

Lessons from Freire: Towards a Pedagogy for Socio- Ecological Transformation

As the most pressing limit-situation humanity has ever faced, climate breakdown offers us opportunities for critical reflection upon exploitative socioecological interactions and functions as a boundary where new possibilities begin – possibilities for a healthier, more equal and sustainable world – based upon hope, collaboration, co-creation of new knowledge and urgent climate action across all levels of society.

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Abstract

Climate breakdown is one of the greatest challenges our world faces. Driven by social, economic, political, environmental and ideological forces, the climate crisis necessitates critical, creative, inclusive and impactful action across multiple levels of society. Adult learning is a core element of societal transitions to a more sustainable future and this article explores Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a valuable resource for understanding processes of, and barriers to, multi-level changes. Drawing on our innovative 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' project, we situate Freirean pedagogy as a cornerstone of teaching, learning and action for socio-ecological transformation.

Introduction

We live in an era of unprecedented socio-ecological turmoil. Entwined with societal patterns of production and consumption, environmental catastrophes such as climate breakdown, deforestation and plastic waste in oceans are heightening awareness of human impacts on our planet. Focusing on the climate crisis as one of the greatest challenges facing our socio-ecological world, in this article we articulate the forces driving climate breakdown as being simultaneously social, economic, political, environmental and ideological. We argue that critical, creative, inclusive and impactful actions are required across multiple levels of society to tackle the climate and ecological crises; Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed is a valuable resource for understanding processes of, and barriers to, societal changes.

Outlining some of Freire's key concepts, we examine problem-posing education, conscientisation and praxis as essential components of adult learning for transformative climate action. We elucidate the influence of Freire's ideas on 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future', a non-formal educational initiative developed by staff and students in Queen's University Belfast. Situating Freirean pedagogy as a cornerstone of teaching and learning for socio-ecological transformation, we emphasise how adult learning is a core element of societal transitions to a healthier, fairer and sustainable future.

‘Anna’s Journey’

Within his Freirean-inspired *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal asks if art should ‘educate, inform, organise, influence, incite to action or should it simply be an object of pleasure?’ In keeping with Boal’s belief that ‘theatre can... be a weapon for liberation’ and present ‘a vision of the world in transformation and ... the means of carrying out that transformation,’ we co-created a short drama, ‘Anna’s Journey’. We designed our play to communicate socio-ecological issues, prompt critical thinking and, hopefully, action among those who engaged with our wider project. Citing Marcuse, Brookfield recognises that ‘art cannot change the world’ but ‘it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.’

Our process of devising characters and narratives within the play entailed collective analysis of cross-cutting inequalities of class, gender, race and socio-environmental injustices across local and global scales. ‘Anna’s Journey’ advanced from decodification to development of generative themes like global inequalities, unsustainability and climate breakdown encompassed within short scenes designed to prompt deep reflection. Each scene involved actors’ performance and aural inputs which were enhanced by related images and brief research findings read by the Narrator and also displayed on an accompanying projector. For example, the play opens with Anna happily sharing her personal (over) consumption patterns of regular international travel, against a backdrop of images related to consumerism; the Narrator and an associated PowerPoint slide outlines how tourism accounts for about 8% of global GHG emissions, the majority of which are caused by high-income countries.

With a narrative that immediately connects individual choices in the Global North with global ramifications, scene one is in stark contrast to the experiences of Amelia (scene two) whose family were dispossessed due to Amazonian deforestation. Although this scene was created before catastrophic fires in the Amazon rainforest (August 2019), the play’s use of imagery of land-clearing for meat-production illuminates some socio-ecological consequences of societies’ hunger for cheap meat; associated research problematises rising

GHG emissions, deforestation and global demand for livestock. Images as codifications are central to the play: ‘the images worked well. For the audience to see heart-wrenching images of the impact of climate hazards really enhanced the dialogue. People engaging with the play encountered auditory, visual and written codes associated with generative themes and were encouraged to decode codifications during discussions which followed each performance.

‘Anna’s Journey’ is based on fictional characters yet presents real socio-ecological issues interwoven with societal processes of production and consumption. By presenting narratives of four characters (from Northern Ireland, Brazil, India and Mozambique), our play illustrates vast differences in life-experiences of indigenous peoples in the Global South and wealthy tourists from the Global North, pointing to intersectional inequalities on a global scale. It also elucidates socio-ecological consequences on countries which bear least responsibility for cumulative GHGs driving climate breakdown, using creative methods to make the global local and problematise societal interactions with our life-sustaining environment. An outcome of co-intentional, problem-posing education within our group, the play also functions as a non-formal educational tool for adults learning about climate breakdown and was incorporated within a series of public events on socio-ecological issues.

‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’ Events ‘

‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’ was influenced by praxis as ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’ (Freire, 1996, p.33) and the development of ‘Anna’s Journey’ demonstrates reflection and some action within the Green Arts team. Crucially, our endeavours were not limited to team members and we also engaged with our wider community, developing engaging educational activities to influence climate action within and beyond Queen’s University Belfast.

In parallel with the evolution of ‘Anna’s Journey’, author one worked with the Duncairn Centre for Culture and Arts in North Belfast to organise a participative evening of arts, music and talks around climate breakdown and sustainability. Seeking to inspire

communities, develop audiences and the arts, the Duncairn aims to 'create a new arts-based model of engagement with disenfranchised, marginalised and disadvantaged communities in North Belfast. Our collaborative event was held on 12 April 2019 and involved a creative smorgasbord of activities such as: a quiz on socio-ecological topics by author one (designed to foster group work and set context for shared learning and discussions); talks about sustainability and climate breakdown by Prof. John Barry (QUB) and Siofra Caherty (a fashion designer who makes products from recycled materials); a performance of 'Anna's Journey'; and music by Ger Wolfe and local musicians. Over 80 people participated in a stimulating evening of deep discussion and reflection upon climate breakdown and unsustainability: 'I feel this was a success. There was immense positive feedback from the audience.'

Building on learning from the Duncairn event, we designed and facilitated a 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' workshop as part of QUB's Development Weeks (20 May 2019). This workshop created a space for participants to examine generative themes of climate breakdown, plastic waste pollution and species extinction in a hands-on stimulating way. Incorporating ice-breaker activities which utilised images as codes to spark dialogue around socio-ecological issues, the workshop included a participative quiz, a performance of 'Anna's Journey', group discussions and arts-based group work. Facilitated by our Green Arts team and colleagues Dr. Lucy McCarthy (Queen's Management School) and Dr. Nuala Flood (School of Natural and Built Environment), small group activities enabled participants to interrogate pressing environmental and social issues as a basis for their creation of a piece of art (visual, poetry, story-telling, etc.) to communicate their vision for a greener, sustainable future. Each small group chose to make visual art to communicate their visions for a greener future, utilising recycled waste and an array of arts materials to co-create pieces which they presented to other participants in order to share learning, deepen dialogue and prompt action.

Reflecting the influence of Freirean pedagogy upon our work, praxis is central to 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' and during a Green Arts team's reflexive session (1 August 2019) we

assessed all elements of our project and agreed to continue collaborating. Subsequent events included three creative public workshops on climate breakdown held in Wholegreen, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal (Culture Night, 2019) and the 'Creating our Sustainable Future' workshop (7 November 2019) facilitated as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science. Building on learning from our previous public engagement events, 'Creating our Sustainable Future' was an exciting artistic adventure which prioritised collaboration and co-creation of knowledge about sustainability and climate breakdown using participative methods.

Held in QUB, activities included performance of 'Anna's Journey', an interactive quiz, a joint performance by the 'Change the World in Song' and 'Sing for Earth' choirs and group activities during which intergenerational participants were asked to co-create their vision for a sustainable future through spoken word or recycled materials and arts supplies. As the workshop was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, we asked participants to complete an evaluation survey, undertaken by 30 respondents. All agreed with the statement 'I am inspired to learn more about this topic' (25 people strongly agreed); 20 participants strongly agreed 'I will use/share things learnt today' (10 participants agreed). Participants were also invited to make additional comments, providing valuable feedback on our pedagogical approach for socio-ecological transformation:

The programme was interesting. This is an amazing way at encouraging people to do something for the environmental sustainability. (Respondent 3)

Thoroughly enjoyed the quiz and creative opportunities to engage as opposed to the usual being talked at event. Really inspiring event! Loved the choir/drama. (Respondent 5)

Fun event, interactive. Would love to attend more activities love the choir as well. (Respondent 7)

I really enjoyed the play and found it quite moving. (Respondent 13)

Excellent Event. So glad I came. I want to learn more. (Respondent 14)

Very informative and well-presented info presented in 'easy to digest' and engaging format. (Respondent 22)

Brilliant evening and very different kind of event. I wouldn't change anything,

enjoyed it! (Respondent 23)

Thanks very much. It was so informative. You made us feel very welcome. We all really enjoyed it. (Respondent 26)

Concluding Thoughts on Adult Learning for Climate Action

Climate breakdown is real and already happening, producing myriad impacts for human and non-human species. Mitigating against climate chaos and adapting to socio-economic and ecological consequences of climate breakdown necessitates wide-ranging actions, which we believe begins with adult learning. Learning to understand the socio-ecological drivers of climate breakdown; comprehending the human causes of threats we collectively face; co-creating new knowledge about how we might tackle climate breakdown; developing new ways of teaching and learning to affect transformative climate action; and engaging in praxis for multi-level changes to enable a healthier, fairer and sustainable future. A pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation is a pedagogy of people mobilising for learning, reflection and socio-ecological action to aid just transitions to low carbon societies. Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed is a vital resource for such endeavours and his attention to conscientisation is invaluable for considering how to tackle climate denial, silence, scepticism and other psychological defence mechanisms which can prevent us from responding to climate change. Freire's focus on overcoming oppression through collaboration, love and humility is important for collective action to tackle unprecedented challenges at micro, meso and macro levels. His writing on co-intentional, problem-posing education is a valuable example of how to develop teaching and learning strategies for socio-ecological transformation; similarly, his elucidation of praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996, p.33) is a key component of radical climate action which can be fostered within non-formal educational initiatives like 'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' (Green Arts Team).

'Creating our Vision for a Greener Future' is one example of a pedagogy for socio-ecological transformation and we are conscious of limitations in terms of scale, reach and accessibility. Yet even such a small project can have impactful results, not just for those who

collaborate as co-investigators but for people of all ages who participate in creative, non-formal learning activities. Positive outcomes of our project were recognised through feedback and the team being awarded a special ‘Innovation for Engagement’ QUB Green Award (4 June 2019); Slevin was also given an award under QUB’s Staff Recognition Scheme (10 June 2019). Yet we did not co-produce ‘Creating our Vision for a Greener Future’ to win awards – our collaborative initiative is concerned with enhancing praxis around climate breakdown, deepening learning and action within and beyond our Green Arts team.

We are hopeful for possibilities arising from critical reflection and climate action garnered through innovative pedagogies for socio-ecological transformation. Other examples include new courses emerging within the formal education sector (e.g. QUB’s new module on sustainability and climate change co-convened by author one) and programmes and initiatives provided by established groups like Cultivate, Cloughjordan Ecovillage and the Organic Centre – teaching and learning inherent to social movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Youth Strikes for Climate.

To respond to climate breakdown with the urgency and range of actions required, we need to make learning about climate action and just transition accessible to people in every village, town and city; Paulo Freire’s work can help us develop a pedagogy/(ies) for such socio-ecological transformation.