The multicultural circle as a dialogical site of (re)costructing social identities in Edinburgh[1]

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Introduction:

The current context of rapidly changing ethno-cultural compositions of European societies represents a challenge for people in both public and private spheres. Global migratory flows that are transforming cities generate 'superdiverse' (Vertovec, 2006) communities with people from widely different cultural backgrounds and experiences. This has produced tensions in various societal aspects with regards to coexistence and cultural diversity and communication among different communities, tensions which have been politicised within the wider integrationist agenda of 'minorities'. In such a climate multicultural learning in communities seems to provide a democratic framework and a valuable starting point for the development of intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence aimed at social and cultural change. As a result, the proposal to create a Multicultural Learning Circle in the community learning centre in Edinburgh with strong traditions of dialogical learning was welcomed as both a necessity and a response to the increasing cultural diversity and mobility.

We start with two key points. Firstly, in this article the collective voice 'we' refers not only to the writers of this text, but also to the participants in the Multicultural Study Circle (henceforth the Circle) [2]. This is not an aesthetic strategy, but rather a material fact backed up by the observation that the Circle itself is a collective accomplishment. Secondly, the driving force behind the writing of this text is ideological; hence it is a value-oriented contribution. This is justified on the ground that any engagement in any discourse (acts of writing or talking) about cultures, identities, religions, etc., necessarily entails description of viewpoints, beliefs, values, etc. These are not innocent or neutral but rather deeply ideological and political because they incorporate various forms of social relations (e.g., Muslims, Christians, socialists, etc.). They also embed contending ideologies (world views) which mutually shape the ways in which the social order is (and should be) structured. Ian Martin (personal communication 2009) is right to point out that 'we need to learn to live together' hinting at the fact that when people interact they mobilise a specific set of ideological assumptions about the world. Yet, we should hasten

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to add the caveat that endorsing a particular ideological position is not an excuse not to argue your case rationally or to provide supporting evidence (see Fairclough 1989).

The article is divided into three sections. In the next Section we provide some historical background about the Circle and the ways in which it is collectively managed. In the final Section, we draw on the discussion to make a set of statements that will constitute our ethical commitment to the principles of dialogic education in the Circle.

The Multicultural Study Circle as a Site for Interrogating Social Realities

The Circle, which is part of the Adult Learning Project (ALP), has emerged as a response to a rapidly changing social and cultural landscape in Scotland not just in terms of the enlarged presence of diverse ethnicities, but also with respect to a variety of multicultural experiences and practices. Out of the context of multiculturalism, the Circle has been created as the necessity to improve our understanding about cultural diversity through sharing cultural knowledge and celebrating differences with the aim to facilitate the social integration of ethnic minorities, and to challenge the cultural stereotyping of the 'Other' as problematically different. Therefore, the task of the Circle is not just to exchange cultural experiences and to learn about each other's cultures, but to promote tolerance and social justice and to be part of a struggle for a better society. In this respect, the Circle offers a common space that allows learners to examine and critically scrutinise 'the facts presented by the real concrete context' (Freire, 1994: 257) and their daily experiences, using their cultural differences as a basis for critical exploration and learning in the context of shared dialogue. From a pedagogical perspective, the Circle is organised around Freire's principles of critical education as a site where learners can be empowered through problem-posing and mutually created dialogue, which encourages participants to collaborate actively with fellow learners and to act as the 'knowing subjects' (Freire, 1994: 259).

Paulo Freire was a radical educational activist whose work in the area of critical pedagogy is committed to the project of transforming the world. His metaphor of 'banking education' which refers to the view of knowledge as a static set of facts 'deposited' by teachers in students is both insightful and transformative. Freire has endorsed an approach that begins with raising the general awareness of the oppressed by enabling them to uncover the causes of their oppression (see Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 2008). However, to avoid the essentialising trap against which Freire has issued his metaphorical warning, we tend through our reflections and actions in the Circle to engage in a critical textual dialogue with Freire. Hence, we provide a grounded perspective through which the work of Freire can be empirically interrogated. For example, each one of the participants has her/his own (auto) biographical narrative which defines 'who' she/he 'is'. Some of the situated personal narratives were historically constructed through various 'non-Western' literacy practices., Against this historical background, the participants not only reject but resist the universalising claim embedded in the autonomous view of literacy that only the western-type of literacy is the valid way of reading the world.

The participants have drawn on their vast cultural resources and experiences that inspired the first dialogical discussions and brainstorming sessions. This led to a collaborative creation of a learning programme which includes the following themes:

- Personal and national identity.

- Social and economic factors in your country (e.g., how do social and economic factors diminish or raise the possibilities of social success?).

- Tales, proverbs, stories and crafts as the main constituents of culture.

- Personal and national heroes.

- The most important historical events in your country.

- The impact of current economic and political relations on the cultural make-up of your country.

These themes were critically explored using the methods of codification (representation) and decodification (analysis) conducted at three levels: descriptive, affective and interpretive with the aim to arrive at 'the critical level of knowing' (Freire, 1994: 257). We have started with the learners' lived experiences of the situation in different cultural contexts and diverse cultural knowledges. During the process of codification a variety of 'knowing subjects' was used, which took the form of a picture, a photograph, a video, a slide show, traditional crafts and musical instruments representing codes originated from different cultural settings. As a result of the decoding process, some learners re-evaluated their understanding of themselves as well as their feelings towards the countries which define them. These issues were revealed and shared in dialogical discussions amongst participants reflecting on the learning process by, for example, commenting:

1. 'I think more deeply about my own country in order to explain it to others' .

2. 'I find it exciting to talk about my own country'.

3. 'The class is an opportunity to externalise the longing or sad feelings about being away from my home place'.

4. 'My feelings about my country are more complex and contradictory. The class is an opportunity to become more objective about your love'.

As the participants' reflexive statements show, the Circle has acted as a dialogical platform in and through which they can 'externalise' the taken-for-grantedness about their

socio-cultural identities (e.g., their countries, home place, the love, etc.). For example, one of the participants (statement 4) pointed to the 'complex' and 'contradictory' feelings about her/his country. It is this complex set of 'contradictions' which assigns a dynamic to our social identities and cultures. We should note here that some of these statements were made against the background of a discussion on 'national geographies'. Here, for example, through a critical process of decodification of 'geographical maps', the participants interrogated the (colonial) genealogy of the notion of 'nation-state' and 'national identities' as bounded and fixed units. The discussions consisted of a series of actions (e.g., talking and writing) and reflections (e.g., critiquing what is said/written) which have exposed the hidden historical character of the social constructs such as the 'West' and the 'East'. These social constructions are not 'innocent' since they incorporate ideologies which in turn shape our power relations producing in the process structures of domination and subordination.

Penrose and Howard (2008) are right to argue that in the current context of multiculturalism Scottish people are under most pressure to review their cultural and social attributes, and this can be a very profound demand as it involves changing their national identity. From this perspective, the Circle contributes fresh and novel ways of understanding and responding to such complex interplays through dialogic learning and critical analysis of how these transformations are experienced and lived through the modalities of daily existence.

For participants of the Circle, the notion of 'culture', for instance, provides them with a pedagogical powerful tool for reflecting about themselves, their relationship to others and their position in society as social and cultural subjects. It also offers a common public space in and through which to analyse the changing context of Scotland as a place for many cultures and where the critical exploration of common issues such as identity and political relationships create a sense of solidarity and cohesion amongst group participants. The latter is the grounds for both the democratic atmosphere in the group and the promotion of the possibilities of shared dialogue as 'the seal of the act of knowing' (Freire, 1994: 259). These interrelationships are evidenced in learners' feedback:

5. 'I enjoy learning from others like in a family'.

6. 'The class allows us to have dignity and showed us how we are linked in common human concerns'.

7. 'The class is an equal sharing of our time together and encourages new people'.

8. 'Our tutor gives us a voice and the sessions are managed in democratic and respectful way'.

9. 'Can we find a way to share what we have discovered and enjoyed with other people, so our work can make a difference?'.

Two key words are mentioned in the above statements that might summarise the rationale for setting up the Circle. The word 'voice and 'difference' (statements 8 and 9 respectively). The term 'voice' here can be interpreted as a reference to social identities of these participants (politics of voice). And it is through 'difference' that these voices and identities are given value and meaning. These reflexive statements clearly identify the democratic possibilities of multicultural learning in a collaborative way as well as the future potential of the Circle that would allow change through common action. For

example, the idea of the Cultural Festival, which is initially originated by participants of the Circle in a form of a structured programme, is not merely designed as an entertainment event, but more importantly as a social and cultural action in which participants take an active part. The aim is to promote non-judgemental attitude towards ethnic minorities, to develop harmonic relations between different cultural groups in society and to cultivate a sense of social inclusion and justice.

The second phase of the Circle has culminated in a new learning programme generated by 'co-educators' through an active dialogue in which the themes were identified and negotiated. This democratic process of constructing knowledge by learners and co-ordinator has allowed each participant to articulate views and to say her/his own word. Such fundamental elements of democracy initially exercised by the participants of the learning group in the public space at a micro-level are expressions of Freire's ideas and practices adopted by ALP. The Circle has become an organic part of ALP enabling people to engage with and analyse critically their lived reality and their 'real' cultural contexts. This critical discourse allows affirming of the worth of different types of culture and cultural groups, claiming that each culture has its own importance and validity. We use the term 'culture' to refer to the 'complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group' (Eagleton 2000: 34). The Circle harnesses cultural studies as a comprehensive framework for constructing views of the world and identities, for analysing society and politics with the purposes of individual empowerment and social and democratic transformation.

By way of conclusion:

In this paper we have reviewed the activities of the Circle as a site of critical education and solidarity in Edinburgh. We have demonstrated how the Circle is a response to the much-needed grounding in 'here and now' of the abstract notions of 'cultures', identities', etc. We have shown the ways in which the Circle has become a site in and through which the participants perform various historical narratives and negotiate social relationships (e.g., the construct of 'national heroes'). One thing which we have learned is that 'world views' (ideologies) are not fixed universals. They are contestable (as they have always been) ways of doing 'being/becoming' in life. In the Circle, participants have engaged in the dialogic acts of 'being/becoming' Russian, Zimbabwean', Scottish, English, Japanese, Chinese, Moldovan, Spanish and Sudanese. Through the analysis of these doings of 'being', we have problematised the mainstream fixed notion of 'multiculturalism'. In the light of the above discussion, we end this endeavour by the following statements which make up our ethical commitment in the Circle to the principles of dialogical education, and we invite you (the dialogical reader of this article) to get engaged in this ongoing learning process:

1. We, the participants to the Circle, declare that all forms of knowledge and meta-knowledge (ways of talking about knowledge), which we construct in and through the very process of debating our acts of 'being/becoming' specific types of socially-recognised persons, constitute the underlying moral foundation of our resistance to all forms of unreflective and antidialogical banking education which might lead, consciously or unconsciously, to damaging and disadvantaging the 'Other'.

2. We reserve and exercise the democratic right to 'name the world in our own word' through the dialogical making of our own social theories about the world which we inhabit.

3. We believe that all forms of knowledge are socially and historically constructed. We undertake to (critically) endorse the principles of dialogic learning as a way of transforming our own social realities.

4. We demand that all our 'world views' be validated by whoever comes in contact with them as situationally legitimate ways of doing 'social-being' in life.

5. Inspired by Freire's (1993: 65) pedagogical principle that 'problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality', we undertake to adopt a problem-posing attitude that rejects outright any homogenising position which objectify our 'identities', 'cultures', languages', etc., as statically fixed given, rather than as inherently dynamic and contextualised processes.

6. Drawing on Freire's (1993: 52) stance that 'education is suffering from narration sickness', we commit ourselves in the Circle to the resistance through praxis (reflection and action) to any overarching and universalising 'scientific' narratives that are insensitive to our historically situated cultural identities.

7. We assert our commitment in the Circle to the continuing development of a democratic educational programme which not only respects but is itself constituted out of the contextualised 'world views' of the participants. Our moral guiding principle in this respect is this: 'One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action programme which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a programme constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. The starting point for organising the programme content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people' (Freire 1993: 76).

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