

Vulnerable Practice: Why we Need Honest Conversations to Make Change

Nicky Bolland

CAMINA (Critical and Alternative Methods and Ideas Network for Action)

Introduction

As practitioners who have been involved in work that draws on traditions of critical education in community settings, frustration, isolation, hope, and connection have been central emotions in our experiences. We feel frustrated by limited resources and the enormity of the task, isolated in the work we are doing and the conditions we are trying to do it in, and over whelmed by the devastating realities we see in and across communities. We also feel deeply connected to the communities we work alongside and we feel connection in the chance meetings with other like-minded/like-purposed people we meet. We feel sure that critical education is a necessary part of changing the intolerable – but we don't feel sure about how to make critical education an effective and sustainable practice in the current context. So how do we find out? In this article we will argue that there is a need to build spaces and relationships that allow for more honest conversations and greater vulnerability about the challenges involved in doing critical education. We believe that these spaces and relationships need to be supportive and they need to connect dialogue with collective action. We will share with you a bit about CAMINA, a project which is trying to nurture such conversations and link them to action, but which also faces its own challenges in doing so.

Critical Educational Practice: Challenges and Dilemmas

It is July 2014. In a community centre on the Southside of Glasgow a small forum theatre group are about to deliver a workshop exploring the issues of everyday racism. Though we don't know it, this is probably the last time we will perform as a group. As the audience applaud, many of them by now on stage beside the actors, the group feel glad and exhausted. Mostly exhausted. The acting was not polished; on more

than one occasion lines were forgotten. If truth be told the event has been a little ramshackle. Yet the conversations and the dramatic processes that occurred were hopeful, challenging, creative. Together they critiqued prejudice and sought out alternatives. They achieved their aims.

So why would it be our last?

The workshop was one of many we delivered around the country in the years our theatre group worked together. The themes of these workshops were primarily the immigration system and racism. Most of the group had direct experience of the asylum system (not to mention racism). A couple of us, including myself, did not. Those of the group with experience of the system were stretched by the daily, monthly, yearly and life-long realities of this: they already had plenty to worry about without the responsibility of an educational theatre group. Still they did their best to show up and be an active part of the group, writing, rehearsing and performing together.

Those of us without direct experience were much less compromised. Nevertheless, to juggle the theatre group and our other jobs/studies was a challenge. The difference in capacity (not to mention privilege), though, would be an ongoing issue for the group. Those individuals without direct experience of the issues were keenly aware that it was not our place to drive the project, only to facilitate it where appropriate. And yet, as we sped towards the next performance and found no one else driving (the reason was always a good one; a last minute lawyer's appointment, too stressed by an upcoming appeal date, moved to a different part of the country), we felt compelled to grab the steering wheel from the passenger seat, desperate to keep the show on the road. But over time even those with more capacity to give became too stretched, too tired to fill in another funding application, to rally the troops for another poorly attended rehearsal.

And now there is no money left and there is no energy left and it is over. We are devastated, but we are not surprised. We each feel guilty, though we know that really it was not our fault - not our fault alone; that the reasons were much bigger than our

small group alone. Indeed we know we are not alone; that this ending is the ending for so many groups who want to do this work, but who struggle to sustain it.

We share the above story not to say that this kind of work is not possible (it is!), but to highlight the challenges that the groups and individuals trying to do this work face.

To say openly and honestly “*this is hard!*”. Because it is hard. Resources are scarce, the issues are multiple and complex, achieving meaningful participation is a process which takes years, decades even (though don’t tell the funder that!), and we are isolated. There is so much work to do and so little space to do it in. Yet in the current context of like-seeking social media pages and *of-course-the-project-went-to-plan* funding reports there are not many spaces in which we can say; – “*this is hard and I don’t know if we’re doing it right*”, or, “*this work is challenging and we need help to do it right*”.

Our experience of working in community settings is that we are very rarely given permission to confess that we are struggling or that we’re not sure what the right thing to do is. If we are not provided with these meaningful spaces and opportunities (accessible to all) within our practice to reflect and to talk about the challenges, how can we effectively overcome them? How can we truly engage with these issues and find a route through them, a route which is collective, not just individual?

In her now famous TED talk¹, Researcher Brene Brown highlights the relationship between vulnerability and wellbeing. Whilst Brown was talking about vulnerability at the individual level, I believe that there are lessons for us in terms of our collective and professional wellbeing, too. I believe we need to find spaces and relationships in which we can be vulnerable and honest in our practice. From that vulnerability we can begin to stretch into alternative responses; open up the practice pathways which might lead to different kinds of outcomes for us and for the communities we work within. As practitioners working in community settings we are well aware of the crucial role that safe and supportive networks play in nurturing resilience. We know that individuals (and communities) need to be seen, heard and understood in meaningful ways to achieve their full capacity. We also know that building those

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability),

supportive networks based on trust takes time. And yet, it seems to me, we have neglected to create such networks for ourselves as practitioners in any coherent or sustainable way.

So how do we create those spaces and those relationships? How do we nurture those conversations? And what might they look like?

CAMINA

CAMINA is our response to those questions. CAMINA began as a series of 'rants' between myself and my partner-in-practice, Isabel. It began as conversations outside the office, stolen between meetings and rushing to the next group session. Conversations there was never enough time for. But increasingly the rants became tied to 'what-ifs', to 'maybe-we-shoulds'. Increasingly, the conversations were given more time and became structured around questions: what's happening and what can we do about it? For it is all very well to talk about the fact that this work is hard, and space to do this is, of course, (so) important. But then what? How do we move beyond frustration towards change? For it is our contention that so much of what makes this work hard is structural, and these structural issues need to be addressed in constructive and collective ways by those who are face-to-face with them. And so we began to wonder who else might be feeling this way and who else might be interested in changing it: who else should be part of the conversations?

It was in this context that we began to think about how we might frame this conversation; how we might bring others into it, and how we might create the conditions for collective vulnerability and collective action.

It was from these seeds that CAMINA has begun to germinate. The word 'camina' comes from the Spanish for 'an invitation to walk'. Inspired by the well-known Spanish poem which reminds us: "*Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking*" (Machado, 1912), we chose the name to highlight both the sense of human connection but also collective direction that we would like to achieve through our endeavours. CAMINA also forms

the acronym *Critical and Alternative Methods & Ideas Network for Action* (though we admit this is a tad clunky).

Our focus is on critical education practice across Scotland (and in the near future linking with Spain as a starting point for wider international connections) and how we can do, support and strengthen this practice and those involved in it. On initiating this project, we were aware that we were not entering a void: that there are lots of existing organisations and networks who are and have been trying to do, build and support critical education practice across Scotland. We hope to connect with and build on such work. Furthermore, in considering *who* we want to work *with* and *for*, we have asked ourselves the following questions: Where are the gaps? What do we have capacity for? What are we best positioned to do?

In response to these three questions we have decided that we will initially seek to work with and in support of critical educators who consider their work to be precarious, popular and peripheral. *By **precarious**, we mean those who are carrying out work which is unsupported, un/underfunded, or difficult to sustain/keep going. By **peripheral** we mean those whose work tends to sit on the edge of or even out-with the 'mainstream'. By **popular** we mean those whose work is in essence/nature, (taking the Spanish sense of the word 'popular'), "of the people".* These three concepts resonate strongly with the key challenges that we have faced as people involved in critical education and a gap we have experienced. Of course, it could be said that all critical education work fits into these three categories. In this sense, these criteria hopefully allow our project to be inclusive to all educators who *feel they need support*, but by using these concepts to define who we want to address first and foremost, we hopefully can target our work (in partnership with existing networks/groups), where it is most needed and to those who are carrying out work which is most precarious, most peripheral and most popular.

Participatory Action Research: Challenges and Opportunities

The next question we have had to address is how we would structure our conversation. With recent experience of using participatory action research in community settings, we felt this might be a useful framework for our conversation. Participatory action research (PAR) is a model used in a range of settings from education to health to shift the relationship between who produces knowledge and who is the subject of knowledge production (Schostak and Schostak 2007; Tandon 1988) as well as shifting the relationship between knowledge and action:

Participatory research attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action (Gaventa 1988: 19)

At its most basic, PAR is an approach towards enquiry led by communities, groups, organisations, networks, etc (Hall; 1992). For those with experience of critical or popular education, the principles that underpin the PAR approach will sound very familiar. Indeed it is our view that PAR is another way of framing many of the processes critical education promotes, including praxis; *"reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed"* (Freire, 1970), and conscientization; the *"process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform reality"* (Freire, 1970; 27). This is not surprising given that PAR has its roots in global critical pedagogy with Freire (alongside many other actors), playing an active role in the development of PAR in international contexts. For us it feels appropriate to use an approach so closely linked to critical education to interrogate and make change in the field.

We have named our PAR project '*learning as we go*' to reflect a broader, more holistic view of 'education' as a constant process, grounded in reality and lived experience, and to chime with the idea of paths being drawn by our collective

footsteps towards a better horizon. We also feel it reflects our feeling that the process must be an honest, self-critical and dialogical one.

We initiated our project in Autumn 2016. So far we have been able to connect with a number of people who are involved in critical education across Scotland and across a range of settings and issues, though we are keen to connect with more.

One of the first tasks we undertook was to work with participants and collaborators to identify core themes to explore. Through initial discussions, (face-to-face and online) we have identified the following themes/questions to frame our conversation: *1) What exists and where are the gaps? 2) What are the key challenges and opportunities facing critical educators today? And 3) What is needed?*

In order to answer these questions we are using a mosaic of approaches and conversations, happening online and face-to-face. In designing/developing these processes, we have focused on the objectives of trying to develop a community who can share their experiences with each other, work together to understand the challenges and explore and pursue ways we can make change collectively. We are aware that few people have lots of time and energy to give to the conversation at this point so we are trying to make it as accessible as possible, offering different ways in which people can interact with it – fleetingly or deeply. Processes include: online webinars and discussion groups, mapping critical education practice (current and past), walking interviews (drawing on the meaning of *camina* - an invitation to walk) and co-creating postcards which reflect practice and connect practitioners. We also hope to run workshops focused on making change happen, support reading groups as well as sharing and developing resources. Crucially, collaborators are welcome to initiate their own processes throughout the research.

The conversations we've had so far have been stimulating and inspiring and it has been affirming to connect practitioners from different contexts to discuss issues that we all seem to be grappling with. Voices from community education, arts, social work, academic and activist backgrounds have all been included so far and we are still striving to include more. Whilst there has been a lot of discussion around the

challenges of the work we do, there has also been much hope for what critical education can and does achieve, and many suggestions for actions to take forward. We are excited by what has begun.

Unfortunately though, CAMINA is not immune to the challenges that critical educators in the field or the small forum theatre group faced, and there is no guarantee that we can overcome them in this endeavour, either. The first challenge is how do we achieve meaningful collective praxis when everyone is busy/over-worked and resource-poor? This was a key reason as to why our theatre group struggled and it remains pertinent to CAMINA. When folk are already stretched, it's a struggle to invest scarce time into activities that are focused on the long-term and the bigger picture. In order to overcome this, we think we need to make the conversation as accessible as possible, and allow people to participate in different ways at different times. We also think we need to recognise that the process won't happen overnight; participation in the conversation itself is a long-term process and we need to be prepared for the long-haul.

This brings us to another key dilemma in this kind of work: how do we call the shots and dictate the pace? There is either money or time (or neither), but very rarely both. How can we be sufficiently resourced and with adequate capacity without becoming beholden to external agendas? How do we carve out the time we need to do this properly? In part we believe this starts with an honest conversation about how long things take, and resisting the desire to project unrealistic timescales (a trap I think we have already fallen into). It involves recognising that building participation is a long-term activity that can't necessarily be rushed, and is subject to many unforeseen circumstances (those last-minute lawyer's meetings, for example). Yet, if we want to take our time we risk facing two problems: 1) accessing resources (i.e. funding), which aren't tied to strict timescales 2) Keeping up the momentum and avoiding stagnation. In terms of resources, we need to be creative about how we resource the project, as well as articulating clearly why we think time is important.

In terms of momentum, we need to remember that conversations on their own are not enough. If all we do is talk (and rant) the purpose of the conversation is likely to get lost, we get stuck in a sense of powerlessness rather than power-full-ness. It's important that whilst time is given to building a trusting network in which people can be vulnerable, we need to avoid wallowing. So how do we galvanise dialogue into action? In order to do this, we need to ensure action is an articulated and integral part of everything that we do and that we have a clear sense of the direction we want to go in. Asking for regular feedback on the content, pace and format of conversations will also be important to ensuring the process is constructive for practitioners.

The final challenge I want to articulate is the question of how we make what we do connected and connecting. How do we avoid becoming yet another thing which is fragmented from the whole - from the 'bigger picture'? How do we ensure that what we are doing is connected in coherent ways to existing and emerging conversations, actions, networks and campaigns – locally, nationally and internationally – not just superficially? How do we connect the dots without simply becoming another dot? Again this challenge links to the issue of capacity in the sense that any meaningful connection requires time (at the very least). In order to address this issue we need to be strategic, switched-on and flexible in the ways in which we connect and invite connection. We need to encourage and nurture ownership of CAMINA so that it is in the hands of many and reaches every corner of practice.

We don't have any sure and fast solutions to the above challenges – just ideas, experiences energy and a commitment to facing them head on. In her book, *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit reminds us:

Hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises. Or perhaps studying the record more carefully leads us to expect miracles - not when and where we expect them, but to expect to be astonished, to expect that we don't know. And this is grounds to act. (2016)

Returning to where we started, our past experience of the small forum theatre group that we couldn't sustain can leave us feeling hopeless, or it can leave us with a record to study, experience to draw on and critical connections to deepen, as we step into the unknowable.

CAMINA is a conversation which is emerging out of our (and others') experiences of trying to do critical education work and feeling isolated, yet suspecting that we were not alone; of feeling frustrated, yet suspecting that there is hope. We want this to be an honest conversation that begins with acknowledging the issues and leads to action. Whilst it's crucial that we support success and highlight the value of critical and community education practices, it is also important that we carve out spaces and relationships through which we can be vulnerable in our practice and can articulate the challenges we're experiencing honestly and with a view towards change. Without these opportunities we remain isolated, burnt-out and ineffective as practitioners.

In this context, CAMINA is a project which is seeking to build those spaces and relationships, using participatory action research as a framework for the conversation. We are seeking to understand where the key struggles are, and what support folk need to overcome them. We are aware that we face many challenges in holding this conversation - from capacity to legitimacy but we believe it is worth trying. Will you walk with us?

You can read more about CAMINA @ www.caminaproject.weebly.com

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