

Review

The 2014 Popular Education Network Conference

Thinking Dialectically in Popular Education

The sixth International Conference of the Popular Education Network (PEN) was held from April 24-26, 2014. Hosted by the University of Malta, Valletta Campus, this conference built on the success of previous PEN conferences held in Edinburgh (2000), Barcelona (2002), Braga (2004), Maynooth (2007) and Seville (2011). The network brings together academics in higher education with an interest in supporting popular education in communities.

Established in 1997, the Popular Education Network was originally intended to politicise the theory and theorise the practice of popular education in a very particular and uncompromising way. As such, in this network, popular education is understood to be popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is

- Rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people,
- Overtly political and critical of the status quo, and
- Committed to progressive social and political change. (see Crowther, J., Martin, I. and Shaw, M. (1999) (eds) *Popular Education and Social Movements in Scotland Today*, Leicester: NIACE)

Recognising that many scholars who support this definition of popular education work in considerable isolation in their own institutions, as described on the conference website, this gathering was an opportunity to discuss such themes as:

- Acknowledging the effects of globalisation on our work;
- Sustaining political commitment and ideological coherence in hard times;
- Developing alliances and strategic collaborations;
- Radicalising research and making it ‘really useful’;
- Contesting managerialism and the culture of the accountant;
- Respecting diversity without abandoning solidarity;

- Exploiting relative autonomy;
- Working with progressive social movements;
- Developing curriculum and pedagogy;
- Using ICT in subversive and counter-hegemonic ways;
- Engaging dialectically with the politics of policy; and
- Developing more democratic, creative, and expressive ways of working.

In the opening plenary, Carmel Borg, Jim Crowther, and Peter Mayo grounded the conference in the particular historical moment of Malta’s and PEN’s evolution. Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther then provided a helpful framework for action in the context of the paradoxical times in which popular educators currently work (see Table 1 below). The first group of researchers, Jonathan Langdon, Helen Underhill, Ted Scanlon, and Vitor Pordeus closed the first day with living examples of popular education “rooted in the Territories of Life” (as Pordeus suggested).

Table 1

Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther’s Framework for Strategic Participation and Non-Participation, Presented April 24, 2014 (adapted from Shaw & Crowther, 2013, pp. 13-15)

Strategic Participation	Strategic Non-Participation
Making structures work more democratically and effectively	Providing convivial, open, inclusive democratic educational spaces
Holding politicians and institutions to account	Strengthening democratic processes outside of governance structures
Ensuring democratic processes have grassroots support	Sustaining autonomy of local groups
Challenging manipulative or tokenistic forms of engagement	Challenging the way in which democracy is framed in policy and practice
Testing the claims and limits of democratic engagement	Making demands on the state that reinforce its democratic capacity
Strategic non-compliance	Strategic compliance
Making alliances with anti-market actors	Highlighting the destructive role of the market and articulating alternatives

This conference drew participants from over ten countries, with the mix of experienced and emerging scholars boding well for the sustainability of the network. Sessions included a range of plenary, panel, and concurrent presentations, as well as films, music, interactive conversations with Maltese activists, and a closing session in the National Museum of Fine Arts. Evening social events provided an opportunity for informal networking and solidarity-building while learning about the history and culture of Valletta. Three books were also featured: *Learning And Education for A Better World: The Role of Social Movements* (Hall, Clover, Crowther, & Scandrett, 2012); *Popular Education, Power, and Democracy* (Laginder, Nordvall, & Crowther, 2013); and *Learning and Teaching Community-based Research: Linking Pedagogy to Practice* (Etmanski, Hall, & Dawson, 2014).

In the final session, Ian Martin brought to the fore adult educator and Cultural Studies scholar, Stuart Hall's question: *Are we thinking dialectically enough?* Martin suggested that this question is helpful for popular educators' ongoing conversations and practice.

Applied to the shifting relations and dynamics of popular culture it is important to make sense of the progressive possibilities that exist rather than to simply get stuck in a dichotomous rut of 'good' or 'bad' developments, 'progressive' and 'regressive' cultural practices and so on. (Crowther, 2014, p.1)

This question closed the conference with an important reminder to recognise and resist monological thinking in the context of the complex, constantly shifting, and often contradictory settings in which adult and popular educators live and work.

Following the conference, we asked participants to reflect upon two questions (listed below). Maria Brown, Cassie Earl, Budd Hall, Petar Jandrić, Liliana Maric, Henrik Nordvall, Vitor Pordeus, and Helen Underhill responded with the following comments (edited for inclusion in this review).

Question One: *What was the (intellectual) highlight of the PEN conference for you?*

The concept of limited citizenship experienced by inmates of rehabilitative/total institutions and other vulnerable social groups and non-citizenship experienced by rejected asylum seekers as the challenging contemporary quests in critical pedagogy. (MB)

The conference provided a convivial and supportive environment for exploration and reflection. The discussions were productive and supportive and there was the feeling that not 'knowing' but critically exploring was the key tenet, for the most part. Therefore, spaces of radical hope were created, supported by reflective criticality and a space to grow ideas and collegiality. (CE)

The intellectual highlights for me were the classification model for adult education and community development engagement done by Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther, and the lecture on museums by Darlene Clover. In general, the level of quality and commitment at this year's PEN conference was outstanding. Consistently good quality, very engaged scholar-activists, and wonderful access to the history and culture of Malta. (BH)

There was no particular highlight—and I mean that in a good way. Presentations were interesting, discussions thought-provoking, and the informal programme provided some great opportunities for discussion. Perhaps the NGO cafe, where we all did rounds from one organisation to another, was the most interesting learning experience—but I definitely would not call it an intellectual highlight. An important part of ethos, for me, is that there are no superstars and intellectual highlights in a traditional sense. (PJ)

The intellectual highlight was to learn what is being done in other countries including Malta. Points that struck me were that popular education is about: 'stirring things up'; developing radical margins by making explicit the relationship between knowledge, power and social action in educational work; regenerating the terms of engagement of

our professional identities, reinvigorating a pedagogical approach with political purpose; and recognising that engagement is not neutral but consists of struggles. Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther discussed aspects of strategic participation by a) ensuring democratic processes have grassroots support; b) challenging manipulative or tokenistic forms of engagement; c) testing the claims and limits of democratic engagement; d) practising strategic non-compliance; e) making alliances with anti-market actors; e) making structures work more democratically and effectively; and f) holding politicians and institutions to account. (LM)

This was my first PEN conference and the highlight for me was the fact that almost every presentation related to my intellectual interests (i.e., critical perspectives on power and popular education in relation to political processes and struggles for social change). Most often when going to academic conferences in the field of education (or adult education) I find—if I'm lucky—one or two papers that are related in a clear way to my research interests or my political interests. So this was a great conference which I really appreciate. (HN)

A highlight was to gather with Researchers of Life studying and researching cultural political life, community health issues, human oppression, racism and therefore interfering with the political life of the communities. *Research action* was demonstrated through social political cultural struggle, symbolic challenges, scientific challenges, cultural strategies, traditions, healing, theatre, music, and music from the jails. Traditional singing showed us the power of culture and tradition in maintaining our sanity. There's an epidemic of mental illnesses and the vaccine against madness is theatre. Or, in Shakespeare's words, "though this be madness, yet there is method in it" (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2). This conference offered the opportunity for critical reflection on our own cultural rituals and symbolic practices. (VP)

This is almost impossible to answer in terms of one point that was raised... However, I was particularly struck by the notion of strategic participation and strategic non-participation raised by Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther. I think it will be really useful for

my PhD study as I think through connections to political participation such as boycotting elections. (HU)

Question Two: *From your perspective, are there any outstanding questions that the PEN community could address at subsequent conferences?*

How can critical pedagogues support the personal and collective emancipation related to the experience of limited citizenship or non-citizenship? (MB)

I think that the question of how we, as academics, support and nurture not only popular education initiatives but each other as educators would be helpful, especially for those recently entering the academic world. We need to address the notion that we are living in interesting and potentially dangerous times and that not only is there a great need for resistance education, but also a resistance to it, particularly in universities—how do we sustain ourselves and others, building solidarity and resilience into communities of educators who attempt to do things politically otherwise? (CE)

PEN is lovely...and perhaps we could include a bit more time for interaction next time? (BH)

I'm not into popular education directly, so I do not feel I'm in a position to address this. Since my area is inclusive education maybe there could be sessions about how schools could develop popular education to foster inclusion of different minorities. Another issue related to form rather than content, is that there could be the suggestion that presentations be done in a more accessible way by having a good contrast between background and font (e.g., black on yellow slides), good font size, and a description of images. I felt that the possibility of having members in the audience with visual impairment was not given that importance. It is not a matter that one has to speak about it but preferably presentations would be done in an accessible format beforehand. (LM)

Apparently (see answer 1), from my perspective, the conference is working very fine regarding what kind of questions it addresses. The platform of the network/conference, which has a clear political dimension, is probably one of the reasons for this. However, although it obviously is fulfilling its purpose quite well, I still think it would be fruitful to discuss the platform in subsequent conferences. This includes a discussion about the definition of popular education. At this conference the issue was addressed at end of the conference, when few—if any—had the energy to discuss it. I think it would be interesting to discuss, for example, if the definition of popular education, used by the network, is related to a political vision about what popular education should be, or if it is relating to the actual practices taking place in progressive social movements, in communities, among activists, etc. (practices which, in my experience, often have a quite paradoxical character, where they both challenge and reproduce status quo at the same time but in various respects). (HN)

“Fit the word to the action, and the action to the word” Shakespeare (Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2). We can learn to see cultural Rituals as generators of political organisation. As Freire says, we need profound coherence between what we say and what we do. What about more Culture Circles? What about developing dialogical circles and also “Cultural Actions for Freedom” as ways of making statements on our thinking with development of tools as theatre, poetry, web-documentary movies as the practice of hope now. (VP)

I think Ian’s questions at the end of the conference were invaluable and should definitely be discussed at a future conference soon, or perhaps even sooner... I am also thinking about my role as academic activist and the tensions associated with many of the important themes raised through PEN. In the context of a higher education system that places increased pressure on academics to work towards impact, how critical can we be? This connects to my own concerns as a PhD student: what space is there for early career researchers to continue working within the objectives of PEN within this system? (HU)

All in all, the PEN conference was an opportunity for university-based teachers and researchers, student-activists, and others involved in higher education, who share a common interest in popular education to meet, exchange ideas, learn from one another, and enjoy some much needed solidarity and conviviality. More information can be found at: <http://www.um.edu.mt/events/pen2014>

The 7th international conference will be held in collaboration with the University of Glasgow in 2016. For more information or to join the network, please contact: jim.crowther@ed.ac.uk.

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