would equip them to take action or become more effective activists. Creating opportunities for action was also an important element in the design of the course, as Ed and Jacob hoped that by getting involved in activism the group would be able to reflect on their new experiences during the sessions and develop a greater understanding of activist strategy. In the survey, during the focus group session, and in the interviews, participants were invited to speak about ways in which the course had equipped or facilitated them to take action, and here I will tease out key themes as well as suggest two key elements of the course’s pedagogical approach that contributed to these outcomes.

Canvassing or getting involved in the Labour Party

11 out of 14 participants who completed the endpoint survey stated that they had gone canvassing during the course of the programme, and for many of them it was for the first time. Jacob and Ed had planned to go canvassing and flyering over several weekends and invited course participants who wanted to try it themselves to join a WhatsApp group. While some course participants may have canvassed irrespective of their participation in DTI, some decided to go canvassing as a result of the course, despite significant reservations about electoral politics or the Labour Party. For Laura, going canvassing was a very significant decision:

“I think before the course I wouldn’t [have canvassed for Labour]. I went canvassing for Labour as a result of this course... that was a serious political decision I had to make for myself.”

Wazir initially signed up to help Ed with flyering, but ended up going canvassing while he was out, and continued to do so with other participants from the course:

“I did go canvassing maybe a few times... well the first time was because Ed put in the [WhatsApp] group that he needed help just flyering, so I turned up and Kirsten turned up, and I wasn't even planning on going canvassing but I was just like fuck it I'm here now, let's do it! And it wasn't bad, so I was like alright I'll do it again tomorrow!”

Identifying or joining campaigns and activist groups

The majority of interview and survey participants described how they wanted to get involved in organisations they had encountered during the course of the programme, especially London Renters' Union and the four activist groups who talked about their work during the activism showcase in the second week. Most hadn't yet managed to attend a meeting, like Laura who described how she hoped to get involved in London Renters' Union and Our Future Now to “keep up the momentum” from the course. Another participant described that they weren't a fan of marches and rallies but got an invitation to participate in Our Future Now through the course and thought it might suit them:

“I still don't really like marches and rallies, but I do quite like the more intellectual discussion. [Another participant] put out a bunch of invitations for Our Future Now, and I think I probably will go to those, and just feel it out.”

Oli got involved in Labour for a Green New Deal straight after hearing them speak and had been supporting them for a couple of months by the time of his interview, which he was really enjoying and he said “felt like useful work”.

Factors shaping the desire and ability to take action

Showcasing issues and activist groups that resonated

Oli described how he quickly got involved in Labour for a Green New Deal and attended meetings organised by Rise Up for Rojava because he agreed politically with the campaigns and felt “in solidarity” with them:

“I was quite trigger happy, everything that came on I was like yeah, yeah, that's why I'm here so I may as well! I definitely agree with the thought behind it and I'm in solidarity with all these people, so I may as well go along and see.”

In the case of London Renters' Union, it was clear that many people on the course were keen to get involved in the group because it resonated strongly with their experiences as young renters, or because they could see how important it might be for the future:

“When I come to rent these people are going to be really helpful if there’s ever any issues, and it is an issue that touches most people especially our age maybe.”

Saba explained that she wanted to get involved in London Renters’ Union following the course because it was an issue that particularly affected her own family and others from working class backgrounds.

The emphasis then on showcasing relevant activist groups, and the organisers’ ability to draw on a wide network of activists addressing a range of issues of relevance to diverse participants was crucial to supporting a number of participants to take their next steps as activists.

Building relationships of solidarity and friendship

Participants frequently described how they took action or felt able to act because of relationships with others, or a sense of solidarity they felt with the group. They spoke about the feeling of being in a group of others who “wanted the same thing”, had the “same goal” or “felt the same way”. Cameron described how he felt fired up in the first session after hearing everyone talk about why they were attending:

“We’d gone round and everyone had said why they’re here and we’re all radical people and we all want the same thing, and it’s almost like we could just, you know, we could just go out and like, make a change like right now!”

For some, these feelings of solidarity and the social relationships they developed through the course enabled them to move beyond barriers that they had experienced in taking their next steps as activists. For one participant this solidarity helped her to overcome feelings of disillusionment due to tensions within social movements:

“As a young person I feel it’s very easy to be disillusioned and not really be active because you’re quite disheartened, especially the tension in climate at this moment of time, and so throughout this course I’ve had moments where it’s nice being in solidarity with the company that we have because everyone feels the exact same way.”

For Laura, who was sceptical about electoral politics and had also struggled to feel comfortable in activist spaces, canvassing as part of a group during the course was particularly significant for her. She felt nourished by the experience of having a shared goal with others:

“Even on polling day we were in Milton Keynes, it was horrible, but at the same time it was really fun you know, like it brought together people from my work some people from the course, like we all drove together it was really really nice and really really nourishing to be... to be around people and to have that goal together. That feeling I think is something that I’ll remember.”

For Oli, being in a group with people who were involved in “activist circles” and the relationships he had made on the course gave him confidence

to go to meetings where previously he had felt anxious about his lack of knowledge. He referred to the importance of meeting Sam, who was one of the two older and more experienced “mentors” invited onto the course to play a supporting role:

“I feel like my energies are best going back into climate stuff with more confidence I can contribute and having met people like Sam and people on the course who are in those circles. I feel more comfortable going to meetings.”

Wazir described that he had previously been uncomfortable in situations where he was asked to participate in activism, as he often felt like he was being used as a “token”, rather than being part of a true community and being appreciated. However, the informal way in which relationships developed in the pub, which built friendships that felt more personal and “less about politics”, created a context where he was inspired to take action:

“So my problem with getting involved with activism and politics generally is that I don’t feel like whenever I do contribute there is like a real authentic sense of community... It always feels a bit transactional, and I always feel like my participation is a bit tokenistic. But I did feel like while we were just chilling afterwards going for drinks and stuff it felt just really organic and it felt more like if I was to take part and do stuff with the people on this course I wouldn’t feel like I was just being used and er, which is why I guess I did go campaigning and canvassing in the final week leading up to the election... I think the conversations we had were less about politics and more just recognising each other as people, which just kind of inspired me more to get involved.”

He described how he would no longer feel “out of place” turning up to a meeting after getting to know people on the course. At the same time, he described how he still felt he hadn’t “found [his] people”, which is something he had really hoped for. When reflecting on the course he compared it to the first DTI course he attended in 2012, where the cohort consisted largely of working class young people of colour, and suggested that recruiting more people from the same background as him might have given him “more people [he] could connect with”.

“I think it was a group of people who were quite good at active listening, and taking others’ opinions into account – I think that’s a very important thing to build that feeling of feeling like you belong somewhere – but I think for people’s lived experience I’m not sure I found someone who could match mine... Maybe if they were able to recruit more people from that working class minority London background then I would feel like there would be more people that I could connect with.”

The formation of relationships of trust and friendship then was a key catalyst for a number of participants to take their next steps as activists. The organisers’ emphasis on building a community through the course,

exemplified by the length of the course, the inclusion of informal social time, the appointment of older “mentor” participants, the decision to incorporate a social session and in their invitations to collective action outside of sessions, played an important role in facilitating the formation of these relationships. These friendships enabled them to overcome barriers they had faced, including anxiety about activist spaces, ambivalence about political action, ideological differences and feelings of being used or tokenised by social movements. At the same time, the sense of being on the margin of the group in terms of class and race meant that Wazir was not able to find the sense of belonging in an activist space that he was hoping to find.

Challenges and obstacles

In this section I will explore some of the challenges that emerged during the planning and delivery of the course, as identified both by participants and facilitators, and the ways in which the facilitators worked to engage with these issues to try to meet the course’s objectives.

Distributing time for speakers and dialogue

A theme that emerged in the interviews and focus groups was a desire for more time for discussion. For some participants, they wished there had been more time to hear both from speakers and from the wider group:

“There was never enough time to hear enough of the speaker or hear enough of the group, that’s not really that much of a criticism cos of course there’s only so much we can run the course for.”

Others felt they needed more time to explore or interrogate the ideas introduced by speakers, through group discussion and further opportunities to ask questions:

“I don’t think we had enough time to delve into the essential issues about [Universal Basic Income]... I would’ve liked more time to sort of... because in my head I can sort of see how that might go wrong for a lot of people and I didn’t have time to say it to him and it didn’t get covered elsewhere.”

“I was like oh my god, this has got me really thinking but also like, like there’s no space for that discussion.”

This sense of frustration and desire for more discussion demonstrates the ability of many of the speakers to excite and inspire the young people, by pitching their talks appropriately to the audience. It also reflects the organisers’ ability to curate speakers whose contributions were relevant and interesting to participants. At the same time, it highlights the challenges of balancing speaker contributions with discussion time, in a large and diverse group with varied interests. Despite the time limits put on speaker contribution, the regular use of break-out groups and discussion

in plenary both before and after each speaker, there was a sense amongst participants that there still wasn't enough space for dialogue around the issues arising.

For Ed and Jacob, this sense of frustration was a somewhat inevitable outcome of political education spaces that had a time limit. They were keen to maximise the variety of speakers showcased, and, from experimenting with the balance in previous courses, also felt that allowing time for greater discussion between participants per-se did not necessarily lead to greater critical understanding of the issues. Instead, they worked to ameliorate the limitations of the timetabled discussion during sessions by building social relationships that could extend the opportunities for dialogue beyond the walls of the session, for example while taking action together or discussing ideas after sessions in the pub.

As outlined above, such relationships were clearly established between many participants and functioned to enable the continued discussion of the issues arising in sessions. Libby's reflections, however, indicate the ongoing challenges of organising educational interventions in the context of mainstream education and a societal "common sense" that is resistant to critical understandings and relational thinking. As one of the younger participants, her learning was taking place in parallel with her politics classes at school, which offered her the opportunity to discuss the course content with teachers and compare with her textbook to "double check" ideas. She described how her teacher had dismissed something she had shared from Lowkey's talk as "a bit far out", and that this had made her cautious about taking what she was hearing at DTI as fact. She felt these conversations with teachers were useful as she was able to get a more "balanced" view and come up with her own opinions rather than being "too easily moulded".

"I... went back with some points that people kind of made that I didn't understand or that I kinda thought like, yeah they're pretty foolproof points, let me go and double check with my teachers and stuff. So I feel like, because I had them to go and chat to about it, there was kind of like, I wasn't too easily moulded and shaped by what people had said, I kinda was able to shape my own opinions, kinda got a balanced side of it. And also cos I am studying politics so I have the textbook as well."

She went on to explain how she felt other people might be at a disadvantage if they didn't have these opportunities to discuss ideas with others outside the course:

"Maybe if someone who went to the course who didn't really have that, who just kind of listens to what people say on the course, I reckon it might be a different story for them. But for me I think it was just opening my eyes to what the other side think could possibly be and whether I do agree with that or not."

There was a sense in Libby's interview then that she trusted her teacher to give a more "balanced" perspective because of their position of authority.

Libby's example then reminds us that radical education takes place not in a vacuum but in relation to other trusted sources of knowledge. While the informal spaces adjacent to the course enabled a number of participants to discuss and build confidence in what they were learning during the course, Libby, who was younger than the majority of the group and still in school, relied on her teacher who reinforced the "common sense" of mainstream education.

Identifying speakers who can connect experience and theory

Another challenge was identifying and programming the right speakers. Ed and Jacob had a sense from experience of the kinds of speakers that the group may respond well to, and in the interviews participants mentioned similar speaker attributes, including the ability to speak passionately, to bring new or exciting ideas, to "pitch" their ideas to the young people's level of understanding, to discuss issues that resonated with young people's experiences, or to speak in a way that connected theory and experience. From previous experiences of programming, Ed and Jacob were conscious that while a speaker might meet one or two of these criteria, they might not be able to fulfil them all. While Lowkey's talk for example was pitched too high for the majority of the audience, many participants were inspired by his talk because he was able to speak with passion. At the same time, in a diverse group, participants were likely to respond differently to different speakers, depending not only on their stylistic preference but the degree to which they could empathise with, or identify with the speaker.

For these reasons, the programming of a wide range of speakers throughout the course, and several speakers per session, from different backgrounds and with different approaches, worked to maximise the possibility that participants would engage deeply with the content. By far the most impactful speakers were those who were able to build clear theoretical arguments or share new ideas by speaking explicitly about their own experiences, but not all contributors were able to communicate in this way. In this context, the facilitators played an important role in contextualising, bridging between, and at times translating speaker contributions to facilitate participants' engagement with them.

The challenge of identifying and programming speakers who can, in Ed and Jacob's words "communicate their ideas, experiences and arguments in relatively simple terms" suggests the importance of identifying mechanisms that support political educators to access speakers beyond their own networks and the kinds of experiences that are present among them, as well as the potential value of speakers training for new or existing speakers. This challenge also adds detail to the issues raised in some of the survey interviews around the need for training up engaging speakers, particularly those who can make the connections between their own life experiences and theory.

Working with large and diverse groups

Ed and Jacob actively worked to build a left-leaning group of young people with varied opinions, particularly around Corbyn and the Labour Party. Their approach of programming a range of activists and academics to speak about their work and their experiences of organising sought to showcase a breadth of activist strategies and cater to diverse interests and life experiences. At the same time, the course took place in the context of the general election, which shaped the kinds of organising taking place, and provided a unique opportunity for young people to engage in conversations and activism around the election.

As activists themselves and recent members of the Labour Party, Ed and Jacob were involved in canvassing, and saw this as an opportunity to invite people to take action, and as a partner in the project, TWT was keen to organise a conversation focussed on Corbynism. The inclusion of a session on the election and the focus on canvassing as an opportunity for collective action was a departure from previous DTI courses, where participants usually identified together an issue of importance and designed a collective action around this issue. However, in line with this historic pedagogical approach, where the course content was shaped by the interests of the group, the proposal to run a canvassing training was taken to a vote. While Wazir hadn't any prior interest in the election, the fact a vote was taken was important in gaining his buy-in to the decision:

“I wasn't really interested in the election or um the Labour Party at all but, because they asked beforehand if people wanted to have like an election centred thing and most people voted for it, I was just kind of like alright cool, like, I'm happy to do it if everyone wants to do it, and I understand people might be more just like anti-system in that kind of respect, but I think the onus is on the participant to respect that if the majority want to do it then you kinda gotta run with it.”

As described above, a significant number of those attending the course took part in canvassing as part of the election as a result of the course, including Wazir and those who were sceptical about the Labour Party or about electoral politics. As well as finding crucial moments of solidarity with other participants during these experiences, some described how conversations about the election that took place during the course helped to shape and refine their understandings of the Labour Party and of the role of electoral politics. Laura described how she found her opinions shifting away from what she described as an “anarchist purism” as she built relationships with other people on the course who had political opinions that she had previously dismissed:

“I feel like something this course taught me was that, I'd come from this place almost of like anarchist purism... and then what I really thought it helped me do was to meet people from across the left and be like, oh I really agree with you on loads of this stuff! Like this stuff is taking place all across the radical left and, er, yeah so I found that really useful.”

These reflections suggest that the course was successful in its particular objective to “strengthen relationships between activists in the Labour Party and those on the wider left.”

At the same time, other participants felt frustrated by the decision to spend time discussing the election, with one describing how they felt canvassing for Corbyn was an inappropriate focus for a group with varying views on the Labour Party and the role of elections:

“I was aware that we’d all assumed that everyone would be up for like, that everyone would be Labour and everyone would be up for it, erm, and I was aware that if it was me a few years ago I’d be quite uncomfortable, thinking, “Well electoral politics got us nowhere, I thought this was a group for activists!”

Libby was disappointed that the focus on the election meant she didn't get to meet more groups or activists involved in climate activism whose campaigning was relevant to her as a school student. While the context of the course shaped the possibilities available for getting involved in different kinds of activism, Ed and Jacob worked to mitigate the fact that not all participants had found opportunities to get involved in activism that mattered to them by offering a follow up call for participants afterwards to discuss their interests and help them find an opportunity for action. In this way, they sought to tackle one of the challenges that organisers face when designing programmes to support large groups of people with diverse political interests and priorities on their journeys into leftwing activism.

Given the uniqueness of the political moment, it could be argued that the frustration of a few of the participants in relation to the decision provided an opportunity for developing strategic thinking in-line with the projects' aims, by bringing them face to face with the concrete realities and necessary compromises of a particular political conjuncture. In fact, it could be argued that the extent to which Corbynism disproportionately focused energies on electoral campaigning, possibly at the expense of other forms of activism, was experienced by some within the course itself. The final session offered an opportunity for the group to reflect on this experience of limitation/compromise in the context of organising around the general election, and worked towards one of the course's key aims: to embed effective strategic thinking and reflection on political practice. The decisions made within the course itself to prioritise conversations about Corbynism and opportunities for canvassing for Labour might have additionally provided further fruitful ground for reflection among the group.

Organising capacity

Many of the challenges the organisers encountered when running the course were deeply connected to issues around their capacity. In its early years the project was made possible because it took place during the summer holidays when both Ed and Jacob were teachers, and so they were both able to spend a significant amount of time working on it in an unpaid capacity. For a period when Ed worked for Global Justice Now, the project

became incorporated into the work of the organisation, enabling Ed to work on it as part of his paid role, with Jacob working on it part-time as a freelancer. However, in 2019, DTI was operating as a stand-alone project, with funding from both GJN and TWT to cover some organising time. Since it was no longer a part of someone's role in a secure job, the organisers had to prioritise more reliable and long-term work opportunities, and when the organisers both found themselves unexpectedly in full-time work, they faced the significant challenge of organising the course around these other responsibilities. They reflected on how these limitations shaped aspects of the 2019 course, such as squeezing out the time that they had had in previous years to design sessions, including experimental pedagogical tools for generating dialogue, such as forum theatre.

Expectations around education and understandings of knowledge production

One of the challenges that Ed and Jacob had encountered throughout the development and delivery of DTI was its relationship to formal education, and the kinds of expectations participants brought into the space as a result of this relationship. The course's first manifestation was as a summer school for students largely recruited from the secondary schools where Ed and Jacob worked. Whilst it actively positioned itself in contrast to school education and used a range of pedagogical approaches and student-teacher relationships that were not possible to use in formal schooling, the course's proximity to formal education and Ed and Jacob's experiences as teachers fed into the course culture.

These influences of formal education, despite the significant changes to the course over 8 years, were still present in the 2019 course. A couple of participants who had recently graduated described DTI's similarity to a university course as a significant part of its appeal, citing the course's significant length and regularity, its intellectual rigour, and the focus on group learning.

The course's proximity to mainstream education shaped participants' experiences in interesting ways. Ed and Jacob described how participants tended to bring expectations from school or university environments into the space. One example included the offer to reimburse participants for travel expenses, which was a practice designed to prevent people from being financially excluded from the course, but also reflected a relationship between students and teachers reminiscent of schools. Building a true sense of being "co-learners" in this quasi-schooling context, where participants understood themselves as full participants and co-creators, was an ongoing challenge. This reflects the challenges identified by critical educators such as hooks (1994) emerging from participants' own sense of responsibility for the creation of a learning community in formal education.

A valuable area for further inquiry might be to explore the ways in which ideas around education and the process of learning itself are transferred from experiences of mainstream education into spaces for transformative

and critical education. In Libby's reflections, she describes the sessions as spaces that provided her with discussion points or arguments, which could be weighed up against (and at times trumped by) those she was gaining from school. This conceptualisation of learning calls to mind the concept of "critical" in critical education that Carpenter and Mojab (2019) seek to challenge, which relies on providing the most critical ideas or "counter-ideologies", rather than encouraging a *way* of thinking *through dialogue* that rejects the abstractions of capitalist ideology and enables them to better identify "the material relations between phenomena" (ibid). Courses such as DTI might be able to provide valuable opportunities for dialogue between young people and critical educators about mainstream education and processes of knowledge production – particularly by exploring what distinguishes leftwing 'thinking' from leftwing 'ideas' – and thereby support them in building a critical understanding that could shape their participation in both radical and mainstream educational spaces. It could also help explore the notion that a facilitators' willingness to speak about their beliefs contributed to an "unbalanced" course, while mainstream education was a space of greater "neutrality". The theme of education itself had been explored in previous iterations of DTI, and the organisers described that this had been of particular interest to participants who were still in, or had recently left, school.

Conclusions

I have attempted to sketch a picture of how and why the course emerged, what the facilitators hoped it would achieve, who participated in the course, and what they hoped to gain from it. After outlining the course's format and pedagogical approach, I described the key impacts of the course in relation to two broad aims of building critical understanding and enabling effective action, drawing on in-depth interviews, beginning and end-point surveys, focus group discussions and my own experiences as a participant in the course and in some of the planning process. Here I will summarise the findings and link these back to key concepts from the literature review.

Ed and Jacob had designed DTI 2019 for young people with broadly defined leftwing politics and a little experience of activism, who wanted to take their next steps on their journey as activists. The objectives of the course continued the concerns that initially launched the course in 2012, such as the need for greater leadership within social movements of young people who were marginalised on the left, including working class people and people of colour. Their objectives also reflected their analysis of the needs of the particular moment, including the importance of developing young people's strategic thinking around how to make change, the importance of embedding an internationalist perspective, and, in line with TWT's aims, to strengthen relationships between activists in the Labour Party and those on the wider left. There was also an emphasis on strengthening the left's internationalist perspective, which was reflected in the course's ongoing partnership with GJN.



Building on learning from 7 years of organising DTI, they designed the 2019 course by selecting trusted speakers who they felt were able to model critical thinking, inspire action and articulate ideas clearly. They also sought to include speakers who fell outside the mainstream of speakers on political education (white, male, middle class) who could role-model critical thinking beyond the stereotypical holders of political knowledge. Through small group and plenary discussions and opportunities to pose questions to speakers, participants were invited to engage with the ideas presented and become “fellow activists mentoring each other, arguing, discussing, rather than teachers/students”. Ed and Jacob’s pedagogical approach sought to build a relationship with participants that was characterised by honesty and a shared commitment to the cause, rather than attempting to offer “neutral” facilitation. Their approach also prioritised creating opportunities for participants to engage in action during the course, giving them confidence as well as the opportunity to reflect on their action in order to develop more strategic thinking about activism. These commitments in particular – to education directed towards social transformation, to disrupting the teacher/student hierarchy, and a focus on building knowledge through acting in the world and reflecting on it – resonate strongly with the strands of critical pedagogy outlined in the literature review. Conscious of the challenges young people face in finding their place in activist spaces, the course organisers were also committed to creating a course that enabled people to become part of a network or community where they could take action together.

The recruitment process sought to bring together a group of young people at the beginning of their journeys into activism, who had diverse interests and opinions but were broadly left-leaning, ensuring there was enough shared ground that discussion could focus on questions around political strategy. The organisers’ long-standing relationships with post-92 universities and youth movement networks were important in recruiting people from more marginalised backgrounds onto the course.

Participants’ motivations for taking part were quite varied, including wanting to get a deeper understanding of politics or hear different perspectives, wanting to find people to take action with, and wanting to be in a community with other learners. Several hoped the course would enable them to find their way into activism after experiences of attempting to navigate opaque or intimidating activist spaces. The regularity and substantial length of the course as well as its group-learning focus – aspects which participants associated positively with university learning – were significant elements of its appeal for several of those who signed up.

Developing critical understanding

Participants described a range of ways in which DTI had impacted their understanding of the world, with some encountering new ideas for the first time, finding a framework within which to understand their experiences or ideas, or having their understandings complicated or “unhardened”. For some this process of complication began with having their assumptions

challenged – for example, in relation to where radical democratic societies might emerge.

Others described a process of seeing connections between ideas they had previously seen as unrelated, such as between climate activism and fascism, or feminism and neoliberalism. These moments in particular call to mind Carpenter and Mojab's (2019) understanding of critical education as that which enables a way of thinking that can identify the material social relations connecting previously unrelated abstractions, experiences and/or concepts. The commitment to supporting people to begin to understand problems in "a new relational context" (Au, 2017, p180) could be extended further into the programming in future, by, for example, thinking about socialism and electoral politics in relation to racism or climate justice.

External speakers played a key role in this learning, and facilitators' careful curation of speakers played a significant role in their impact. By drawing on their historic relationships with social movements and academics, they were able to identify speakers who could articulate their ideas clearly and passionately, and connect with participants on the level of their lived experience, helping them to understand their situation as, for example, renters or precarious workers. Several participants described how the talks were most impactful when speakers referenced their own experiences, which added credibility to their theoretical contributions as well as making them more engaging, or even more "passionate". A few wished they could have heard from more speakers who could speak in a way that connected experience and theory, rather than taking a more conceptual or academic approach to the subject. This resonates with bell hooks' (1994) theorising on the significance of speaking from the "passion of experience" (see literature review) and highlights the importance of thinking about not only the content of a talk, but the ways in which the experiences (or perceived experiences) of the speaker affect how participants engage with it.

The facilitators' focus on creating opportunities for dialogue and discussion around the speakers' contributions was also vital to the development of participants' critical understanding. Small-group conversations and structured tools for dialogue helped participants engage who might not always be the first to contribute, and invited conversations that led to a deeper understanding of the issues. The programming of regular breaks, as well as the discussions that took place in the pub after sessions or while participants took action together, also played an important role. Participants described these as spaces where they were able to explore more fully the issues raised during the sessions, and where their assumptions about others were challenged and complicated. The success of these informal spaces as learning spaces was tied to the formation of relationships of trust and friendship among participants and with the facilitators. The programming of a social session in response to participant feedback was particularly important here, and reflected the facilitators' emergent approach to design, which enabled them to change tack to prioritise meeting their objectives, rather than

prioritising following a particular programme or agenda²³. In this case, the focus on building strong relationships between participants played an amplifying role in both the development of critical understanding and of taking action.

Taking action

Participants hoped that the course would equip them for action by helping them to prioritise what they wanted to take action on and to know what action needed to be taken, as well as helping them find a “way into” activism, often after negative experiences of trying to get involved in activist groups.

A significant number of participants ended up taking action during the course by canvassing for Labour with other participants, including those with significant reservations about the place of election campaigning or political parties in activist strategy. From the interviews, it was clear that the building of relationships of friendship and solidarity with people on the course played a significant role in enabling people both to canvas and to get involved in other activist groups. These relationships enabled people to overcome barriers to activism arising as a result of previous experiences on the left, such as feeling tokenised, feeling out of place, or believing that political differences were insurmountable. Again, the inclusion of a social session in the middle of the course was significant in supporting these relationships to form, as was the substantial length of the course and the gathering of a number of participants after sessions in the pub. Meeting activists from different groups during the marketplace sessions also led to several participants attending these groups regularly, as did the encounters with the more experienced “mentor” participants on the course, which gave them greater confidence to attend activist meetings for the first time, as they had already met some of those involved in various groups and knew others who they could go along with.

Importantly, the pedagogical approach of DTI, made possible by its significant length and integration of opportunities for activism, enabled dialogue around this action and its limitations that led to the development of critical understanding about the place of elections in leftwing strategy.

Engaging with challenges in political education

The organisers confronted and negotiated a number of challenges in this course. Pedagogical challenges included how to balance the contributions of speakers with space for dialogue and discussion, and, while speaker contributions were generally limited to 15-20 minutes, participants reflected that they wanted more space for conversations. While they were

²³ Training for Change describe emergent design as “adapting the agenda in the middle of a workshop to follow the needs of a group and better meet learning goals” (Training for Change).

keen to maintain the diversity of speakers and themes covered, Ed and Jacob sought to engage with this tension by building a learning community that could extend beyond the Thursday evenings, where dialogue could continue. At the same time, not all participants took part in this community to the same extent, and Libby's reflections demonstrate how she relied on other trusted sources who were able to provide a "more balanced" view – one that countered the critical ideas she was encountering.

The range and quality of speakers also provided a challenge, again in the context of a diverse group. Ed and Jacob had access to a significant network, and curated a programme of speakers who could not only communicate ideas clearly but also be role models to young people from marginalised backgrounds and speak with passion and from their experiences of organising and resisting. Nevertheless, some participants reflected critically on speakers who spoke from a place of "intellectualism", rather than explicitly drawing on their experiences, suggesting the importance of not only access to speakers who can connect experience and analysis, but also the potential value of training and mentoring opportunities for grassroots organisers or activists to be effective speakers and educators.

Another pedagogical challenge arose from the diversity of political positions, interests, life experiences and expectations in the room. While there was general alignment around leftwing politics, there was still a broad range of priorities and political ideologies present, and expectations around what they could gain from the course. The organisers were faced with decisions around what to prioritise, drawing on their own interests, those of partners and the opportunities afforded by the political context. In line with their pedagogical commitment and historic approach, they also sought input from the group through a vote, leading to a decision to run a session on canvassing. Despite this, there was still disappointment among some who were less interested in discussing the role of electoral politics even as others who were initially sceptical found engaging with the election a transformative experience.

As well as bringing diverse hopes and needs to the course, participants also brought with them particular understandings of, and relationships to, knowledge and education. These understandings and relationships are shaped by the social relations of power that condition mainstream education and produce its "domesticating" effects. These effects include participants approaching learning spaces as "educational consumers" (Seal, 2017), being reluctant to take on responsibility for their role in creating learning environments (hooks, 1994), and holding understandings of knowledge as something that is possessed (and by some bodies more than others) rather than for example, in Allman's understanding, a "tool" (Allman in Carpenter and Mojab, 2017). While the research methods and themes only allow us to speak in a very limited way to these challenges, this is something that would be valuable to explore further, and political education courses like DTI might provide a valuable space for participants to have an explicit discussion on education, knowledge and power, and to consider what critical thinking might look like as a method or tool, rather than a set of ideas.

Finally, the organisers faced significant challenges around capacity in the planning and delivery of the course, which had knock-on effects on their ability to design the course in the way they would have liked. The history of DTI, which is among the longest-running projects identified in this research, demonstrates the significant paid and unpaid labour required to sustain this kind of project. While initially made possible by Ed and Jacob's unpaid work over the summer break, when they moved into other work this became unsustainable. By incorporating the project into the core work of an NGO who saw its value, the course benefitted from the stability of an institution that was able to resource it over several years. But now, as an independent grant-funded project, it relies on its organisers' own steam and is vulnerable to the pressures of less precarious work. This raises important questions about the possibilities of long-term funding for political education work, and the role of sympathetic institutions in making them sustainable.



Case Study: Trademark Belfast's Political Economy Courses

Research process

We chose Trademark Belfast (which I will refer to as Trademark) as a case study in January 2020, intending to participate in one of their courses in Ireland and carry out a series of interviews with participants. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic I was only able to attend one day of a London-based course, hosted by Unite Community, before Trademark's face-to-face activities were suspended. As a result of this, I carried out two interviews with participants on this incomplete course, and two interviews with people who attended a two-day Trademark political education course in Dublin as part of the 2015 Right to Water campaign. Two of those I interviewed had attended more than one Trademark course. In addition, I interviewed Stevie and Sean who had designed and delivered the courses, and a trade union organiser with Mandate who had collaborated with them on the Right to Water courses, and for whom Trademark had regularly delivered trade union education.

While the courses had different target audiences and took place in very different political contexts five years apart, the core content and pedagogical approach was similar. The benefit of interviewing recent attendees on a course as well as those who had attended one five years before was that I could get fuller reflections on the impact of the Right to Water trainings on people's organising, while getting more detailed reflections on the content and pedagogy from those who attended the Unite Community training. I also drew on my own experiences and insights from participating in the course.

Context of the courses

Prior to 2008, Trademark were primarily involved in anti-sectarian work in communities and workplaces in Northern Ireland. This work involved a significant amount of mediation as well as, in Stevie's words, a lot of "going into rooms and arguing with and sometimes shouting at people". He described their educational work and approach as "not exactly Freirean":

"It was not exactly about building relationships in the room, it was often short-term fire-fighting. It was sometimes just going in, almost shouting at people nearly, saying "You will not behave this way, you will not fucking do this and stay in the union". And that's how we tried to bring these things to a resolution. Then the longer term work would begin in mending relationships, if the employers allowed us to stay the course."

The key catalyst for their shift in focus towards education on political economy was the financial crash of 2008, when it became clear that there was very little political education happening in the trade union movement in Ireland that looked at capitalism and class. There was a real enthusiasm among activists and organisers who wanted to understand what was happening, and Trademark were asked whether they could run a course on political economy that might explain the global financial crisis. Stevie

described that there was a particular hunger to talk about economic and social issues in the Irish context, where the sole public narrative, as well as the focus of education and peacebuilding work for many years, had been one of a society moving from violence to peace. In Trademark's analysis, what had in fact happened in this period was a "double transition", where the shift from violence to peace had been accompanied by a move from military Keynesianism to neoliberalism.

The financial crisis hit ten years after the Good Friday agreement, yet there had still been very little discussion around the root causes of the conflict. Stevie described how trade unions weren't doing this essential political education work, focussing instead on functional courses such as health and safety and core trade union work. In the Irish context in particular, they saw an opportunity to tap into a widespread dissatisfaction with anti-sectarian and peace-building work that failed to talk about class. As Sean explained:

"Even the community groups and the ex-combatant and ex-prisoner groups that we work with were fucking fed up with the single identity work, they're as much interested in addressing the socio-economic dimensions of the conflict as we are, and not only interested in looking at the divisions and the problems in the North... Once you get them into the room you find that they're really interested in having those conversations."

Maria, an Irish trade unionist who participated in the Unite Community course in London as well as a course run by Trademark at the Burston School Strike Rally²⁴, described her experience of not having the language to talk about class and socialism, growing up in a context where politics was framed primarily around British imperialism:

"I didn't have the language because in Ireland our politics wasn't talking about the working class. We didn't use the language of class. It was very different. It was very political against an imperial aggressive infiltrator who's basically invaded your country. The Irish people looked on each other as equals and we didn't talk about class in Ireland... We blooming well did talk politics all the time, but the language was so different. It was so so different, so it took me quite a while to find my voice politically. How to express my socialism."

While they intended to run only one initial course, demand was so high that they ended up running three weekend-long political economy schools for trade union activists in August 2009, who attended without paid release. Following these initial courses they began to work with shop stewards in a couple of local unions in the north of Ireland (including the public sector union NIPSA), and ran dozens of three-day political schools with their members. They soon began to work in the south too, particularly with retail workers' union Mandate, and also began to deliver regular courses with

²⁴ The Burston Strike School Rally is an annual event celebrating the longest strike in history in 1914 where students 'went on strike' to support teachers who had been sacked for organising agricultural workers.

Unite in Ireland and across Britain. In 2015 they were drafted in to make an intervention into the Right to Water campaign in Ireland, which had emerged from community-based activism against water metre installation, and had gained the support of several unions.

Objectives of the courses

Facilitator objectives

Trademark stepped in to fill a vacuum in political education that they saw neither community groups nor trade union groups filling, and from an explicit left perspective. Their courses sought to help people understand the causes of the financial crisis and the root causes of the conflict across Ireland with the explicit aim of “build[ing] a class consciousness” and exploring possibilities for an alternative future. As they explained:

“It’s about a more forward thinking, positive, political outlook and project, as well as just a response to the financial crisis itself.”

They also saw their work as part of the wider political project of “building left hegemony”²⁵ through a process of bringing the “big socialist ideas” that they saw being discussed in certain spaces to those at the grassroots so that they could become a new ‘common sense’ through a process of ‘counter-hegemony’²⁶.

“The big ideas people are talking about that might become popular, they need grassroots support and understanding, so that’s really what it’s about. [Taking] the big ideas to the grassroots and convincing people that those narratives are right, so that those left narratives become people’s common sense. Capitalism’s been at it for two hundred years... Neoliberalism’s been at it for forty years, so we’ve got a long way to go to break their narratives and replace them with our own.”

While their courses with unions aimed to cultivate this class consciousness amongst union members, the Right to Water campaign provided an opportunity for them to work in a more “comprehensive and large-scale way” in the Republic of Ireland and with a movement that was born in communities rather than in the labour movement. They ran three-

²⁵ In the workshop I attended Stevie drew on Antonio Gramsci’s work to explain the concept of hegemony. According to Mayo (1999) Gramsci described hegemony as “a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a single class” (p34). This hegemony is supported by ideological social institutions – including law, education, mass media and religion – as well as civil society. Civil society can also transform the bourgeois state through a “war of position – a process of wide-ranging social and cultural influence”, also known as “counter-hegemonic activity”.

²⁶ In the Unite Community workshop, it was Gramsci again who was the reference point for the notion of “common sense” that emerges under capitalist hegemony. In his analysis, common sense consists of “all those heterogeneous beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection, but encounter as already existing, self-evident truths”, and assume the status of reality through repetition (ibid, p29).

day political economy courses as well as shorter workshops all across the South in church halls, community centres, and even pubs. Many of the community activists involved were averse to party politics and had very varied political views, including those with conservative and even far-right leanings. In this context Trademark saw their task as trying to reframe local struggles against water charges in the context of a “battle for worldwide control of water systems and all our collective resources”.

Participants and their objectives

Both the Right to Water courses in 2015-16 and the course I attended with Unite Community were delivered to community activists, who were invited to attend because of their involvement in organising or activism. There were several attending the Unite Community course who were very seasoned activists or organisers, including CLP secretaries and trade union officials. Maria was secretary at her CLP, and had tentatively joined the Labour Party after Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader, and soon became more active in her local Labour Party where the MP was unsupportive of Corbyn. At the time of our interview in April 2020 she had been secretary for 3 years.

She described how Momentum didn't seem to be doing much political education, and she wouldn't consider going to the Labour Party for it, so she had been “taking political education wherever [she] could get it”, particularly through the Socialist Party. While she had been active in politics and attending leftwing events for several years, she described how she rarely spoke or took a microphone in political education spaces. She felt socialism was in her DNA, but she struggled to talk about it in the English context where the language was so different:

“It was so so different, so it took me quite a while to find my voice politically. How to express my socialism, because [it is] expressed in my core – you share, you bring everybody with you, you bridge the gap between rich and poor. You should be sharing the means of production. It's just in your DNA, but I didn't talk about it in the way that a lot of my other comrades did... In the pubs somebody would, the seanchai, the storyteller, somebody would just suddenly start speaking out loud and tell a story. And then somebody would pick up a guitar or a fiddle and you'd sing your songs, which were very political. It was such a different way of talking politics.”

She had previously attended a talk by Stevie at the Burston School Strike Rally which she described as “phenomenal”, and when she heard he was running a course for Unite Community she decided “I've got to go to that!”.

Shanaz was in her early 20s and had similarly been inspired to join and become active in the Labour Party since Corbyn's leadership. Through local campaigning she had met someone who encouraged her to join Unite. Soon after, she was made redundant and became a member of Unite Community, and continued to be one while studying for a masters degree. She described how she went to the course “just for the sake of

it” because she was invited and had lots of time on her hands since being unemployed, despite thinking she would already know a lot of the content having studied economics. She had also already attended a number of Unite residential courses.

The activists attending the Right to Water courses were much more diverse in their politics. They were recruited from largely working class community-based campaigns against water privatisation, and as such many had several years’ experience of organising – some had even been in prison for their activism. Yet political education was new to many of them. As Dave from Mandate described:

“They were physically stopping water companies from entering their housing estates. These are people who’d never done a course in their life. They’d never gone to college. They had no educational background. And it was those people that were embraced and brought into these courses.”

Another participant, Keith, had been involved in community activism and in stopping the installation of water meters in and around Cork for three years. He considered it very much a “single issue campaign”, and one that was strictly independent of any political parties, who in his experience had only engaged with the campaign to “use them like guinea pigs”. Trademark had visited Cork and made contact with him when the Right to Water campaign got underway, and invited their activists to a residential workshop in Dublin. For Keith, a significant part of the appeal was a free two-day stay in Dublin. At the same time, he was curious about the content and aware that, as the Right to Water movement picked up pace, growing from local resistance to water meters to huge marches, their campaign group might need to learn more about “the bigger picture” if they were to have “a say”.

“We were all at the stage where we wanted real change in our country and we thought that with the way it was going, the protests, if it was going to go down the political route, we needed a say on that, and we all wanted to learn more about it. We felt that we needed to educate ourselves more and it was being offered to us.”

He described how many of those on the course, himself included, hadn’t been in front of a teacher in years. But this wasn’t the case for all attendees. Helen had been a trade unionist for 16 years and had previously attended several courses that Trademark had been involved in, including a course they ran for Mandate when she was a shop steward. She got swept up in the Right to Water movement almost by accident when her friend who was organising a march asked for her help printing flyers.

Curriculum and format

The core content of Trademark’s political economy courses drew on Trademark’s interest and expertise in history, and began with the basic



premise that people needed to know how and why capitalism emerged if they were to imagine and build alternatives:

“We took it right back to the plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I always had an interest in history, so when we sat down to design a political economy course, historical capitalism was the first stop. You have to teach people where the system comes from, how it emerged, why it emerged, based on that simple premise that if you can teach people that capitalism didn't always exist you might be able to get them to think about a time when it won't exist in the future.”

They had adapted the course significantly in the decade since they had first initiated it. In particular, they felt that their initial “broad brush stroke” history spanning 800 years was too broad, and they had worked in additional historical periods. In trying to decide what to keep in and what to leave out, they described that the priority was “narrative”– they wanted to tell a “story of class conflict”. The idea was that it would be a story that makes sense of people's experiences, giving them a “framework” on which to hang them.

I only attended day one of a two-day course designed for Unite Community and facilitated by Stevie, which was a compressed version of the three-day course. As such it was incredibly fast-moving. Stevie began by explaining that, through discussing historical capitalism, the course sought to counter the idea that “there are no alternatives” by showing how there was a time in history where capitalism didn't exist, and there could be a future where it wouldn't again. He referenced Gramsci and explained that hegemony is established when an ideology becomes common sense, using examples to describe how capitalist ideology is embedded in the state and has “colonised our institutions”, including the university and the labour movement. In particular he challenged the “common sense” following the financial crisis that governments shouldn't be in debt and that the problem had been too much government spending.

He described a “new normal” of global financial instability, degraded public infrastructure and structurally precarious work, and argued that the experience of the 1950s-70s involved an accidental compromise between labour and capital which was long over. The course then shifted back in time, and participants were asked to identify in small groups any events in history that they could think of relating to the emergence of capitalism. As groups fed back moments they had identified, Stevie drew them into a collective whistle-stop tour of history, beginning with the great famine of 1315, through to the Peasants' Revolt, the colonisation of Latin America, the Atlantic slave trade, the Reformation and Renaissance, the mass privatisation of common land in the 1500s and 1600s, the development of the manufactory and creation of the working class, the colonisation of India, the long depression, the scramble for Africa and the great depression. Each of these events was described in terms of its significance in creating the conditions for, or precipitating the emergence of capitalist economies – for example, he described the origins of the concept of

companies in the buying of slave ships, as the formation of companies enabled people to access money through shareholders. The narrative emphasised the contradictory boom-and-bust nature of capitalism, where accumulation leads to speculation and bubbles followed by a crisis leading to monopolisation, protectionism and imperialism.

Throughout this history, Stevie drew on cultural reference points such as songs and stories, emphasised Europe's dependence on the rest of the world (arguing for example that in the 13th century the Arab world was "a hundred years ahead of the rest"), and highlighted the existence and intentional suppression of alternative economic systems, such as those relying on reciprocity. As such it told a narrative that challenged the European knowledge's claims to modernity and universality, and highlighted how Britain's "progress" depended not only on the dispossession of its own population but on the rest of the world.

While I didn't attend day two, participants explained that it focussed on alternatives to the current system, including discussions about the way that Trademark itself operates as a workers' cooperative.

When describing their pedagogical approach, Stevie spoke about his own experience of being involved in the International Voluntary Service in Yugoslavia and how he encountered "an awful lot of that North American group work bollocks", which was very different to the more "aggressive" and direct approach he had developed through doing anti-sectarian work with trade unions. However, he found that some of the facilitation techniques and ways of working as a group he encountered in this context were "actually very useful" and so incorporated them into their political economy courses, which he felt reflected a fusion of these two very different approaches. In practice, the course I attended was a full day, and the vast majority of the time was spent in plenary, with two 10-15 minute substantial discussions in small groups, where we discussed with those beside us our memories of learning history at school and our understanding (or lack of understanding) of several historical events, including the long depression and the scramble for Africa. The parts that took place in plenary were very informal, with almost continuous conversation back-and-forth between Stevie and the wider room.

Impact of the course

Questioning received knowledge

A significant theme in participants' accounts of the effect of the course on their knowledge or understanding was an experience of having previous ideas destabilised. Helen described the process as one that "opened [her] eyes" and enabled her to start "looking more closely" at what was going on in Ireland:

"I have to admit I used to be one of those very naive people who thought that politicians were there to look after us (laughter), thought I was doing my duty 'cos I went out and I voted every time because,

you know, our grandparents fought for the right to vote, and it really opened my eyes an awful lot to just how corrupt our whole system is, and how much it's stacked against people."

It was particularly the "mindset" or lack of values underlying the capitalist system that she found so shocking and surprising, having thought that politicians were "there to look after us". In particular she recounted how Stevie and Mel had described that there is "no thought of morality" when it comes to markets and speculation. She described how for the participants on the course this experience of seeing "what was really going on" led to new mindset and of critical questioning around the situation stretching from the local to the national:

"We all kind of latched on to what they were saying in the course and we all started looking more closely at situations, say, even in the county, the area we live in, the province, and then Ireland as a country."

For Dave who had helped organise the courses, this process of questioning was a very clear long-term impact of the training, which was visible in the way people on the courses began to engage with social media:

"There's probably 200 who went through the intensive three-day courses... Some people switched off, but a lot of people are still asking questions that they never asked in 2008, 2009, 2010... It might not be as organised as we'd like them to be, but they certainly are questioning the system because of those types of courses... Whenever [the Irish Times or the Irish Independence] start putting pro-water charges stuff up on their site, people who'd been on our training courses are ready to jump into the comments section and say, "hold on a second lads, that's not what the game is here." Without that education, without them understanding the system, yes, they knew it was wrong but they didn't know how to engage and criticise and have a go at the journalists."

Joining dots of the past and present

Participants frequently recounted in their interviews new understandings of history that they had encountered during Trademark's course, often describing with them a sense of shock or surprise:

"The whole thing about where shareholders came from with slave ships, and the whole idea of like, the reasons slavery came about."

"The scramble for Africa, all these things, when you come out you're like, oh my God. That kind of feeling of, Jesus! This actually happened!"

Frequently, participants raised examples relating to Britain's colonial past and its relationship to the development of capitalism. Shanaz found the course less surprising because she already knew a lot of the content. But

she explained that the course gave her greater clarity around the post-war consensus, which Stevie had described as an exceptional compromise in the history of capitalism:

“I knew as well before we were all part of the capitalist system and that even the rich people are affected by it, they’re victims of it as well. But, it gave me new ideas and new thoughts. And the stuff about how the post-war consensus was a blip in the history of capitalism, I knew that as well, but it made things clearer to me.”

While Keith named during his interview many historical events that he had heard about for the first time on the course, for him what was significant was that the course enabled him to put the current moment of struggle over water into a broader historical context, and to “join the dots”. This understanding of the past led to a new understanding of what was going on in the present:

“This hasn’t just happened now, this isn’t just happening now. It was the historical aspect of it. From the scramble for Africa and how Europeans divided it up and the atrocities that happened over there. And they’re talking about Fordism and Henry Ford and the assembly lines. We kind of understood that what was going on had a bigger context. We couldn’t kind of verbalise how, what was going on. We really couldn’t join the dots and that’s one of the big things they helped us do is join the dots.”

Maria also described how the course enabled her to see the financial crash in the context of what had come before:

“It was all very, shock shock shock shock, when you start seeing it all laid out about the crash. About how it all fitted together. How it all... like a row of dominos.”

Hope and conviction

The participants on the Right to Water course described various ways in which participating in the course had strengthened their activism. In particular, they described how they returned to their hometowns with renewed conviction and motivation. For Helen, while she felt a sense of hopelessness after the course on comprehending the scale of the “forces we are fighting against”, she nevertheless felt invigorated and convicted of the importance of the fight, and tried to organise for Trademark to deliver the course for more activists:

“We didn’t go away with no hope, we went away educated. We went away invigorated saying this is a fight that needs to be fought and we came back to our groups, actually, and we were trying to get trademark to come down and talk to more of us because we knew people would benefit from this.”

Keith described a renewed sense of conviction and confidence that came from seeing their activism in historical context. Crucially, this counteracted

a sense that they “weren’t left enough”, that they had gleaned from previous interactions with leftwing organisations:

“I think it gave people a better understanding and a better grounding of what they were at and a bit more conviction, it kind of gave you a lot of confidence in what you were doing... It’s a hard one to explain but our dealings with the left up to that point, we felt like we weren’t left enough for them. We came out feeling that actually we are. The stuff we’ve been fighting is the stuff they’re talking about, but it’s in the modern context.”

Strengthened action

While much of what participants described were the affective impacts of Trademark courses – anger, hope, confidence and conviction – and how these motivated action, they also described how the the knowledge they had gained on the course equipped them with understanding, counter-arguments and an accompanying confidence that was valuable to them as activists in a wide range of contexts. They began to directly question and challenge the media online and were able to “jump on” stories in the paper about water privatisation. As Keith explained:

“When we were challenging stuff that came up in the media we were able to jump on it. Stuff that came on the papers about water and costing we were able to jump on it and do right to responds and that kind of stuff. Definitely gave us an awful lot, looking back it really did.”

He also described how they felt more equipped when they were invited to input into an event intended to come up with Right to Change²⁷ policy principles:

“At that moment, none of us felt out of our depth. We were able to talk to an awful lot of long-term politicians and long-term activists and say we don’t agree with that policy and here’s the reason why.”

Finally, he described that his activist group were able to use the arguments they had learned to “talk people round” and answer difficult questions while they were organising on estates against the installation of meters, both when knocking on doors and when organising public meetings:

“You know when you knock at a door you’re not going to get a favourable response all of the time but we were able to talk people around because of what we’d learned. It gave us a confidence boost [...] We got an awful lot of estates come out towards the end. Definitely down to the confidence given to us by Trademark courses and the political economy one. Definitely.”

For Dave, the political understanding developed by activists during the course had a profound impact as the Right to Water campaign developed and gained the support of political parties, as it enabled them to see how the campaign was being used as a political football.

27 As political parties got involved, the campaign was re-named Right to Change.

Factors shaping the impact of the course

Deconstructing received knowledge and exposing capitalist ideology

One of the most impactful elements of the course for Helen was the way the facilitators pulled apart the narratives of politicians around the privatisation of water, exposing them as lies. Through this process she came to understand how repeated lies could be taken for truths over time:

“What really opened my eyes as well during the course was the blatant lies that our politicians were telling us... what Stevie and Mel were doing was they were dismantling the lies that politicians were telling us and explaining to us why they were lies... it's very funny you really see it now in a big way with Trump – you repeat the lie and it becomes the message, and it's, it's kind of frightening.”

In this way the facilitators were taking the “common sense” she had received from politicians and picking it apart. Another way in which they challenged received understandings of the world was through asking people to describe what they had learnt about history in school and exposing key gaps in knowledge. Maria described how:

“They lead you along to draw out of you things that you knew, or things that you thought you knew and then they say, ok, that's the way you were taught at school, this is the way we look at it.”

In the session I attended, Stevie highlighted where there were significant absences within the groups' collective historical knowledge, explaining, for example, how the “long depression has been entirely written out of history”, and asking why no-one had heard of the scramble for Africa. As such, he was able to highlight the ways in which violence and dispossession are written out of our collective understanding of the history of capitalism. This process entailed an implicit critique of the politics of knowledge production. There was also an explicit epistemological critique as described above, where Stevie argued that neoliberal narratives had colonised the institutions of the state, the university and political parties, and as a result become “common sense”.

As well as picking apart people's understandings of history, the course also sought to destabilise “common sense” about the present through exploring the gap between the promises of capitalism and the present-day reality of people's lived experience. For example, Stevie described that the prices of goods under capitalism are, according to capitalist logic, supposed to go down, and while this has happened for consumer goods, the prices of all the essential things we need to live have increased. As such he described the way capitalism talks about itself as “propaganda” through highlighting the gap between the promises of capitalist ideology and our lived experiences of it.

Telling a new story

In contrast to the “propaganda” of capitalist ideology, the political education courses sought to tell a new story of the past and present by piecing together the fragments of people’s historical knowledge and experiences. This re-telling of history had several emphases. Firstly, it focussed on the real material relations of capitalism’s emergence in the context of other social relations. The organisers described how Trademark’s focus on the historical emergence of capitalism, rather than simply talking about its manifestation in the present, sought to challenge its inevitability and give people hope for an alternative future. The story told of the emergence of capitalism in the session that I attended emphasised historic alternative economies and their active suppression, strengthening the case that there could be other alternatives in the present. For example, Stevie highlighted the destruction by colonial powers of economies of reciprocity, such as the Canadian government’s banning of the potlatch, as well as existing forms of reciprocity that operate despite or alongside capitalism such as the Irish ‘meitheal’ and even buying rounds in the pub. In the interviews there was a strong sense amongst the participants that they had understood that there was an alternative to capitalism and this gave them hope:

“What they were very much driving at during the whole course was, just because in our lifetime this is the system that we live in, this does not have to be the future.”

Secondly, the reconstructed history told was one that sought to place the participants within it as protagonists in an ongoing class struggle. As Stevie described:

“[You’re] helping people to situate themselves in that story, because it’s a story of class conflict. It’s a story of the evolution of capitalism and you’re trying to situate people within that.”

Throughout the session I attended, Stevie regularly sought to put people’s everyday experiences of oppression in historical and systemic context in order to explain them. For Keith, this meant that he was able to understand the single issue campaign around water privatisation in relation to a bigger political picture, and furthermore to help others situate their own day-to-day struggles in a wider political context:

“Obviously we were all fighting a single issue, but the training the lads were giving people was enabling them to go into their communities and say, this is *why* it is the way it is. This is why your nan can’t get an operation.”

Stevie’s ability as a storyteller to draw relationships between this history, the current political context, and people’s experiences in the world, was something Dave described in his interview:

“He’s able to put a Marxist slant or analysis around current policies and topics and policies that are relevant to people’s minds....There’s always a story there and that’s what makes it really powerful, is that

Stevie's able to spot those people in the crowd and know the topics to bring."

Thirdly, the story sought to create a sense of shared class consciousness, or unity in the struggle against capital, both with those who had struggled against the establishment of capitalist hegemony throughout history and with others in the room. This was a significant take-away for Helen, who left the course believing that people needed to stop fighting each other and focus on the "powers that be":

"We can find so many different ways to dislike or decide we don't want to be... that we don't relate to people that are at our level, that are at our class standing, and I think the whole idea is that, we're fighting with the wrong people, we're all fighting with one another instead of fighting with the powers that be."

Stevie described how honing a story that "worked" for the particular groups he was working with was important to his approach. Since creating a sense of shared struggle and "unity in the room" was a priority, the parts of history he emphasised shifted depending on the possibilities afforded by those in the room, emphasising narratives that people could identify with. In particular, the extent to which he talked about British imperialism shifted depending on where and with whom he was working:

"When I went over to work in England for the first time, that was big challenge for us in terms of the content. Telling British people all about British imperialism- for the first time usually, isn't always something that they find very comfortable... We had to adapt the way we approached that subject, because in Ireland you can deliver a course on British imperialism, you can kick the Brits, everyone agrees with you and it's great! You have a go and it creates a great sense of unity in the room. But you can't use the same approach when you're talking about the birth of capitalism in England itself and the emergence of imperialism with Britain at its core... But usually the room has people from the Indian subcontinent and Black people as well, so you can talk about slavery and what the British did in India, so it's a very different more nuanced dynamic when working in England; but you absolutely can't avoid talking about colonialism and imperialism, because they're not historical concepts, they're still at work."

He went on to describe how he thought it was important to challenge imperialist narratives in this context, but in a way that wouldn't "lose" people.

"What you're trying to do is build a sense of class consciousness and it would defeat the purpose to go in and give an anti-imperialist perspective that didn't also give respect to the history of the labour movement. That's not to say you don't challenge those imperialist narratives and history, but you do it in a different way than you might do with a republican group"

Rather than only seeking a more “truthful” re-telling of history then, Trademark’s pedagogical approach sought to generate affective impacts in the room through storytelling. They encouraged space for anger by explaining people’s current experiences as the result of conscious choices throughout history and in the present, worked to transform this anger into a sense of urgency and hope through demonstrating that capitalism isn’t inevitable, and told stories that sought to build solidarity through emphasising class unity or shared experiences of oppression. These emotions were all evident in the interviews, and Stevie described how bringing emotion into the space was a conscious aspect of their approach.

Facilitating dialogue

“I love how he is always bringing the audience in: “Oh, you might know this”, or “you might know that”, or “you said this”, or “remember what you said”. He’s always bringing us in. He’s really a phenomenal speaker.”

Participants regularly referred to the Trademark facilitators’ ability to “bring people in”, and facilitate a conversation or dialogue among the whole group without “leaving anyone behind”. During the course I attended, I noticed there was a sense of a continuous invitation for participants to ask questions or make comments, and despite my tendency to want to stay quiet I also found myself drawn into asking clarifying questions. While there were people who spoke more frequently and those who spoke less, I noticed all 12 participants spoke in front of the whole group during the course of the day. While the group size was relatively small for the Unite Community session, the interviews suggested that this conversational atmosphere was a key feature of all their workshops. Maria described what she had noticed about how Trademark facilitators worked as a pair to bring people into the conversation:

“One talks and the other one watches, one watches the reactions. Mel is very much about watching the reactions and sizing people up, and then he will question people as he’s going along or ask for input. They’re very good at getting people to talk who wouldn’t normally talk.”

Helen described how the facilitators mingled with participants during break times, identifying those who hadn’t already spoken:

“I came in the next day with loads of questions to ask, and wanted to talk about different things, which they did because that’s something that they tend to do as well during the lunch breaks and the tea breaks. They wander round chatting to people and kind of feeling them out... people that maybe haven’t interacted during the actual official course, but yeah, they’re very easy to talk to.”

She went on to describe how she felt it was their ability to talk about any topic and encourage people to bring their experiences into the space that enabled them to include everyone in dialogue:

“They’re very much a give and take – they do the course but they involve everybody and, erm, I think it’s the fact that they have such a broad knowledge on, god, no matter what you talk to them about they seem to have some knowledge or experience with, and are very open to hearing about other people’s experiences.”

Others remarked on the breadth of the facilitators’ expertise and how this enabled them to engage meaningfully in conversation with people with diverse experiences and interests.

Significantly, most participants described at length the facilitators’ informal approach, their sense of humour and the fact that they were likeable. These traits made them “very approachable” and able to “put [participants] at ease”. For Maria it was this style that made Trademark’s pedagogical approach distinctive, rather than the format of the courses:

“I don’t think there’s anything in my opinion that’s earth shatteringly different other than their unique style – very informal.”

This style played a crucial role for Keith, enabling him to “feel at ease” in a context where he was anxious about being out of his depth, having not been in a teaching environment since school. He tied this to the facilitators’ sense of humour, which Stevie himself described as an important component of Trademark’s approach. But he also tied this sense of ease to his shared class identity with the speakers:

“A lot of us hadn’t been in front of what we would call a teacher in years. A lot of people were worried they’d look stupid within that classroom. They made us feel very at ease. They laughed and joked with us. They’re working class people. They talked to us like working class people.”

While several participants commented on the conversational style of Trademark’s courses, Shanaz described how she wished there had been more discussion and interaction between participants. She found Stevie really interesting and thought he had “a great amount of knowledge”, but she wanted more opportunities to discuss between participants in small groups, as she said this was her preferred method of learning.

The challenges of a very conversational, interactive approach in workshops with people who, at times, had very differing prior knowledge was also evident. Maria described that on a previous Trademark course she had attended, she found herself among other participants who were union officials and were extremely knowledgeable:

“It was fast paced. I felt slightly out of my depth. I kept very quiet. It was very fast paced. The other people were full on...it was a very, very intense half a day. [Stevie] was the same, he was interactive and inclusive.”

But rather than being overwhelmed, she described the experience as “amazing” and said she preferred being out of her depth than being in a session that was “dragged down” by those with less knowledge, which was her experience of sessions with less structure or a greater focus on

dialogue between participants. She felt Trademark handled this challenge well by combining informal facilitation with expert knowledge and “discipline”:

“Trademark are just top notch and [Stevie’s] got a knack – he’ll quickly backtrack and just say “bluh bluh bluh”, then he’s back on point again and moving forward. So it’s about... you know, they say you get what you pay for?”

I had a similar experience to Maria on the course I attended: a lot of what was being discussed, particularly the things contributed by other participants, was difficult for me to follow, and afterwards Stevie described that it had been a particularly knowledgeable group. While, like her, I found it enjoyable nevertheless, I spoke during the lunch break with another participant who had been quieter in the group, who said that much of it had also gone over her head.

Mutual trust

For Keith, the feeling of being at ease or relaxed in the space was significant beyond enabling him to participate in dialogue. He recounted his previous experience of being in leftwing spaces as ones of being “looked down upon”, and compared them with being on the Trademark course where he felt treated like he “belonged”:

“It was an eye opener, the big thing for a lot of us was we felt that we weren’t out of our depth in there. We were treated like we belonged in the class and that we could handle what they were telling us... They talked to us like working class people. The biggest thing for me was that they weren’t talking down to us. These were people who are educated, are on the left, but they didn’t sound like they were.”

On the Trademark course he felt trusted to engage with the ideas discussed, in contrast to his previous experiences of being patronised. This experience was deeply connected to the experience of being taught by working class people. In turn, he described how it left their group feeling a greater sense of confidence and conviction in their activism as working class people in a wider left context where their sense of belonging had been eroded. In this sense, it worked also to strengthen the “unity” Stevie was aiming for through the narrative element of the course:

“It’s a hard one to explain, but our dealings with the left up to that point, we felt like we weren’t left enough for them. We came out feeling that actually we are. The stuff we’ve been fighting is the stuff they’re talking about.”

There was a sense of a desire not to patronise but to trust in the capacity of learners in Stevie’s interview, where he explained how they might change the pace of the course but would still cover the same content when working with people who had spent fewer years in education or had very different political starting points:

“We can also work with groups in Ireland with people who left school at fourteen, literacy problems, ex-prisoners, ex-convicts, who might read the fucking Sun, that’s the level we’re at, but we still go through the same stuff. We still go through the birth of capitalism, Kondratieff waves, derivatives, bonds and guild markets with them as well. We go through everything, we just do it at a slightly different pace I suppose.”

While the sense of being trusted to “handle” what they were being told, rather than being patronised, was a theme in Keith’s interview, an emerging theme among interviewees was the sense that Trademark could be trusted as educators and that they were “credible”. For Stevie, Trademark had developed a credibility amongst working class people because they were activists who had a demonstrable historical commitment to struggle in Ireland:

“They have to believe [in your credibility], or in the organisation’s reputation – you carry that with you as well. So, we’ve got quite a good name here in Ireland... We were all over the country with them. So, that kind of expression of solidarity has to have a practical meaning as well.”

This history of activism was something that Mandate shared, and Dave described how this was essential to both organisation’s credibility with working class audiences across Ireland who felt abandoned by the Trade Union movement.

“We had that credibility where we could go into working class communities and whereas most trade unions couldn’t. Stevie, Mel and Seán have that credibility too. They can go into those working class communities that feel abandoned by the trade union movement and talk to them.”

Dave also understood Trademark’s credibility as stemming from the educators’ own class background and how this meant they were able to speak from a place of passion and lived experience, rather than “ticking boxes” or, as he parodied, saying, “here’s something I learned by the way and I’m presenting it to you because it’s been drilled into my brain”. The fact that they were a workers’ cooperative, rather than paying themselves trade union salaries meant that they were living their values and that they “feel it too”:

“There’s not everyone from the trade union movement who is from that class, that background, and don’t feel it the same way. The fact they’re a cooperative and they’re not paying themselves trade union salaries, means they feel it too. They know that sort of stuff... Relatable to your own life and it’s not ticking boxes. You can see it in them. They’re passionate about this stuff. They feel it themselves... they’ve sacrificed an awful lot to be where they are. They’re not capitalists like. Stevie is talented enough that if he went into a business he’d do very well, but he’s not, he’s a communist, so he’s sticking to his guns.”

While Dave compared Trademark’s legitimacy to that which was lacking amongst trade unions in Ireland, Helen compared them favourably to

political parties. She felt that the parties had got involved in the Right to Water campaign for political reasons rather than because they wanted to help. Instead, she felt Trademark, unlike most organisations, had no other agenda except “things have to change, people have had enough, we can’t take any more”. This sense that Trademark, unlike other organisations involved in the Right to Water campaign, could be trusted in their reasons for getting involved featured in several interviews. Here, Trademark’s political independence became another important element in their credibility as an educator.

Conclusions

I have attempted here to sketch a picture of how and why the course emerged and what the facilitators hoped it would achieve. I then outlined who participated in the courses and what they hoped to gain from it. After outlining the curriculum and the pedagogical approach the facilitators intended to take, I then went on to describe the key ways in which the course impacted participants in relation to two broad aims of building critical understanding and enabling effective action. I explored core elements of their pedagogical approach that contributed to these outcomes, drawing on interviews and my own experiences as a participant on one day of the course. Here I will summarise my analysis so far and highlight some questions it raises for political educators.

Participants across the two courses described how the course had destabilised their understandings of the world. Some described how they began to doubt things they had previously taken for granted, and this questioning of “what was really going on” was evident following the Right to Water course, where participants began to actively query and challenge mainstream media narratives through social media. Participants also regularly described new knowledge they had gained around the history of capitalism, frequently referring to connections between imperial and colonial history and capitalism and how it had “joined the dots”. They also spoke about developing a new understanding of how their activism was situated in the context of this history, and some described feeling a new sense of being part of “the left”. For those on the Right to Water course, this in turn gave them renewed confidence in their activism. They also spoke about how having “the right arguments” gave them more confidence and more success in engaging their neighbours in the campaign, and in challenging the media and politicians.

I identified four key processes at play or elements of Trademark’s pedagogical approach that contributed to these outcomes. The first was the facilitators’ focus on exposing gaps in knowledge and contradictions between capitalist ideology and people’s experiences, through a rigorous deconstruction of the groups’ received knowledge of history and the present. This was coupled with an explicit spotlight on capitalism’s relationship with knowledge production, which Stevie described as propaganda and hegemony, which, through repetition and the

“colonisation of institutions”, becomes common sense. It was propaganda in the sense that it kept social relations apart from one another and failed to explain our experiences. The explicit attention given to the role that capitalism plays in knowledge production may have been what Helen was articulating when she described how the course “opened doors [she] didn’t know were closed”.

This deconstructive process was coupled with a reconstructive one, which had a re-telling of this history of capitalism from the 1300s to the present day at its heart. I identified three components of Trademark’s re-telling: firstly, it emphasised capitalism’s emergence as a result of the active suppression of alternative economic models in order to argue that it wasn’t inevitable. This worked to ignite a sense of hope and agency in the face of what Mark Fisher has called ‘capitalist realism’, whereby it has become impossible to imagine an alternative to capitalism (2009). Second, Trademark facilitators worked to situate participants’ experiences into this reconstructed history and present in order to get a fuller understanding of them. Thirdly, they adapted the emphasis of the story depending on the participants in the room, in order to prioritise building a sense of unity amongst those present.

Taken together, this deconstruction and reconstruction follows Freire’s problem-posing approach, whereby a “perceived totality” in the lives of the participants is “decoded or broken down, and then “reconstructed through making more systemic, relational connections – making new sense of the problem within a new relational context” (Au, 2017 p180). Trademark’s emphasis on human agency in history also reflects Freire’s emphasis on enabling people to understand themselves as active agents or subjects. However, the reconstruction for Trademark was also one that aimed explicitly at other affective impacts – in particular generating anger and a sense of unity. Both of these emerged in the interviews. This strategic approach to the re-telling of history focussed on engaging emotions is reminiscent of the community organising approaches which utilise the affective power of storytelling to mobilise action²⁸.

At the same time, this poses a challenge when the desire to build unity, for example, is in tension with a commitment to developing critical understanding that seeks to build “more contextual and systemic connections between things”. The dead end of indefinitely postponed conversations around, for example, socialism’s relationship with patriarchy does not bear repeating, so the question of when and under what conditions these conversations *can* take place is an urgent one. The facilitators did not however shy away from making regular and challenging connections for example between imperialism, colonialism, the creation of the British state and the emergence of capitalism.

A third theme I explored in Trademark’s pedagogical approach was a strong focus on conversation and “bringing people in”, including those who

²⁸ See, for example, Marshall Ganz’s (2009) work on public narrative, which has been widely adopted by organisations and movements on the left.



might not have spoken, particularly in the plenary sessions. Participants regularly attributed this conversational atmosphere to the facilitators' informal style, and in particular their use of humour and informal language which made them feel "at ease" and able to ask questions. This was despite the fact that a significant majority of the work took place in plenary and might have been considered "didactic". This indicates the importance of avoiding simplistic associations between format and pedagogical approach. While small group work was in many ways limited, dialogue between the participants and facilitator was almost continuous. To complicate it further, the way in which people experienced this dialogue varied. For one participant, it gave them an experience of "belonging" on the left, while for another they felt out of their depth because of the high level of knowledge of other participants. This raises challenges around "pitching" to groups with differing levels of prior knowledge.

Finally, I explored trust as a key factor that shaped the ways in which people engaged with and were impacted by the course. Keith's experience in particular turns our attention to the nature of the relationship with the facilitator as a significant factor affecting people's participation in dialogue and/or sense of being a "subject" in the educational process. The final theme I outlined, drawing heavily on Keith's account of the course, was the significance of mutual trust between the facilitator and the participant. For Keith, feeling trusted to "handle" knowledge in contrast to an experience of being patronised in other leftwing spaces enabled him to feel like he belonged as an equal in the space, which in turn supported his participation. This also contributed to an increased sense of conviction in his local activism and its importance and place within leftwing social movements. This transformative experience was not only the outcome of pedagogical choices by the facilitators, but was tied to the experience of being taught by working class people. There was also a sense in his interview and among other participants that the facilitators could be trusted and were "credible". This credibility was associated at times with their class background as well as their long-term commitment to working class struggles, and their organisational model which eschewed capitalism and indicated that they "lived their values".

This final exploration of the role of the speakers' identity and groups' relationship with facilitators is an important reminder that the social relationship in which political education takes place is crucial, and can not only shape people's participation in dialogue but also have wider transformative impacts.

Conclusions

A picture of political education

Through desk-based research and informal interviews with organisers of political education, it was clear that practices of transformative political education have been present and are continuing to emerge in a wide range of spaces across Britain and Ireland. Some were situated in, or working in partnership with, long-standing institutions such as the WEA, trade unions and Ruskin College, trying to reignite their historical traditions of radical working class education. A significant number were based in CLPs or Momentum groups, trying to carve out space for critical education and equip Labour Party members to become more active.

Other projects were part of campaigning or activist groups working on a wide range of issues including trade justice, housing, racism, sex worker rights, migrant rights, poverty, peace and environmental justice, where education was an integral part of their wider organising or campaign strategy. There were a number of projects taking place in libraries, museums and archives that sought to create an audience for radical histories. Transformative political education was also taking place in community-based organisations, sometimes combining language skills or rights-based education with critical education and community organising. It could also be found in faith-based groups with a social justice emphasis, providing tailored education that brought theology or religious teaching together with political critique.

As well as projects emerging in existing institutions and networks, the research uncovered a wide range of projects that had been established independently, influenced by a range of radical education traditions and practices. These included a number of arts-based initiatives such as political theatre companies, and projects sitting at the intersection of art and pedagogy. It also included projects organised by enthusiastic educators and facilitators inspired by various radical education movements, including book clubs, study groups and walking tours. A number of these projects were focussed on working with younger people and sought to address the failures of compulsory education, such as the omission of colonial history from school curricula, or aimed to address a lack of understanding of socialism and trade unionism. And still others were inspired by the Free University movement, seeking to challenge the elitism and unaffordability of university education.

These diverse projects were engaging with different audiences depending on their institutional and geographical location as well as their objectives. They varied from students to workers, children to older people, those facing particular kinds of challenges (e.g. those affected by poor housing or the hostile environment) as well as members of all kinds of civil society and political organisations – including religious organisations, community groups, CLPs and Momentum groups. A number of projects were targeting a general audience or anyone in particular locality.

While some had been doing political education for decades (such as Banner Theatre company and the Marx Memorial Library), and others

emerged in the years following the financial crisis –including a number of Free University projects as well as Trademark Belfast’s political education courses and Demand the Impossible –a significant number of projects, particularly those organised by CLPs, Momentum groups and TWT-inspired local Transformed groups, had emerged more recently in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party, or in the context of the burgeoning environmental and anti-racist movements.

While we sought to maintain as broad a view of these projects as possible by targeting groups by tradition and geography, the limitations of our methods meant that our survey sample was skewed towards groups and organisers who were familiar with or connected to TWT, in particular those associated with the left of the Labour Party, and those based in London or operating nationally. The survey design also favoured those who could think about their work in terms of distinct “projects”. This excluded the many practices of political education that are more short-term or integrated into longer-term campaigns, community work or organising. It may have also excluded those working in a long-term way in communities who wouldn’t consider their work to be an intervention. Finally, it was clear that thinking in terms of political education was uncomfortable for some radical arts-based projects with strong pedagogical components, who were interested in much broader outcomes and found this terminology too narrow or instrumentalist. While some of these projects were still included in the qualitative data through interviews with organisers, these challenges indicate how future research might be able to enrich understandings of transformative political education practices by approaching the subject differently, for example, by choosing organisations or community groups as the unit of study rather than political education projects.

Why are organisers doing political education?

Organisers had developed their political education projects in the hope of addressing problems both on the left and in wider society. They also demonstrated varied understandings of the role that political education should play in progressive change.

Education for critical understanding

The majority of organisers were concerned with a lack of understanding on the left or in society at large in relation to a wide range of issues and problems. There was a particular concern about the lack of understanding of history, both of social injustices and of struggles against oppression. This was central to Trademark Belfast’s course, where an in-depth history of capitalism formed a central component of the curriculum. Their approach was rooted in an understanding that, in Stevie’s words, “history is the enemy of capitalism”, and that by putting capitalism in historical context, participants would be able to envisage alternative ways to organise society.

There was a strong sense among many groups that by situating people's current struggles – including those against neoliberalism, the hostile environment, racism and the rise of the far right – in a wider context, progressive movements would find inspiration and be able to develop more strategic and powerful resistance. Both the case studies were particularly concerned with the need to put local and national struggles in a global context in order to understand and resist systems of oppression.

Other projects were established to address the failure of the left to adequately understand the connections between cultural and economic problems, dealing instead with “issues” in a siloed way, and failing to see for example how relations such as patriarchy and colonialism are co-constitutive with capitalism.

While a number projects aimed to develop a new understanding of the past and present, others emerged in the hope of building an alternative vision of the future, including several who had been inspired by Corbyn and the recent surge in support for a socialist agenda, aiming to “disseminate” this vision, or bring “big ideas” to the grassroots. An enthusiasm for sharing new ideas with those who haven't encountered them was evident in both of the case studies, alongside their other objectives. This understanding of the practice of political education as dissemination *to* the grassroots was in contrast to a number of other projects that were concerned with building new knowledge *from* the grassroots, including those who wanted to connect this grassroots knowledge with policy making which failed to understand people's lived experiences.

Those surveyed identified a wide range of factors that contributed to these failures around knowledge. Some laid the blame on institutions such as the Labour Party and trade unions, for failing to fulfil their function as spaces for radical education, reflecting the narrative of the depletion of spaces for working class education outlined in the literature review. There was a sense that leftwing institutions were no longer places where people could build critical knowledge because spaces for education had disappeared or because the cultures of these institutions were simply unsuitable for this kind of dialogical work. A growing interest in socialist politics as well as debates around antisemitism in the Labour Party had made this absence stark and the need for these spaces more urgent. While some projects sought to transform these institutions, others projects were working outside them to remedy the problem, aiming to avoid political or bureaucratic barriers and to find greater freedom to create the kinds of spaces and cultures they felt were needed to facilitate essential conversations. A number of other groups were critical of mainstream schooling, which they felt was failing to provide space for the development of critical understanding, and sought to create this space themselves.

Education for stronger activists, increased democracy and effective organising

While many projects surveyed had a primary interest in the development or distribution of critical understanding, others saw political education

primarily as an opportunity to re-democratise, re-invigorate or radicalise organisations and institutions of the left as well as social movements, and thereby situate political education within a wider organising strategy.

While some were interested in building the confidence of new activists to get involved in movements or organisations, others were concerned with developing activists who were able to intervene more strategically, arguing for the need for more strategic thinking about activism rather than simply training people in practical campaigning skills.

Others still were concerned with building the skills and leadership of those who had been consistently marginalised from political activism and movement leadership roles. One sought to address the domination of campaigning NGOs by white and middle class staff, and another to address the persistent marginalisation of disabled people from policy-making processes. Conscious of the ways in which social relations of oppression were left unchallenged in leftwing spaces, some of these projects established themselves independently so they could create alternative cultures within which to nurture alternative leadership.

The case study of Demand the Impossible demonstrates how a project sought to intervene, through radical education, into a number of identified failures in both thinking and organising on the left that were shared by partner organisations, including a lack of strategic thinking and action among young activists, the marginalisation of working class young people and young people of colour in social movements, the failure of the left to think internationally, and the need to build understanding and collaboration between social movements and activists in the Labour Party.

While some projects, like DTI, combined several objectives, others didn't sit comfortably within the framework of outcomes offered in the survey. This was particularly the case with arts-based organisations, many of whom felt uncomfortable seeing their work with individuals and communities in an instrumentalist way, hoping to leave open the possibilities of complex and potentially unpredictable outcomes, including those concerned with the transformation of the self and of community beyond a very "rationally bounded" model of the self. Through this refusal to be reduced to traditional educational goals, these projects worked to challenge the assumptions in our own methodology and remind us of the critiques of Feminist Popular Education, as well as demonstrated the kinds of didactic associations these organisers had with the term "political education", and some of the challenges that might need to be addressed if there is to be fruitful collaboration across these different traditions.

Participant objectives

The case studies provided an insight into the reasons why people were signing up to participate in transformative political education. These reasons were quite broad in the case of DTI, which was targeting politically engaged young people aged 18-25, compared those involved in Trademark Belfast's Right to Water political education courses, which

were explicitly designed for activists involved in the campaign at the local level. Nevertheless, even as the Right to Water courses' stated objectives were around strengthening local campaigning, participants still expressed multiple objectives, including building relationships and having a free residential break away from home. In the case of DTI, the breadth of participant objectives reflected how they were at different stages in their journeys as activists: while some were struggling to "find a way in" to activism or couldn't decide what to take action on, others had some experience and wanted to learn how to make their activism more effective. Many wanted to develop a broader political understanding, and a significant number were interested in "hearing different opinions" or being in a learning community. The emphasis among participants in DTI on wanting to learn from others and hear "different perspectives" seemed to speak to a sense that, in the post-Brexit context, young people were hungry to encounter and understand different political opinions. At the same time, across both DTI and the Trademark courses, the appeal of being with "like-minded" people was also expressed. This diversity of DTI participant objectives raised pedagogical challenges for the organisers around meeting expectations and managing competing needs while holding to the projects' multiple objectives and to a pedagogical approach that sought to be participant-led.

What impacts are projects having?

The survey painted a picture of the impacts that political education organisers understood their projects were having, while the case studies provided the opportunity to explore both organiser and participant reflections. Both the surveys and the case studies indicated a broad range of impacts, not only on people's understanding and capacity to take action, but also on people's sense of themselves as political actors and on the relationships between people. Furthermore, these transformations were inextricable from each other. While in the case studies I evaluated outcomes in relation to knowledge and action, here I have included subjective and intersubjective impacts as a separate outcome. My aim is to emphasise the significance of these impacts for participants in the cases studies, and raise not only how these kinds of transformations are central to achieving other educational outcomes, but to suggest the possibility of transformed social relations in educational spaces prefiguring the kind of society we want to build.

Attending to participants' reflections on their experiences of political education is important if we are to avoid the "triumphalist" accounts of political education that Manicom and Walters warn against (2012, p5), with which we miss crucial opportunities for critical reflection. These participants' accounts painted a complex picture of the impact of transformative education, where some approaches "worked" for some and not others, and where impacts were shaped by participants' identities, previous experiences and relationship with others in the group, and were situated within wider spaces of knowledge-making and systems

of oppression. A sense of ambivalence about the impacts of projects, or how to meaningfully talk about them, was also evident in some of the organiser interviews and surveys. This raises the question of how organisers might meaningfully evaluate the complex, multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory impacts of political education work. And crucially, the findings of this research demand that educators and organisers pay attention to the workings of power in political education spaces, being aware of how they can both transform and replicate the very social relations they hope to address. An approach to transformative political education that takes seriously the work and critiques of critical pedagogy emerging from social movements requires that organisers see how the transformation of social relations between educator/participant and among participants – which both recognises and enables them to become full and embodied subjects in education – is not a complement to, but foundational to the possibility of transformative action in wider society.

Impacts on development of knowledge and understanding

Impacts relating to knowledge and understanding were described in a broad range of terms that, as with the project objectives, demonstrated different understandings of the processes of knowledge production in transformative political education. Some organisers spoke in terms of the dissemination of new ideas amongst participants, while others described how their work had led to transformations in the kind of thinking that people were able to do – for example, understanding their experiences or struggles in a wider political context or making new relationships and connections between phenomena.

In the case studies, participants described the development of critical understanding in numerous ways, and in relation to a wide range of themes. While at times they spoke about gaining “new knowledge” or hearing things that were “completely new”, more often they talked about learning in terms of having their understanding complicated. Some described having “naive” or “basic” ideas or assumptions challenged or softened. Others spoke about the experience of seeing “the bigger picture” or seeing how things “fitted together”. In Trademark’s courses, seeing the bigger picture involved understanding the current situation – particularly the campaign against water privatisation – both in the context of neoliberalism at the national and international level, as well as in historical context. In DTI, participants described making new connections between feminism and neoliberalism, and between environmentalism and fascism. These descriptions echo the central reconstructive process in Freirean education which Au (2017) describes as seeing things in a “new relational context”. In both courses, the de-centring of Europe from concepts of democracy or modernity surprised and challenged some participants’ assumptions, exposed colonial ways of knowing, and enabled them to see connections between colonialism, capitalism and the state.

Yet these impacts weren’t consistent or homogenous. In both courses there were moments where people explained how things “went over their

heads” (although interestingly, this wasn’t always experienced negatively), demonstrating the challenges of pitching ideas to diverse groups and creating room for people to ask for clarification. There were also moments where participants were left unconvinced by new ideas presented by speakers and didn’t have the opportunity to ask the questions they wanted to. Informal spaces for dialogue, such as the pub, created important opportunities for these questions to be explored, but one participant took these ideas back to their school teacher in search of a more “balanced” opinion. Without having the tools to critique the processes of knowledge production within mainstream education, this participant sought to compare one set of ideas with another, rather than seeking a more complex understanding, and concluded their teacher was more trustworthy.

Subjective and intersubjective impacts

Several organisers described the new kinds of spaces or cultures created by their projects as a key outcome, where conversations could take place that were less adversarial and more supportive of dialogue, including the possibility of questioning and empathetic listening. Here the impact on the development of critical understanding was secondary to, or dependent on, the kinds of intersubjective processes and transformed relationships that their projects enabled.

New or transformed relationships were a strong theme in the reflections of participants in DTI. They included the building of empathy, trust and solidarity with others, including with those they had political disagreements with. While for participants these were important outcomes in and of themselves, it was clear that they were also crucial to both knowledge and action-based outcomes.

Another strong theme in the case studies was a transformation in people’s sense of themselves as knowledge-makers and political actors. Participants developed confidence that they were capable or legitimate political actors, as well as feeling like they “belonged” within progressive movements. For one participant on the Trademark course, the development of a sense of belonging gave them confidence and conviction in their struggle as working class activists, against the backdrop of a patronising middle class left. Across both case studies, working class activists and activists of colour spoke of the significance of finding spaces where they belonged and which enabled them to get involved in activism, in the context of a left where they felt patronised, used like “guinea pigs” or “tokenised”.

Both the Trademark case study and the survey data also indicated the range of affective impacts on participants, including feelings of anger as well as feeling hopeful that change was possible and feeling motivated to make change. Participants also spoke of a sense of “feeling part of history” or “part of something bigger”.

Interestingly, it was the objectives that had subjective and intersubjective elements to them –“building solidarity with a cause” and “building

relationships between participants” – that organisers were most confident they were successfully achieving. Yet the case studies illuminate the ways in which these kinds of outcomes can vary significantly between participants, suggesting the importance of using qualitative evaluation to try and better understand the kinds of relationships and power dynamics at play. Frequently, and significantly for this research, the subjective and intersubjective impacts that emerged in the participant interviews were inseparable from participants’ ability to engage in the co-production of critical knowledge or to engage in action.

Impacts on capacity for action

Many organisers described how their projects led to the creation of more confident and effective activists or more active memberships, in cases where projects were part of membership organisations such as CLPs and trade unions. Some organisers were able to make connections between their educational activities and the development of new motions or increased strike action, and a number spoke in terms of the creation of leaders who could take their learning back into other spaces in order to politicise others. However, there was less certainty overall amongst organisers about the impacts of political education interventions on increased activism or involvement in organisations, suggesting challenges in tracking impacts of this work once people “leave the room”.

In the case studies it was clear that the courses gave people confidence, knowledge and opportunities to become more active. In the case of Trademark, the critical understanding developed on the course enabled participants to be more effective at persuading others to get involved in the Right to Water campaign, and pushing back against narratives peddled by the media and political parties. For participants on DTI, a number got involved in, or intended to join, activist groups they had encountered during sessions and through fellow participants, with the new relationships they had built supporting them to overcome confidence barriers to participation. A significant number took part in canvassing for Labour with others on the course at the invitation of the organisers, even where they had been sceptical about the role of electoral politics or the Labour party. As was the case with the development of critical understanding amongst participants, the subjective and intersubjective impacts that participants described played a crucial role in strengthening capacity for action, through giving people a community to take action with, as well as an increased sense of belonging and unity with others in the room.

Again these impacts weren’t uniform or consistent, demonstrating the significant challenges of supporting a diverse group of young people on their journeys into activism, and to find a place where they could “belong” on the left in a context where white supremacist and classist cultures made activist spaces inhospitable. It seemed that both DTI and the Trademark course provided some participants with a temporary refuge from organising cultures that reinforced particular social relations of oppressions, and enabled new ways of relating that demonstrated

new possibilities of solidarity. The impact of these experiences in the longer term is beyond the scope of this research but would be interesting to examine.

The structure of DTI, which took place over several months, provided a unique opportunity not only for participants to get involved in activism but also to critically reflect on it, enabling rich conversations about the limitations of door-knocking and the place of elections in leftwing strategy.

Priority areas for consideration

Reflecting on the challenges identified for political educators in this research, and situating them within the wider history and theory of transformative political education, I will propose some priority areas for consideration for political educators, networks and funders interested in strengthening the culture and practices of transformative political education in Britain and Ireland.

Supporting meaningful evaluation of political education

Fewer than 10% of surveyed projects felt that support with evaluation was a priority, identifying instead the need to exchange with other groups, access funding, increase capacity and reach new audiences. At the same time, when asked about the impact of their work, there was a lack of confidence among organisers that their projects were having the outcomes they hoped for, particularly when it came to increased organising or participation. Developing ways of evaluating what happens when participants “leave the room” could support organisers in better understanding if and why their projects are having the transformative impacts they hoped for.

While organisers were more confident in some of the more immediately visible impacts of their education, for example, on participants’ relationships with one another, the case studies demonstrate the “complex and contradictory” outcomes of political education, where results are not uniform across a group (Manicom and Walters, 2012), and suggest that much could be learnt from more in-depth qualitative evaluation of political education projects. Evaluating our work also challenges us as organisers of political education to ask questions about what success looks like, and how this might be measured. The indicators of successful projects transposed from other fields - including numbers of people reached and participant satisfaction - might not necessarily tell us what we need to know about the impact of our work. We might instead want to assess, for example, the resolution of conflicts, the increased sense of belonging and trust, or the capacity of people to do more “connected” thinking and to take action more likely to result in the kind of change we hope to see. We might also want to examine how these impacts differ between participants, and the possibility of our work both unsettling and reinforcing the very social relations of power we are seeking to dismantle.

While I found it difficult to find in-depth evaluations of contemporary political education projects, one recent and very pertinent report shares learnings from a process of deep reflection on the events leading up to the closure of Campaign Bootcamp (Mahmood and Lawrence, 2022), an organisation who participated in this research. The report describes the de-prioritisation of evaluation and learning in the context of an organisation frequently praised for its work in the field of activist training. It argues that the organisation set the bar too low for impact by measuring, for example, whether participants “felt they got value from the residential trainings”, instead of rooting their approach to evaluation in a theory of change and paying more nuanced attention to the qualitative data collected. This problem was exacerbated by a tendency to use evaluation as a “tactic to secure funding” rather than as an opportunity for rigorous analysis of the impact of their work “across different groups in the short, medium and long term” (p13).

While calling for greater reflection can seem to push against the urgent calls for action and for scaling up that come not only from funders but from within social movements, taking time for evaluation might help us move beyond what Manicom and Walters describe as “triumphalist” accounts of political education (2012, p5). Such accounts, while being inspirational and garnering much needed funding, can get in the way of “understanding the potential for reproducing dominant logics and colonialist relations, as well as the possibilities for revealing and dislodging them” in transformative political education (ibid).

Developing relational pedagogies for transformation rooted in trust

While many organisers were concerned with building participatory spaces, understandings of what participation looks like in practice were varied, and articulations of the purpose of participation were often unclear. The history of the depoliticisation of participatory and democratic pedagogies through their reduction to a set of tools, the prevalence of educational approaches that are “ambiguous in their political effects” (Manicom and Walters, 2012), and the possibility that the language of participation can, in practice, disguise and maintain hierarchies of knowledge, make it urgent that political educators return with real care to the question of why the way we do education matters - because the way we do education has the capacity to change not just what we know, but to change our relationships with ourselves, one another and, in turn, society.

Traditions of popular, critical, feminist and decolonial pedagogies offer important insights into the nature of critical knowledge, the processes of its production (including its relationship to embodied experience), and the role of the educator. These insights demand careful attention when designing participatory pedagogies. Crucially, they all share a deep concern with the transformation of social relations within educational spaces, between the educator and the participant, and among participants, into ones marked by love and mutual trust. These relationships have the capacity to heal past harms (Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea & Scott, 2018),

prefigure new ways of being together (Manicom and Walters, 2012), and are the precondition for dialogue that leads to critical understanding (Freire, 1973). As demonstrated in the case studies, relationships of trust, friendship and solidarity were inseparable from people's ability to think differently, and had a deep impact on their desire for, and capacity to take action.

When we initially set out to do this research, there was a sense that we might be able to identify some successful course formats or session plans that could be adopted by different political educators across Britain and transferred for use with different groups, in different contexts. Instead, this research suggests that a more helpful starting point might be for organisers to ask themselves about what sorts of new relationships they are seeking to create in their educational spaces, and develop or adapt models and tools to this end.

Sharing learning across movements and traditions

46% of organisers surveyed wished they had more opportunities to exchange and collaborate with others doing similar political education work, with some describing an unhelpful fragmentation between projects with very similar goals. The Independent Working Class Education (IWCE) project, who participated in this research, has been working to bring together a wide range of organisations concerned with working class education including trade unions and adult education organisations, providing valuable opportunities to share educational materials and consider how to address shared challenges collectively. There could be lots to gain from expanding these kinds of peer-sharing initiatives.

I would argue that the challenges identified in this research also call for a much broader sharing of knowledge and skills, beyond those operating within the tradition of working class education. If, as we have seen, the building of relationships of trust and creation of spaces for healing and dialogue are essential to transformative education, then learning from educators and organisers engaged in work more associated with peace-building and conflict resolution becomes a priority. And if, as explored in the literature review, we are to challenge the idea of the disembodied learner, then transformative political educators need to learn also from those whose work engages with the body, affect and spirituality, including arts and faith-based organisations. This research did not draw as much on the insights and approaches of arts-based projects as initially hoped, so further cross-fertilization between socially engaged artists/arts organisations and political education would be very fruitful.

Peer-learning across movements and traditions might also enable organisers to begin to address their challenges around reaching audiences. Where organisers are keen to reach beyond those already engaged in political education, or to reach more people in their local communities, they might ask what educational work is already happening in, and emerging from, these communities. Such investigations could

reveal opportunities for exchange and collaboration with allies working in organisations and educators offering “practical” or “survival” education, such as ESOL or computer literacy classes, or those already working across this boundary (English for Action provide one great example of this [English for Action, 2022]), to develop an understanding of how survival knowledge and critical education can be combined, rather than held to be in conflict with each other.

Finally, if the development of critical understanding requires that we are continually seeking a more complex relational understanding of our lives, then challenging ourselves to collaborate and work across the boundaries of social movements is essential in order that we can continue to challenge one another. For example, we might consider the kinds of collaborations needed for the development of educational projects that can build understanding of the connections between socialism, colonialism and racism, or environmentalism and facism.

Training up educators, facilitators and speakers

Almost a fifth of projects surveyed wanted support in accessing speakers, and there was a particular interest in speakers who were activists, organisers and trade unionists. Several organisers were struggling to find the speakers or facilitators they needed to be able to meet demand for their courses. The case studies provided an opportunity to flesh out the kinds of skills and expertise that supported the development of critical understanding. As well as speakers who could talk with clarity, their ability to bridge between lived experience and theory was particularly impactful. This gave speakers credibility as knowledge holders, as did their roots in social movements. Programmes that can support the development and platforming of such speakers would no doubt be valuable.

At the same time there is a need for peer-learning and training opportunities for educators and facilitators in critical pedagogy who can create learning communities for critical understanding. It is clear that the skills needed for transformative education extend far beyond having the “right ideas” – “the role of the educator is not to “fill” the educatee with knowledge, technical or otherwise” (Freire, 2013, p109) - but involve being able to hold open dialogue that can take diverse groups towards more conscious, systematic understanding of their relationships with the world, in the context of complex social relations of oppression that are both historic and alive in the learning space. Augusto Boal’s insight that transformative work requires not facilitators but ‘difficultators’ provides a useful challenge here (1995). At other times, as Black feminist pedagogues have demonstrated, the educator plays a crucial role as a healer and mentor to those confronting the violence of education (Perlow, Wheeler, Bethea & Scott, 2018). Crucially, the capacity of the educator to trust in the knowledge of participants requires, for Freire, the recognition of one’s own ignorance and the ability to approach education with humility (2013, p104), or, for hooks, that the educator engages in a process of self-actualisation (1994, p14).

There are a number of active, well-funded training programmes for media spokespeople, communicators, campaigners and community organisers (many of which participated in this research as forms of radical education). However, in-depth training or support for social justice educators and facilitators has been less visible. One notable recent example was the Training for Social Action Trainers, hosted regularly by Campaign Bootcamp and facilitated by US-based Training for Change, whose direct education approach is inspired by popular education approaches. Train-the-trainer programmes that build on the expertise of feminist and anti-racist educators, as well as popular education practitioners, would support the development of spaces for critical knowledge production rooted in relational pedagogies.

Accessing sustainable funding

Accessing funding was a clear priority for many organisers, which they hoped would allow them to pay organisers and so increase their organising capacity and the sustainability of their projects. Some were also keen to prioritise getting funding to pay speakers, a move which could help to grow the pool of speakers and educators beyond those who can afford to do political education work for free, or those who can take on this work within their existing capacity as paid researchers, organisers or academics.

At the same time, it is clear that funding brings its own challenges, and while more research would be needed to look into the ways in which the funding landscape shapes transformative political education, there are a couple of warnings to initially heed here. While groups might be able to identify and co-opt funding sources for radical education, it was clear that the independence of Trademark Belfast from, for example, political parties, was a crucial part of their ability to build trust and engage with particular audiences. The impact, then, of funding on trust and audience is important to consider.

Secondly, as the recent report on the closure of Campaign Bootcamp has powerfully argued (2022), funders can contribute to a culture of “haste” among the organisations they support, through rewarding growth and conflating scale with impact. Funding practices can exacerbate an anxiety among radical organisations that dialogical approaches to political education are too slow and that change is too urgent to allow the necessary space for them, a tendency that Friere strongly cautions against (2012, p104-107). This culture has its foundations in ableism and white supremacy and can undermine the possibilities of transformative work. The reality is that the kinds of transformative political education that this research has identified and advocates for are time hungry. The reflections of Ted Hartley for example on the political education work of the South Yorkshire Hub²⁹, demonstrate how doing anti-racist educational work in

²⁹ The South Yorkshire Hub, a collaboration between the WEA and Northern college, formed part of the government’s Active Learning for Active Citizenship approach (2003-2010) delivered through university/college and community partnerships

the community requires not only a “safe space” and a “skilled tutor” but the ability to work with people “at their own pace” (Hartley in Mayo, 2020, p69). This was an approach emphasised by the facilitators of Trademark’s Political Economy Courses among other educators interviewed as part of this research. I would argue then for the importance of funders working alongside political education organisers to create a culture of transformative political education practice that resists the temptation to do ever-expanding projects while working with the same or fewer resources.



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