A practice that aspires
Pedagogies of creativity, democracy and inclusion in popular higher education

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Framing

We want to share with you some of the things we are learning about the relationship between creativity, learning and democratic social life in our efforts to create new forms of cooperative higher education through a project called the Social Science Centre, in Lincoln [image of the map]. As part of this, we also want to share some of the things we are learning about the role of our own habits of theorizing as they have been manifest in this project.

We would like to invite you to walk with us through what we experience as a process of exciting and discomforting discovery – one which raises important questions about the meaning of and relationship between creativity, education, democracy and human flourishing. The path we will take winds its way from theory to practice and back again, and from the frustrations of navigating human complexity to the good chemistry of catching glimpses of radical democracy in action [image of the walk].

We think that the form of the academic conference does not lend itself to such perambulations – which are, like creativity, learning and democracy itself, ongoing. However, we also think that by offering snapshots of the route we can point to some of the social, cultural and political conditions that we believe allow aspirations of creative democracy to be realized, and to raise critical questions about how we can make such experiences more open and inclusive.

What is the Social Science Centre, and what are our ambitions?

The Social Science Centre is an emergent, alternative higher educational project that works within the city of Lincoln [images of the class, lectures, materials]. It is one variation on many hundreds of radical education projects now being undertaken around the world.

It was established, on the one hand, to provide a way for people who wish to study social science but who cannot pay the new tuition fees, do not want to or are unable to take out student loans, or are not particularly interested in learning towards a formal credential to be able to do so. Its early founders – many of whom are no longer part of the project – argued, the SSC was a response to the 'act of vandalism against "the idea of the University as a progressive and political project" of the Browne Report, the Comprehensive Spending Review and the White Paper in Higher Education' (Canaan 2011).

Alongside this, many of those involved sought to work with others in creative, cooperative, non-authoritarian and non-bureaucratised ways to cultivate values of 'critical

thinking, experimentation, sharing, peer review, cooperation, collaboration, openness, debate and constructive disagreement', rather than the 'short-termist, highly competitive, profit-driven motives of the private sector' and of many universities. Members of the Social Science Centre therefore aspire both to challenge trends that align learning and inquiry with the needs of capital and the powerful, and to create alternative forms of critical and cooperative education in our own locality.

The SSC is a broad church that attracts people wanting to 'accomplish different things…from intensifying the sheer pleasure of learning, to informing political practice, to supporting creative self-transformation and experimentation, to developing movement-relevant research, to pursuing a more traditional goal of educational or professional recognition' (Amsler and Motta 2012). From its inception, the SSC thus aspired to embody principles of co-operation through plurality and diversity. In our wildest ambitions, we aspire to

> 'critique separations and hierarchies between teacher and learner, knowledge and practice, academy and society, and education and life; […] to develop an ethic that recognizes and embraces this diversity, and we would like to develop ways of talking about these practices that are not closed, fixed or homogeneous; […] and to create an epistemological politics that is open, flexible and heterogeneous, embracing multiple forms of knowledge – theoretical, practical, concrete, oral, affective, spiritual, embodied and visual' (Amsler and Motta 2012).

The question which has faced us from the start, however, is how such an ambitious pedagogical politics will work, and what is required to make it possible. As John Dewey once wrote of the US 'progressive' school movement, the '…rejection of the philosophy and practice of traditional education sets a new type of difficult educational problem for those who believe in the new type of education. We shall operate blindly and in confusion until we recognize this fact; until we thoroughly appreciate that departure from the old solves no problems' (Dewey 1938, 25). What sorts of spaces, environments and relationships open possibilities for the kinds of education and democratic politics which members of the SSC desire to practice and promote?

Querying theoretical approaches

Not surprisingly, each of us attempts to answer these questions through the lenses of particular theoretical frameworks, which we have cultivated both deliberately and unconsciously. More surprisingly, we are learning that bringing these frameworks into critical conversation with one another does not simply help us to understand or 'do' the project (and sometimes cannot inform our practice at all), but rather that such conversations are the heart of the project itself.

[Image of the logo]

David

David brings an adaptionist explanation of creativity and education to the SSC. An adaptionist approach assumes that

> the characteristics or behaviours displayed by an organism enhanced ancestral reproductive success, and forming hypotheses about how they did so.
> (Nettle 2009: 273)

I approach our emerging practice at the SSC from within a particular adaptationist framework – Cultural Group Selection, or cultural evolution. This approach understands our social institutions as *culturally* evolved technologies.

This does not mean that institutions are beyond conventional Darwinian description (because they are not biologically/genetically coded, some believe, erroneously, that the prerequisites for selection are not satisfied), nor is it a version of the 'selfish meme' interpretation of cultural variants popularized by Richard Dawkins in his campaign against the maladaptive institutions of religion (Dawkins 2006). It rather means that our social institutions are not 'natural' or 'inevitable' products, or byproducts, of social primate *genetic* evolution, but are evolved, group-level, *cultural* adaptations to the current (social) environment.

If we accept that cultural evolution is a valid approach to understanding our social institutions, an obvious question, anticipated by Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson – two of the leading researchers in the field, follows:

> Can we influence the current evolution of human societies in desirable directions? As humans, we are unusually active agents in our own evolution, because we each choose which cultural variants to adopt and which to neglect. Moreover, we organize institutions ranging from a simple tribal council to highly complex modern ones, such as a research university and the political party, that are designed to direct the course of cultural evolution. […] With a reasonable picture of cultural evolution in hand, we could begin to understand how we might humanize processes that often exact savage costs in the currency of human misery (Boyd & Richerson 2005: 253).

You will not be surprised to hear that I also think the answer is a cautious 'yes, we can'; and that my contribution to the pedagogical and organizational culture of the SSC is a modest, inchoate, attempt to do so.

However, from within a critical-theoretical framework, and consistent with our polyphonic/pluralist approach at the SSC, we must question what 'desirable directions' means in contemporary society.

From a critical theoretical perspective, this statement could read:

> 'With a reasonable picture of power, freedom and subjectification in hand, we could begin to understand how we might humanize processes that often exact savage costs in the currency of human misery.'

The question, in both cases, is what 'a reasonable picture' looks like, what 'humanization' is, and how better knowledge can be related to better practice.

Sarah

Sarah works in the broad tradition of critical social theory. Like David, I also presume that social institutions are contingent historical projects; i.e., durable ways of organizing social life that are not inevitable but that, in each particular place and time, shape the development of society (and in particular its democratic and creative potentials).

My primary concern is with the effects of power and power/knowledge in processes of the formation, legitimation and development of institutions, particularly of education. I am particularly interested in the possibilities and the limitations of learning and teaching as world-making practices. The formation of ways of thinking, being and doing things which are outside of the institutions and forms of subjectivity that have already 'demonstrated their truth value as historical projects' (Marcuse 1964) is important to me. This is because such institutions naturalise hegemonic relations between knowledge, power and social and political reality which – to a greater or lesser extent and in many different ways – work to maintain the equilibrium of everyday life in the interests of the powerful.

But the naturalised meanings, relationships, individual subjectivities and historical futures we inherit and inhabit are matters of history but not matters of fate. And because human beings play a strong if often not deliberate role in constituting them, we also have the potential to make them otherwise. An important purpose of democratic education is therefore to help people 'short-circuit, dismantle or explode systems of power' that limit their possibilities, on the one hand, and to imagine and practice other ways of thinking and being, on the other (Foucault 1975). Through this lens, political action necessarily has epistemological and pedagogical dimensions, and education is always-already political.

However, efforts to liberate knowledge and practice from historical determination or cultural path dependency involve hard and sometimes painful labor – particularly where they are embedded in advanced systems of power. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) once argued, 'the relation to what is possible is a relation to power'. I therefore draw inspiration from work in critical pedagogy and prefigurative politics which regard such limits as the origins rather than the limits of possibilities for thinking and being in new ways, and for transforming or creating new types of institutions, of which the SSC is one example.

Both

What are we learning about the relationship between education, creativity and democracy by attempting to inform our practice in the SSC through these theoretical frameworks?

Various things.[i] One that stands out now, however, is that 'support for a movement does not in itself ensure that one's research findings will be relevant and useful for that movement' (Bevington and Dixon 2005: 197). Understanding how human beings adapt to our environments or how we exercise and resist power does not mean that we can do these differently without *doing* them differently.

We are also learning that while theoretical insights can help us understand the purposes and potentialities of cooperative learning, patterns of group dynamics, forms of communication and behavior, they do not directly help us to 'develop ways of talking about these practices that are not closed, fixed or homogeneous; [or] to create an epistemological politics that is open, flexible and heterogeneous, embracing multiple forms of knowledge – theoretical, practical, concrete, oral, affective, spiritual, embodied and visual' (Amsler and Motta 2012).

We are thus also learning that our theoretical knowledges about learning, creativity and democracy do not inform our practice if they are not being constantly and critically recreated through and for our practices themselves. On the contrary, when imposed on one another and on our relationships, they often misinform. The other is that 'venturing beyond' what we think we know, can know and want to know from one another, and beyond the boundaries of our own intelligibility, is a catalyst for the creation of new ideas, relationships and cognitive possibilities. It is also an embodied act that forces us to attend to democratic processes of learning.

What is the link between the creation of the SSC and democratic social life?

Working at the SSC is a creative, political, and ambitious act. We aspire to create the circumstances, through our practice, that promote individual and collective human flourishing by developing an approach to pedagogy that prefigures a truly participatory social democracy (Fielding & Moss 2010). It can often be exhausting; it can occasionally be exhilarating. We make no pretense that our scheme is a finished and final account – how could we, we've only just begun and it's a perpetual process – or that the techniques we are using are our own innovations (e.g., in the 19th century US, the Chautaqua Movement,[ii] the free schools and universities movements of the 1960s, diverse cooperative education movements, and many different [iii]). However, we do think that we have something worth sharing (FUN polycentric governance).

We, the scholars, come from different social positions, with different frameworks, and sometimes radically different conceptions of the purpose and scope of pedagogy – here, we represent just two of the multifarious frames held together within the Centre. The SSC is, to a certain extent, a microcosm of what happens in the wider society (our aspiration is to expand the circle of membership to properly reflect our city). Whenever we work together, when our theory becomes praxis, collectively we experience those differences, those tensions, we feel it… we embody it. These resonances, and these dissonances, obviously, echo the reality of our individual and collective encounters beyond the Centre, and, we hope, it is through our ongoing attempts to understand them within and through the body and work of the Centre, and our continuing work of occupying and creating

spaces for understanding and engaging with radical, democratic, participatory pedagogy across the city of Lincoln (and the county of Lincolnshire), that we prefigure the society we aspire to live in, and by so doing, contribute to its creation (F&M 2010).

'Can we influence the current evolution of human societies in desirable directions?' Our experience in creating and developing the SSC suggests to us that it is not naïve to think that, with dedication, we can learn to re-imagine and recreate the worlds in which we are living – so long as we understand this *as* an ongoing process of learning to be otherwise, and not as a recipe for creative democracy. We think the SSC makes a contribution to this project, as it is difficult to imagine undertaking it within the existing institutions of formal higher education and research. [Something about 'paths' here, not teleological but made by walking?]

Is this wildly utopian? In our view, the Centre succeeds whenever an individual scholar's, or citizen's, encounters within the Centre or our work acts as the catalyst for any subsequent, personally transformative, social behaviour. However, we suggest that this cannot be possible unless the each scholar's encounters, work and experiences are regarded as matters of collective responsibility and concern. Ours thus aspires to be a pedagogy of interdependence and contagion. As John Dewey once wrote,

> 'Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past.' […] Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.' (Dewey 1939)

Our hope, our radical hope, is that by engaging in a prefigurative pedagogic practice we might create a 'cultural variant' (my frame) or 'radical alternative' that can have the potential to act catalytically, expanding the ambition and the circle of social democracy, beyond the language and current logic of smooth social inclusion, to the lived experience of social democracy championed by Dewey.

Ultimately, we agree with Dewey that 'a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are when they are put up in contrast with actual conditions the most penetrating "criticism" of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress' (Dewey 1936: 360).

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[i] Contributions of the different frameworks…

David's framework of cultural evolution, and evolutionary social science more broadly defined, offers many useful insights to help us negotiate our work and our relationships at the Centre. The recent work of moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt provides us with some tools to manage our inevitable, and potentially divisive, distortions of emphasis and differences of opinion; evolutionary anthropologist David Sloan Wilson's on-going work in Binghamton NY acts as an ambitious model for engaged, community based, evolutionarily informed, pedagogical 'interventions' that aspire to raise the prosociality of a whole city – one block at a time. Boyd and Richerson, as well as younger generation of researchers that includes Joe Henrich, Alex Mesoudi, and Richard McElreath, continue to refine their theoretical, and field, work on the cultural evolution of individual and social learning, and the various mechanisms of transmission.

Sarah's framework of power/knowledge, and critical theory more broadly defined, offers many useful insights to help us in our work in the SSC. Insights from the sociology of knowledge help us to understand the social and material struggles underlying what appear to be ideological differences of opinion and conflicts of interest. Insights from the critical philosophy of language cautions us to attend to the ways we close down and potentially open up spaces of possibility through our bodies and words. A critical theory of society reminds us to attend to the ways in which exercises of institutional, economic and cultural power shape trajectories of a project's development, and reminds us that it is complex and difficult, but possible, to resist these and to strive towards alternatives.

These lists are neither exhaustive nor exclusive, as each framework will have movement-relevant research that will inform our respective, and possibly collective, work at the Centre.

[ii] J. Scott, 'The Chautaqua Movement: revolution in popular higher education', *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1999, 70(4): 389–412.

[iii] See, e.g., the Melbourne Free University, now in its second year, online at http://melbournefreeuniversity.org/downloads/MFU_How_to_Start_a_Free_UNI_manual.pdf.