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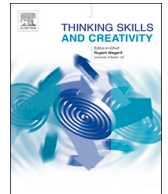
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# Thinking Skills and Creativity

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## Civic learning in conversation: The common ground of difference

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### ABSTRACT

Situated in the context of a conversation between the authors, this paper is both a reflection on past community based practice and a statement of intention for the criticality of dialogic space in the development of civic engaged learning. Through addressing a series of questions held in common, we explore lessons learned through our own educational praxis, explore the conceptual underpinnings of our collaboration and conclude with our early conceptualisation of a dialogic civic learning playground called ‘Urban Dialogues’. The intention of this new relational space is to bring staff and students from various faculties within a higher education institution together with community stakeholders to co-create both the practice of and research on community-based learning and learning-based community development.

Pedagogic discourse has posited how participatory civic education can enable an emancipatory agency, serving to advance the socio-cultural, economic, ecological and political livelihoods of a community. It also articulates how that development can be integrated with an enriching of the student learning experience. At the same time, the bringing together of community, educator and student poses challenges, notably in negotiating otherness; i.e., the differences in perspectives, aims, and expectations that each participant brings. Concurrently, discourse on the urban argues that the city is a site of multiplicity, and that we need to recognise that this multivalence can not only enrich but also include dissonance and conflict. The challenge within civic engaged learning is to not only acknowledge but also embrace the opportunity that this difference affords for the mutual illumination of each other through a dialogical encounter.

Our conversation, as outlined in this paper, critically considers the potential for such dialogue, and how creative forms of educational practice across disparate fields can enhance student development, meet curricular objectives within higher education and contribute to the common good within a community context.

### 1. Introduction

**Paul** Maybe we should begin by explaining what this “talking paper” will be. It is a conversation between two academics within the same University in the UK that up until recently have been working separately on the same vision to enhance civic engaged learning within higher education. It explores a series of questions that as we have got to know each other we have realised that we share as issues of concern. Rather than grappling with them in isolation we wanted to explore the potential to learn from listening to each other and ourselves through the back and forth process of dialogue.

**Bob** And crucially these questions that we are exploring in conversation are those that we have increasingly found other

*Abbreviations:* OSDE, Open Space for Dialogue and Enquiry

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academics, students, and community partners in this field of educational innovation are challenged by too. One critical aspect that we are also finding is that while there is a lot of good work being achieved, to date this work has been pursued mostly as independent trajectories, which is the antithesis of the joined-up approach we advocate. The challenge is how we might bring these various valuable practices together and expand the impact of of this work.

**Paul** You are right about the challenge. Yet I think we are at an exciting time of reform in higher education. The drive for a reframing towards notions of the Civic University and serving an active concern for the common good are gaining momentum. There remains a move to go beyond narratives of disciplinary expertise and employability, towards the development of graduates as 'compassionate critical creatives', who have the competencies, social capital and efficacy to participate in processes of civic change that serve the well-being of others. This has been highlighted for instance in UNESCO's Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development,<sup>1</sup> and its transformative agenda to civically engage students with making a difference in the communities their lives are connected to. Yet as you point out, I often see this re-visioning of HE being worked out in pockets of isolated practice by committed staff with little space for dialogue and collaboration.

**Bob** In speaking to colleagues about the possibility of bringing this practice together into some form of interactive entity, there are so many colleagues expressing interest but also a sense of projecting valuable but divergent hopes on to this. That is encouraging, but also troubling; there is scope here for that divergence to disrupt rather than enrich. What we need to do is delineate more carefully just what this dialogic and collaborative practice needs to be; maybe not so much a manifesto or set of rules, but rather an understanding of the space in which this activity can arise and flourish.

**Paul** Perhaps in this emerging sense of the criticality of dialogic space within civic engaged learning can be explored together through the very process of a dialogue!

**Bob** Good thing I am recording this then...

**Paul** (Laughs)...Absolutely. My feeling is that through the process of dialogue, the challenge of questioning and clarification-seeking that it brings, we might reach a deeper insight into and articulation of where our collaboration is leading us. The hope being that in doing so we will also reveal something of use to others grappling with the same dilemmas in education. I think we can really draw some inspiration from Ira Shor and Paulo Freire's book *A Pedagogy for Liberation*.<sup>2</sup> Through their conversation back in 1987 they explored a liberating education using real questions they themselves were asking. We could do the same and explore some of the key questions that our civic education work with students, staff and community partners has raised?

**Bob** I am not familiar with the text, but it sounds like it is worth trying; a dialogue about dialogue as it were. For me it evokes discourse both on and by Mikhail Bakhtin. The former is by Caryl Emerson, who talks of Bakhtin's writing as being about a developing idea. This writing is like how we speak; that is, fragmentary, circular in its redundancies, and open-ended. It is a way of inviting the reader in, encouraging them to participate in the discussion, if only through an internal dialogue.<sup>3</sup> The latter aspect references Bakhtin's suggestion that the text can hold multiple points of view, reinforcing each other and even juxtaposing one another. While recognising the necessity of being a single text, a dialogue between us is a way of allowing for multiple voices.<sup>4</sup>

**Paul** And for allowing reflexivity as practitioners. In coming to know you and your practice I am no doubt coming to know myself and my practice in new ways too. My hope is that through making visible the expansion of a dialogue between us we both can perceive how we could curate together a new space for academic and civic partners interested in community-based learning. Pursuing this common ground fully aware of our different perspectives and life histories. For me my flight path has been through person-centred citizenship education work where I started my practice outside of formal, subject-defined educational structures. I began by developing community-based learning with teenagers who were in care, or who had become dis-affected by mainstream schooling. Twenty-five years later my work has evolved to the point where it is now closely organised around participatory and experiential approaches to Education for Sustainable Development in Higher Education settings.

**Bob** For me it has been about community-based work in professional practice as an architect situated both in the UK and overseas, and as an educator siting students' project work in the context of live urban regeneration agendas. Increasingly through this work I have come to recognise, and give emphasis to, the issue of difference. I have come to believe that the fundamental challenge in civic engagement is that of difference, and how we respond to that difference defines our approach. Following this as a line of inquiry, I am finding more and more reference to difference as a formative construct, notably in discourse on the contemporary urban condition, the ground within which I most commonly operate; that is, while there is much reference to the urban as a site of multiculturalism, the urban is equally a site of belligerence, ignorance and stubbornness.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO's Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development is in response to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This outlines 17 integrated Sustainable Development Goals for a transformation of society to address social injustice and environmental points of crisis. Education, in all its forms, is seen to be play a key role in achieving this, by ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for such societal change in support of human rights, gender equality and environmental stewardship. For more details see UNESCO (2014a) Roadmap for Implementing the Global Action Programme on Education Development. UNESCO, United Nations (2015) Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

<sup>2</sup> Shor, I. and Freire, P. (1987) *A pedagogy for liberation*. London: Bergin and Garvey.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, C. (1984) 'Editor's Preface', in C. Emerson, ed., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. xxix – xliii.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, M. (1984) 'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,' in C. Emerson, ed., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3 – 302.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Deutsche, R. (1999) 'Reasonable Urbanism', in J. Copjec and M. Sorkin, eds., *Giving Ground The Politics of Propinquity*. London: Verso: pp. 175 – 206; Donald, J. (1997) 'Imaging the Modern City', in S. Westwood and J. Williams, eds., *Imagining Cities – Scripts, signs*,

I think it is vital that we address difference within this text; whether the difference encountered in civic-engaged learning, or even extending this to any difference between the two of us in terms of our beliefs, experience and outlook on civic engagement.

**Paul** So perhaps this is where our starting points are different but connected – for you and your students your common ground has been a shared single profession, and from this the priority has been to expose and lay bare the differences lying within the multiplicity of our community contexts. In my work within interdisciplinary learning spaces the starting point has been to identify the common ground of connected community issues of concern, a shared heart cry, and then collaboratively try and create change for the common good.

**Bob** What I find interesting is how we start from such different points. While you are trying to build off a common ground, in my work I am interested in embracing difference, exploring its potential to actually be the solution. While the possibility of the latter has come to me through my experience as an architect and an educator, I have found echoes in Holmgren's and Mollison's writings within the field of permaculture.<sup>6</sup>

So what we have discussed so far helps situate where we are coming from and how we aim to proceed. I think we have reached the point where we need to flesh this out with discussion of some examples from our own educational practice. Can you recall an early practice that embodies how concepts of common ground and/or difference have played out in practice?

## 2. How do concepts of common ground and difference play out in practice?

**Paul** An early example of me trying to develop my civic education practice is an extracurricular active citizenship programme in Lancaster, UK, aimed at 16–18 years olds. It began with participants exploring the principles of dialogue and collaborative working and then sharing with each other their different community issues of concern. My role as facilitator was to encourage the students, through questioning and active listening, to share their different perspectives on these issues: their root causes, implications, solutions and where their perspectives were coming from. They were then encouraged to identify and construct ways that their issues of concern were shared or interconnected in some way. One of my first programmes involved a group of fourteen 17 year olds sharing their interlinked concern over community issues such as the breakdown of relationships between younger and older generations, issues of loneliness, and problems with a sense of connection and belonging where they lived. From this provisional common ground the citizenship education programme guided the young people to go out and research the different perspectives of others. They reached out to a local sheltered housing area for senior citizens and asked through a short survey what these members of their community saw to be the problem and contributing factors. They also researched examples of solutions locally, nationally and globally. From this, the students identified one of the root causes to be a lack of positive interaction space for young and old generations in their neighbourhood to get to know each other and form experiences that challenged the commonly held negative stereotypes of each other. Their community action in response to this was to organise a coach trip to a nearby seaside town, inviting a group of local elderly residents to join them in visiting a ballroom dancing hall. Once there, the young people organised refreshments, and sat and listened to the senior citizens who reminisced on previous visits to the hall. The evening ended with the senior citizens pairing with the young students and teaching them how to ballroom dance.

**Bob** This sounds like a great project, and some great outcomes. But coming from my initial starting point, who was being heard and listened to? What about the students or elderly people who didn't want to relate to the other?

**Paul** Well, I am aware I offered this civic engaged learning opportunity with an educational agenda. I was first of all interested in students learning through making a practical difference in their community – I had a broad direction of travel that I was oriented by. I wasn't interested in facilitating an educational space where the students wanted to just run a talk shop. Nor was I willing to preside over students choosing a community action that I thought might exasperate their community issue of concern. I held concern for well-being objectives and followed certain educational processes, such as action learning and collaborative learning. I influenced the culture as it were. Freire provides a good point of reference here, as he is very clear that as educators we are cultural workers and we need to be reflexively conscious of this.<sup>7</sup>

There was no 'institutional' or 'structural' insistence upon the participation of young people – it was deliberately extra-curricular rather than a compulsory element of their curriculum. Students who did not want to relate to the 'other' of their peers or their community through this programme could choose not to take it up. I sought to be dialogic with the young participants; I did not dictate to them the community issues I thought they should care about or choose to focus in upon. Nor did I have a predetermined notion of the community action they should undertake. The ballroom dancing trip was very much their ingenious idea. But whilst I think I embraced a difference between the students and my perspectives, I am not sure how well my educational practice allowed for a difference to remain and be present across the students participating. Not all students stayed and completed the programme, some drifted away after the first week or so, maybe they didn't feel listened to by me or their peers. Similarly, not all elderly people chose to

(footnote continued)

memories. London: Routledge, pp, 181 – 201; Sorkin, M. (1997) 'Traffic in Democracy', 1997 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture, University of Michigan. Available at [https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/pdfs/publications/map/wallenberg1997\\_michaelsorkin.pdf](https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/pdfs/publications/map/wallenberg1997_michaelsorkin.pdf) (Accessed 08.07.16); Wilson, E. (1997) 'Nostalgia and the City', in S. Westwood and J. Williams, eds., *Imagining Cities – Scripts, signs, memories*. London: Routledge, pp, 127 – 139.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Holmgren, D. (2002) *Permaculture – Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability*. Hepburn: Holmgren Design Services; Mollison, B. (1988) *Permaculture – A Designer's Manual*. Tyalgum: Tagari Publications.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller account of Paulo Freire's views on educators as cultural workers see: Freire, P. (2005) *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Colorado: Westview Press.

take up the invitation to join the students on the coach trip.

**Bob** But how did you allow for engaging with difference? Was there any degree of difference in how the young people and senior citizens saw the issues, and how they saw any difference in interests of the roles they held within the community?

**Paul** I think this example of my practice only partially achieves this effective engagement with difference. The students were encouraged to share their different points of view – the dialogic space was not to reach a single viewpoint but to scrutinise the different perspectives that the students felt they held or were possible for others to hold. Similarly, when they collaborated over possible responsive actions they were free to choose their own roles within this; no one was assigned a contribution, and as a group they were constantly negotiating the construction and ownership of action points with each other. But the programme was framed around one collective community action project. There was no room given to a group of students choosing a completely different issue as their focus. There were processes at play to keep a unified group rather than allow for a self-determining multiplicity of groups to form. Also this programme was guilty of prioritising the views of the young people over those of their elderly community partners in significant ways. So as the educator I constructed a sense that this community action project had been a civic development success largely through evaluation and reflection activities that were only held with the students. I was far less rigorous in my capturing of the senior citizens' evaluations and feedback. While I remain confident that this community engaged learning initiative was done *with* rather than *on* the community partners, I increasingly feel more could have been done dialogically together by way of co-construction and co-learning. I think this is where the embracing of difference and multiplicity in this example of my early practice falls down in a number of important ways.

**Bob** I like how you were providing a site to form connections, and your wanting to challenge 'negative stereotypes of each other.' I can recognise similar aspirations in projects I both know of and have participated in. It is the latter phrase regarding stereotypes that I am most intrigued by; indeed, it might have been this problem that might have served, if not the beginning point, then as the point of departure for finding a solution.

I can illustrate this through a project I ran last year with our final year Master of Architecture students in Macau, China, these days known as the 'Las Vegas of Asia' and the most densely populated city in the world. We were invited by the (former) president of their national architects' association to look at a neighbourhood (i.e., the Inner Harbour), bypassed by all the development driven by Macau's gaming industry and its ever growing population, to explore possibilities for its regeneration. Tragically, one month before we arrived, Macau was hit by a devastating typhoon, with the neighbourhood we were to work in the hardest hit in the city. The effects of the typhoon were still visible on our arrival. This had a significant impact on our students, and raised questions about what sort of physical and programmatic interventions might be made to protect the neighbourhood in the future. For one group of three students this challenge became the central focus of their work. Having explored the prevailing coastal protection measure of seawalls, they found a growing recognition that seawalls have for a number of reasons been discredited as a long term solution by environmental sciences and marine engineering. Moreover, looking at various research on global warming, rising sea levels, and predicted increases in the amount and severity of typhoons, they saw that the problem is likely going to get worse for coastal cities like Macau. Rejecting a more defensive stance against the threat (i.e., an element of difference within the socio-ecological patterns of living in the city), they chose to embrace the reality that the river adjoining the Inner Harbour neighbourhood is prone to flooding. Embracing the problem as the solution, their proposal was based on letting the area return over time back to its origins as a wetland. Concurrently they proposed relocating the now under-used maritime industrial activities along the Inner Harbour's edge to elsewhere in Macau; This move was underpinned by dialogue with the owners of these businesses and representatives of the Macau government, and knowledge of the relocation of other, similar activities in more recent years. In place of the current marine-based industries they proposed a multi-disciplinary urban program of ecological education, eco-tourism and agriculture for the neighbourhood's economic livelihood. The proposition, echoing examples in China and elsewhere, is that the wetland will act as something like a giant sponge absorbing the impact of storms while allowing for inhabitation on raised platforms.

**Paul** I think your example poses two questions. Firstly, the explicit engagement with the problem as a potential solution can represent something of a paradigm shift for students can't it? How did the students respond to that as a learning opportunity? Secondly, it is interesting that while beginning with difference, they ended up pursuing a solution based on an emerging sense of common ground with environmental science and marine engineering. So is your way forward about embracing difference, or finding common ground?

**Bob** I think those are two good questions. The first exposes what is a fundamental challenge to an approach based on working with difference. You are right that this is a paradigm shift, and is in fact a significant conceptual jump for students. Historically in both architectural practice and education, the emphasis has been on articulating a singular clarity of vision, and following through on this in generating a design for a building. Any conditions that differ from the realisation of this vision - e.g., on the site or in the wider context, between activities proposed to occur within the building, as well as as in the design itself, have tended to be either somehow diminished or even negated. This is illustrated in Schon's seminal text *The Reflective Practitioner*,<sup>8</sup> in which he drew upon the design studio in architectural education as an exemplar; in a key tutorial Schon recounts, the tutor encourages the student to impose a discipline upon a given site / project (i.e., rigorously pursue a singular vision), even if it is arbitrary. Unstated here is that certain interests are prioritised, and others, notably those that are different to those interests, are negated. It is a reductive form of practice.

**Paul** I recently had an illuminating conversation with a group of former undergraduate students. They remembered their civic engaged learning opportunity as being rewarding and meaningful, but also as their most challenging, uncertain and risky. They talked of how within the current mainstream educational culture they felt pushed towards focusing on high grades, avoiding failure

<sup>8</sup> Schon, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. London: Routledge

at all costs. With the outcome of their community-based learning project being intertwined with various others, they saw their capacity to self-determine success as being threatened and made vulnerable. Their continued participation required a reflexive awareness of the risk and the courage to overcome their internal resistance to working in a more contingent context. Additionally, I have worked with students who have chosen to resist engaging with notions of difference and diversity and the requirement to participate in some form of critical self-reflection or reflexivity, preferring to remain in the familiar of their current viewpoints and perspective sources.

**Bob** Before we lay too much blame on either the community or students, or even tutors, it is worth remembering it is arguably in our human nature to resist change. Erik Blumenthal has spoken of 'tendentious apperception', a tendency to want to hang on to our existing world view.<sup>9</sup> Instead of challenging our own preconceived meaning perspectives and engaging with new ways of viewing the world, it is in our disposition to want to fall back on that which we know and is safe and familiar.

Asking questions that can prompt a critical self-examination is the antithesis of that; I recall one student remarking on our work with a marginalised community that the project made him realise that he was prejudiced. However beneficially transformative in the long-run, that is a significant revelation to come to grips with in the context of learning. It goes without saying that there is a huge responsibility for the tutor in supporting students in this work.

**Paul** As well as this resistance to change, another aspect of the challenge of civic engaged learning is negotiating participants' different expectations and experiences of disappointment. Research with colleagues in the Institute of Education has looked at this very issue within service-learning approaches to civic engagement.<sup>10</sup> This work has highlighted this challenge being present along three relational fault lines. The first is between the student and community partner and the risk of the community development project failing to meet initial expectations and agreed action points resulting in the service-learning relationship faltering or breaking down. The second fault line is between the educator and student and the loss of the breadth and depth of contemplative learning through civic engagement, for example due to the academic's module's learning objectives dominating all interactional processes. The third is the risk of burnt bridges between the community partner and the academic/educational institution – where the community member perhaps felt the civic learning project had been done 'to them' rather than 'with them'. Where any of these fault lines materialise there is the risk of the withdrawal of each partner's willingness to engage in future community engaged learning initiatives. Preventing these fault lines appearing or addressing them when they do is where the research suggests a dialogic and mediation space can play a vital role.

**Bob** In my work with communities and especially students a significant portion of this risk comes from encountering the unknown. What I am trying to do in my own teaching is encourage and support students to be open to working in a way that doesn't rely on knowing what the end goal is; rather it is about encouraging them to engage in process with an unknown goal. This is highly relevant to built environment education today, owing to the broad and significant changes affecting built environment practice. I would argue that key here is the attitude that you bring to this encounter, or even more notably the attitude one forms through engaging with another.

Throughout my teaching I have placed students in *terra incognita*; a place unfamiliar, even if only a part of the city where they have been previously reluctant to venture. The communities here, like those in practice, were economically and socially challenged. What has been amazing is the transformation in students' attitudes towards such places, and towards the inhabitants of those places. At the beginning students have often been apprehensive, voicing concerns owing to often long-standing stereotypes; for example, that the area is dangerous, or that the people in the area are themselves somehow threatening. Later however, the students recognised that the area's reputation distorted the reality, and that real people lived there with their own aspirations for a better life, much like the students.

Critical in these experiences was that not only were the students going to have a discussion with these people but that the students were encouraged to embrace what these "others" were saying. There is a big difference in asking people to step outside normal ways of working and their own preconceptions, and to engage with an other, even an other of who they might be afraid or even with who they might be in conflict.

**Paul** Something key about what you are saying is that it is not just about encountering 'otherness' but being open to actively listening to others. And then from this experience of difference, reflexively considering our own perspectives?

**Bob** To be clear; this is not about simplistically adopting the other's point of view, but instead how that other's thinking makes you think about your own thinking.

Picking up however on your thought about being reflexive, I would like to go back to your earlier question about my example from teaching where the students started (i.e., embracing difference) and where they ended up (on a site of common ground). I think you are right about that. But then going back to your example, I would suggest that in the end the students themselves embraced difference as a way of taking the project forward. It would have been far too easy and understandable for the students to remain on their own side of the divide as it were, bemoaning the difference that lay between them and the senior citizens, and how such difference would get in the way of ever identifying some form of common ground. Yet key in the students' approach was their embracing of the senior citizens' interests, notably through ballroom dancing. Brilliant.

So in the end I am not so certain that we are so far apart after all; it is partly a matter of the language we use, which I recognise

<sup>9</sup> Blumenthal, E. (1997) *Way to Inner Freedom: A Practical Guide to Personal Development*. Rockport: Oneworld Publications.

<sup>10</sup> For further information on this action research project into service-learning; see: Warwick, P., Morgan, A. & Miller, W. (in press) 'The pursuit of compassionate hope – repurposing the University through the Sustainable Development Goals agenda' in Peterson, A. & Gibbs, P. (2019) *Higher Education and Hope*. London Palgrave Macmillan.

both reflects our life histories and simultaneously frames our thinking and communication with others. It is also a matter of the process we are using to get there. But in the end we are ending up at the same location. So the question worth exploring here might be about how we get there? How do we create an open space for dialogue to flourish?

### 3. How do we create an open space for dialogue that actively engages with difference?

**Paul** I think that what is key in establishing a genuine dialogic space is understanding the process of dialogue as *meaning passing through*, where participants listen to each other in order to understand the other and also themselves. Creating this open space takes time and practice; we can't just assume our students already possess the competencies and attributes it requires. Nor can we rely upon students being familiar with a dialogic process of relating. A number of years ago I was involved in an international group of educators who sought to make this dialogic process explicit for learners. Led by the scholar Vanessa Andreotti, this Open Space for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) methodology engaged students with critical issues of community concern by first making visible to participants a framework of open space principles.<sup>11</sup> These are along the lines of:

- 1 Including everyone: The knowledge each person brings deserves to be heard.
- 2 Lifelong Learning: Everyone sees the world from points of view that can change and develop over time. This means at any given point no one has got all the answers.
- 3 Recognising diversity: All knowledge is related to who you are and where you come from.
- 4 Critical Engagement: All knowledge can and should be questioned through dialogue.

Importantly the OSDE methodology doesn't only rely upon the otherness and diversity of the participants themselves. A key element of the process is the facilitator bringing into the open space the perspectives of others not present – in particular representation of the marginalised and disempowered through stimuli within a dialogue such as a guest speaker, video, article, illustration etc. In this way different perspectives are encountered to some extent within the creative process of civic consideration. Such a dialogic space also serves to catalyse reflexive engagement with self, drawing in particular upon Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model of human development - recognising the different levels of contextual influence upon our sense of self and personal development.<sup>12</sup> So participants within an enquiry on a particular civic issue such as local responses to climate change, or the portrayal of refugees in the local media, would be encouraged to not only actively listen to the perspectives of others but to reflect upon their own perspectives and consider critical literacy questions such as:

- What assumptions is my perspective based upon?
- What are the sources of influence contributing to me forming this perspective?
- How can I think about this issue otherwise, what might marginalised and under-represented perspectives on this issue be?
- What points of curiosity and future investigation does the difference of perspectives represented here prompt me to ask?

**Bob** This bringing in of others is crucial for the richness that emerges from their added voices, and also what it prompts in ourselves, recognising that we become ourselves through our interaction with others. Our self-identity is not autogenic – rather, we are influenced by our parents, siblings, friends, colleagues and teachers, by others, even if the other that poses difference. In opposition to a mythologised monological generation of the self, our self-identity is fostered in dialogue with others. This dialogue allows us to be able to see ourselves, both through our own self-awareness of our constructing of our discourse, and seeing how others understand our discourse.<sup>13</sup>

The attitudinal shift prompted by these encounters, and in parallel more regular and frequent activity in the Design Studio, is enabled through what I refer to as play. Within the context of games, the community and students are invited to participate in games that give them opportunity to engage with, challenge, test and extend both existing and new knowledge and skills.

Critical to this conception of play is to understand it as more than just recreation. Play allows us to see the world both as we rationally know it, while opening up opportunity to imagine the world as it might be.<sup>14</sup>

Within the context of games community and students are free to play and explore notions of 'what-if?'. In these games there is no right or wrong answer; rather the intention is to reveal opportunities of what might be possible. Intrinsic to this play is act of lateral thinking – e.g., making connections between the seemingly unconnected, having one thing stand in for another, or adopting momentarily things seemingly in conflict with one's pre-existing thinking. These playful acts often result in uncanny collisions and juxtapositions; in allowing this to happen new insights can be revealed. Such play relies on intuition, and a willingness to let go of what is known, familiar and safe. This play allows one to both see the world through a different lens, and reflect back upon one's

<sup>11</sup> To read more about the theoretical underpinning to the Open Space for Dialogue and Enquiry Methodology see: Andreotti, V. (2006) 'Soft versus critical global citizenship education', in *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, 3, 40-51. DOI: 10.1057/9781137324665\_2.

<sup>12</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

<sup>13</sup> See: Taylor, C. (1991) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Bakhtin 1984.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: Ochsner, J. (2000) 'Behind the Mask: A Psychoanalytical Perspective on Interaction in the Design Studio', *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 53/5, 194 – 206; Reilly, M., ed. (1984) ed., *Play as Exploratory Learning – Studies of Curiosity Behaviour*. Beverly Hills: Sage; Sicart, M. (2014), *Play Matters*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

habitual ways of thinking about and valuing the world.

**Paul** In principle this notion of play sounds vital in the liberatory civic learning approach we are seeking to facilitate, but how does it actually work. Can you show how it is possible to put this all into practice?

**Bob** One example that always works well is something I run very early on in a Design Studio project (in which students are asked to design a building) when students are just starting to formulate ideas about the project's site. In this game, entitled "Testing the Site", students identify a few key words that identify key attributes that define the site for them. They are then asked to identify an example of a building that reflects their thinking. Armed with a copy of the floor plan(s) and section(s) of this example they then cut the plan and section into their constituent parts (e.g., a u-shaped building might be cut into three separate pieces). To do this, the students need to analyse the precedent and thus better understand it. As the key step in this game, students are then asked to situate these constituent parts on to plan and section drawings of their site in a way that reinforces (or juxtaposes) the key words that they have previously identified. At the end of this students have generated a notional plan and building form; the purpose is not however that they now have a preliminary gesture of a scheme that they can go away and work with; rather, the purposeful siting of the constituent parts, framed through their own key words, reveals both possibilities and parameters about the site. It is these possibilities and parameters that they can then go away and study further. What the game achieves is the revealing of these possibilities and parameters, alternatives which might not have been exposed if they had been asked simply to generate their own plan and section, an act which would most likely have limited them to working within their existing thinking. The momentary borrowing and creative manipulation of the precedent, and testing it on the site, opens them up to other ways of thinking both about the site and the possible nature of the design they might pursue. I think it is crucial to note here that this is a game that is not merely solitary, but one that I have had students play working in collaboration with various others: their fellow students; architecture students from other universities (including other countries); school children, and community partners.

What we are trying to do is get them to unlearn, if only temporarily, their inherited ways of thinking and working, and so consider the merits of other possibilities. Doing so opens them up to a richness, including that afforded by engaging with what an other might have to offer. At the same time this opening up to an other prompts them to reflect upon on own attitudes, thinking and values.

I think this sense of play together with your sense of principled process, reveals something of the nature of the dialogical space we envision. What remains is where do we situate this space for a dialogical embrace of difference within civic engaged learning?

#### 4. How can we create a collaboration space for a dialogical embrace of difference within civic engaged learning?

**Paul** Our conversation has highlighted for me that there is a vital need for a dialogic space to exist that facilitates a more collaborative taking forwards of our University's civic engaged learning aspirations. This dialogue needs to be at two levels. It needs to exist 'within' each community engaged learning initiative, present between the academic, the student and the community partner. It is also needed 'across' the institution's community engaged learning work as a whole, providing a collaborative networking space for all participants, forming a community of practice across academics, students and community partners.

**Bob** What we are aiming at here is dialogical interaction between all key partners that, in the spirit of both Bakhtin and Freire, embraces difference. But we have to be careful about how we conceptualise and locate this space.

**Paul** I agree that a vision of a dialogic interaction space is problematic if it is conceived of as a singular fixed physical space. But perhaps this space is more of a *metaphor* for a type of relational space between academics, students and community partners, principled in its dialogic playfulness.

This relational space embraces difference, both represented and missing, as a key aspect of the creative process and catalyst for personal growth. But it is also a space of common ground in that it is underpinned by a sense of civic compassion and active concern for the well-being of other people and the environment, as differently as we all see this to be! Whether this dialogic space comes to life, is contingent on the principled engagement of openness and respect by all and a spirit of grace and care towards the participation of the other and self.

**Bob** You mentioned metaphor, and I think this is a good way to think about it, as a metaphor is a much more open-ended and fruitful way to frame it. Yet wariness is warranted in not taking the metaphor literally; metaphors, while useful to help make us make sense of our experience, should not become a simulacrum. One possibility we have previously discussed for our dialogical space is as a public square. This is problematic however, as it is too easily translated into something literal, as if an actual, specific space. Equally, we need to be critical of the historical record of public space, and negative economic, political, and social associations it can hold for people; moreover, we need to remember how it has previously existed, and again today does at times exist, as a site of exclusion.<sup>15</sup>

The dialogic space we seek to construct and situate is grounded in its social nature and its accommodation of difference. Such a

<sup>15</sup> See for example discourse that as critiqued how poorly designed and situated public spaces have become the site of anti-social behaviour. Or how public space has been taken over by economic forces, through the acquiescence of political powers, all in the name of the public good. Even the historic model of the agora, posited as the locus of Greek life is suspect; upon closer interrogation we find that the agora was not so much a public space of inclusion as a privileged space of exclusion, in which participation in politics was limited to free-born males. See for example: Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. London: Penguin; Minton, A. (2009) *Ground Control*. London: Penguin; LeGates, R., and Stout, F. (1996) 'The Evolution of Cities – Introduction', in R. LeGates and F. Stout, eds., *The City Reader*. London: Routledge, 15 – 19; Basson, S. (2004) 'Beware Greeks Bearing Gifts: The Greek agora revisited as a discontinuous subject of historical knowledge', in *Limits: Proceedings from the 21st Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, pp. 14-19, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 26-29th September, 2004. Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne.



space cannot be fixed and must remain unfinalized; to fix and finalize it would be a reductive act which delimits the conceptualisation, exploration, testing and even realisation of possibilities.

**Paul** Crucial here then is that we forge a dialogical space for collaborative approaches to civic engaged learning to flourish by embracing this tension of different perspectives, forms of knowledge and approaches. To seek the design of such a dialogic space of critical consciousness raising and participation in solution-making has echoes not only of Freire's 'cultural circles', but also Augusto Boal's forum theatre.<sup>16</sup> Central to the pedagogy of forum theatre is the creation of an inclusive environment that frames all participants as 'spect-actors' able to play the role of being the central protagonist seeking civic change. Working recently in this way on a project seeking to tackle local marine plastic pollution seemed to really help engender the presence of optimism and camaraderie.

**Bob** What I am interested in, and what I see a possibility of, is a space that brings together the nature of space you are discussing, and the open-endedness and possibility of "what-if" present in the act of play. Metaphorically what comes to mind is a conception of this space as a "playground".

What I like about this metaphor are a couple of things; first is the reference to a space of play. What we are both envisioning is the making of this space, an open ground from which various possibilities may spring forth. Set in the multivalent condition of the urban (but not excluding the rural), this dialogue would bring together various disciplines from across the University, together with community collaborators, whose teaching, research and/or practice is grounded in community-based learning and learning-supported community development. Such a meeting would embrace the difference disparate disciplines bring to their praxis and seek to investigate and operate within the intersections between these trajectories. Such a pedagogic space could become what Carolyn Shields has described as 'a community of difference'; this space is defined not by shared beliefs, ideas or values in which all must fit, but rather by being open to the difference between one and another. The space allows people to come together across difference perspectives to engage in dialogue.<sup>17</sup> Such dialogically-oriented practice affords opportunity to bring existing and emerging agendas into a multi-layered framework enabling more joined-up thinking on pedagogy and community development. That is what we on the threshold of now, and it is simultaneously daunting but also exciting stuff.

The second thing I like in this metaphor of playground is the element of risk taking it supports, and the sense of freedom and creativity it prompts in students. This metaphor understands play as an act of agency, both revealing and testing possibilities and simultaneously developing oneself and others, through a belief in 'what-if.'

## 5. Conclusion

**Paul** So, where I think we have reached is this: the pedagogy of dialogue has a vital role to play in the co-construction of civic engaged learning. Within Higher Education there is a real need for dialogic space to be provided that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration by academics, students and community partners. Within our own institution the curation of such a space could help counter so much of the current community based learning practice being conducted in isolation from each other. Calling it the Urban Dialogues network, the intention of this space will be to draw from our emerging notion of playground, engaging with difference as a site of curiosity and co-constructed experimentation.<sup>18</sup> In a parallel sense, the Urban Dialogues will also be about us curating a space that encourages reflexive engagement; prompting a transformative dialogue with ourselves as much as with others.

**Bob** Yes, and why I think such a dialogic space is important is that this learning doesn't come easy; any true dialogue must recognise the possibility of difference, even of conflict. That leads into, just as it did in our discussion, to exploring how we can work with that difference. It is not about closing things off but opening them up. But you can't just completely open up; there is a constant process of opening it up and (re)framing - that is where both structure comes in, and where the relational play of all the participants come in. This space of dialogical pedagogy we seek to generate grows from the same spirit. Dialogism in its own way is playful; it brings together things seemingly unconnected and reveals multiple possibilities in their simultaneous activation of each other. In fact, there is a line of discourse that further weaves together conceptions of play with dialogism, emancipation, pedagogy and space.

Our intention to create a dialogic space in our practice is exactly what we have enacted here. Our dialogic process of *back and forth* has enabled us to construct a common understanding and reach fresh insights, both through building off shared thinking but also by acknowledging and explicitly engaging with the differences between us. It is this common ground of difference upon which the work of community engaged learning can flourish and thrive. So to continue...

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<sup>16</sup> Boal, A. (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.

<sup>17</sup> Shields, C. (2007) *Bakhtin*. New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the Urban Dialogues network, visit <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/urban-dialogues>.