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EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER 47

Unite and Unrule! Reflections of a co-created pedagogy for transformation

Collaboration in Higher Education: A New Ecology of Practice

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8.3 Unite and Unrule! Reflections of a co-created pedagogy for transformation

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Reader notes

- As a collective, we experimented with co-creation as means to develop a more creative, innovative and collaborative space in order to inspire (in)direct transformations in the larger HE system we study and work in.
- Our approach to co-creation, as a specific form of collaboration, is inspired by insights from critical, contemplative, social justice and relational pedagogy based on design principles derived from regenerative development.
- In this case study, we highlight two interrelated features of our co-creation approach to developing transgressive learning spaces: 1) relational learning beyond individualism, and 2) from competition towards reflective and self-directed learning.

Keywords

co-creation; social justice and contemplative pedagogies; regenerative development; pluriverse; decolonising knowledges

Introduction: Planting the seeds of collective self-organising

The occupation of the University of Amsterdam's (UvA) main administrative building, Maagdenhuis, and the banner reading 'No Democratisation without Decolonisation' in spring 2015 signalled two key demands of the protesting students and staff. They demanded equal access, democratic participation, and more transparency from the university management, while a second demand was aimed at decolonising knowledge (The University of Colour, 2018). The movement mandated the new Diversity Commission chaired by Prof. Dr. Gloria Wekker to investigate the state of the University, which resulted in the publication of concrete recommendations for democratic and decolonial practises (Wekker et al., 2016).

Inspired by this spirit, a handful of Master students and a lecturer at the UvA's International Development Studies (IDS) programme started self-organising the Critical Development and Diversity Explorations (CDDE) initiative to collaboratively explore alternative pedagogies for social justice-inspired and transgressive learning. The CDDE initiative was initiated in 2017 as an attempt to 'unrule' student-teacher asymmetries, address epistemological hierarchies, and overcome institutional barriers to develop a more collaborative and holistic learning space. We are a growing collective which started with 10 and has grown into a group of 32 (former) Master students and an initiator and lecturer(s) who are organising the seminar-style CDDE 'course,' which is open to Master students in the IDS programme. CDDE student members are recognised for their CDDE membership and can include a number of study credits within their Portfolio, a 'free' space within the IDS curriculum. The initiator and lecturer was awarded a teaching innovation grant which freed

up time to develop this initiative during the initial three years. Over the past five years of the CDDE journey, we experienced and un-learned together, while also influencing tangible changes in teaching and learning practices within the IDS teaching programme, and increasingly in other academic and professional contexts where CDDE alumni continue to design CDDE-inspired work.

Our broader objective is to contribute towards imagining and enacting a transgressive (hooks, 1994; Wals, 2015) and collaborative alternative to the neoliberal HE model. On the one hand, we seek as a collective to counter a managerialist, competitive, market-oriented, and Westernised HE culture (Springer, 2016). On the other hand, through CDDE we aim to co-create a creative, revitalising, and critical space to cultivate a pluriversality of knowledges along with a cross-hierarchical learning community based on an ethics of care (Mountz et al., 2015) and slow scholarship (Berg & Seeber, 2013). Inspired by Regenerative Development and Design (Mang & Haggard, 2016), and infused with contemplative pedagogies and practises (Berila, 2016), CDDE co-creates an innovative space to develop personal self-reflection and development as individual and collective 'change agents', in order to inspire (in)direct transformations in the larger HE system we study and work in. Extending the notion of relational pedagogy into community building has its foundations in the work of Nell Noddings (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Biesta et al), Humberto Maturana, and Paulo Freire (Souza et al., 2019).

In this chapter, we reflect on our collaborative and co-creative practices and experiences of the CDDE initiative to create a transgressive and more inclusive learning space within the university.

Enacting transgressive education through co-creation

We translated our aim into practice through our agency-oriented, cross-hierarchical, and co-created 'course' design. Co-creation, as a specific form of collaboration, is considered a key approach to relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020; Souza et al., 2019) and serves as a way to integrate (individual and collective) contemplative practises into collective spaces of anti-oppressive learning (Berila, 2016). We highlight two interrelated features of our co-creation approach to developing transgressive learning spaces: 1) relational learning beyond individualism, and 2) from competition towards reflective and self-directed learning.

Relational learning beyond individualism

Through co-creation, community building, and engagement with an ethics of care, we learned how to think of education as a collective, relational process (Mountz et al., 2015; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), rather than a pre-fixed route to a predefined destination. With teams of students and the lecturer, we collaboratively co-create each of our bi-weekly sessions. The themes for each session are brainstormed together at the beginning of the semester. Then, small teams prepare the content and activities for a particular session, which are further refined and co-facilitated. We found that the key in the co-creation processes is taking time to collectively, and inclusively make decisions: a "[d]ecision-making process is a consensus-based dialogue, rather than democratic voting. The extra effort this takes is worth it in terms of making people feel included."[1] As expressed by one CDDE member:

[1] Reflection of CDDE member during session on 07.05.2017

> I learned how challenging it is to take everyone's opinion/wishes into planning while also being pragmatic of possibilities and time constraints. I do believe we managed that well and that everyone's preferences were included.[2]

In this learning community, we hold each other and ourselves accountable and have a sense of responsibility towards each other. As a lecturer, this process creates a very different dynamic:

> I prepare for and leave these sessions with students more energised and enriched with resources and insights I would not have experienced in more traditionally organised classes, and I too benefit from the sense of community which is established, there is a shared sense of care which is not always present in academia.[3]

From competition to inclusive and self-directed learning

Co-created sessions often include contemplative practices in combination with social justice pedagogies, which enables a reflection on our education process. Through self-directed learning and both introspective and collaborative reflection exercises, we aim to enhance our agency with regards to our individual learning trajectories, as well as a shared purpose for the CDDE community to support broader systemic transformation within and possibly beyond the department. Through meditation, journaling and sharing our experiences, we learnt to channel empathy towards each other but also towards ourselves. Instead of focusing on competition in our HE space (Naidoo, 2018; 2016), we have been motivated by our sense of community. Inspired by the integration of regenerative design and living systems thinking frameworks (Mang and Haggard, 2016), our reflective frameworks focused on enhancing 'internal locus of control' and 'external consideration' as practices of introspective personal development. This dimension was addressed by a CDDE member:

> For me, CDDE is a way to connect the academic to the personal. It is a space where I am learning to enjoy education again. I have always been very passionate about education, but I often experience stress and anxiety. Our focus on contemplation, embodiment, and sharing spaces have helped me to reconnect to my surroundings and be more present and mindful.[4]

Through practices of embodied knowledge, we focus on 'walking the talk' of what a feminist decolonising learning process might look like, by recognising and employing a pluriverse of knowledges in and beyond the classroom (Kothari, 2006; Kothari et al., 2019, Sultana, 2019). One of our sessions in 2019 was themed on storytelling as a form of knowledge. During this session, each of us shared an experience of marginalisation at university (that they experienced or heard). At the end of the exercise, we reflected together on the common elements in the stories and the axis of oppression. By exploring the politics of ontology and epistemology, we identified how power operates at the university and specifically in a complex and interdisciplinary field like IDS (Harcourt, 2017). For us, the alternative practices of (forum) theatre, music, poetry, yoga, storytelling, and so forth are a way to engage with the pluriverse of knowledges. These contemplative and creative methods have enriched a sense of inclusivity in the way we co-create our learning journey.

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[2] Reflection of CDDE member after a session on 09.04.2019

[3] Interview with Mieke on 20.08.2021

[4] Reflection of CDDE member on 16.04.2020

For instance, by consciously designing the atmosphere for collaborative and empathetic work in CDDE sessions, co-creation teams would often include a piece of poetry, a song, or visual art in the opening part of the session for the members to wake up to a more creative, mindful interaction and reflection.

For example, in a session we co-created between a group of the student members and the lecturer on intersectional feminism and climate justice, when the group entered the room we had a painting by Bolivian artist Mamani Mamani on the screen called “La Pacha Mama” (Mother Earth), and played some Andean music as we all settled in. We then started seated in a circle with a grounding and visualisation exercise, using breath techniques and visualising what “mother earth” means for us, followed by some structured journal writing on the theme of the session. After this wake-up, we had a conversation about intersectionality as represented in feminist literature, after which we listened collectively to a historically recorded speech by the American 19th century women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth and watched a short video by Kimberley Crenshaw on intersectionality. We then connected these feminist reflections to the theme of climate justice and present-day debates. We went outside for a walk around the university campus in small groups to work on a ‘counter-mapping’ exercise, which allowed groups to reflect on and draw out a counter-hegemonic picture of real-life examples in the way the university environment (mis)represents issues of intersectional and climate justice (including the build environment, food offerings and more discursive expressions such as posters or observed interactions). We then closed the session by engaging with each other’s counter-maps, and ended with a brief guided breathing exercise and journaling moment. Post session, we captured notes of what we worked on, and asked all participants to reflect briefly in an online post-session survey to capture key insights, to inform our continued work and analysis, resulting in ongoing projects such as this one.

Drawing some conclusions: to unite and unrule?

After five years of collaboratively organising the CDDE space in various forms, we carefully navigated between meaningful autonomy and the neoliberal academy, as well as shifting constellations in our collective - not least shifting from in-person to online engagements due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of our key motivations lies in our shared desire to create a sense of community, ownership, and transformative space, while this brings up the challenge of becoming integrated into the mainstream institutional university culture in less valued ways or being showcased as another ‘diversity’ success (Ahmed, 2012). Nevertheless, we inspired tangible changes in the IDS programmes at the UvA, including integrating aspects of the co-creation pedagogical approaches into several Bachelor and Master courses, and more attention paid to research ethics, reflectiveness on positionality and the importance of (introspective) reflection and inquiry to develop students’ capability to (re)connect to their unique learning trajectory and purpose.

Another tension we successfully navigated concerned the sustaining of the community space over multiple years and generations of students. Each year, CDDE has reinvented itself based on that year’s unique make-up of members while building on experiences and insights gained from the past. Together, we are committed to disseminating insights and approaches we gained, and feel might serve others. This means, uniting energies as students and lecturers alike to co-create inclusive, transformative and transgressive learning spaces in HE, to individually and collectively un-rule existing education structures and connected patterns of thinking, being, and acting from competition to collaboration.

CDDE has inspired us to explore the re-appropriation of the classroom space as one of movement and connection, rather than fixed "banking education" (Giroux, 2010). By (re)claiming space and challenging hierarchies in the classroom, we explore what it means to transgress traditional institutional boundaries. In CDDE, we co-created the content and pedagogical design of the sessions, shared food and built friendships beyond the classroom.

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