Teaching What We (Preach and) Practice: The MA in Activism and Social Change

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Abstract

In the search for strategies that work in the continued fight against the corporate takeover of education and in taking solidarity with oppressed peoples, this short article reports back to fellow academics, action researchers and other activists on the first year of a brand new Masters programme dedicated to campaigning and social change. It argues that in the present neoliberal context, teaching radical politics and encouraging students to engage with social movements and struggles as part of their studies is vital, both to stop the further corporate takeover of higher education and to generate new ideas and solutions for emancipatory politics. Following a brief introduction to the broad processes of neoliberalisation underway, the article provides a glimpse into the commodification project enclosing university education through the journey of the MA course. I then set out the main aims and structure of the MA, recount some of the experiences so far and respond to some of the main and recurring "criticisms" by activists towards the course. In conclusion, the paper argues that while there are many problems with setting up a Masters programme in "activism", the course team is unapologetically committed to using education for social change.

Introduction

Shell's sponsorship of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) is symptomatic of the corporate takeover of higher education and research in the UK. While British universities have long been integrated into the capitalist economy (see Thompson, 1970), neoliberalism has progressively imposed the "law of value" within higher education meaning that academic work is no longer valued primarily for its general "usefulness" or "use values", but is instead valorised in monetary terms in an increasingly marketised, competitive system (Harvie 2000: 106; see also: Levidow, 2002; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). This process of commodification can be seen unfolding at several levels at once: our labour process is becoming exploitative, segmented and ever more precarious (see Bauder, 2006); research and teaching are being consciously designed to serve the military-industrial complex (see Muttitt *et al*, 2003; Campaign Against the Arms Trade and Fellowship of Reconciliation, 2007); critical thinkers are being reduced to "academic functionaries" engaged in "compiling and redacting received knowledge" and teaching students "transferable skills" for the labour market (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007, 15); campuses are becoming recruiting grounds for global corporations; and universities themselves are increasingly being run along corporate-lines, driving the commodification and commercialisation of knowledge and education, particularly in "e-learning" (see Federici this issue), in order to attract more income and investment and become "world class". Although driven from the top-down, it is important to acknowledge that in some way we are all complicit in these processes as neoliberalism's willing or unwilling executioners.

Paralleling these trends has been much published hand wringing among left academics, particularly in Human Geography, about their "relevance" in neoliberal times. As Noel Castree (2002, 103) observes, this literature reflects a "double-sided anxiety" among critical scholars that they have not only "sold out" in their rise up the greasy career pole, but are also "insufficiently engaged beyond the university". Castree for one dismisses the assumptions behind such concerns, arguing that the priority for academics who want to change the world "out there" must be to challenge the current neoliberal restructuring of higher education "in here" by doing academic work that "makes universities less sausage factories and more institutions where critical thinking is not grist for the next peer reviewed article" (Castree, 2002, 108). While I disagree with Castree's assertion that being an academic *and* an activist is often irreconcilable, his central argument is spot on: we in academia who believe in fighting for social and environmental justice must start putting our own house in order if we are serious about making a wider difference.

One of the main ways in which we can resist corporate takeover and the neoliberal agenda is through our teaching (see Merrett, 2004). In September 2007, a group of geographers at the University of Leeds launched a brand new taught Masters programme that aims to turn the classroom into a radical political space

dedicated to the theory and practice of social transformation. The aim of this short article is to report back to fellow academics, action researchers and activists on the Masters experience so far as a contribution to the ongoing discussion about "academic responsibility".

Putting our own house in order

Both an outcome and driver of the current neoliberal direction of higher education is a reduction in the number of degree programmes serving notions of the "public or common good", as opposed to private, corporate or individual interests. Many students who pass through universities have little or no intellectual exposure to the rich tapestry of alternative ideas, practices and examples to capitalist, market-based life. The anti-war movement and Make Poverty History campaign have showed that millions of young people in the UK are involved in social justice politics. A *Guardian* survey in July 2006 revealed that over 70% of students identified a company's ethical track record as a crucial factor when choosing their employer (Robinson, 2006). This is a generation of students and active campaigners keen to advance their own knowledge base for social change activism but frustrated by the choice of courses out there, especially at Masters level, and forced to spend large amounts of money on programmes that only partially cover their interests.

The 2005 July G8 protests in Scotland were arguably the tipping point for several of us in the School of Geography, University of Leeds. We saw a real and urgent need for undergraduate and postgraduate courses that would reopen educational spaces for students to develop their own ideas and thinking *per se*, challenge the neoliberal direction of our own workplaces, and at the same time, create new learning opportunities for those who clearly wanted to take action to make the world a fairer and sustainable place to live in. Inspired by several existing courses, particularly the MSc in Human Ecology at the University of Strathclyde and the MA in Activism and Social Change at the New College of California, we decided to launch a new Masters programme also called Activism and Social Change. In July 2007, we linked up with the World Development Movement to host their annual conference, providing the opportunity for the MA to be publicly endorsed by campaigning journalist, George Monbiot, and Kenyan scholar activist, Ngugi wa'Thiongo.

Despite its name, the MA in Activism and Social Change is in many ways just like any other Masters programme: it recruits fee-paying students, offers a range of modules on theoretical, empirical and methodological issues, requires students to critically analyse the existing literature, and assesses ability through mainly written essays and a dissertation. The course is also under pressure from the university to be "profitable" with **less than 10 students** a year considered "problematic". The extent to which neoliberal values pervade the university was revealed by the requirement to provide a "Course Launch Assessment Report",

which was in reality a market-based evaluation of our proposed venture. While we understand the economics of higher education and the need to be aware of potential student interest, it felt very much as if the academic or intellectual benefits of our Masters programme were considered far less important than its likely performance against "current competitive provision":

> The objective of this analysis is to understand how the proposed course can be positioned relative to competing courses and analysis will include consideration of the audience (end users) and influencers/channels relevant to the course; the benefits and course characteristics to emphasize; and the language to use when communicating the course offering. I recommend that the next step is to finalise the list of competitors for the proposed course and the market segments in which the course will compete.
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> A key requirement is to illustrate the financial viability of the proposed course at different intake levels. As viability is a function of cost, volume and pricing conditions, it is important to show an awareness and understanding of these issues (Email communication with author).

Committed to getting the course accepted, we joined the ranks of neoliberalism's unwilling executioners and spent weeks producing what became a huge 47 page report with accompanying Excel Spreadsheet of the financial viability. Eventually, the new MA was approved although we heard of some disquiet on the grapevine, one senior manager told us the MA was "very controversial" and we were being "closely watched in higher places". To be honest, anything different would have been a great disappointment (!), because, despite the many standardised aspects of the programme, the MA in Activism and Social Change was radically different to most higher education courses in its overt political values, methods and aims, and we expected some eyebrows to be raised. Nevertheless, our Head of School backed us all the way and the School was rewarded when we managed to recruit some 20 students for the first year.

Tooling up for social change

The course content rests on three main assumptions: first, that social and environmental justice cannot be achieved in a market capitalist system; second, that transformational social change requires powerful grassroots social movements creating viable alternatives to the current global neoliberal order; but that, third, there are many possible solutions, strategies and tactics for achieving a better world. We see the MA as a small contribution to this political agenda of challenging capitalism, building social movements and developing strategy. This includes higher education: a key focus for teaching is the students' own educational environment and the roles of the University as an employer, educational

establishment and local political actor in creating social justice and injustice. In line with these values, the new MA is not designed as a "detached" study of activism, activists, or social change. Students who think they are simply going to 'read, reflect and write' about social movements are in for a rude awakening. Being an effective activist not only requires having a variety of skills to organise, communicate, work collectively and strategise, but also going out and using them. The MA is thus all about "action" and "engagement", enabling students to develop firsthand the many campaigning and research skills they'll need alongside activists, campaigners and practitioners who provide guest lectures, seminars and workshops, as well as field trips to campaign offices and sites of political struggle.

The programme is organised in three parts.[2] Semester 1 covers some of the theory of radical social change. The module Spaces of Radical Thought uses key thinkers in Marxism, anarchism, socialism, ecologism, feminism and post structuralism to cover ideas of resistance, revolution and alternatives in five thematic areas: Work and Exploitation; Nature and Commons; Utopian Cities and Communities; Civil society, the State and Internationalism; and Queer Spaces and Radical Sexualities. This is accompanied by a module on Researching for Social Change, which provides a grounding in the principles, methods and strategies of Action Research, and specifically those approaches that are organically connected to social movement struggles. It also draws on students' own experiences of neoliberalism in higher education through a series of discussion-based seminars in which we dissect different aspects of the student experience such as the introduction of fees and crippling debt, the focus on customer satisfaction, the business takeover of the student union, and the squeeze on teaching quality due to the obsession with research outputs.

Semester 2 is more empirical and practitioner based. The module Empire and Resistance examines the historical and contemporary structures of Western imperialism and the myriad stories of popular resistance to colonisation, from slave rebellions to anti-imperial struggles, as well as the spaces for resistance that are being opened up by global social movements campaigning against neoliberal policies. Alongside this historical and geographical tour through centuries of social struggles is the module Campaigning for Social Change in which a range of guest tutors from different activist backgrounds lead weekly workshops on developing the strategic thinking and practical skills and knowledge useful for effective campaigning and movement-building. Topics include: consensus decision making and direct democracy; media strategies and tools; direct action; dealing with

[2] The module outline here is the newly revised 2008-2009 programme – we offered a slightly different programme in 2007-2008 but changed it following student feedback. The main difference is that in the original programme, we offered an extra module called Autonomous Futures, which we have subsequently merged with Campaigning for Social Change.

government; popular education; community and grassroots organising; trade unionism and work place militancy; and international solidarity.

The theoretical and practical aspects of the course are then brought together in the final semester in the Action Research Dissertation, which requires students to link up with a particular campaign, political group, community struggle or organisation, and produce a collaborative piece of research that is beneficial to them. The form or depth of this relationship can vary: some students will undertake placements, others may simply have a discussion about a mutually beneficial project. The aim is to get students, and campaigners, thinking about and incorporating action research into their approaches, and to hopefully create long lasting relationships. In this they are helped by the course's links with a range of activist groups, campaigning organisations and radical projects in the UK.

Experiences so far

Confounding our early anxieties, the experience so far has been overwhelmingly positive. The classroom environment is always full of energy with rich and rewarding discussions. We have an amazing mix of students, some fresh out of undergraduate studies, others coming back into education after decades of activism, with a genuine rainbow spread of views and experiences. They have become a close-knit unit. A constant concern – and sign of the times – is the number of students on the verge of pulling out of the course for personal and financial reasons and we have lost a few students on the way.

At the end of Semester 1 we held an open forum to ask for their feedback in order to gauge progress and make changes if necessary. It was gratifying to see their maturity and confidence in offering some valuable critical reflections on the programme. The general verdict was positive – all the students were happy with their decision to do the MA and were enjoying the course, the learning environment and their fellow students. But there were difficulties and tensions. The main problem was workload intensity – students felt overwhelmed and bombarded with new ideas, readings, and tasks, and were lost and frustrated. While they wanted us to provide lectures and liked the idea of learning through discussion, they also felt the actual spaces for interaction and in-depth exploration were too compressed. The biggest complaint was that the MA was derailing some of them from 'activism' due to the workload and pull of the university. Accordingly, we have incorporated the student feedback into a revamped programme for 2008-2009. The main change has been to reduce the number of modules offered in order to increase the time available for more discussion-based seminars without losing the lectures, which the students valued. We have also added some quantitative research methods to the Researching for Social Change, and altered the assessments for all modules in order to give students a more varied and interesting menu of exercises, rather than just the traditional essay and presentation, as well as enabling the assessed work to have yet more linkages to social movement struggles. For

example, in Empire and Resistance, we have introduced a report-based assessment that asks students to provide an overview of social movement groups in countries or regions where social conflicts are occurring for the purpose of international solidarity.

The most difficult and disappointing experience so far concerns the MA's accessibility, particularly to migrants classed as "asylum seekers" and "international students". Prior to the beginning of the course, we were given some freedom to vary the fees from the university norm of £3500 for students classed as "Home" or "European Union", and £10,300 for students classed as International. This latter category of people included adult asylum seekers who, while legally entitled to study at all levels in the UK, are legally prohibited from either taking paid employment or receiving public funds, and are routinely classed as "overseas students" by universities for fees, meaning that they are *de facto* barred from most educational courses even though they might be waiting for a decision on their case for years (for more on asylum seekers' plight in education, see Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit, 2006). The existence of a differential is caused by the fact that UK universities do not receive any central government funding to pay for their international intake and are encouraged instead to exploit them as profitable cash cows. We decided to create a single fee of £3000 a year for all students, regardless of what passport they held on two main grounds. First, because we saw reducing the cost of education as a positive move; and second, because we saw the deliberate creation of a two-tier pricing system on the basis of where you were born as a clear case of institutional racism that had to be challenged. In doing this, we were responding to University policy:

> We have a responsibility as a world-class university to make our education accessible, promoting and supporting educational inclusion as one of our core values. There are people from all sorts of backgrounds to whom we can offer the educational opportunity which will enable them to realise their full potential (University of Leeds, 2006: 14).

We soon learned that the University's invitation to vary our fees did not include the option to "vary *down*"! We argued that reducing fees might attract more students to do the course and thus create a win-win situation, but other colleagues saw a "higher price" as denoting a "higher quality of course and applicant", and vice versa. The University has allowed us to have a single fee for one year (because we had already advertised it) but will re-impose its fee norms once again for 2008-2009, meaning that international students must now pay an outrageous £11,150 a year, while Home/EU students fees are back up to £3500. Following discussion among staff, the School again tried to help, making five £4000 scholarships available for the "best" international students in Human Geography and at least one full fees scholarship for Home/EU students on our course. As a reviewer of this

article pointed out, the fact that our department has the resources to offer such large scholarships shows the relatively privileged environment in which we work. But we doubt that the scholarships will make any real difference to the overall financial barrier for international students, certainly not those who might want to enrol on the Activism and Social Change course.

Meanwhile, three asylum seeker applicants for a Post Graduate Certificate (which comprises a third of a full Masters programme and excludes the dissertation) in Activism and Social Change were rejected by the University. Despite the course tutors approving their "practical experience" as activists on race and immigration as meeting the entry requirements for this particular course, the University would not acknowledge either their educational background or practitioner experience as meeting its standardised test of "academic ability", and could not be satisfied that they would be able to pay the £1000 fees. One applicant, from DR Congo, was also required to take an International English Language Test, which could not be arranged straightaway, and which, in any case, he did not manage to meet the University's required score. In fairness to the University, all three had applied after the course had started, which made it extremely difficult to sort these issues out in time. However, the experience revealed to us the unique and challenging situations faced by UK-based asylum seekers that make it almost impossible for them to access higher education. These included: the legal prohibition to seek paid employment; the lack of bridging courses or programmes to move asylum seekers into mainstream education; the lack of information about the availability of free or low cost specialist and mainstream courses, where to get funding, course eligibility, and what (if any) support there is to cover transport, subsistence, childcare, course and materials costs; the cost of courses (especially at advanced level) and support for studying; the time spent on bureaucratic requirements dealing with health, housing, benefits and the legal processes in an unfamiliar system and in an unfamiliar language (for many) and the disruption it can cause when attending courses; limited recognition of overseas qualifications and work experience (usually no recognition for those without documents to prove it) and lack of systems to assess these qualifications or experience; and the stress, loss of confidence, anxiety and inferiority complexes that accompany the above circumstances when coupled with the trauma of their experience of being forced to flee their homeland and leaving family and friends behind.[3]

What this also reveals are the continuing issues of elitism, institutional racism and white privilege within higher education that we must continue to

[3] For a fuller account of these issues, please read the enclosed document Refugees & Asylum Seekers: An education, training and employment guide for advisers, Produced for advice-resources by RAGU (Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit), London Metropolitan University, July 2006. Last updated: April 2007)

challenge and overcome. Our University is clearly *not* open to people from all backgrounds, especially when precarious migrants are trying to get in. Yet, the University can – if it is genuinely committed to widening participation – easily slash its fees for asylum seekers and set up a system of study skills support to help them cope with the course demands. Contrary to what universities say, there are no laws preventing them from charging asylum seekers home fees and they have full discretion to lower them, although they will not receive any central funding for them. This has not deterred the University of Manchester to become the first Russell Group[4] university to commit to reducing asylum seekers fees to the level of home students. With both the staff and students unions behind us, we are hopeful that a process of dialogue can now take place on these issues and the Vice Chancellor has publicly stated that he is "in principle" not against the idea of home fees for asylum seekers.

In the process, we have learned a valuable lesson in academic activism: if we want to change the rules, we have got to improve our communication skills in order to convince our colleagues to back us. We did nevertheless manage to make the three asylum seekers "official guests" of our department and they have participated in the MA programme on an informal basis. Their presence significantly enriched the classroom experience for all of us, made issues of Empire and Resistance extremely real and personal, and created relationships of international solidarity, especially following several legal rulings in late 2007 that placed all three students at risk of imminent deportation back to Zimbabwe and DR Congo. A campaign group has been formed and the three asylum seekers are accompanied by some students to their monthly signing at the nearby Immigration Reporting Centre.

'Critical' critical voices

There have, understandably, been plenty of criticisms from activist quarters of our decision to put on this particular Masters course. A common reaction is that the very essence of an elite-level university degree in 'radical activism' is a contradiction in terms as universities are "part of the problem" and the course will inevitably be exclusive to white middle class kids who will go on to become a 'professional elite' of "career activists" and "social movement managers". By placing activist education within the constraints of the universities, the course will "quash the radical spirit of activism" and "divert energies" from real movement

4 The Russell Group is the unofficial Premier League of UK Universities, bringing together the top 20 research-intensive institution. In 2004/5, Russell Group Universities accounted for 65% of UK Universities' research grant and contract income. See http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/

building. The argument goes that activism cannot be taught; it can only be experienced. It will also "reinforce the logic of the market" in education provision. Others argue that the university will not like such courses and will eventually shut them down, or force compromises to course content that render the whole exercise meaningless. There is also some hostility to us, the course tutors, for seemingly "making a career" on the backs of "real activists".

We do not shy away from these criticisms – in fact, in many ways we agree with them. Yes, we have been forced to accept the logic of the market in order to get the course on the books, but we did this in the full expectation that the space we opened up would challenge the cultural political economy of the University through its values, its interaction with political movements and its success. Yes, universities are a part of the problem, but how do you undermine (or recast) their role as "major institutions of social reproduction" (Castree, 2002: 108), as well as their local footprint as mass employers and real estate developers with significant impacts on uneven urban development, educational (in)access, income distribution, property and rental values, and community cohesion? We have set up the MA in Activism and Social Change precisely to challenge the neoliberal university from the *inside*, to expose our colleagues and the wider student body to the infectious ideas and practices of social justice movements in the hope they will spread. By fighting for a more progressive, less corporatised education system with our colleagues and students, we are actively challenging neoliberalism elsewhere. Yes, our University – and thus our course – is more inaccessible to non-white, non-middle-class students, so what better than to fight to open it up to a genuinely wider audience! Yes, we could be perpetuating the problematic division of labour between (now certified) "activists" and everyone else, but the whole ethos of the course is to break down those divisions, discourage students from seeing themselves as professionals separated from the groups they are working with, and instead, to equip themselves with the skills and knowledges that will inspire others to take action. Yes, we recognise that activism cannot just be "taught" in a classroom, that is why our students are encouraged to work with and become part of social movements, developing an action research agenda with campaigners that can be continued year on year by fresh recruits to the course, creating a continuous and reflexive relationship with movements from below. If that is what some people want to call "careerism", than yes, we must be careerists!

Conclusion

Overall, the fact that we agree with much of the "activist critique" does not lead us to the conclusion that we should drop the MA or, for that matter, our broader commitment to bringing our teaching and research in line with our political beliefs and activism. While we want to change the society we live in, and the way in which education is organised as part of that, the main point of the MA is to ask 'how' given the recent failures of Left politics. With higher education increasingly

neoliberalised, the aim of the course is to promote values of mutual learning, collaboration, and solidarity among students, tutors and social movement groups, and certainly not elitism, specialisation or domination. It is the MA's cooperation with outside campaigners and organisations that on balance makes it a positive, rather than a negative, contribution. We have understood the power of teaching, research and writing to unearth and expose injustices, and provide another form of legitimacy for grassroots movements' claims or demands. Ultimately, we see our academic work as intrinsically political; it is all and only about understanding, promoting and organising for social change.

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