

The ‘Welcome Hut’ as the concrete utopia of a migrating educational institution: conceptualising civic sanctuaries for human dignity in an uninviting public sphere.

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Abstract

This study examines possibilities to practice anti-racist pedagogies through and migrating practices in a formal educational system in Europe that is often perceived as static. Drawing on a concrete 'in-between' educational site, and linking pedagogies of radical practicality with human geography, this paper proposes a transfer of historical claims in the UK for 'really useful knowlege' towards the structural emergence of 'really useful spaces' for the social recognition of other learning. This research analyses the concrete utopia of a roadworthy tiny house shepherd's hut, which had initially been sketched out as a mobile outreach version for collective life storytelling and narrative arts.

Key words: co-migration, centre-periphery, outreach, tiny house, concrete utopia

Introduction

Research linking migration and adult education often adopts the perspective of the displaced, involuntarily mobile ‘other’ confronted with a rigid qualification system. This contrast between the mobile migrant and the static institution can be observed in the often slow and tedious progress for implementing intercultural opening as mentality shift in institutions (Sprung, 2011). This case study develops the theorisation of the institution as stakeholder of welcome by critically questioning its reduced role as only sedentary receiver and host of those migrating. Drawing on the spatial dimensions of outreach and proximity in the human geographies of learning, this arts-based reflection conceptualises possible future institutions as pilgrimage or nomadic spaces which can be migrating as much as the learners they hope to welcome. Drawing on the author’s 'in-between' educational site of the *Welcome Hut*, the concrete case of this roadworthy tiny house shepherd’s hut discusses imaginative ways of allowing the margins to challenge the centre towards reciprocal dialogue: how could an adult

educational micro-system as vagabond antidote to functionalist skills agendas help consolidate solidarities and establish connectivity between lifeworlds of difference by bringing its own organisational hierarchies on the road? Discussing eight years of cross-sector projects in community education, social work, culture, art, as well as health care, the potential for creating itinerant spheres for singularity, anti-racist pedagogies and the *poetics* of difference will be assessed.

Functionalist discourses of ‘lifelong yearning’

The Welcome Hut concept was initially sketched out during postgraduate research in adult education in Scotland. I imagined a sphere for mobile educational institutionalisation firstly as counter-narrative to narrow skills agendas in European lifelong learning policies. Theorists in adult education challenge and criticise that the provision for adult learners in policy is largely framed in a vocabulary suggesting to make adults fit for employment, bringing them on the ‘right’ track (Field, 2006). The generalised prescription of this ‘right’ way could however be perceived as alienating and detached from certain adults’ realities and their search for a primarily meaningful, and not predominantly functionalist, occupation. Lifelong learning as the externally imposed accumulation of fragmented, modular knowledge commodities therefore runs the risk of perpetuating a focus on lack and imperfection fuelling neoliberal consumer logics: the desire “for more always outruns what we have at the moment” (Welton, 2005, p195). Analyses of adults opting to craft their own small-scale decent work and therefore actively and voluntarily dropping out of vertical knowledge frameworks (Guichard & Pouyaud, 2015; Vannini, 2014) increasingly enter educational research and challenge widespread assumptions that lifelong learning schemes should train learners into hierarchies of constant craving for new diploma certificates. A certain number of adults prefer not to participate in this race, as for them leaving aside the accumulation of functionalist skills does not necessarily mean losing out in life (Kaeyhko, 2006). Recognising unconventional life philosophies off the diploma grids as unclassifiable but legitimate ways of meaning-making then leads to a question that is not only relevant to the margins of educational discourse: how can an inclusive rather than assimilationist adult education system open spaces and welcome the many unfitting and/or dissenting narratives at the outskirts of the knowledge economy?

Existential learning in the West

The Welcome Hut as a vagabond educational concept was then in theory built around the notion of hospitality more than the implementation of dominant training frameworks: valuing experiential, existential and spiritual dimensions of living, and opening up a setting for the resources, wisdoms and life achievements of the individual and groups. From a transcultural perspective, my own experiential learning taking place during a one year residency in South Africa profoundly influenced my stance as informal educator valuing subjective and unquantifiable knowledge. After having experienced, mainly in South African townships, that non-formal encounter is already a fundamental form of education, I had difficulties situating myself in a highly regulated European educational system, which was separating learning into neatly ordered age categories. While I was going to be an adult educator in the West, I identified much more with intergenerational and transcultural practices of learning such as the African classroom without walls (Fordjor et al, 2003) which focused on commonalities rather than compartmentalised skills classifications and labels. Analyses of literacy campaigns situated in the global south suggest that “there is a sense of giving people dignity and improving their own human condition whereas in the West adult literacy is regarded much more as a means of ‘welfare to work’” (Jarvis, 2007, p187). While researching African philosophies of education (Abdi, 2005), I resolved my inner conflict between European origins and the discovery of African pedagogical thought by imagining my own educational micro-institution tailored in its outreach mobility to fragmented and modular European learning, but reframing the experience in a simple encounter space for collective interconnection. Creating my own experiential and existential learning oasis in a tiny mobile outreach architecture had the prospects of allowing me to roam freely and with geographical resilience around and beyond the skills agendas of EU vocational adult education. Building an autonomous institution in its own right implied that it was my own responsibility as initiator to supervise the exact function through which my transcultural utopia was going to meet dominant educational hierarchies: relating Marcuse’s thoughts on repressive tolerance to my mobile institution, there was a risk of becoming the folklore version of alternative pedagogy, the amusing oddity as an annexe to the commodification of adult learning: the “alternative, oppositional perspective is seen as an exotic option rather than a plausible natural centre” (Brookfield, 2005, p104). But there was also the potential that this space dedicated to

existential forms of being and becoming would be taken seriously as an educational entity standing on its own feet.

Supported by a literature review on the non-recognition of refugee life skills, the micro-institution in a tiny house was invented to address the absence of recognition of refugees for the innovative and creative people they are, having shown exceptional capacities in overcoming multiple hardships: “They did not learn it overnight. Their life experiences have taught them how to live in the face of death” (Yambasu, 2004, p43). In an aim to shift my personal adult educator stance from technical know-how towards the existential dimensions of learning, the competencies hosted in the shepherd’s hut were then broadly identified as something already existing in the learner’s development, therefore something healthy to be recognized more than a lack or deficit to be compensated. This alternative pedagogical space would then firstly focus on giving adult learners the feeling of unconditional recognition for what they have already achieved in life, informally and irrespective of certification schemes.

Issues of participation and the politics of difference

Personal observations from professional experiences allowed me to witness subtle expressions of a mistrust of adult learners about the sustainability of the standardised learning institutions in Europe. While some of the arguments put forward were biased anti-establishment slogans, other arguments however suggested that this suspicion was solidly grounded in everyday experiences of social relegation and also humiliation within the exclusionary logics of the prevailing educational hierarchies. The ambiguities of asking from adult learners to fit into educational inequalities and therefore to enter a race which has to a large extent already been scientifically identified as severely socially stratified (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003) opens criticism to the normative assumption that training is the one panacea that the learners of the periphery need: “The strategy of assimilation aims to bring formerly excluded groups into the mainstream. So assimilation always implies coming into the game after it has already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards. In the assimilationist strategy the privileged groups implicitly define the standards according to which all will be measured” (Young, 1990, p164). Transposing Iris Marion Young’s politics of difference to the

contradictions of adult education provided a conceptual framework from which to claim that these ‘disoriented because remote’ learners were not necessarily disoriented but cautious. They might not be automatically in need of prescriptive orientation but in search of educators who would listen before enacting a highly generalising policy agenda. As an adult educator trying to make Iris Marion Young’s theories relevant to my own practice, I first had to ask myself with which good arguments I would encourage isolated, marginal learners to enter at the lowest level in a race where the rules of the game had been set before their entry. What looks like remote learners from the centre can also look like a remote educational system from the periphery. It was crucial to investigate how an educator can help to build a bridge and reduce this distance. Adhering to lifelong learning agendas simply did not present itself like an attractive option to quite a few people at the margins of society.

In my search for educational schemes recognising singular human beings in their existential dimension, my personal stance as adult educator shifted from asking ‘what makes these people withdraw from educational provision?’ to asking ‘what makes that these people are not being listened to in their reflections and dissent?’ Words like ‘bildungsfern’ in German imply that education only happens at the accredited centres of society. The invisible alienation of thoughtful adults from formalised training schemes and the centrist making of the remote learner as a dysfunctional societal category then demanded to investigate the structural dysfunctions of immobilised, centralised educational set-ups in which educational alienation is discussed as unilateral problem and not addressed as a reciprocal issue between the learner *and* the institution: ‘Who is ultimately distant from whom?’ (Latour, 2005) was then the question which helped me to bridge the void and educational desert which seemed to exist at the intersection between the accrediting centre and the allegedly ‘lost’ peripheries.

While the educational system asks from the individual to be flexible, creative, constantly networking and mobile enough to take the necessary steps towards the formal institution, one could provocatively ask why the system asks something of the individual which it has enormous difficulties performing by example. Taking the side of the outsider and acknowledging that this flexibility race is not as fair as suggested when one’s starting point is the marginal ‘no man’s land’, one could also provoke the remote institution to lead by example and demonstrate flexibility and take a step into the tiresome, less ordered, improvised margins. In order to reconfigure adult educational entities as dynamic and adaptive microcosms, the de-institutionalisation and de-centralisation of my own shepherd’s

hut institution to the informal street level ultimately took place on three conceptual dimensions.

Firstly, by critiquing the vertical distribution of narrative capital to the most affluent participants of society (Delory-Momberger, 2009), a major concern was to develop horizontal schemes of storytelling and expression of life story. My training as humanistic counsellor and the choice to develop collective forms of listening *activism* rather than storytelling training for those who can afford their own story coach were motivated by arguments from social justice theory: narrative practices are also needed in the format of open access and civic existential care, and not only as private practice therapeutic or self-optimisation consultations.

Secondly, responding to the tendency within society to withdraw from civic and collective engagement to privatised security zones (Low, 2003), I tried not to frame the pedagogical act as the unilateral concern to bring citizens back into the public sphere. First of all, the sources of this silent wish to retreat and timidly expressed perceptions of fear and fatigue needed to be taken seriously (O'Toole and Gale, 2013). While society and its public sphere can be increasingly perceived as uninviting or even overtly hostile, the challenge was to create cosy spaces, civic zones and public sanctuaries of micro-hospitality in this macro-setting of judgment, assimilation and conflict. Creating a physical setting based on wooden walls and a functioning wood fire stove allowed to let the concept of a mobile institution physically be grounded in a pedagogy of shelter and refuge. At odds with the standardised architecture, equipment and room design of many learning centres, educating in a tiny house is then a deliberately non-sterile, open invitation to the untidy *poetics of difference*.

The main focus of this article lies on the third dimension of my educational utopia, the notion of radical proximity to peripheral lifeworlds of society. By analysing vagabond learning entities as fundamental, not add-on stakeholders of adult learning, I will be arguing that the claim for 'really useful knowledge' also relies on the format of the educational system which might or might not have the capacity to opening up 'really useful spaces' in order to provide best conditions for recognising learners in their singular life paths.

‘Really Useful Knowledge’ in really useful spaces: the theory

Discourses of usefulness and uselessness within knowledge economies have historically been challenged in Britain by a collective search for ‘Really Useful Knowledge’. Johnson (1988) and Lovett (1988) point at the many faces and the diversity of initiatives seeking to make education more relevant to everyday struggles at the grassroots level. Movements for social change offer sometimes contradicting ideologies and conflicting viewpoints on the nature of and transformations towards social justice. Outreach to those who are variously referred to as the marginalised, the oppressed, the subaltern etc. is then framed in a vocabulary ranging from liberal to radical positions. Outreach policies which tend to conceptualise street presence as merely a tool to bring the learner on the safe side of the liberal institution reduce the issue of proximity to a question of technical know-how. In order to challenge the structural disparities between centre and periphery, a migrating institutional stance can emerge in its own right. On the opposite extreme, radical education practice often positions itself so far outside of the institutional agenda and in confrontational opposition that the result risks to be the further driving of the activist-system wedge and ideological divide (Buhren, 1997).

My hypothesis was that a migrating site of learning would have more freedom to roam between both worlds and could facilitate an emotional turn in activist adult education: the feminist transcendence of binary oppositions, suggesting that social justice does not have to pass exclusively through ideological conflict but can also be facilitated through listening and care (Bondi & Laurie, 2005). While the emancipation of the individual is historically framed in political agendas, the vagabond manifesto for adult education would then primarily encourage the “capacity for social imagination, the most important prerequisite for engaging in emancipatory action” (Hart, 1992, p154). Shifting attention from power struggles to the person’s poetic and imaginary expression does not necessarily mean to de-politicise adult education, but to prepare reconciliatory futures within dialectical rather than binary spaces of coexistence. The reconfiguration of the institutional framework towards a shared and reciprocal *co-migration* carries with it the potential reconfiguration of the locus of the peripheral voice within educational discourses. Because the mobile learning centre establishes an unprecedented intermediary space as close to the margins as to dominant discourse, participation can be housed differently in the public sphere. With a fluctuating standpoint as a permanently mobile institutional positionality, this educational system is more flexible to

reach out, to retreat, to step aside, to confront, but ultimately also to provide the rare space of stillness and care (Conradson, 2003) that the instrumental street outreach trying to make those lacking behind solely fit for employment cannot provide. The motivation to create hospitable social environments in an increasingly uninviting public sphere experience led to the design of an educator setting where listening activism became unconditional pedagogical care.

The challenge of connecting vagabond education: the practice

From the very first steps outside of academia, the proposal to intervene in an established institution as a migrating educator with a wooden hut generally caused confusion, raised doubts and triggered initial suspicion in the helping professions. The possibility to gradually make my way to working in such settings was owed to the curiosity and conviction of very few staff members, sometimes only one person, who convinced senior management to accept the presence of the Welcome Hut space as an experiment. As soon as members of staff were seeing the hut officially installed in front of the building and advertised in the media or on their institutional website, the foundation for mutual encounter between staff and the itinerant other was built and more and more educational stakeholders got timidly involved. Entering the professional world through an educational utopia however demanded first of all a shift from my own comfort zone in critical theory into learning to practice professional relations of trust and reciprocal project coordination. In order for the daily practice of reshuffling educational hierarchies to include both the periphery *and* the centre, its coherent implementation implied being constantly reshuffled and challenged as an educator myself. In order to facilitate mutual listening and situate my practice in direct connection to institutional set-ups, I had to shift my own vocabulary from critiquing the structural dysfunctions of the educational status quo to emphasising the creative freedoms available to each citizen to shape their own learner path and of each institution to be agents of their internal change. While the Welcome Hut was never intended as anti-pedagogy, its theoretical roots were inspired by the unpredictable characteristics of migration, closer to refugee errancy than to affluent cosmopolitan travel itineraries.

I had to accept that the discovery of the otherness of the other as the shared experience of proximity (Levinas, 2003) first of all meant putting my own convictions and values on hold and accepting institutionalised lifelong learning as the realities of most adult learners and as a

horizontal partnership without superiority of any one educational practice. Instead of playing out a convenient binary opposition of my de-institutionalised and ‘their’ institutionalised world, trust in dialogue gradually emerged through my own daily exposures to alterity and lifeworlds of difference (Ricoeur, 1992). In order to be actor rather than scientific observer of the professional field of lifelong learning, I had to welcome the deeper complexities of the field as equally legitimate expressions as my conceptual insights from critical theory. It became apparent that schemes of regular collaboration could only emerge within dialectical spheres of mutual trust and mutual inspiration where the mobile site is open for exploration and participation of staff as much as the visit of locals. The hut experience was not meant to be permeated by a divisive ‘superiority from below’, its intention was the enabling of the non-confrontational “articulation of ‘views from below’ – not because they offer truer, more accurate accounts of the world but because they increase the possibilities of knowledge” (Barr, 1999, p80).

It is therefore only after learning to renounce from my vertical researcher position as the superior analyst that my horizontal utopian setting set new ideas and synergies among staff teams in motion. Before establishing relations, I had to make my intrinsically imagined utopia accessible, more vulnerable and open to scrutiny by the real world. It is important to further define the ideological orientation of my educational stance when speaking about the disruptive nature of my shepherd’s hut interventions. While disruption can be used to create division and perplexity and to install certain value systems by force, my public sphere disruption through the tiny house installation had the intention to be a poetic more than political provocation towards dialogue, to challenge through connectivities rather than by means of ideological confrontations and belief competitions. I had to communicate the difference of making things messy through conflict and making things messy through dialogue. As my presence in the institution as vagabond educator was not to oppose the routine procedures, the doors within the institutional system opened and city majors, directors and board members mixed around the wood fire with those coming from the invisibilised zones of the public sphere.

What has become my daily ritual of introducing a foreign element (the hut) into an established system, has indeed become an open-ended and improvised reshuffling of routines and standards as I had theoretically imagined, in which my role is to foster the process of communication, but not to push participants into a specific direction or change agenda. As a

mobile educator observing the situatedness of learning in place-based specificities, I cannot give an expert opinion during my short term vagabond visit. Every new intervention negotiates again the role and place of the marginal others of a learning environment, and every new environment also brings a tension on how the Welcome Hut will be perceived by the institutional hierarchy. It can happen that the traveller's wagon will initially be hosted as the untidy and strange guest disturbing an institutional identity of stability, preservation and control. But it can also happen that in the course of that same project, this presence triggers new forms of mobility and outreach within this institution's walls, therefore transcending the fear of the unknown worlds of the temporary, the in-transit and the interstice.

In-betweenness as fragile and fertile ground

The Welcome Hut as an in-between site of learning poses an important question that is situated beyond postmodern fatalism. Is in-betweenness always one's active choice, just a conceptual or professional option for the individual educator? I would like to point at the unilateral orientation of such a question. Working in-between does not solely rely on the educator and career plans. Working in-between the institutional walls and the vast public sphere has allowed me to witness, observe and reflect on the major role that the social, cultural and professional environment plays in supporting or delegitimising in-between practices. In a transient world order in motion, major societal struggles (loneliness, hidden precarities, radicalisations etc.) will increasingly *not* be played out within the institution, but outside of the system's safe walls (Bauman, 2011). If scientific discourse accepts that many societal issues are not sufficiently addressed by the normative institution as we know them, one could argue that it is the educational, social and health care system and not the individual learner that should act towards making in-betweenness a hospitable place in society. I would now like to discuss the Welcome Hut case study as a *rooted* professional practice, a practice rooted in mobility. This means changing the perspective from the innovative, eclectic project of an individual artist to transposing this isolated case to a broader potential of a reconfigured adult educational sphere in which migrating institutions are not peripheral but central to a co-designed way of educating adults, dialoguing between movement and stillness.

When I started working with the Welcome Hut in the public sphere, the large majority of counselling professionals and social workers that I knew from my own training

programmes looked at the concept with suspicion and reservations. Offering almost the same activities as them, having followed the same courses as them suddenly did not seem professional, respectable and reliable because it was happening in a mobile shepherd's hut in the public sphere. In-between practice was kept at a safe distance. And then, when I first started practising my concept in priority housing areas with the help of art centres rather than local social work, the reaction to my shepherd's hut presence by the inhabitants of the housing towers was also based on suspicion: 'You are elitist wanting to make us talk about positive things in our lives so full of hardship' was a comment I heard quite a few times, illustrating among other things a distance and gap between the perceived reality of the housing estates and the kind of relational activity that was authorised for me, coming from a humanistic background. Neither inhabitants nor professionals initially wanted to enter the hut or embrace this uncategorised practice. When I had made in-betweenness my professional choice, I did not deliberately choose homelessness, the impossibility to be accepted by the one or the other. I chose the hope that the vagabond perimeter might become a hospitable rather than hostile space. Is in-betweenness then simply the individual's responsibility? Is its rejection then a societal dysfunction? In-betweenness could be an inclusive practice, a hospitality hub and it could be given a legitimate place in society (Parr, 2008). Most of the time however, in-betweenness is considered as an exclusionary label. With 8 years field experience and the decision to continue going to housing estates to gradually deconstruct the suspicions of 'elitism' by observing and listening other people's lives, I have found a way to reframe my own deviance as a mobile adult educator in positive terms, making this liminal space my professional home. After several years of resilience in the precarious zones of 'neither...nor' and support from very few but passionate individuals in hesitant institutions, my concept has received several innovation awards both in social work as well as counselling. Going beyond my own individual case study, the question still remains how such deviance and the dignity of these margins that I have come to discover can be welcomed through encounter, not through containment. While the individual adult educator has a certain creative freedom to facilitate hospitality in adverse circumstances, society also has the capacity to choose how to receive, integrate and not to ignore this unclassified otherness worthy of a responsive system.

This paper encouraged educators as well as institutions to re-negotiate ideals of stillness and to enter the complexities of positionality in adult education to investigate by themselves the more obscure zones of the public sphere. To what extent is it only the learners

who withdraw from society? Does formal education withdraw from learners as well? Can educational institutions afford to function around a sedentarising centre if indeed they want to bridge gaps and respond to a silently expressed generalised climate of suspicion and distance?



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