
Putting ourselves into practice: popular education at/and universities

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Abstract

This paper looks at different ways in which popular education has been played out in South African university adult education (UAE) since the 1980s. It traces the changing relationships between UAE and sections of civil society, notably social movements, within the context of shifting socio-political dynamics. It suggests that today, there is a tension: UAE is asked to pay allegiance to vocationalism, market values and individualism. Adopting the old struggle language of ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’, and ‘people-centred education’ seems to signal that the old freedoms adult education as non-formal education utilised, are still alive. However, popular education is in danger of becoming a technology, divorced from the purpose and alliances that gave it meaning in the past. The paper asks what role does popular education have to play, today? It outlines some ways in which UAE can still make itself accountable and useful to struggles for social justice. These are proposed as a model of good practice – encapsulated by Collins’ (1991) suggestion that rather than putting theory into practice, we should put ourselves into practice.

I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognise that I have one right alone: that of demanding human behaviour from the other. One duty alone: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices (Fanon, 1986, p.229).

Introduction¹

In *Adult Education as Vocation* Collins (1991, p.46) argues that it is problematic to consider competent performance as the result of a process in which we familiarise ourselves with theories, and then put these into practice. The notion that a particular theoretical model can faithfully represent a particular order of reality is seen as overly deterministic and not borne out in

¹ This paper is a review of my experiences in university adult education (UAE) at what is now the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and in particular the relationship between the theory and practice of popular education and UAE since the mid-1980s. It is based on extensive dialogue with activists and activist-academics, that is, people who share a history of engagement with education and/in action, and on documents such as publications, pamphlets and visual materials. Various drafts of the paper were circulated and the feedback and critiques received were incorporated into the final version.

the roles we perform in our lives. Instead, he proposes we should work towards a thorough understanding of theoretical constructions and then put *ourselves* into practice: “Serious engagement with theoretical models improves our potential as reflective practitioners, which in turn manifests itself in actual performance”.

The paper is in three parts: I begin by establishing a working definition of popular education as education aimed at promoting and strengthening organisations that are overtly political and in opposition to a status quo (Prajuli, 1986; Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 1999). In the main part I describe the changing relationship between UAE and popular education since the 1980s. I suggest some shifts: firstly, in the 1980s, popular education was primarily in the service of the struggle against the apartheid regime and capitalism without much attention paid to theoretical considerations. Its link to UAE at that time was tenuous and functional. Secondly, in the early to mid-nineties as the link between UAE and popular education became closer, we began to put theory into practice. The writings of Freire, literacy campaigns particularly in Latin America, feminism, and the increasing prominence of dependency theory in community development all insisted on a bottom-up approach to working with excluded people and inspired what was thought of as praxis. Thirdly, with the increasing focus on process rather than content since the development of education policies and legislation in the later nineties, and the focus on process, popular education came to be reinterpreted primarily as access for the ‘disadvantaged’. Both inside universities and outside in ‘the real world’ the principles of popular education were truncated into technologies of participation. At the same time, however, popular education as a counter-hegemonic discourse also resurfaced hand in hand with oppositional action. Its links to UAE today, however, are sporadic and individual.

In the third part of the paper I ask whether the underlying political purpose of building a more democratic and just society and world for all is still served well through aligning UAE to social action. Finally, I propose that there are still ways in which university adult educators can put themselves into practice, in the best tradition of popular education.

What is popular education?

Popular education, in the sense of populous as being ‘of the people’, has always been there, guiding people and helping them make sense of their world and give meaning to their lives. As ‘people’s education’ it defines itself clearly as an alternative to the dominant system in terms of the process, content, context and, importantly, purpose of provision. The term has come to be associated particularly with Paulo Freires’ work, first in Brazil in the early 1960s, and later in other Latin American countries. It has strong resonances in the radical tradition of adult education, and, currently, with promoting democratic access to the exploration of ideas and the debate about what counts as worthwhile knowledge (Crowther *et al.*, 1999).

While different sources and claims about popular education centre on it as a means to challenge traditional education that turns learners into passive recipients of knowledge, and hence its overtly political stand for social change (Arnold and Burke, 1983; Grossi, 1983; Hammond, 1998), there are different views on what constitutes social change and similarly, the interpretation of what would make up the basic ingredients and defining features of popular education.

Arnold and Burke (1983) suggest that the starting point of popular education is the concrete experience of the learner, and that the process is highly participatory and active; it is a collective effort in which everyone teaches and everyone learns in the course of creating new knowledge. Hammond (1989) describes how poor people who educated themselves and their children during the war in El Salvador created popular education. He outlines as defining features of popular education

- conditions of scarcity and limitations of poverty
- a vision rooted in material conditions and the need to change these
- the aim to achieve personal development
- the close link between education and other practices and
- the development of political consciousness.

More recently, introducing a book on popular education and social movements in Scotland, Martin (1999, p.1) asserted that popular education “is always contextual and contingent, reflecting and responding to changing circumstances and, in particular, the changing relationship between the formal politics of state and the informal politics of social movements in civil society”.

As an education that is “rooted in the interests, aspirations and struggles of ordinary people”, popular education “is overtly political and critical of the status quo” and committed to “progressive social and political change” (Martin, 1999, p.4).

Similarly, Kane (2001, p.8) reminds us while ‘popular’ may simply communicate the idea of ‘the people’ or popular classes and organisations, it also carries the connotation of ‘in the interests of’ the people, the unemployed, peasants, the poor. He furthermore suggests that the political commitment of popular education is underpinned by a “radical vision, or dream, of a much better world” (2001, p.10), and that this utopia is thought of not simply as desirable, but indeed possible to achieve.

It is in this combined sense that I define popular education for this paper. Popular education, then, is

- self-consciously located within struggles of power and dominance
- overtly oppositional aiming at addressing the asymmetrical relations of power as inscribed in socio-political and economic structures and systems, and
- it asserts the potential of people to build on their own experiences and knowledge not just to change consciousness, but to transform institutions and relations of power towards a more equitable, democratic society
- inspired and guided by a utopian vision.

Popular education practice

My path to adult education began in the 1970s through cultural activism in the independent trade union movement. Like many people working in adult education at the time I did not think of my activities as education, but rather as action in defiance of the state and in support of the struggle against apartheid. The worker plays of the 1980s aimed to raise awareness about trade unions, build consciousness of class relations in the audiences, and advocate for and support action. They also carved a space for workers’ performances and creative powers, asserted in a strategic document prepared for the FOSATU Education Workshop in July 1985.

We are a movement which announces a real democracy on this land – where people like you and me can control for the first time our productive and creative power (. . .) because, even if we are culturally deprived as workers, we demand of ourselves the commitment to build a better world (Sitas, 1986, pp.68-69).

Participants in the workers cultural group wanted to “create space in our struggle – through our own songs, our own slogans, our own poems, our own artwork, our own plays and dances” (Sitas, 1986, p.60). Unionised workers all over the country had begun to perform at public spaces, at union meetings, shop-steward seminars, in church halls and at mass rallies – wherever people met to organise, mobilise and inform. After the performances songs re-linked the reality of the story to the immediate present, and the performers engaged with the audience in debates around the causes of their misery, drawing parallels between the story and the audience’s lived experience.

Despite the overtly educational dimension of this work the practice was rarely considered in terms of theories of (popular) education. Instead, I saw it as rooted primarily in oral culture and theatre traditions such as Grotovskis ‘Poor Theatre’ and Boals ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ and shaped by Marxist reading groups rather than educational literature. Workshops were the forum for collectively constructing stories and enacting these in often highly improvised ways, using found objects as props and tools and drawing in the audience as co-actors (or as Boal called them, spec-actors). Such work on projects with a common purpose and living through the implementation of ideas established trust. Accumulated trials and triumphs in creating and performing plays, music, art and writing forged solidarity. A passionate belief in the possibility and necessity of change towards social and economic justice and mutual care and caring provided the fuel. And, while the regard for what each had to contribute, based on different knowledge and ways of knowing, needed to be constantly renewed, this happened through action rather than rigorous reflections on either the practice itself, or the theoretical underpinnings of the work. As Chambers (1983) suggests, in the 1980s there was a difference between what practitioners and academics did: the one was concerned with results, the other with understanding.

The link of this work to the academy was mainly instrumental. The university provided access to resources such as books, materials for making pamphlets, telephones and safe spaces for meetings and rehearsals. Generally, activist academics went about their political business knowing that this work was not deemed part of an academic’s job description, but that the nature of their

employment with its flexible time schedules afforded the opportunity and flexibility to take the gap.

Towards praxis

When the South African government declared a state of emergency in June 1986, as a way of further repressing insurgency and protests, the doors of the academy were forced open. Many activist-academics brought their work with grassroots organisations, unions, support agencies, literacy programmes, community health advocacy units and the like *physically* into the space of the university, as a way of securing them a base for operating safely. As political attacks and assassinations escalated, universities provided important sanctuaries for social action initiatives linked to ‘the struggle’. Projects were generally funded by outside (international) donors and in some cases the university finance division provided some of the book-keeping infra-structure. Physically, projects were squeezed into a corner office in some corridor; organisationally, they functioned much like non-government organisations. Ideologically, they were informed by the interests of poor people, women, workers.

Outside the academy, in the formal education sector, People’s Education called for an end to any education that “divides people into classes and ethnic groups”, and that is “essentially a means of control to produce subservient, docile people”, that “indoctrinates and domesticates” and that is “intended to entrench apartheid and capitalism” (SASPU, 1986). The language of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) and ‘Peoples Education for Peoples Power’ revealed the inspiration derived from popular education struggles in Latin America, and in particular the works of Paulo Freire whose *Pedagogy of the oppressed* had been passed from hand to hand in the Black Consciousness movement and in discussion groups in the 1970s. Some of this work may undoubtedly have put pressure on UAE to respond to challenges by members of the NECC to contribute to the development of People’s Education, as Motala and Vally (2002) have suggested.

Increasingly, an alternative development discourse in opposition to the top-down modernist notion of development was articulated and translated into new forms of practice. Participatory research (also in the developing world) became accepted as a more democratic form of knowledge production (Chambers, 1983; Fals-Borda, 1991; Pretty, Guijt, Scoones and Thompson,

1995; Tandon, 1998). Processes and tools invented to include ‘the voice-less’ were the subject of much experimentation and reflection, and adult education and the emerging field of community development expanded energies thinking about ways of valorising experiential knowledge in order to bring it to bear on and be recognised as ‘official’ knowledge and part of formal curricula. Feminist writers challenged the dominance of rationality as the exclusive domain of learning. Reflections on livelihood practices as embedded in political structures and power dynamics gave rise to visions of alternative societies in which people would live more sustainably with each other and the increasingly fragile environment. Freire’s writings, Chambers’ (1983) work with Participatory Rural Appraisal, health sector books like Werners’ *Where there is no doctor* and the teaching companion *Helping health workers learn* (Werner and Bower, 1982) are examples of what came to be thought of as good praxis, that is, a constant moving between reflection and action and reflection on practice (Von Kotze, 2003).

Within these broad tensions I began to theorise and contextualise my practice and formulate it as praxis (Freire, 1983). Like others, I worked at both popularising formal knowledge and drawing popular ‘lifeworld’ knowledge into formal curricula.

Changes in university adult education

In 1990 I left my job in a mainstream academic department and began to design and run a university programme that would be accessible to all those education and training practitioners who did not have the necessary qualifications for enrolling in formal university study, and in particular the ‘Diploma’ programmes offered by a number of English-speaking universities. The ‘Certificate in Adult Education’ and other such initiatives (Walters and Loza, 2000) were new in so far as they provided access by creating pathways into the academy, and by being accessible through experience-based, participatory and learner-centred ways of teaching.

The Certificate attracted students who, in the main, were Black adult activists who were working in voluntary organisations, trade unions, non-government organisations, support agencies and movements like the Workers Cultural Local. Most of them had found themselves in positions of educational leadership as a result of their organisational abilities, rather than specific demonstrated skills as educators and trainers. Often their only experience of

education had been schooling in the Bantu Education system; learning, for them, happened outside institutions in the 'school of life'. They were organic intellectuals, articulate leaders who had a wealth of understanding of how the dynamics of power and interests are played out. What they may have lacked in terms of academic reading and writing skills they made up for with understanding of 'how society works'. Participants valued the time out from the harsh realities of daily struggles, and a space dedicated to reading, reflection, critical investigation and creative imaginings.

Although run at university, the course was not formally accredited. It was recognised by social networks and NGOs, but not by government departments and rarely by private sector employers. At the time this did not matter as the underlying purpose was to further the aims of progressive movements – not individual credentialism. As Millar has pointed out:

University-based adult educators – in contrast to academics in mainstream education departments servicing the schooling system – found their field of practice authorised by The Struggle – as alternative education with the capacity for social transformation. They operated with considerable legitimacy in the project world of small organisations with a field of practice lying between educational and organisational work – a field that maximised their process and strategic skills. Such engagement ensured the flow of donor funding into university departments of adult education: they were resourced, in fact, through demonstrated distance from the university (1993, p.150).

Participants' commitment to learning together was high: frequently, factory workers arranged to go on night shifts in order to attend classes during the day, and NGO employees dodged political violence during the height of the KwaZulu-Natal civil war, on their way to university. In many cases participants attended classes at the university with the expressed and financial support of their organisations. In return for time off to study, they could be expected to feed whatever they had learnt back into the work of the organisation and in this way multiply their personal learning. The slogan of 'each one, teach one' was taken seriously both as a way of practising accountability, and stretching resources.

The experiential knowledge of participants became the core of curricula, and personal and informal theories were negotiated with formal theories, in particular the writings of Freire. His critique of 'banking education' and advocacy of problem-posing struck a cord amongst participants. Much of the process of learning and teaching drew on local oral cultural traditions, both in

terms of the epistemological focus and with regard to methodology. There was a great emphasis on process, rather than outcomes, as we worked in processes reminiscent of drama workshops that demanded collectivity, connectedness, creativity and criticality. Drawing on different perspectives, participants analysed strategies and rehearsed arguments, made sense of the South African situation by contextualising the local struggle within larger socio-political, economic and environmental developments, constructed new meanings and understanding and formulated clear ideas and suggestions that would inform future action. Interactions in the classroom would create models of changed power relations between educators and students, book-based ‘imported’ knowledge and local oral knowledge, across disciplines, based on shared interests and common purpose.

At the same time, the mounting pressure to open up the resources of the academy to people and communities outside led a range of academics (not just in adult education) to popularise curricula and to make information more readable and attractive for people whose first language was other than English. Non-formal adult education programmes abounded: Street Law, shopstewards’ courses, workshops in meeting skills and basic financial management for youth groups and community-based organisations, industrial health and safety courses, literacy classes, drama and writing workshops and the like, were run both on and off campus. All saw themselves as part of serving and supporting the struggle of the mass democratic movement. Conversely, academics also drew on popular participatory research to foreground local, indigenous knowledge and self-consciously began to include more experience-based knowledge into formal curricula.

Using theory for practice

After the first democratic elections in 1994, educators like myself with experience in popular education continued to use a participatory methodology for the work of building democracy and civil society through voter education campaigns and train-the-trainers workshops for census workers. Women and gender workshops became part of the training programme of many institutions. ‘Marginalisation’ was to give way to social and economic inclusion: all people should be given the opportunity to participate in the building of the new democracy – and hence access and recognition of prior/ other learning developed into an important area of research.

However, when popular education and participatory techniques came to be understood as synonymous, the mainstreaming of 'participation' in adult education and community development discourses created the impression that choosing to work in a particular way is not a political choice, but simply a matter of methodology. If we consider the link to social action and counter-hegemonic movements as definitive to the definition of popular education, as suggested above, the impression of radicalism created by the rhetoric was turning out to be increasingly a veneer (Field, 2003).

By 1997, two years after the promise that the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) would reverse the fortunes of people through a radical redistribution of land, access to jobs and loans and education and training, it was replaced by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR). Changed funding policies and lack of foreign donor support, the exodus of leadership into the ranks of government and the private sector, blatant opportunism and corruption, swapped priorities as new opportunities presented themselves, and the sense that the democratically elected government would take over many of the functions previously performed by non-governmental organisations, lead to the collapse of a wide range of NGOs and support agencies. Maslamoney (2000) suggests, that civil society became depoliticised.

The paradoxical relationship between power and social transformation is evident in the ranks of policy makers and within the academy. Many of the old leadership within and outside universities moved away from direct contact with communities into national and local government, or into lucrative jobs in the private sector. The empowerment experienced as a member of a social movement had been power *with*, rather than power *over* people. Now that individuals and groups participated more fully and effectively in the political functioning of our new order they became part of that system: "By gaining power, they have a stake in maintaining that power. In other words, they buy into the larger configuration of power relationships and become co-opted." (Schapiro, 1995, p.41)

Units and organisations that had found refuge in the university in the late 1980s were given a choice: be incorporated into mainstream academic work regulated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and outcomes-based education (OBE), or join the market place outside the academy and become independent self-financing businesses. Generally, organisations that survived into the late nineties often did so only by

succumbing to the pressure to adopt more cost-efficient management systems, cuts in staffing, design of operations of scale, and delivery of tangible (countable) development outputs.

Alternative courses such as the Certificate Course were subjected to sustained pressure to become a university-recognised qualification linked to the emerging National Qualifications Framework. The formalisation of these courses had an inevitable impact on curricula which were no longer designed in consultation with and response to the expressed interests and needs of movements, action groups and organisations. Instead they submitted to the pressures of outcomes-based education and came to be defined in keeping with competencies that respond to market-driven imperatives. Popular educators who were once called upon to assist the process of transition from capitalism to socialism in the interests of all, were beginning to be expected to prop up the new order through ‘capacity-building’ and ‘empowerment programmes’ for ‘clients’ and ‘stakeholders’. Increasingly, student intake had to conform to generic entrance criteria and the new learners were/are expected to pay the fees commanded by university study. Popular education at universities became de-linked from social movements and re-configured as a methodology of team-work.

The profile of participants reflected these changes: despite the rhetoric of ‘community empowerment’ participants seeking admission to university adult education came to have personal life trajectories and as ‘portfolio shifting’ individuals (Gee, 2000). Many of them were teachers from the formal school system who were hoping to branch into an alternative area of work. Their trajectories were underpinned by aspirations for individual professional advancement rather than a passionate desire to contribute to the well-being and survival of poor people and communities, human rights, gender equality. Political vision appears to have given way to personalised economic planning. In 2000 the Certificate course on the Durban campus of the then University of Natal ran for the last time; it gave way to and was incorporated into a formal undergraduate degree programme in Community Development.

Meanwhile, the language of popular education is still used as if the meaning of terms rooted in opposition politics has remained the same in neo-liberal times. In 1999 the education minister Kadar Asmal outlined the key priorities for education as guided by ‘participation’, ‘social empowerment’, ‘empowerment partnerships’ (Asmal, 2000). Unlike emancipation which preserves the edge of critical challenge and the potential for critique and acts of opposition,

empowerment has become inclusion into mainstream agendas (Inglis, 1997). Popular educators who serve these agendas are in danger of becoming what Brecht described as instructors in the school of sharks (Brecht, 1967): facilitators who employ the participatory methods and jargon of popular education in order to advance market driven agendas. The idea that everyone can be a facilitator of do-it-yourself learning (Kane, 2001) as long as she or he is equipped with the right manual that is written in terms of pre-defined unit standards and measurable performance indicators has become wide-spread.

Engaging civil society

Not surprisingly, after the second democratic elections, and simultaneously with moves towards assimilation and incorporation or 'inclusion', conditions of disaffection and deprivation generated the emergence of new grassroots struggles in opposition to what Desai has called "the frontlines of the establishment's 'undeclared war' on the poor" (Desai, 2000, p.7). As the gap between the rich and the poor increases, so does the determination of the poor, the landless and the sick: "Civil society is now beginning to move from a sense of powerlessness to a situation in which it is tentatively but increasingly asserting itself" (Motala and Vally, 2002, p.189). Again, the praxis of collective campaigns and actions is the site of learning. Learning in social movements helps ordinary people to understand how their own personal troubles and struggles for survival are related to larger public issues. Deliberate educational efforts within the movement can build and draw on solidarity networks across areas, regions and countries. Strategic teaching can help them to alert people in positions of power to their ability not just to mobilise support but also critically analyse the structures and mechanisms that entrench the status quo. Impromptu plays performed by members of the Treatment Action Campaign (Von Kotze and Endresen, 2004) inform about ways of tackling stigma associated with HIV/Aids; songs learnt on the march or picket line help to mobilise support for the campaigns of the Landless People's Movement; discussions at teatime are rehearsals for people to argue the link between the lack of social grants with economic globalisation.

This raises the challenge of trying to identify new spaces for supporting the work of such groups and movements, and inventing new forms of engaging what is now a university in a democratic country with struggles of people from popular movements, in opposition to the ravages of global capitalism. In the following, I want to suggest ways in which like-minded colleagues in current

university adult education try to help students, action groups and communities to build crucial knowledge and skills to improve the new democracy. This work is very much informed by the principles of popular education in that it aligns itself to the interests of poor, excluded groups, but it rarely translates into popular education in the sense of “systematic efforts by working class people to develop their own independent forms of education” (Martin, 1999, p.31). It asserts that educators should assume leadership and bring their organisational skills to bear on educational undertakings rather than just ‘letting them learn’. It advocates a move away from laissez-faire facilitation of adult learning where educators supply the means for self-directed projects, towards suggesting that education must involve a political analysis of knowledge, and requires the educator to assume agency and to commit her/himself to ethical moral practice.

Putting ourselves into practice: popular education-like adult education

How do the principles of popular education translate into current everyday realities of research, teaching and community outreach – the core functions of academics at universities? Below I will look at research, teaching and outreach in turn while relating how each ‘feeds’ (on) the other as they are deliberately integrated with each other.

Firstly, as researchers in education we are expected to focus on knowledge and learning/teaching. And so we may ask: What have we and are we still learning from our experiences of political struggle, and what knowledge and ways of knowing for building a deeper democracy have we accumulated in that process? The fight against poverty and capitalism, against environmental degradation and the AIDS pandemic are now fought at a more geographically localised level. We can research and encourage students to research with people and groups engaged in social, economic and political struggles. The nature of this research requires us to draw on the lessons from feminist research, and learn how to “read knowledge expressed in often quite different forms than what she has been trained to recognise (and validate) as knowledge”(Hart, 2000, p.35). Thus, the insights we build will be both contributions to knowledge discourses and to understanding how education and learning can strengthen social action and the practices of particular interest groups. This research may also call on us to become active members of the

groups engaged in action and get involved further than in our researcher roles, taking on educational campaigns both within a movement, and of a movement. In this way, we can take a stand, as researchers, teachers and as citizens.

Like academics elsewhere, we are called upon to increase the number of fully paid-up full-time students for whom the university can claim full-time-equivalent points and money, to upscale publication quotas in accredited journals, and to compete for prestigious and lucrative research funding (Crowther *et al.*, 2000). And yet, we have the freedom to research and write in support of progressive social action initiatives, instead of channelling our energies solely into refereed journal articles.

Secondly, as teachers, we can choose to act as “the sand, not the oil in the works of the world” (my translation) (Eich, 1973, p.88) instead of as instructors in the school of sharks. By designing and leading processes of true dialogue, the purpose of which is the production rather than transmission of knowledge, we model more democratic knowledge production. By initiating and guiding reflections in which complex theories are collectively negotiated and translated into useful ideas, we engage in re-thinking and re-connecting values and purpose with agency. By asking questions that smoke out agendas we make the dominant discourse appear less natural and neutral, and by scrutinising what is presented as ‘diversity’ amongst ‘stakeholders’ we throw light on conflicting interests as imbued with advantage, and difference. Students are also citizens who require an acute understanding of how social control is maintained and changed. Our education in the formal classroom as much as in non-formal gatherings in which people come together to plan for action can strive to serve the interests of people, rather than those of corporations, it can aim at supporting life rather than worshipping commodities.

Universities have old-established assumptions about where knowledge is located, and sending students (and ourselves) out into communities through various community-based learning requires them (and us) to re-connect knowledge and ideas with life and living. “Respecting people’s knowledge means understanding the context of people’s lives, respecting the specificities of their histories and their systems of knowledge” (Hawthorne, 2001, p.79-80). Indigenous knowledge is characterised by its embeddedness in the cultural web and history of a people including their civilisation, and forms the backbone of the social, economic, scientific and technological identity of such a people. Among the most important aspects of indigenous and traditional

knowledge is its depth of understanding about a particular place, a particular environment and its ecology. This situatedness can be invaluable in determining what works and what does not work in terms of sustainable survival. Horton has pointed out that people learn democracy by acting democratically. Through engaging with civil society students learn about how power dynamics and interests really play themselves out. This is not the kind of knowledge listed in the shopping lists of ‘module competencies’. But it is the kind of knowledge that helps to question, and challenge and re-make.

Thirdly, community-outreach requires that we do work that supports local communities. Collins has charged that “Critical practice calls for direct engagement in definable concrete projects for social change without which talk of justice, emancipation, and equality becomes hollow rhetoric” (Collins, 1991, p.119). How can we hope to understand the people with whom we align ourselves politically, without interacting and working with them, ‘out there’? We must go outside the safe walls of the institution and align ourselves with social action groups and movements, directly. We can act in opposition to forces that entrench patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian ways of working and decision making.

Residents of Glasgow who were involved in local campaigns to improve housing and health described how they began to make connections between their own struggle and that of people elsewhere. Drawing on Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, Cathy McCormack explained that his struggle, as that of Paulo Freire, was much like their own, and that it involved insight into how

the oppressed will never be free until their oppressors are liberated. (. . .) Through analysing my community struggle, I have come to the conclusion that for the first time in history the survival of the rich is dependent on the liberation of the poor. Poverty is not only costing us our lives, it is costing us all the earth!’ (Martin and MacCormack,1999, p.262).

Poor and oppressed groups are often so busy coping with the struggle for daily survival that they do not take time out to reflect critically and learn from their actions. As educators we can again provide the space and the tools that will support groups involved in struggles for justice to think for themselves. At the same time, this dialogue can help us as educators to re-root our ideas and ideals in the material world with its clashes between modes of production and competing interests. This will improve our practice and our actions as citizens.

Conclusion

Living and working as an activist-academic with one foot in popular education, the other in the world of the academy creates peculiar tensions and excitements. We may dodge and dive competing agendas and expectations in order to find that space that allows us to live with integrity, contributing to the struggle for social justice, and along with others, becoming more fully human in the process.

A recognition that the subjectivity of the adult educator is central to any critical practice of adult education will prepare the way for a reception of more careful accounts about our counter-hegemonic pedagogical projects in which we reflect upon the practices themselves and on our own (reflexive) experiencing of these practices (Collins, 1991, p.117).

Universities as sites of popular education would be a contradiction in terms. However, academics who believe in the principles of popular education can put pressure on academic institutions to become more democratic epistemologically, politically and socially. We might model a way that re-directs funding to collective forms of research and publishing, we can record and teach active engagement with unearthing and valorising progressive indigenous knowledge, we can work more democratically with students and communities outside. We can mobilise others who believe that consistency and integrity should be at the root of our practice and insist that universities allocate resources to work that is explicitly aligned to a social justice agenda. We can make the academy more accountable to progressive forces in civil society, *substantively* (Murphy, 2001). If we don't, our work reproduces and helps to entrench what is. Putting ourselves into practice means living and working with integrity and as educators, researchers, citizens, sustaining the vision of the world how we want it by working for it.

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