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In this article, the authors describe a new vision of open education, a "public pedagogy," that can respond to both the neoliberal university and contemporary rightwing media.

Critical Engagement for Active Participation: The Digital University in an Age of Populism

Sheila MacNeill, Bill Johnston, Keith Smyth

Introduction: The Context and Aims of Our Work

Our position is that the current sociocultural and political crisis in the United States, United Kingdom, and Mainland Europe has developed through two interrelated ideological and political forces: neoliberalism and populism. It is this combination of forces acting to impoverish university education and adult learning (Johnston, MacNeill, & Smyth, 2018; Jones, 2019; Valentine, 2019), which demands a response of critique and resistance expressed through new ideas, approaches, and practices of adult education. We respond by advocating a new approach to critical pedagogy based in progressive uses of digital technology and increased commitment to open education. In this chapter, we will focus on the pedagogical challenge of populism, having dealt at length with the influence of neoliberalism in our recent book, *Conceptualising the digital university: The intersection of policy, pedagogy and practice* (Johnston et al., 2018).

We propose that populist campaigns of misinformation and political distortion can more accurately be seen as an exercise in mass adult education, which must be challenged by adult educators. It is, we argue, a "public pedagogy" that must challenge populism by developing citizen's critical capacity to resist populist narratives. Participation in social movements (e.g., for national self-determination and for action on climate change) is central to engaging citizen's criticality. We present the role of the "academic developer" as "open, critical provocateur" as central to achieving this new public pedagogy.

In this chapter, we explore the extent to which digital technologies and practices allow us to rethink where the university, curricula, and educational opportunities offered are located and co-located in order to extend higher education as a public good. Drawing on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1974) and challenging the constraints of the bounded curriculum (Hall & Smyth, 2016),

we propose a concept of the digitally distributed curriculum grounded in open education to address the challenge of neoliberalism and populism from a position of critical and public pedagogy. Our model of a digitally distributed curriculum visualizes the digital university in terms of a curriculum shaped and enabled by a number of core values and commitments: *porosity, open scholarship, co-location, co-production, praxis, public pedagogy, and participation*. If fully developed, this concept offers a means to portray the digital university as part of a project to reform higher education as a public good.

Our perspective is based within our context of traditional formal adult education within the UK higher education/university sector. We have observed neoliberal influences impacting core notions and expectations of university provision in the United Kingdom, for example, the increased drive from government (still the main funder and, more importantly, regulator of the UK university sector) for universities to align themselves as "businesses" with explicit and implicit norms around "service provision" and students as "empowered consumers" (Dickinson, 2019). However, our work is centered on extending the notion of what a university is, can, and should be in the twenty-first century (Collini, 2017). Through an alternative view, we seek to extend the role of digital technologies to allow greater engagement between universities, the communities they sit within, and a more open approach to accessing and creating learning spaces that cut across traditional educational boundaries including adult education.

The relevant theoretical perspective in our work is critical pedagogy, which we align to the values of open educational practice. This alignment informs our approach to the development of academic praxis as a basis for developing new forms of open knowledge construction, development of critically informed digital literacies, and increased community participation aligned to notions of the common good (Darder, 2018). Using a critical pedagogy perspective, our critique of the role of technology, not only within our universities, but also across wider society, seeks to create "a language of hope and critique" (Giroux, 2011). As Giroux highlights, education is inherently situated within political and civic power relationships, populism having key currency at this point in time warping the public conversation in order to sustain the politics of Trump and the Brexit. Critical pedagogy provides proven methods to allow people to question their contexts, develop notions of agency (praxis), and thus to create conditions for social transformation.

Development of shared discourse should allow wider, democratic participation around the use of digital technologies throughout society in order to "challenge and change what needs to be challenged and changed" (Freire, 1974). In terms of adult education, we see the notion of the curriculum as pedagogical space that needs to be transformational. Challenging notions of curriculum is a key area we will return to in more detail later.

## A Public Pedagogy in Our Age of Populism and Mass Adult Education

A number of factors are now intertwined within our age of populism. Education was once seen as impartial, employing experts as trusted sources of knowledge curation, sharing, and development. Now, populist political messaging derides expert opinion in the quest for electoral victory and reduces complexity to simple opinion. President Trump claims not to be "a big believer in man-made climate change" (Dennis, 2016) and during the Brexit referendum, Michael Gove (Conservative MP and Brexit supporter) claimed the people of the United Kingdom had "had enough of experts" (Mance, 2016). Both encourage a tsunami of distrust in the validity of research, and the rise of acceptance of non-evidenced political rhetoric as fact.

When critical digital literacy is a key competence for all citizens, neoliberal governments, in tandem with global technology companies, focus on developing the curriculum for coding, rather than criticality. We do recognize the need for software coders/engineers; however, there is an equal need for critical digital literacy around information dissemination (fact checking, etc.), and data literacy, particularly in light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Channel 4 News, 2018).

To draw these strands together, we suggest that much "adult learning" in the age of Trump and Brexit can be conceived as *an exercise in mass adult education in the form of populist political campaigning*. In particular, such mass education exploits the power of the Internet and digital media such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to the mainstream print and broadcast media. Our contention is that this phenomenon can be addressed and challenged through the idea of a renewed *public pedagogy*, which crosses boundaries between adult education, populism, and the content of populist campaigning modes. We illustrate our perspective using the model in Figure 9.1.

In our model, we emphasize the idea of public pedagogy aligned to adult education (Giroux, 2000; Sandlin et al., 2013; Schubert, 2010) as a vital component of the public space for open, democratic debate and critique (Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1989). Our contention is shared with Giroux (2000), who frames public pedagogy within the argument that academic work undertaken in a university should matter in relation to social needs and the wider good, and ultimately with improving the human condition. In current circumstances, populist campaigning activity distorts and undermines the scope of public pedagogy. There are direct synergies here with important pedagogical notions of "outside curricula" (Schubert, 2010) and critical forms such as participative communal pedagogies, and of porosity, which we return to in our discussion of the digitally distributed curriculum.

We can elaborate our model by portraying public pedagogy as in part *an experience of popular movements opposing neoliberal populism*. Such movements are counter-hegemonic and contain strands of opposition to populist campaign narratives. This extends the notion of public pedagogy located

Figure 9.1. Public pedagogy and the public space.
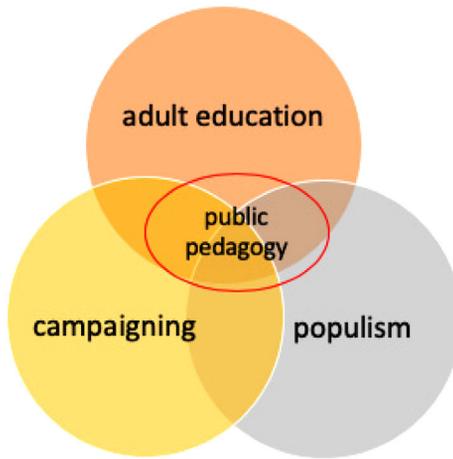
outside formal education (e.g., in museums, libraries, and popular culture Sandlin et al., 2013) to encompass movements for change as significant sites of learning.

The movements for national self-determination constituted by the "stateless nations of Europe"—Scotland, Catalonia, and the Basque country are long-standing and complex movements based in a desire to separate from an overbearing larger national entity, and their politics offer a notional "curriculum" including a re-telling of national history and proposals for political change, including alternatives to neoliberalism. Just and Muhr (2019) describe how The Women's March movement in the United States developed as alternative act of populism in the aftermath of Trump winning the Presidency. Their critique of its development also positions it as a powerful example of an alternative model of social action development and leadership based on collaboration and contestation. The global movement on climate change ignited by Greta Thunberg offers another example of the *campaign as classroom*. In this case, knowledge of climate science channeled through radical activism presents a counter-narrative to climate change deniers like Trump.

National Populism: Re-Shaping the Space of Public Pedagogy

National Populism challenges mainstream politics, overturning conventional parties and their leaderships, introducing new actors, redefining issues, and proposing radical new solutions (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2019; Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Kleis Nielsen, 2019).

A key characteristic of populism is a powerful narrative of disenfranchised so-called "ordinary people" revolting against the received wisdom of the

establishment. The core populist challenge to democracy is posed in terms of aspects of the democratic system deemed to be elitist, unrepresentative, and unresponsive to the concerns of "the average citizen." The elite would obviously include the well-educated section of the elite, the "Graduariat" if you like. Conversely, the "uneducated" are stereotyped as having lost out to the metropolitan elites and are presented as the authentic angry voice of popular wisdom. Key populist narratives include: the decline of the nation; questioning the capacity to absorb immigrants; anger at economic inequality; skepticism about the "cosmopolitan" values and interests of the elite; rejection of experts. Racism and xenophobia and virulent criticisms of opponents are common. In essence, populism presents citizens with a ready-made "hidden curriculum" in the form of a simplistic narrative, encouraging support for Trump ("Make America Great Again") and Brexit ("Take Back Control"). Anyone presenting alternative or more complex ideas is immediately characterized as anti-democratic, the "enemy" of the popular will and framed by a simple dualist epistemology.

As we have introduced here, the phenomena of Trump and Brexit can meaningfully be regarded as a massive "adult education" experience, with "knowledge" transmitted to whole populations via the campaigning activities of national populists. In effect, we have seen the creation of a "massive, open, online course" in civics channeled via the Internet and social and other media, with a "curriculum" promoting anti-immigration, racism, denigration of "experts," and justification of inequality. This is rather different from the skills, personal development, and discipline-based curricula offered by formal education. At the same time, formal adult education in universities and elsewhere has been neoliberalized both in terms of an impoverished curriculum and a managerialist form of governance based on corporate values and practices (Valentine, 2019). Thus formal education has been weakened and harnessed to neoliberal objectives at the same time as populist narratives have been vigorously promoted across societies.

The effect of this significant distorting project is to legitimize extremism and impoverish society's capacity for understanding and humanity. Educators must intervene using alternative forms of learning and teaching, incorporating the Internet, and creating new forms of community to expose and counteract populist movements and the mis/dis-information influencing their supporters. This challenge raises issues of the capacity for critical evaluation on the part of the population, which should be a focus for radical educators.

Media and Information Literacy (Johnston et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2013) should be a significant aspect of that focus by developing the ability of citizens to analyze and challenge the messaging of populists. There should be a place in every curriculum to identify and critique examples of online political manipulation. The Internet could then be reimagined as part of an open democracy aligned with the digitally distributed curriculum and harnessed to critical pedagogy and radical adult education.

The situation we face today calls for educational interventions based not only in critical pedagogy but on the progressive use of technology. In this context, the notion of the unbundled and "rebundled" university (Czerniewicz, 2018) is emerging to describe the increasingly complex set of stakeholders involved in developing and delivering education. Educational technology providers are rapidly becoming mainstream partners within and across institutions.

In our recent work (Johnston et al., 2018), we argued that the early rhetoric positioning open online education to widen access to tertiary and higher education has not happened. Instead, we have seen extension of access for those who have *already* experienced formal higher education, and not opportunities for those seeking to engage for the first time. This situation needs new thinking and approaches and we set out a model of *digitally distributed curriculum* generated in our recent work.

A Response to the Symbiosis of Neoliberalism and Populism: The Digitally Distributed Curriculum

Populism offers a framing strategy to analyze current directions within the sociocultural formations of neoliberal political economy and the nature of Trumpism and Brexit. The educational task is to challenge the legitimacy and efficacy of neoliberalized adult education and to connect with critical pedagogy as an alternative approach to the societal effects of populism. The overriding priority for critical educators is to maintain the practice of discursive construction (Jones & Goodfellow, 2012) and keep together as a radical "thought collective" (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 15), thereby creating a movement for critical public pedagogy to resist the impoverishment of debate in the public space.

In these terms, adult education is best understood as part of a social whole including politics, law, and social activism rather than a narrower concept of the curriculum as a repository of knowledge, skills, and limited forms of personal development. The aim of public pedagogy in the present age is therefore to generate new directions for democratic strategies to overcome the populist surge around Trump and Brexit.

The task for radical educators is to not let right-wing populists exploit the anti-austerity feelings of an increasingly large section of the population. The question is how? Our view is that rethinking "the digital" within a critical pedagogy perspective provides a constructive way to challenge and change responses to neoliberalism. Equally notions of openness and porosity challenge the boundaries between sectors, curricula, and forms of access to adult learning. At base, these educational concerns are fundamental to the question of democracy and public pedagogy in the age of Trump and Brexit. We offer our model of the digitally distributed curriculum as such a tool, to be developed in the realm of public pedagogy and adult education.

Figure 9.2. The digitally distributed curriculum.
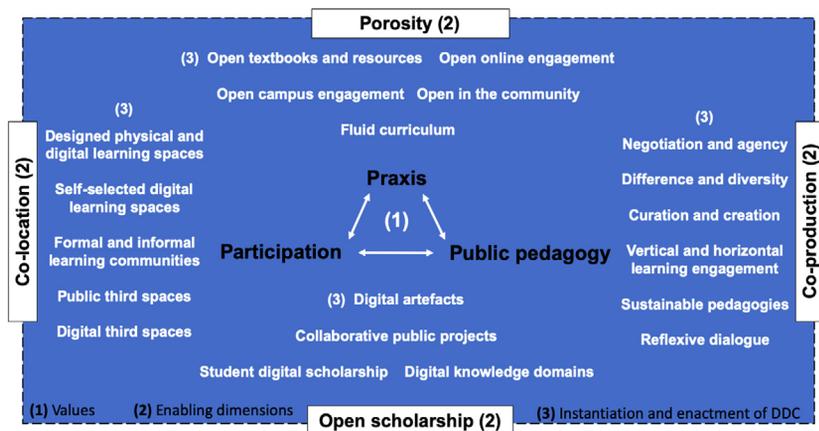
From a critical pedagogy perspective, we have framed much of our response to the neoliberalization of education within a critical consideration and repositioning of what the curriculum is, where it is located, and whom it is for. Moving beyond well-established notions of the curriculum as a body of knowledge, as a product, or as process (Smith, 1996, 2000), and extending the notion of curriculum as praxis into the idea of curriculum as space and place. In doing so we sought to build upon the work of Hall and Smyth (2016) who outline the range of ways—technological, cultural, and pedagogical—in which the curriculum and the activities of the curriculum are currently often "bounded" within the university. These include, but are not limited to: (i) the cultural narrowness of the curriculum; (ii) modularized curricula structures that create false distance between disciplines and cohorts; (iii) abstract and other forms of assessment that "lock" student knowledge and knowledge artefacts within the virtual and physical walls of the university; and (iv) one dimensional conceptualizations of open education that conflate open with open online.

As we moved toward a fuller conceptualization our focus shifted toward defining the digitally distributed curriculum in relation to: the *values* that we feel should underpin it; the *enabling dimensions* that are required to link those values to practice, through establishing the context and conditions for practice; and the specific approaches to practice through which the digitally distributed curriculum is instantiated and enacted. These facets are set out in Figure 9.2: The digitally distributed curriculum.

Although we can only summarize here key aspects of how we have conceptualized the digitally distributed curriculum, in the context of our preceding consideration there are a number of salient points to share.

The first concerns the centrality of public pedagogic practices, educational praxis as a means of challenge and change, and of participation and

participative practices within our conceptualization of the digitally distributed curriculum. The second salient point relates to the various "enabling dimensions" we identify. These are unified by a commitment to democratizing: (i) the content of the curriculum (co-production); (ii) how the curriculum can be engaged with and where it is located in space and place (porosity and co-location); and (iii) how the learning and knowledge creation supported within and through the curriculum can produce outputs and artifacts having wider societal relevance and value (co-production and open scholarship). The third salient point relates to the specific pedagogic locales, approaches, and interventions through which the enabling dimensions of the digitally distributed are enacted and realized. Through our work to date, we are confident that these represent an important range of evidence-based and critically focused educational practices that need to coexist and intersect in order to harness the digital in extending higher education and the activities of higher education as a public good, and to extend formal and informal opportunities to engage in tertiary learning.

We offer this conceptualization of the digitally distributed curriculum as a working tool, or catalyst, for four specific purposes. The first lies in opening up the curriculum as a public space, which is open, distributed, and negotiated. The second is to explore how to harness public and digital third spaces to co-locate the university in local and geographically dispersed communities, within which increased opportunities for adult and continuing education can be offered. The third is to explore how to democratize university estate spaces for openness. Finally, we seek to offer practical curriculum design considerations through which to inscribe values of humanist and critical adult education that offer a response to educational practices which sustain or offer a platform for the populist views of a privileged, culturally unrepresentative minority.

The aim of a given intervention using our model would be to develop critical insight into populist narratives and the confidence to devise effective challenges. Insight and confidence would be gained through collaboration, co-construction, and co-production of the learning experience and outcomes. This would include the co-production of learning artifacts that enact praxis through the narratives and challenges they communicate, and through being produced as "open" artifacts to be shared and utilized in the public domain. Locating an intervention in the particular contexts of an everyday life shaped by populism and neoliberalism would provide opportunities to reshape the landscape of adult education to embody openness and democracy, in essence, learning by reading and challenging power.

A Model for Critical Engagement: The Role of the Academic Developer and the Digitally Enabled University

Drawing on our experiences as teachers, researchers, educational developers, technologists, freelancers, union activists, professional association leaders, and voluntary sector activists, we propose a way of conceiving, analyzing, and

Figure 9.3. Conceptual matrix for the digital university.
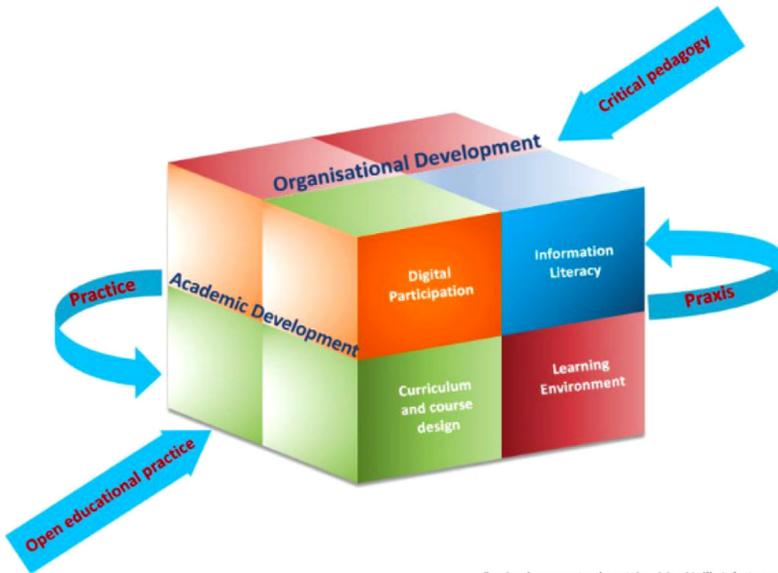
Revised conceptual matrix,, MacNeill, Johntson, Smyth, (2019)

changing educational formations such as universities and by extension adult education programs. These experiences have coalesced in the shared understanding and role of the "academic developer." In the United Kingdom, the majority of universities have an academic development unit or team to support the professional development of academic teaching staff. These teams support the development of teaching practice and research of theories of learning, as well as providing formal postgraduate qualifications in teaching and education. In tandem with these developments, a growing body of research around academic development and the role of the academic developer has emerged (Sutherland & Grant, 2016). These units tend to report to institutional targets around professional development targets and institutional goals. Building on existing framework that conceptualizes orientations of academic development (Land, 2004; Neame, 2013), we propose an additional classification, that of the *critical, open provocateur.* This provides an explicit link to developing practice that is based on both critical and open pedagogical perspectives, and also is cognizant of wider socio-political context in which any development of academic practice is situated. The open practice element could also be used to increase notions of porosity and sharing of experiences across traditional sectoral boundaries (Johnson, MacNeill, & Smyth, 2018).

We developed a conceptual matrix located in key organizational dimensions as a strategic tool for educators to deploy in the service of critical engagement with learners and society (Figure 9.3). We see the matrix as providing an

alternative way for people to analyze and contextualize their own practice and provide a range of alternative readings of institutional reality within a dialogic process akin to the culture circles that were originally part of Freire's practice. This process could be used as the basis for creating extended, critical, open, collegial spaces for knowledge exchange and development at the individual, group and organizational level.

The main intellectual strategy we adopted is described as *discursive construction* (Jones & Goodfellow, 2012), and we draw on Freire's work (1974) in our pedagogical thinking. Our contention is that a blending of these strategies offers a mechanism for radical educators to conceive of themselves and their practices as an alternative to the kinds of neoliberalized educational practices aligned to populist forces that we have earlier described in this chapter. In these contested times, we believe it is more important than ever for radical educators to emulate that way of working, using exemplars like Freire to build international connections and collaborations that influence politics and that inspire public imagination and trust. We believe our matrix could be adapted and used within other educational settings, including the wider context of adult education, as well as providing a mechanism for increasing porosity between and across formal and informal adult learning opportunities.

We developed the quadrants of the matrix to provide a holistic, novel, and accessible view of the elements of a digitally enabled university. This balance of the familiar (learning environment, curriculum, and course design) and unfamiliar (digital participation and information literacy) dimensions was chosen to stimulate discussion among staff and students. The participation quadrant explicitly focuses attention on the links between formal, university structures, and the wider community (including the role of adult education) alongside notions of digital participation, knowledge creation, and sharing alongside access to publicly funded digitally rich learning spaces.

The quadrants are situated within two key institutional dimensions of organizational and academic development. We propose that these two areas are often not linked effectively, leading to strategy around organizational change not actually making any impact or changing practice. Combining open educational practice and critical pedagogy, we contend that the model identifies the key aspects of praxis for meaningful change. We imagine a new form of critically engaged public pedagogy, or digitally distributed collective movement, which could be culturally contextualized and developed at local, national, and international levels.

Key to this process is the agency of educational developers employing: (i) digitally enriched learning spaces; (ii) supporting democratic engagement in learning by involving co-production of the curriculum; (iii) developing porous boundaries between knowledge, spaces, and formal organization; and (iv) applying a new focus on digitally distributed curriculum. We argue that this renewed practice in turn requires a change in traditional academic development roles. It is in this spirit that we propose that the role of academic

developers needs to move from a focus on institutional compliance, to challenging academic development structures involved in neoliberal control and oppression (Roxå & Märtensson, 2017) to one of open, critical provocateurs. We believe that academic developers are uniquely placed within universities to critically challenge accepted practice and lead the development of more inclusive, open, and democratic forms of educational practice and public pedagogy. We suggest that this approach can be adapted more widely across the landscape of adult education.

Conclusion

At present, the educational challenges to populism described in this chapter are emerging and need to be explored and developed to create appropriate organizational contexts and units of activity.

Our interim proposals for enactment of radical public pedagogy include:

1. Restore the validity of knowledge and critique in public discourse, for example, develop concise critical "texts" exposing the fallacies contained in populist narratives on immigration, etc.
2. Provide education in media and information literacy, for example, make space in curricula and disseminate through open systems, focus on internet culture, and analysis of popular narratives, educate more citizen journalists within community groups, encourage academics to make a commitment to this type of community involvement.
3. Develop new, nontraditional forms like the porous university/cooperative university.
4. Give priority to promoting open education and develop relevant offering, for example, via staff development programs.
5. Form local/national/international collectives of educators to directly challenge populist misinformation in social media, perhaps focused on an alternative "curriculum," for example, utilizing existing networks and conferences.
6. Engage educators with oppositional movements and offer critical pedagogy forms/skills to those movements, for example, climate change activism around Green Deals; engage with existing local community groups.

The forces of neoliberalism and populism are powerful and embedded in state power, economic reality, political culture, and institutional strategies so adult educators cannot overcome them alone. For educators, there is a longer-term job of analyzing the deep roots of populism and working to address those roots through pedagogical initiatives, including a commitment to a fundamental shift in ideas about the very purposes of a university.

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