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The Politics of Radical Interdependence in Critical Pedagogies: A Non-Alternative Context for CAMPUS at Nottingham Contemporary

Abstract

The past fifteen years have seen a rich debate situating the curatorial in the expanded field of exhibition-making, towards dialogical and discursive formats. Under the umbrella term the 'educational turn', pedagogical programmes have explored classroom aesthetics and the emancipatory potentials of pedagogy in the arts and curating – within and outside arts institutions. This paper investigates the relevance of such pedagogical programmes in the cultural sector that aim to generate an open resource for long-term critical debates and collective thinking. The paper reflects on the role of cultural institutions in wider discussions around the neoliberalisation of formal education and the political potentials of new pedagogical initiatives. It draws on decolonial problem-posing pedagogy to counter the increasing cultures of anti-intellectualism and anti-complexity in the United Kingdom (UK). The text reflects upon the experience of the CAMPUS Independent Study Programme, I curated in 2019–2020 at Nottingham Contemporary, a contemporary art centre in the UK. Contrary to the popular claim for alterity and outsidership, this paper demonstrates the political role of embeddedness and radical interdependence in critical pedagogical initiatives in contemporary art institutions.

critical pedagogies, curatorial studies, curating, neoliberalism, educational turn, anti-intellectualism, Nottingham Contemporary

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Introduction

In 2019, I curated CAMPUS Independent Study Programme (CAMPUS) at Nottingham Contemporary – a contemporary art centre in Nottingham, United Kingdom (UK). CAMPUS was a free-to-attend and year-long programme in curatorial, visual, and cultural studies, based on collaborative knowledge production and the exploration of critical methodologies for practice (Nottingham Contemporary 2019b). The programme consisted in monthly closed-door gatherings with 20 participants (selected via an open call), Nottingham Contemporary staff, and invited guests. The closed-door gatherings were complemented by free public talks in different venues in Nottingham opening the programme and the debates to a wider audience. CAMPUS was part of a series of initiatives I have curated under the umbrella title Critical Pedagogies, which, for two years, delved into the role of contemporary art organisations within the matrix of the neoliberalisation of education and the hostility of the growing anti-intellectualist culture (Gilroy 2002). With this curatorial research programme I wanted to ask the questions: What role do cultural organisations play in this debate?; what resources can the sector mobilise to foster this inquiry?

The expansion of artistic formats towards platforms for collective critical thinking and learning is known since, at least, the 1960s with the emergence of conceptual art, process-based art, and

participatory practices (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2012). Today, practitioners and researchers continue to draw from the broad recognition of art as an aesthetic-political arena that problematises value systems and proposes critical and new approaches (predominantly, but not limited to dialogical and discursive formats beyond the physical artwork). In the early 2000s, the increasing number of pedagogical platforms organised by artists and curators was termed the 'educational turn' — this phrase came to signify curatorial programmes and artworks concerned with the aesthetics of teaching and learning and, moreover, the enactment of emancipatory potentials deriving from the deployment of new models to foster critical debates outside of formal educational settings. Inspired by grassroots and horizontal organisational systems, pedagogic programmes started to spread widely from discrete non-for-profit art spaces to international biennials, exemplified by projects like A.C.A.D.E.M.Y, Night School, and unitednationsplaza (O'Neill and Wilson 2010: p.13 for a useful compendium of key projects).

Although curating is commonly understood as the practice of exhibition-making; in the last fifteen years, this definition has gone through a process of intense transformation and debate. More recently, curators and practitioners have used the arena of curating to set up discursive, dialogical, and pedagogic formats to engage knowledge and concerns, materials and affects, in the expanded field of the artwork. Curatorial practices have expanded beyond the curation of exhibitions and have pointed towards the interpretative and epistemic functions of cultural production (O'Neill and Wilson 2010 2015; Lind 2011; Martinon 2013).

The epistemic explorations of the curatorial and the mobilisation of related dialogical and discursive platforms for pedagogical purposes also help contextualise CAMPUS. CAMPUS was part of a larger series of initiatives I launched as head of Public Programmes & Research (PP&R) at Nottingham Contemporary from 2017 to 2020 under the umbrella Critical Practices (Nottingham Contemporary 2019b). During this period, the PP&R aimed to explore the research capacities of public programming based on the making-public of long-term curatorial projects, via discursive, dialogical, publishing, and time-based formats. In that way, CAMPUS expanded the dialogical commitment towards a pedagogical forum able to generate a long-term critical exchange on the

neoliberalisation of education; on decolonial modes of education and knowledge production; and on the role of critical practices to the advancement of de-neoliberalised cultural programmes.

The Neoliberal Model of Education Today

One of the aspects that was clear from the beginning of CAMPUS was that education's emancipatory potential should not be taken for granted – either in a contemporary art setting or elsewhere. Education is a controversial terrain known for playing a decisive role in the implementation of value systems. Uses of education radically vary from acting as an effective tool for the implementation of conservative ideologies and, therefore, abuse of power – i.e., in the context of authoritarian regimes – to operating as an indispensable tool for the edification of more equal societies and the emancipation of their peoples. A great deal of literature on critical pedagogies has come out of the critique of colonial regimes in postcolonial nation-states. As we have been reminded repeatedly by critical pedagogies thinkers, including Paulo Freire (2018) and bell hooks (1994), pedagogies should be deployed for the advancement of critical tools that equip individuals and groups with sophisticated ways to understand and act upon their situated political and social matrix.

For Freire, traditional education was premised in inherited colonial, class and race divisions, therefore, a critical pedagogical approach should entail the undoing of those systems by implementing a problem-posing education where individuals:

develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation (2018: p.83).

Freire situates pedagogies away from the process of skill transfer that seeks efficient responses to an externally given problem. Against this reductive model, Freire understands pedagogy as an ongoing process of figuring out the tools required to unpack and undo the systems of oppression with the aim to envision and reimagine new political scenarios.

Reimagining new political scenarios was as urgent in the past as it is today. In the last ten years, British education has been marked by cuts to primary and secondary schools, the implementation of large tuition fees in universities, divestment in Higher Education, and an increasing investment in vocational training. This shift can be seen as both practical and ideological. It is practical because it tries to supply the workforce demand after the UK exit of the European Union and the decrease of European immigration to the country. And it is ideological because it intentionally conflates education with the provision of a skill set for an efficient problem-solving approach that is, arguably, more appealing to employers and the market. This move is designed to purposefully question the value of learning for learning's sake and to erode a diversity of critical approaches.

The anti-intellectualist agenda has long been paired with the neoliberal business model of academia, which, in many ways, is not different from any profit-oriented trade based on a customer-service prerogative. The implementation of student satisfaction rates has radically changed the pedagogies in the classroom. As I have argued elsewhere, students are seen as costumers who pay to acquire professional skills that will increase their employability in a ferocious job market (Rito 2020). Simultaneously, educators are deemed to meet students' expectations and provide the service they pay for to become equipped with skill sets for an efficient provision of services. The process is accompanied by a growing number of managers in higher education institutions who monitor service delivery compliance, with roles that range from teaching evaluation to quality control. To the disenchantment of most educators who are there for the love of teaching, the customer service culture has left teachers atomised and pressurised by performance demands and managerial bureaucracy.

Such concerns with the neoliberalisation of education and progressive anti-intellectualism were stressed by Paul Gilroy in the introduction to *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* in its new edition in 2002. Gilroy notes the collapse of informal networks of democratic, feminist, and socialist solidarities being replaced with a damaging anti-intellectualism boosted by unethical privatisation and opportunism. Consequently, the hostility towards complexity, speculative thinking, education, and the life of the mind become part of the appeal of hyper-individualistic neoliberal thinking. Gilroy argues that neoliberal culture has contributed to weaken anti-racism

and to consolidate a view of it as a disreputable and immature commitment. In this sense, the identity politics of the 1980s and 1990s has been contained in the theatrical and bureaucratic inclusiveness that was regularly staged to create the impression of more solid shifts (2002: p.xxx).

Attacks on the value of intellectual engagements and complexity have been particularly damaging for the arts and humanities, as well as the creative disciplines. For instance, just in the last year, the arts subjects in schools saw a 50 per cent Government funding cut; the number of art degrees' students limited; and Higher Education secretary of state openly vilifying non-Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers. In this context, former Education Secretary of State Gavin Williamson stated: 'The record number of people taking up science and engineering demonstrates that many are already starting to pivot away from dead-end courses that leave young people with nothing but debt' (Tidman 2021). By 'dead-end courses', Williamson means what Freire calls the problem-posing disciplines, those that entertain intellectual engagement with abstract ideas, foster critical thinking, and are driven by creative methodologies.

A Non-Alternative Context for CAMPUS

CAMPUS was part of a wider series of initiatives I curated under the umbrella title Critical Pedagogies (2019–2020); a strand reflecting on the impact of almost ten years of student fees and a perceptible shift in the understanding of the role of education in British society at large. The programme was meant not only to support audience and staff reflection on the current conditions under which we engage with educational activities (including the learning activities in the gallery), but it also aimed to advance artistic, curatorial, and pedagogical responses from the standpoint of a contemporary art organisation.

CAMPUS consisted in a forum of 20 participants from different backgrounds – artists, curators, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, organisers, educators, architects, and designers – selected via an open call who met monthly for three days. These meetings were joined by Nottingham Contemporary staff and guest participants including Gurminder K. Bhambra, Tina Camp, Céline Condorelli, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Anselm Franke, Quinsy Gario, Andrea Phillips, and Nora Sternfeld. The contribution of the guest participants aimed to expand on the inquiry on

decolonial critical pedagogies in contemporary critical practices, and on the critique of colonial/neoliberal imperatives in education and cultural programming.

In addition to CAMPUS closed-door gatherings, the Critical Pedagogies strand included a series of monthly talks open to the public (Nottingham Contemporary 2019a), the conference Architectures of Education organised with e-flux Architecture and Kingston University (including a co-edited volume in e-flux Architecture) (Axel et al. 2020), and a new editorial issue in *The Contemporary Journal* (June 2019 – July 2020) – a digital-first and commons-based publication I launched in 2018 to expand the PP&R's activities (Rito 2019, 2020). In this way, CAMPUS was part of a wider set of activities that furthered the conversations within the study programme, while it allowed its participants to contribute to a wider debate.

CAMPUS is set up to draw on the epistemic potential of the curatorial in the form of a forum for collective debates and practices, in order to explore the emancipatory potentials of the site of education. In that way, this programme understands education as a collective process of learning and unlearning triggered by the conditions provided: a physical space for the meetings and events, three days a month of closed-door gatherings, the participation of external guests invited to speak to the role of critical epistemologies in the arts and knowledge production, and (not least) the time spent together in-between the planned activities. The monthly three-day gatherings aimed to provide the conditions to delve into the abilities of problem-posing pedagogies driven by criticality instead of efficiency. Thus, the programme was not intended to provide a 'set of skills' for the participants to become more efficient or better at their professional practices. I would like to argue that it was the lack of pre-ordained outputs that stimulated a durational collective engagement with complex ideas, the not-yet-knowing, and the entertainment of a non-immediately conclusive exchange. As a testament to this critical engagement, 11 participants of CAMPUS decided to write a collective piece for *The Contemporary Journal*, expanding the conversations during the programme and reflecting the kind of preoccupations each one of them had throughout the process (Chairetaki et al. 2020). Reflecting CAMPUS conditions of exchange, the piece was written using a conversational format, while the dialogue explored:

collective knowledge production [...] organised around five key questions which address some of the challenges when thinking about institutional and extra-institutional spaces of learning in a neoliberal society. (Chairetaki et al. 2020)

The published conversation among the participants also demonstrated a preoccupation with the role of CAMPUS within the bigger picture of institutional reputation and potential re-absorption of economic and cultural capital into the institution. Moreover, it reflected on the types of solidarity at play and how they could be mobilised beyond the institution's domain.

Nottingham Contemporary was well placed to host this enquiry, not least because the Public Programmes & Research department has been, since its inception, a three-way collaboration between Nottingham Contemporary, the University of Nottingham, and Nottingham Trent University (2009-). Despite being a partnership, Public Programmes & Research was set up as an independent programme to experiment with curatorial methodologies and practices in the conceptual and infrastructural intersection of the contemporary art centre and the two universities. My curatorial approach aimed to devise and activate critical methodologies for knowledge production drawn from artistic and curatorial practices; and explore the role of a contemporary art centre in generating a forum for critical practices and thinking away from the neoliberal imperatives of growth. The programme was organised around three long-term research strands, Institution as Praxis, On Translations and Critical Pedagogies (Nottingham Contemporary 2019c).

From the beginning, CAMPUS refused alterity, as well as the taken-for-granted radicality and progressiveness that comes with discourses on alternative initiatives in the art world. We were aware of the art market's valorisation of pedagogical activities in and/or outside arts organisations and their international symbolic capital. Within the context of the inaugural event for CAMPUS, practitioner and theorist Andrea Phillips reminded us of how self-styled alternative education programmes risk being seen to comply with the precarity, divestment, and privatisation of formal education by providing free programmes that further segregate the struggles of educators on the ground (Phillips 2020).

By refusing the need to posit an 'alternative' to either formal education or to any institutional structure, CAMPUS found its strengths in the mobilisation of its radical interdependence with

structured ties to both universities and, indeed, with its role in the solidarity-structures with the precarious working conditions in the sector. From this perspective, CAMPUS could have never been set apart from its own ecology – the same applies to any so-called alternative initiative – which consists of ongoing dialogues and collaborations, tensions, and productive disagreements with colleagues (from staff to students) in institutions of formal education and elsewhere. Not least, CAMPUS' eschewal of alterity comes out of an awareness of the dangerous discursive currency of the alternative agenda — infamously captured, reshuffled, and rebranded under the new far-right movements (e.g., the white supremacist alt-right).

Moreover, educational models should never be limited to the so-called validated mechanisms of formal institutions. CAMPUS is based on the belief that education, as the entertainment of new ideas and collective critical thinking, should not be limited to the sites and mechanisms of schools and universities. Notably, because formal education cannot possibly provide all the answers and models for the totality of pedagogical experiences, nor be the exclusive site for education. A good example of the political role of educational models outside of formal institutions are the supplementary schools in the UK organised by Black communities in the 1960s. Mainly instructed by parents, teachers, community activists and church leaders, the supplementary schools aimed to fight against racism and in the mainstream schooling system (George Padmore Institute n.d.). Recalling Freire, education, as in the Black supplementary schools, should emerge in as many places as the need to critically undo the matrix we inhabit, and guarantee that the right to engage in education is not gate-kept by the privileged few in the decision-making end of formal education institutions.

In conclusion, the role of cultural institutions is neither to claim outsidership from the complex matrix of pedagogic-politics, nor be compliant with the anti-intellectualism agenda and performance indicators. Instead, cultural institutions should always seriously engage with their responsibility to provide resources to critically debate the conditions in which we live and experiment with interdependent modes of collective thinking. In that way, the curatorial move toward dialogical and discursive platforms is a crucial setting for countering the prevalent anti-intellectualism and anti-complexity ideology that is promoted even by the university sector. As

argued by curator and educator Irit Rogoff, education, ultimately, is a shorthand for forum, a mode of coming together, which we so very much need to continue practicing for a complex understanding of our times (Rogoff 2010).

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