'Silence is the sentence': adult learners' experiences of a co-created curriculum constructed through free writing tasks

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Abstract

This paper outlines the pedagogical approaches taken on a University Access course, teaching predominantly mature students on a 12-week 'inclusion in education' module. The methods aimed to validate and develop literacy and academic skills for students undertaking undergraduate courses. Practice on the programme of study, replicated over three years, is informed by transformative learning theories. We outline how our developing praxis situates students' self-concepts in confronting past biographical experiences of education and empowers them to improved literacy and purpose. We further propose that such andragogical approaches to teaching and learning can potentially serve as a model for improved literacy practices in post-compulsory education in England – a curriculum and qualification regime in radical need of overhaul and replacement.

Keywords: literacy; transformative andragogy; co-created curriculum; adult learning; agency

1. Introduction

Traditionally, literacy provision in England and Wales education is available through a limited set of routes that do not reflect well the literacy crises in the UK, that sees a reported 5 million functionally illiterate adults. As observed elsewhere (Scott, 2018; Hughes, 2018), English is a poor vehicle for literacy: '[t]he identity of English has been and is founded on premises and practices that are not viable … even though it may continue doggedly to make special claims for itself … English … works against the majority of its students' (Peim 1994, 8). For younger students and particularly those 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET), Foundation Learning has been designed as an intervention for skills deficit focused largely on literacy and as an agenda of social inclusion (Smith and Wright, 2015); the type of literacy provision 'designed to domesticate rather than liberate' (Lavender & Tuckett 2020: 31).

The UK literacy crisis threatens to get worse, even while successive Ministries scramble to emphasise traditional literacy and numeracy in school. At the expense of a rich, diverse curriculum (including Music and Arts), school pupils are in many cases directed to start the two-year Level 2 English GCSE courses a year earlier, thus investing heavily and arguably

unethically in an academic qualification to deliver improved levels of literacy alongside improved grade scores. The emphasis is entirely instrumentalist with employers needs shaping classroom provision, for instance with employers calling for more onus on 'oral communication' (Hall et al., 1999). It appears that teachers with subject specialisms in English are distrusted to teach and marginalised by others, such as curriculum designers and employer focus groups; as such 'the object of activity is in satisfying the institutional and authoritarian outliers defining 'literacy'' (Scott, 2018: 3). Literacy without creativity is banal and literacy that is taught in a functional and performative manner – to the test, to improve an institution's scores, to help secure a job or one's economic prosperity – is transactional, and lacks deeper integrity, as reported by the chair of HEPI: 'Creating art or appreciating artistic endeavour is seen as producing a nation with an enriched cultural and social life, and a possible route to personal fulfilment. But there is a flaw in the logic that says to count is to be economically productive, but to create is not.' (Last 2017: 1).

The GCSE is the supposed gold standard in literacy, though it is conflated with 'English' (as literature and language) and functions much more as an opportunity for assessment than a course of study. This is reinforced by the 2011 policy recommendation from Professor Alison Wolf's review of Vocational Education that school-leavers entering the post-compulsory FE and vocational sector are compelled to re-sit the English (and Maths) schools qualification if they have not secured a "decent" 'C' standard pass in school. The resits policy has not been effective – if success is determined by students meeting the required C (or '4') grade at the second or third attempt, the policy can often be seen to compound existing failure (Hughes, 2018). In our experiences as FE teachers, 16 year old school leavers are demoralised and discouraged by the resit experience, with some FE students obliged to re-sit it until the age of 19 while undertaking demanding vocational courses.

Where results are determined by the terminal assessment of a rigid written exam, claims to address the traditional components: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, largely consist of studying archaic English texts, with a fixation on the memorisation of classroom-based grammar. Such approaches have little cultural relevance to many students and, worse still, remain the single, prime option for adults returning to college, who are often surprised to discover that education has been in stasis since leaving school.

One slight variation is the option of Functional Skills, a slightly more flexible post-compulsory Level 2 equivalent, with varied entry points and assessments by exam and graded work. Functional Skills tends to be less regarded, has no formal parity to the GCSE and is often not recognised as accredited literacy for Higher Education access. This effectively creates a two-tiered system of literacy across the lines of vocational and academic routes (Duckworth and Smith, 2019) that has been said to denigrate the dignity of students (Scott, 2018). The impact of this extends beyond students: situating literacy within such a narrow framework has a negative impact on teaching, and the recruitment and retention of newly qualified teaching staff; often, they find little agency to teach the subject with enthusiasm and passion, as it is stultified by curriculum constraints. The message that achievement in 'English' is framed on either 'success' or 'failure' leads us to draw the conclusion that improper policy and the poorly imagined design of literacy for schools is, for too many students, disenfranchising.

Wolf's recommendations that led to the resit policy intended, rightly, to arrest a perceived decline in literacy standards; though the language of incline and decline keeps us shackled to the literacy ladder that Lynn Tett (2013) problematised. Therefore, it would appear that the teaching of 'English' as a disciplinary subject in schools is an ineffective vehicle for driving up literacy standards; furthermore, the GCSE framework is an ill-fitting system, especially within FE where students expect a different experience to that of school – which was often disciplinarian and negative (Anderson and Peart, 2015; Smith and Wright, 2015).

It is against this 'literacy landscape' that we, as teaching staff at a widening participation University situated in the Midlands, lead our module for adult students. Laura Rendón's insistence that '[w]e need

to validate students' capacities for intellectual development at the beginning, not at the end, of their academic careers' in order to ensure that they feel worthy and valued (Rendón, 1992: 63), underscores the ethos of our short course. As Lavender and Tuckett also state, traditionally, '[d]ifficulties with literacy [are] seen as a feature of personal aptitude' (2020: 33). We recognise that our students are inquisitive, enthusiastic, and eager to learn and perceive any deficit as being about confidence. What they tend to share across the teaching the course is analogous with many others returning to classrooms as mature students: a sense of being alienated from educational environments; and a desire to reclaim their dignity in and through learning. Understanding this, alongside Freire's perspective of liberation as 'transforming actions' and his concept of 'conscientization', gives us a sound basis for method. 'Conscientization' is cited as similar to agency – being able to act upon the world and reality and to transform one's life. This – we feel – contextualises and orientates the educational philosophy of the course and our approach to teaching.

2. Pedagogical approach to Access to HE

The students involved in this course participate in a preliminary 12-week 'inclusive education' module prior to their involvement on an undergraduate course. The 'inclusive education' module runs once a week for 3 hours, with an hour in the afternoon following a morning session. Numbers are high and increase year on year; its first iteration in 2018, was attended by 35 students, and this increased in 2021-2022 to 80. The pedagogical approach – now in its fourth year of implementation – has remained the same in focus and manner, and is outlined below.

We start from the perspective that the outcomes ('learning objectives') of the course are not significant and this emancipates teachers and students alike. There are formal outcomes, which are outlined below – learners will:

- Demonstrate an understanding of current debates in the field of inclusive education and practice
- Relate concepts and theories of inclusion to current educational practice
- Reflect on your understanding of inclusion and educational practice effectively in a given format

Importantly, we avoid being bound by these outcomes; the module description reinforces this by inviting students to explore their own beliefs and values towards meaningful lifelong learning. We also underpin the course by a set of implied and aspirational objectives: we want to celebrate "who" the students are (rather than who they are "not"), and what the students have to offer as opposed to what they may lack. We prefer students to view learning as a series of encounters and episodes, rather than a set of targets measured by assessment. Holistically, we aim to create a community of writers and a formal sense of belonging within HE to equip adult students with the potential to re-evaluate their educational biographies. We also carry some assumptions:

a) Our students arrive with rich life experiences, but perspectives of education that may not be generally positive.

b) Some of the negative experiences they have encountered are due to their not being recognised for who they are. Their accents, backgrounds, contributions are unvalued, discredited and ignored and they feel peripheral to inclusion.

c) Their expectations of education can be diminished from the beginning.

d) As mature students, they may be intimidated by formal education, teachers, classrooms and particularly the writing process.

e) They need to feel that they belong.

Our aims are to eliminate their apprehensions by enculturating confidence and participation, to denounce the fetishisation of grading written work, while creating a scaffolded support mechanism through free writing that confronts and celebrates whomsoever our students are becoming. We manage this through the teaching of content – general social, psychological, and educational theory – in order that a language can codify the personal transformation.

The course comprises two main teachers, with Graduate Teaching Assistants supporting, who also lead on sessions. We make a rough plan of what to cover as content, which has tended to be based on educational theorists who might be classed as 'critical pedagogues', including Ivan Illich, though the course has also extended to academics, cultural figures and commentators from Gilles Deleuze, Basil Bernstein, Albert Bandura, Ken Robinson, and bell hooks.

As we sought to set a context for thinking and a basis for writing, most of these theorists were, initially, introduced to give the programme a working structure; conceptual links were established iteratively and collaboratively from week to week. However, as we continued to develop the programme, by the second year of delivery we started to see the content as largely superfluous; and by the third year, we started to use the authors and theorists to give shape to a deterritorialisation of 'inclusivity'. By "drawing in" the students themselves, we started to locate biographic reference points that spoke more closely to them. As a culturally diverse group, the incorporation of bell hooks, W. E. B. Du Bois, and more local theorists, academics, and cultural figures such as Professor Stuart Hall, Gary Thomas, Rob Smith, Kris Kristofferson, Morrissey, Jim Showell, Liz Berry, etc.

As a result, each session now tends to be delivered through the following routine: two hours of content, followed by a one-hour lunchbreak, and then a final hour dedicated to a free-writing reflection activity. The final part is explained as voluntary, an opportunity to synthesise the day's content and discussions, a space to enable students to process the day's content. However, rather than encourage the students to integrate the cascaded knowledge, we invite them to negotiate meaning-making, by drawing on and incorporating their own 'previous experiences'. As this is a free-writing exercise, we set no expectations or demands for them to explain or demonstrate a technical understanding of concepts or theories; but rather, to reflect on an – indeed any – aspect of the material that has chimed with them, and to write about this in an honest and personalised way. The main thing, we stress, is to write freely, as part of a low-stakes approach, freed from the traditional academic concerns of theoretical content, grammar, and other bases for judging and grading written work. We aim to inculcate a sense of dialogue and support with each student; so, when we return the work to the students, we offer only positive feedback and praise, along with the building of further questions (and memos).

3. Research design & ethics

As part of this section, we include samples extracted from the students writings – both as primary data, to address and include the students' sense of self, and becoming writers, and also to illustrate the academic content of the curriculum, and how this is complemented by personal meaning-making through the free-writing exercises.

Given the personal nature of the largely autobiographical material, we ensured ethical principles and processes were met. We explained to the students, on a weekly basis, that the free-writing exercise was fulfilling the following pedagogic purposes: to develop inclusion, confidence, and a sense of self as writer. We ensured that participating students were comfortable with us using the samples of their writing. As part of securing their consent, we explained that we wished to use aspects of their writing, to illustrate how the module is constructed, and how it operates as part of a paper for a formal journal submission. We approached all individuals whose writing contributions would be used in this paper retrospectively at the course end to gain consent for inclusion here. We ensured anonymity by randomly allocating pseudonyms, which were then applied to the sampled quotes, to mitigate against potential harm resulting from personal disclosures. There may be considered a question of plagiarism regarding the citation of the samples used, but we consider the extracts to be akin to vignettes to highlight the students (as research participants) views (Kara, 2015).

Ethical approval was secured from the university, through an application to the ethics committee; as part of this, we explained our intention to use student's personal writing extracts, as a way to highlight the construction, operation and outputs generated by our particular course. We acknowledge that using student contributions for the purposes of academic publication can be problematic. However,

following Watson's work (2011), we achieved consensus by sharing drafts of the paper with the students, and entering in dialogue with them, to ensure that their thoughts and views were accurately represented.

4. Discussion

Mezirow (1978) outlined how certain trigger events precipitate a challenge to existing mental models and schemata for meaning making. In learning contexts, these can be induced by the introduction of new information that initiates critical reflection. Mezirow labels these 'disorientating dilemmas' and suggests they can become the prompts for transformative experiences, where decisions, memories and responses are internalised into potentially new processes or ways of seeing, doing and being. These disorientating dilemmas have much in common with 'threshold concepts' (Meyer and Land, 2005), where a shift occurs in ontological position and changes in perspective accompany transition points in the learning journey. Meyer and Land argue that significant changes in perspective are probably irreversible; therefore, the traversing of threshold phases can be complex and emotional, but also empowering.[1] Barriers can be interpersonal or intrapersonal and may be situational (circumstantial, e.g., domestic obligations for the student) or institutional (e.g., organisational practices around learning institutions, limited tutorial support, pastoral care, lack of facilities). We might also add that there may be cultural barriers, such as alienation from a curriculum that lacks significance or relevance; here, arguments relating to 'decolonising the curriculum', which signify the importance of providing not only a diverse curriculum, but also promoting culturally situated knowledge, can be important.

Rancière, who remains a significant reference point throughout the module, might see the model of the threshold concept as a way of writing poiesis, i.e., an approach that brings something new into being that did not previously exist. This, in turn, can produce a dissensus – the disruption of consensus – of the 'the idea of the proper', which traditionally surrounds and defines the academic work that students produce. Rancière sees this as a necessary method of equality in the face of 'hierarchical distributions where everyone's speech is determined in terms of their proper place and their activity in terms of its proper function, without remainder' (Corcoran in Rancière 2010: 4). Our commitment then, as Rancière suggests, is to oblige our students to realize their capacity to create, as it were, 'a circle of power homologous to the circle of powerlessness that ties the student to the explicator of the old method' (Rancière 1991: 15).

We are aware that we have the privilege of autonomy to teach the way that we wish, in conjunction with this, we have the luxury of fairly small groups, which supports an educational approach that sets out to confront barriers and obstacles in the negotiation of transformative threshold experiences. In this sense, Rancière could be describing our own students when he notes, '[t]he circle of powerlessness is always already there: it is the very workings of the social world', and that the circle of power, 'can only take effect by being made public'. He concludes that this can only appear as an absurdity, a response that we have also experienced from our own students, as a result of inviting them to write in this way. Initially, students are invariably non-plussed, taken aback, even faintly amused. However, this is quickly overtaken by a sense of nervous purpose once it is clear that 'discourses organized with the goal of being right' have been disabled and a method of equality has been instituted in which group members 'find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others.' (Rancière 1991: 44).

Week by week, we start to ritualise the free-writing process, so that students become accustomed to its style and outputs. Students submit their work, but as we have stated, we only provide positive feedback in

[1] Meyer and Land note that, 'there are 'conceptual gateways' or 'portals' that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps 'troublesome', way of thinking about something. A new way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something may thus emerge – a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view … they may be transformative (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), irreversible (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and integrative (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something).' (2005: 373)

order to create a dialogic exchange with our comments, questions, and ideas. Quotes from previous free-writing pieces tend to reappear and feature as part of subsequent writing sessions; as a form of co-created curriculum, this helps to weld or connect related theoretical content as part of the unfolding narrative thread.

The writing and our feedback is not intended to incorporate or emplace the role of the teacher, and importantly, it is in no sense a form of graded assessment. Rather it constitutes a vital part of each session and fosters an ongoing sense of progress within and across the course, (reimagined as a collective of writers in transit). It demonstrates the value of all manner of things (e.g., thoughtfulness, ideas, communication, one another, the collective), and anchors pretty much everything else we do in relation to the thoughtful opinions of others – and this includes ourselves. It is a rare opportunity in life to be free to write, and to write freely, without judgment or cost (especially for students); as such, we are always surprised by the levels of passion and innovation that manifest, once the students are afforded the chance – and accept the invitation to – write creatively, with openness and honesty. It is so important to recall here, that our students often have memories of difficult formative experiences, in one typical instance, Chris disclosed: "I am someone who now knows I am someone who can do anything if I put my mind to it, regardless of what I have done in the past, work or education." As such, we recognise that we host and convene a platform for transformation. We cherish this and note that the experience is enlivening and liberating for ourselves as teachers in the HE environment. Our students' free writing expressions show how their confidence increases in preparation for study on a formal degree course:

"Today I am happy. I am proud … I am breaking the mould." (Jade)

Most students write willingly and easily, some need prompts, which we keep light to start with, for example: 'what did you learn today?', which evokes stunning responses that confirm to us that 'content', while important, is only a trigger or platform for people to learn about their own self-efficacy:

"Today I learnt I can be who I want to be.

Today I evolved." (Kemisha)

Lianne shows how the writing gives this opportunity for self-actualisation and reification – a transformative sense of becoming, which is supported through a scaffolded language and by a collective commitment to making the curriculum. The contributions of student voices alongside our own and those of other theorists are never forced. The whole endeavour is an exercise in inclusion played out in real time and subject to the normal standards of scholarly interaction. The student community enacts the curriculum with trust, and this is more than repaid at every level, "Language growth is the real thing that improves communication" (Beth).

The writing invites expression: it never asks, 'Do you understand', preferring 'What have you got to say (for yourself)?' It endeavours to situate writing as creation, answering Deleuze's call for a ritualistic "resistance to the present". The writing time, which comes with a guarantee of readers, creates a reliable weekly ritual, among other things a haven from what Barthes calls the "whole disorder" of speech and its devouring momentum. As one of our students deftly put it: "What I write; this is me" (Chevelle).

The ideas allow us to actively realise our ambitions for a pedagogy that escapes notions of mastery and embraces an equality which is method, not aspiration. Although this module is not a writing course, by creating opportunities for free-writing in a non-judgemental, inclusive environment we create an expressive space for writing that becomes routine and reduces anxieties around formal literacy. However, this is not principally about deficits of any kind and in a short time it is not about deficits at all. As work is produced and showcased, an energy for the possible is generated, akin to 'the power you give yourself by assuming the other person can hear you' (Rancière 2016: 71). It is in this way, rather than through a focus on 'training' undergraduate skills, that we address the principle of providing a foundation for further study. We are in the business of developing a community of writers who are firstly asked to step up as subjects of their own stories. This subjectivization as Rancière describes it, 'firstly occurs in the sense of taking the floor and speaking' and this is both literally and metaphorically what is happening

in the classroom and on the page, but this really is only the beginning. Through the convergence of student writings, the module content is borne proper, as a testing ground for new experiences and language emerges; in academic terms, this is a transition from mutism to speech. This is Rancière's description, as he insists that this transition 'is made using words that aren't yours, that already exist, the subversive act being the appropriation of those words.'

This model of appropriation fits our experience exactly and reinforces our claim to have established this as a method for developing student writers. We start explicitly to fuse a vocabulary and theory into the writing to work in line with the formal course objectives (i.e., prepare students for HE) but only on their own terms. Again, as Rancière explains 'what counts is the appropriation of speech that allows you to tell your personal experience differently, to subjectify daily experience and phrase it in a language that is no longer the language of everyday life or of work'. Rancière indeed identifies several forms of appropriation, as we have, including the rhetorical speech associated with membership of an academic community and 'poetic speech through which experience can be re-described' (Rancière 2016: 71).

After one session, a student returned to explain that she had left the morning session, gone to lunch and sat alone writing a poem on her mobile, which she wanted to share with us, (but was unsure whether it was suitable as a 'formal' piece of work). Composed in couplets, it beautifully captured the day's discussions on the multiple roles and responsibilities that make inclusive education challenging:

"This morning I woke up as a mother,

And as the day progressed I turned into another" (Mursal)

After getting Charlene's permission to share this, we had further examples of writing submitted as poetry:

"I am loud. I am quiet. I am outspoken. I am free.

When I write; this is me. What I write; this is me." (Bria)

These declarations strike us sometimes as suppressed expressions given vent for catharsis. At other moments, the writing, shown here through poetry, is a reclamation of personal voice, dialect and sociolect given performance in the educational environment. Thus, through the appropriation of the borrowed language and structures of poetry comes a new appreciation of silence and sound:

"Umma proud aunty da luv to sing,

I play wit ma nieces n nephews out unda the tree.

You see, wen we outside anything is possible

We dance, we sing, we run, our imagination runs wild

'Sing for meh tantie' day would say

'Ahyah lawd try go play' wat else I mus say." (Nikeva)

The ritual of writing as a form of membership evokes a 'Community of Equals', (Rancière) – a company of the recognised, who are also emancipated by their own actions. The parallels are striking as Rancière also predicates his model on a society who would 'repudiate the division between those who know and those who don't, between those who possess or don't possess the property of intelligence'. It is also an active community who 'would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone' (Rancière 1991: 71).

"I believe we need to be educated in society about life skills, different backgrounds and situations of others, learning how other people live." (Greg).

As stated earlier, our students' experiences of formal education have often been problematic or disrupted – sometimes by domestic circumstances, learning difficulties, exclusion, or numerous other factors. We are confronted with a need to teach something (anything) to satisfy all demands, but we recognise that this is a particularly unique context where we have immense freedom to map the module as we see fit. Writing is critical to that, for as Boyd (2008) has pronounced 'young people write themselves into being'. The question is whether this writing is to be acknowledged, encouraged, or even allowed, as Irigaray complains, '[t]hey never taught us

nor allowed us to say our multiplicity. That would have been improper speech.' (Irigaray 1992: 207). In this context we insist on their freedom to write as themselves without judgment and they all have much to say.

As was also stated earlier, we teach theories apropos of inclusive education, but are insistent that content is less important than context, for instance how such theory is embodied into the lifeworld of students. An example is given of teaching Bernstein's Restricted and Elaborate codes from linguistics; in the classroom, this theory was explained in its terms of its applicability to education, and the resulting conversations were encapsulated personally in the free writing exercise by Karielle:

"Language has always been a barrier for me. Coming from a working class Black Country family, I have been raised with a limited and common vocabulary" (Karielle)

And Isra shared an example of how idiolect is important for inclusion:

"Each child has many ways of language, and this is what makes them so unique, an important individual." (Isra)

We explained in subsequent sessions how Bernstein's ideas are considered quite dated and elitist today to show how theory evolves. This explanation drew the above quote from Isra's free writing product to show how personal language is a hallmark of identity. After we had explored Bernstein's theories we gave a simple prompt, 'who are you today?' which resulted in a beautiful evocation of our course in the words of a student that we feel really captures the essence of this course and its endeavours.

"Who Am I today?

Smile, yah beautiful people would say,

Kind words comes out of my mouth

I've grown and feel so empowered about myself

Who to think da I go University rite now: ah just laugh at maself.

I'm the rose that grew outta concrete."

circumstances.

5. Conclusion

As stated earlier, 'free-writing' as an expressive practice is lamentably absent from formal education as it is from other contexts in life. We posit that the tired, drab, and unimaginative landscape for literacy in post-compulsory education – one framed entirely around personal deficit models, instrumentalism, and the transaction of students development for vocational prospects demeans the affordances that personally arise from the practices we have outlined. One only needs to look at the final words from 'Who am I today' and considers how such eloquence and craft would be received on a formal GCSE course to see that the 'English' that is being delivered bears no resemblance to a living language. If that freedom is stifled, silence is the sentence – and that is not something we should entertain as a possibility or objective. The subjective must be emancipated.

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8. Open Access Policy

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