

YOUTH WORK AS TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION: A REFLECTION ON THE NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF IRELAND'S PEDAGOGICAL BOOTCAMP

SALLY DALY AND AIDAN FARRELLY

Abstract: Following two years' delivery of the National University of Ireland (NUI) Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate, 2019/20 and 2021/22, and within a wider context of programme development, a space of learning and sharing for a group of youth workers engaged with the programme was created. As part of a continued commitment to supporting youth workers in addressing and engaging issues of inequality, poverty and injustice, as both local and global phenomena, a bootcamp was facilitated as the latest in a series to resource their work as educators. Importantly, using an anti-oppressive framework, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach and to support them to see their work in this way. This approach is an attempt to bring to the surface much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in day-to-day practice. This article will present a reflection on this bootcamp as a means of contributing to the discussion on youth work as a model of transformative education.

Key words: Global Youth Work; Anti-Oppressive Approaches; Community of Practice/Hope; Non-Formal Education; Pedagogical Approaches in Youth Work.

Introduction

Youth work as an intentional learning space is one where the young person generates the learning as part of an engaged process with the youth worker and other peer learners. Good youth work seeks to support young people to learn from one another alongside practitioners and to address identified needs and interests collectively (Sapin, 2013). This approach, underpinning a youth work ethos as a non-formal learning environment, draws upon Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy in which 'culture circles' (Freire, 1970) provide a context for a negotiated learning experience. In this way, a critical pedagogical approach understands knowledge as something we create through dialogue with each other, one that

seeks to educate the oppressed about their situation (Ibid.), while promoting consciousness and encouraging action to address inequalities (Sallah, 2014).

Global youth work (GYW), as Sallah (Ibid.) notes, combines the critical tools of development education and youth work. At the core of a GYW approach lies the promise of transformation through reflection. This approach is explicit about facilitating discussion to produce knowledge generated initially from the learner's own experience, but importantly, it then seeks to engage the learner in knowledge production about the wider world. The non-formal negotiated nature of youth work and the lack of predetermined learning goals can be understood as a strength of GYW, along with the ability to engage often-disadvantaged young people in flexible, suitable learning about the world and their place in it. It invites young people to explore their capacity to effect change at a personal and structural level, by contributing to local, national and global communities whilst developing their own social capital (Adams, 2014), and critical consciousness (Sallah, 2014).

According to Adams (2014), GYW is aligned to a Critical Social Education model from which Hurley and Treacy (1993) suggested that *outcomes* include:

“Young people have developed the ability to analyse and assess alternatives and the capacity to define ‘their position’ in their world and the skills to act to change it; Young people are aware of the inequities which institutions promote; Young people are active in mobilising groups at local level to seek changes within existing structures” (Ibid.: 41-43).

Global youth work as anti-oppressive practice

It is recognised that an ethical obligation exists for youth workers to contest the social structures that cause young people to be subjected to discrimination, with Howard Sercombe suggesting that youth work ‘...that takes ethics seriously cannot be comfortable with cleaning up the consequences of injustice while allowing injustice to continue’ (Sercombe, 2010: 151). Youth work is an ethical practice which is concerned with the promotion of the rights, voices and interests of young people within a human rights and equality frame (D’Arcy, 2016). Flowing from

this ethical commitment, a global youth work approach encourages and supports both practitioners and young people to identify, explore and address oppressive social structures locally and globally (Daly et al., 2023).

An anti-oppressive approach to practice brings to attention an awareness of power differentials, challenging wider injustices in society and working towards a model of empowerment and liberation. It is a practice that requires youth workers and youth practitioners to understand the nature of oppression and power, to make a commitment to empowerment, and to develop the ability to reflect, critically analyse and change their practice (Chouhan, 2009: 61).

Centering, de-centering and re-centering

“Despite claims of globality and inclusion, the lack of analysis of power relations and knowledge construction in this area often results in educational practices that unintentionally reproduce ethnocentric, ahistorical, depoliticized, paternalistic, salvationist and triumphalist approaches that tend to deficit theorize, pathologize or trivialize difference” (Andreotti and De Souza, 2012: 13).

There are many issues within the broad field of global citizen education (GCE), of which GYW is a part, starting with its colonial roots of development (Andreotti, 2011; Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2017). This development of ‘helping’ the Other through projects of civilising ‘them’ are seen in common, ‘soft’ or uncritical forms of GCE (Andreotti, 2006).

The empowerment model of youth work which involves raising critical consciousness is part of a response to addressing global issues, and an understanding of the world as an interdependent arena. By examining the interconnectedness of the globe, it is easy to see that inequality is a global phenomenon, and the suffering that is caused by the current neoliberal hegemony (Daly, Regan and Regan, 2016). By questioning the system that allows these inequalities to exist, we must also question our role as youth workers within that system.

How to be an effective disruptor

As part of a continued commitment to supporting youth workers in addressing and engaging issues of inequality, poverty and injustice in their work, the GYW team at the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), i.e., Youth 2030, hosted a summer school in June 2023. The NYCI (2023) is the lead partner in the Youth 2030 consortium which also includes Concern Worldwide, Trocaire and the Centre for Youth Research and Development in Maynooth University. The programme, titled ‘How to be an effective disruptor’, is funded by Irish Aid, at the Department of Foreign Affairs and facilitated by Youth 2030, as the latest in a series of opportunities for a collective of youth workers to share experiences, question their practice, and to bring a critical gaze to their work as educators. The group was composed of 23 individuals, working within a variety of youth work contexts and representing a diversity of identities.

The programme was delivered across two days of workshops, with an introductory evening to support connection and a spirit of inquiry across the group. While many relationships already existed across this gathering, new connections had yet to be forged, and some connections were waiting to reignite and deepen. After two years of delivery of the NUI Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate, 2019/20 and 2021/22, and within a wider context of programme development, a space of learning and sharing for this community of practitioners was created. Not all invitees had participated in the Certificate, but each participant had a stated commitment to addressing social justice issues in their work. Moreover, all invitees worked with an understanding of systemic inequality, and how this is manifest as a local and global issue. Professor Momodou Sallah, a scholar-activist engaged in disruptive pedagogy, co-facilitated the bootcamp as someone who is interested in both bringing real life learning into the classroom and transformative learning within communities.

The bootcamp: a space of hope and possibility

With the expressed need by youth workers for a negotiated and consistent space to share, reflect and learn together, the bootcamp was not conceived to prescribe a community of practice but rather to be a space of hope and possibility. Importantly, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality

as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach in the work of challenging inequality as a local-global phenomenon. This article presents a reflection on the bootcamp as a non-formal educational context to support understanding about the nature of oppression and power, and an opportunity to develop or enhance the ability to reflect, critically analyse and inform practice.

Disruptive pedagogy

Disruptive pedagogies establish a learning context that intentionally seeks to disrupt mainstream or common thinking (normalising discourse), to provide spaces for new possibilities to emerge (Mills, 1997). The process of engaging with productive disruption challenges us to reconsider commonplace assumptions that may seem neutral or natural in dominant discourse but may create or reinforce structures of inequity in educational contexts (Buyserie et al., 2021). The approach encourages disruption to be considered as a form of engaged, productive pedagogy – one that places emphasis on individual lived experiences as well as structures of injustice or inequity (Ibid.).

Being an intentional and effective disruptor is an approach that asks us to get comfortable with asking difficult questions, it asks us to dig into our own constructed reality and work with a level of discomfort, towards socially just outcomes. Our starting point recognises youth workers as offering a critical role as educators, and that young people enter the youth work space as voluntary participants. The relationship developed between a youth worker and a young person/group of young people, underpinned by the voluntary nature of their participation allows a youth work process to evolve from activities towards liberation (Young, 2006). This voluntary nature informs an educational context which is based on relationships and dialogue, and where the principle of voluntary engagement is central (Adams, 2014). Youth workers are in a unique position to disrupt and not replicate dominant notions of teaching and learning reflected in what Freire (1970) called the ‘banking’ model of education. In this framing, knowledge is recognised as socially produced (Giroux and McLaren, 1986), and all of us are in a process of ‘human meaning making’ with the socially constructed world around us, including the legacies of colonialism, immigration, and discrimination (Sallah, 2014).

Importantly, we know that youth work is a practice of empowerment, and that to support young people to see and challenge the inequality in their own lives and in the world around them, youth workers need to develop the skills to *effectively* challenge and disrupt inequality (Fitzsimons, 2011).

Setting up the bootcamp

Nurturing skills in an educational context is a practice that takes time, competence, commitment, relationship, courage and trust. Such nurturing happens where we see ourselves as both welcome and belonging in a space; where we find both familiarity and curiosity in each other; somewhere that personal and professional growth can happen, and a place where the skills and expertise that we bring are acknowledged and considered as a core element of the space. An environment like this can only work where outcomes are negotiated.

We opened the bootcamp by inviting participants to a community gathering and followed this with a group meditation process the following morning. We made space to connect across the group, while also fostering an environment that allowed people to look inward and ground themselves in the natural world. Using grounding moments, taking care of ourselves and acknowledging not only our minds, but our bodies and spirits, can help to resource ourselves in committing to anti-oppressive practice (Ng, 2012; Macy and Brown, 2014).

What is your pedagogical approach?

The points along the thread that connect the work

Starting with a silent reflection on disruption allowed participants to reflect on their understanding of disruption from lived experience. Professor Sallah then invited the group to enter an exploration of individual pedagogical approaches present in the room. Five themes in disruptive pedagogy were explored as part of this delivery: Pedagogy of Ambiguity, Pedagogy of Discomfort, Pedagogy of Compassion, Critical Pedagogy and Pedagogy of Hope. It was an opportunity to think through individual educational styles and lived experiences as well as structures of injustice and inequity. It was a calling to step into the awareness of the practice of youth work as an intentional education space. The gathering moved through a process of creative reflection and group work to a dialogic

context, exploring and uncovering teaching styles. For many, it created a framing of youth work practices in the room through a different lens.

Aligned with this, there was a call to take a step back and think about ways to disrupt systems and structures, to challenge inequality. Attuning to the tension of working within a system, while also disrupting it, requires us to understand different aspects of the system, and understanding what feeds the system, the supply routes that resource the front line. This requires us to be strategic in our approach, in considering how we can disrupt those supply routes, to get behind them, to influence and impact outcomes. We need to be ready and resourced to have a plan for what might come, e.g., the loss of core funding for the work, a change in a policy context, so that we are not thrown off track. Importantly, to understand the construction of our own world, we must actively reflect on this, by centring ourselves in our story. As part of this exploration, we created space to consider positionality.

Positioning the self as part of a critical pedagogical approach

To understand the social construction of reality, we need to actively reflect on this, centring ourselves with questions like: who am I and where do I come from, and what is it that I believe in? Then, to decentre is to take a figurative step back from our beliefs and thoughts, and challenge these beliefs, some of which may be hidden from us. It may take some exploring and stepping into discomfort to uncover that which is not at the surface. Only when we have actively made some discovery about ourselves, and worked through some discomfort, can we recentre ourselves, and in doing so, we may have to accept that the discovery work, and centring, decentring and recentring may be part of an ongoing path. In our role as youth worker educators, we are called upon to do this work with young people, so that they may go on their own voyage of discovery with themselves and the world around them.

A wider discussion followed on different manifestations of oppression. Reflections from the group on disruption through lived experience, included the following:

“Sometimes disruption is necessary to counter an act of injustice. Yet, even where this is a non-violent protest, this can be called an act of violence by the authorities. Challenging injustice is vital”.

One of the key issues here was how people from minority identities experience oppression as a form of violence, and how this violence can be manifest in different ways, including as a disruption to the self:

“There are different faces of violence. Violence happens through language too, not just a physical act. People who are minoritised can feel violated through language even where it has good intent”.

“The constant feeding of stereotypes in the media can create an internalised violence for people who are themselves from minoritised identity. This is a fear response”.

“Being from a minoritised ethnic background does not make you immune from being impacted by the frenzy of fear generated in the media. This fear unchallenged is a form of violence. A disruption to the self”.

Cho (2010: 315) describes knowledge as ‘democratic, context dependent, and appreciative of the value of learners’ cultural heritage’. The creation of this evolving knowledge is an active democratic process that warrants us not just accepting the diversity in the room, and accepting people’s views of culture, but it is an interrogation of the world by all parties (Seal, 2021). In understanding anti-oppressive practice, knowledge is something we create with each other through dialogue and may entail challenging and changing cultural norms (Freire, 1970).

Making an anti-oppressive framework explicit is an attempt to bring to the surface much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in group work. Bringing attention to centring, decentring and recentring is creating space for that which may lay below the surface of a group and is an important part of a growth process at an individual and collective level.

Pedagogy as part of the intentional path of an educator

With all this talk of pedagogy, at one point during our collective reflection, a question was posed to the group on the role of youth workers as educators. What unfolded was a rich conversation about the role youth workers play in young people's lives, with many participants visibly processing the notion of being a teacher. In many ways, despite some apparent disagreement in the room about this, further probing identified a shared set of ideas about youth work and education.

Example one

When discussing points of convergence and divergence in relation to youth workers and teachers, the apparent absence of a curriculum in youth work in Ireland was an obvious difference. While teachers are provided with a curriculum to teach young people, youth workers often approach the learning process in a mutual way i.e., 'I don't know the answers to your questions, but let's find out some information together'. In this example, the youth worker is not necessarily teaching the young person about the topic, but instead showing how young people can embark on a learning journey which young people themselves lead. Rooted in the Freirean model of education for the purpose of liberation, not domestication, a youth work process facilitates young people to learn experientially, developing the capacity to think critically and engage in 'sense-making' (Young, 2006: 79).

Example two

When considering the perspectives of a youth work process as opposed to the outcomes of youth work - the notion of assessment being a binary indicator of learning was also discussed. In contrast to formal education, whereby assessment is based on exams and essays to repeat back what a student has learned during their schooling, in youth work there is a broad hesitation in focussing on the outcome of a youth work intervention. Instead, youth workers prioritise the process of learning throughout an engagement rather than focussing on the end product. Ultimately, the conversation drew to a close with some participants suggesting that while it's important for youth workers to sit comfortably with the responsibility of education, and being educators, it is not the responsibility of youth workers to know and impart information but display an ability to facilitate

an informal learning process. Not only will this enrich the relationship between youth worker and young person but can also provide young people with an important template to use in future settings. This speaks to the ‘accompaniment model’ of youth work identified by Janet Batsleer (2008), where the relationship is nurtured between youth worker and young person by simply joining a young person on a journey of exploration and education.

The elements that make youth work a distinctive and powerful form of education are reflected in the established definitions of youth work; where the content of the curriculum is less important than the principles of dialogue, voluntarism and participation (Adams, 2014). The negotiated learning context is key here, along with the capacity to provoke a deeper consciousness and engagement for young people with their socially constructed worlds.

Emerging community of practice (CoP)

As this group has continued to meet, and membership has evolved over time, an emergent need has arisen within its membership to continue meeting. From its beginning as a collective of youth workers participating in the Certificate programme, others have stepped into the space as practitioners working from a similar set of values and aspirations. The Youth 2030 Global Youth Work programme at NYCI has been a cornerstone in the evolution of this *emergent* CoP from the outset. With the expressed need for further engagement and the creation of a negotiated and consistent space for youth workers to share, reflect and learn together, NYCI has continued to offer its resources in convening this CoP.

Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023) have written extensively on the concept of communities of practice and their more recent publications have characterised CoP by the following three traits;

The Domain - What is the community about? What do people identify with?

The Community - Who should be at the table? What relationship should they form?

Practice - What should they do together? How can they make a difference in practice? (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023: 12).

As this group continues to evolve, and needs emerge, the value participants place on the domain is clear. When events are planned, either in person or remotely, members of this CoP continue to attend when available. Whilst membership criteria are not necessarily defined, those involved demonstrate a consistency both in terms of values and commitment to practice youth work in a way that is committed to challenging inequality and promoting consciousness raising through non-formal education. There was an intention on behalf of the organising team to further seed and nurture this CoP, by structuring spaces for participants to be together. On the opening night for example, participants were invited to get to know each other more through icebreakers and activities that allowed opportunities to share personal and professional stories.

Reflecting the conversational nature of youth work practice, participants were encouraged to get to know each other more, in the hope of providing a trusting foundation for the days to come. With a breadth of experience in the room, youth workers also actively stepped into hosting activities on the opening night. It is this that further supports the assertion that this group has become a CoP, encouraging ‘buy-in and ownership’ of the space, the activities and the membership (Davis-Manigaulte, 2012: 152).

Participant Reflection: “I have a deeper respect for our collective practice. I am taking away new knowledge and confidence to continue practising the art of disruption in my practice. I have a renewed sense of energy”.

Relationships have formed and developed over time in this emergent CoP, and the benefits of these have far-reaching outcomes. From individual support and friendship to cross-organisation collaboration, the membership of this CoP has embraced the potential of using each other as a resource.

Participant Reflection: “I am taking away the absolute pleasure it has been to share this space with other youth workers and knowing I am not isolated in this work”.

Participant voices

Creating a space for participants to reflect on their experiences during this bootcamp was an important step in evaluating the work. The ways in which participants could reflect were provided for throughout the bootcamp and in the days and weeks following. In acknowledging the space, three participants reflected the following:

“It’s like a dystopian future – all the spaces I am in the world, there are people fighting to be heard and acknowledged just for being a person. Everyone in this space constantly humanises people”.

“It’s a sneak preview into what the world could be like. There are lots of unique relationships here. These spaces can become deep, and it’s amazing to see all the work people have done on themselves and with each other in the last 48 hours. It’s existing in this space”.

“I want to acknowledge how unique it is that we have such different perspectives in the room, and the vulnerability of the space. It was healing for me personally. I want to bottle this up and give it to every young person. The honesty of it all, even in our learning – we are unlearning. I am so proud to be here, and so grateful to be here”.

As a follow up to the bootcamp, participants were invited to complete a short online survey to reflect on their experiences to understand the impact of the bootcamp, and more importantly to inform the future for this community of practice. The responses received in this question focussed on three C’s: commitment, confidence and collegiality. How do you intend to put the learning into practice?

“I commit to bringing the learning with me - to be more reflective, analytical, questioning and supportive”.

“I intend to move out of my comfort zone to enhance the experience of my learners and to encourage growth in my pedagogical approaches to working with groups”.

In terms of confidence, participants noted a greater sense of consciousness in their practice.

“I intend to put my confidence in my ability to disrupt effectively, acknowledge the times where I have done it and create my many war and battle plans for future disruption”.

“Personally, I have the confidence to talk about uncomfortable topics that I usually will shy away from. And, to transfer this confidence, creating space for young people to speak up and speak their truth”.

The great sense of collegiality shone through in the bootcamp, but remarkably, many participants shared a desire to communicate their learning with others.

“I intend to use the learning I have gathered to challenge and reflect on my own pedagogical approach on an ongoing basis. I intend to support other youth workers in doing this work also”.

“Specifically, around the area of encouraging more of our organisations to challenge the current racist systems in regard to people seeking protection and their rights”.

It's clear that participants have placed value on different elements of the bootcamp. For some, the opportunity to be in a space with like-minded individuals and to share experiences was important. For others, the bootcamp acted as a form of restart in their professional journey.

On reflection, what are you taking away from the experience?

“The takeaway from this experience for me is that the spaces to co-exist, support and challenge each other as humans for the purpose of growth and development can exist when mindfully resourced”.

“*Lots!* The conversation about centring is a standout. Also, being ok to call myself a teacher and educator without having to know it all. We learn together”.

“Understanding it is a privilege to be a disruptor, to provoke consciousness according to means/abilities”.

“Knowledge! The bootcamp gave me a new lens from which to view reflection of my practice, with centring and re-centring, and to start thinking on multiple pedagogies”.

Community of hope

Youth workers offer a critical role in shaping transformative socially just outcomes in collaboration with young people. The empowerment model of youth work which involves raising critical consciousness is part of a response to addressing global issues that understands the world as interdependent. Youth workers therefore need spaces of collective engagement, informed by an anti-oppressive practice to develop the skills and knowledge to work towards understanding the nature of inequality and their role in challenging this. During this bootcamp, youth workers were invited to consider their positionality as educators, and to identify and step into their pedagogical approach in the work of challenging inequality as a local-global phenomenon. Understanding pedagogy as a core aspect of youth work is a critical part of a commitment to transformative outcomes that places emphasis on individual lived experiences as well as structures of injustice or inequity.

The youth workers who participated in this bootcamp are from diverse backgrounds and have their own socially constructed realities that shape their practice. Utilising an anti-oppressive framework is an attempt to bring to the surface, much that often goes unsaid or remains unexamined in day-to-day practice. Accepting this as part of the work is aligned with an invitation to continue the ongoing work of centring, decentring and recentring. As this emergent CoP continues to evolve, what is evidently clear is the value participants place in the domain to support understanding on the nature of oppression and power, and an opportunity to develop or enhance the ability to reflect, critically

analyse and inform practice. This is part of the ‘human meaning making’ of an active youth work practice.

Those involved demonstrate a consistency both in terms of values and commitment to practice youth work in a way that is committed to challenging inequality and promoting consciousness raising through non-formal education.

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Sally Daly is Capacity Development and Monitoring and Evaluation Officer with the Youth 2030 team at the National Youth Council of Ireland. She holds a PhD in Human Geography and Sociology from Technological University Dublin. Her background includes work with refugee communities in the UK and Ireland, and she has worked within a youth and community work context for over twenty years.

Aidan Farrelly is Higher Education and Research Officer with the Youth 2030 team at the National Youth Council of Ireland. Aidan has been a professional youth worker for fifteen years and has

worked in the Department of Applied Social Studies in Maynooth University, Ireland lecturing on the Community Work and Youth Work programmes. Aidan is currently working towards a Doctorate in Social Sciences with his research focussing on professional youth work in Ireland.