



## THE NORTHERN COLLEGE SOCIAL PURPOSE SPACES

*"The Community of Praxis has allowed me to be completely present, as me."*

### Executive Summary

Every piece of action research begins with a set of assumptions: that would be disingenuous to deny (Learning for Democracy, 2008). We expected to hear more resistance to the online element of blended learning. Our headline assumption was that Community of Praxis participants would have a strong preference for face-to-face learning and a supporting acceptance that the opportunities for this were limited by resources. In short, that they might see the online spaces as somehow 'second best'. The findings comprehensively challenged this. Although there was a slight preference for face-to-face spaces, this was minimal when matched against expectations and some students articulated a clear preference for operating in an online space, particularly when given a validated opportunity to 'lurk'.

The metaphor of 'rhizomatic' learning has been helpful, to assist in the explication of this organic, creative and value-added approach to adult education.

We have lessons to learn in terms of practically supporting individuals entering the online spaces and will be thinking about the development of digital literacy more strategically.

It is evident that the potential for democratic (transformational, empowering, social purpose) education is rich, given this combination of blended learning. The research also gave an insight into the role each space plays for each individual and how 'lurking' can make a valuable contribution to learning and its impact on communities.

### Introduction

This research project set out to make sense of what the Teacher Education Programme at The Northern College has come to call 'The Community of Praxis', spaces both on- and off-line where students, colleagues, graduates and critical friends come to share their experiences of teaching for a social purpose.

The community has grown organically since our first foray into using Facebook in 2011. It now encompasses Twitter, Facebook, Yammer, Eventbrite, LinkedIn, Wordpress and Google+ social media platforms and offers a range of face-to-face opportunities, alongside formal teaching programmes.

The aims of the project were:



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- ★ To establish what works about the TeachNorthern 'Community of Praxis'
- ★ To evaluate what could work better to increase the impact of democratic education
- ★ To identify new and impactful innovations in blended learning, which don't require lots of funding/technological expertise

The nature of the Community of Praxis is that it is organic and growing. These aims may have shifted slightly throughout the months of the research project (for example, we renamed the project 'Social Purpose Spaces'). This reflects the mutability of the phenomenon we were investigating; this report stays true to its spirit of transformation and change.

## Methodology

The methodology was affected by the development of the Community of Praxis throughout the life of the research project and developments more broadly in adult education, following the publication of the FELTAG report in 2014. This is good practice in educational research (see eg Avis, Fisher and Thompson 2009), as both the policy context and technological landscape change rapidly and the sector is expected to respond with increasing swiftness. This element of 'horizon scanning' (FELTAG, 2014) was imperative if the findings were to have meaningful currency.

We were also concerned that the FELTAG implications should be integrated with the theoretical underpinnings of social purpose education if this work was to have impact for our Teacher Education Programme at The Northern College, and more broadly for a sector, which is starting to take notice of values-based education.

The Northern College also developed three additional projects<sup>1</sup> between December 2013 and June 2014, which brought a fresh wave of new membership to the Community of Praxis, many of whom were new to the College's environment and social purpose mission.

The table below indicates how our original thinking around potential methodology changed over time. The balance we sought initially between quantitative and qualitative data has been preserved:

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<sup>1</sup> TeachDifferent: The Diversity Programme (funded by EDIF2014), TeachDifferent: The Reflexion Programme (ETF JPD Project) and WEA Thinking Differently (ETF JPD Project).

Proposed	Actual
Online steering group, comprising students, graduates, tutors and critical friends.	Achieved via Yammer and Facebook discussions, with additional perspectives invited via Twitter at key points.
Critical research friend from outside the organisation, via dialogue using Thinking Environment techniques.	Three phone dialogues at key points with Bryony Croft, Thinking Environment practitioner.
Survey Monkey for qualitative analysis, cross-referencing with some demographic data.	Achieved, using Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (1995) as the questions. See below for discussion around open-ended question re identity.
Real and virtual focus groups, facilitated as Philosophical Inquiries.	Achieved less formally, via discussions on Yammer, Facebook and the March #teachdifferent Twitter live chat, supported by face-to-face Community of Praxis coffee meets in February, April and June.
	Literature review around emerging themes (from the data collection, above) of community, education for democracy and rhizomatic learning.

The discussion, below, draws together the literature review with analysis of the research findings.

### Demographics and Qualitative Data

The Survey Monkey poll was circulated via social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Yammer. We received 27 responses. Given that we estimate that approximately 200 people are signed up to Yammer and Facebook (Twitter is impossible to estimate for this purpose), this gives us a response rate of approximately 13.5%. (NB we approximate that around 50 people are actively commenting at any one time across social media. We chose not to use the more robust figure of 54% we could have extrapolated from this as a response rate, once we came to value the role of the 'lurker' as a consequence of the research findings).

All the participants of the Community of Praxis 'coffee-meet' discussions completed the Survey Monkey poll. Their face-to-face evidence is therefore included to deepen our understanding of the research issue.

We asked participants a single demographic question:

*What aspects of your identity would you like us to be aware of for the purpose of this survey?*

19 participants chose to answer this question. Of those that chose not to, one wrote:



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*"None, should it matter?" and another, "I think to get to the problems that the Community of Praxis offers to solve none of these things should matter."*

Of those who did choose to answer, 13 identified as female, 2 as male. Others chose not to identify themselves by gender. 2 described themselves as *"Heterosexual"* and one as *"queer"*.

11 gave their age (ranging from 27 to 55) or described themselves as *"mature"*. In one case, the participant said, *"Young at heart."*

6 described themselves as *"White"*, 2 as *"British"* and one as *"European"*. One of the British participants described their heritage in more detail: *"Scottish by birth, Irish by descent"*.

3 referred to themselves as having a disability; 1 said they had no disability.

1 participant described themselves as a *"faithful and trying 24/7 Christian."*

One participant described themselves in class terms as *"working class"*.

Participants also moved beyond the protected characteristics, two describing themselves in terms of their parenting status and one as a Service veteran. Others identified themselves by employment status: full time worker, part time worker, unpaid worker, teacher, student, lifelong learner (1 of each). Some participants took the opportunity to say a little more about themselves, for example: *"previous negative learning experience baggage."*

This section was more difficult to analyse than a traditional 'protected characteristics' tick box, but provided insight into how people view themselves when liberated from this approach. It is evident that intersectionality is at play and that individuals appreciated having the choice of identities to highlight for themselves – and the choice not to participate. This reflects work that some Community of Praxis members have done recently around an identities- (rather than protected characteristics) based approach to diversity.

## **Discussion and Findings**

*NB Quotes in italics are drawn from the Survey Monkey and face-to-face contributions of Community of Praxis participants.*

The literature review does not set out to be a systematic or comprehensive exploration of material around social learning and new technologies. Instead, we explore some of the most exciting ideas and concepts that have energised and extended our thinking around Social Purpose Learning Spaces.

To help shape our action research, we are focusing on some of the literature around community, rhizomatic learning, democratic education and the four cornerstones of social purpose teaching. This is literature which is freely shared

via social media with Community of Praxis participants and indeed much of it is sourced by them and arrives with us that way. We have not especially considered theory relating to the technology of on-line learning, although we have analysed the responses participants made around their own digital literacy, to identify some practical steps we can take to further encourage participation.

This is not because the technology that facilitates the development of spaces for social purpose learning is not relevant, but because we did not want our research to become dominated by questions around the vehicle for learner interaction. As social media technology develops, it is likely that the tools, platforms and environments we use now will be rapidly superseded; however, the practice principles and social purpose values that underpin our approach will remain constant, albeit these might also grow and deepen.

The project developed as part of our wider work in building a Teacher Education Programme for those engaged in teaching for a 'social purpose'. The antecedents for this come from a background of community development principles; this in turn is based on Freire's approach to education as a deeply transformative process. (1996) Our Teacher Education students, and ourselves, are engaged in many different curriculum areas, with many different groups of learners, but our common ground is about 'why' we teach. We teach, as Brookfield suggests, "...to change the world." (1996.)

This review is structured around three key themes, plus an exploration of digital literacy and how this is experienced by the educators we talked to: the themes are Community, Education for Democracy, and Rhizomatic Learning. Within these, we also aim to explore the four cornerstones of Social Purpose Teaching; these are: Win/Win/Win; Embedding Diversity; Reflexion and Teaching to your Values.<sup>2</sup>

## **SOCIAL PURPOSE EDUCATORS AND DIGITAL LITERACY**

We asked participants to rate where in the Community of Praxis they felt most comfortable and Appendix 1 presents this data. Not surprisingly, TeachNorthern courses (the formal programme of teacher education qualifications) and Training Days (project-funded CPD events) were the most popular. We anticipated this, however we did not anticipate how close the gap would be between these and the social media leaders: Yammer, Facebook and Twitter (0.37 on a scale of 5). Least popular were LinkedIn (which we have not actively promoted this year) and the very new Pearltrees, which was introduced during the life of the project.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Win/win/win' refers to the benefits of social purpose teaching for teachers, their learners, and the wider community; 'embedding diversity' focuses on identity, and involves not only reflecting the identities of those present, but also absent identities; 'teaching to your values' involves articulating and acknowledging personal and political values and the impact they have on teaching and learning; 'reflexion' involves a process that considers the wider influences that impact on teaching and learning, as well as the actions and emotions of the teacher.

Whilst it is encouraging (and, in terms of the FELTAG changes coming, also a relief) that social media spaces are catching up with face-to-face spaces in terms of where participants feel most comfortable, we anticipated hearing that, for some educators, engaging online in the Community of Praxis was a 'second-best'.

*"I still think that face-to-face trumps online for quality of interaction."*

In fact, many more practitioners appreciated the blend of face-to-face and online contact, though we appreciate that those most resistant to online engagement could be least likely to take an online survey. To mitigate this, it is worth noting that all those who attended non-mandatory face-to-face events during the academic year (ie additional to formal programmes of learning) were also regular online contributors. We draw from this assumptions which are more connected with motivation than digital literacy.

*"I always feel engaged with the Community Of Praxis. I love to take time out and have space for myself and also to engage fully too. I feel it is always there for me and I hope I do the same in return. I feel that there are multiple ways I can engage and that there is so much there - so many opportunities to engage all the time. I like the balance of face-to-face contact and online contact as well."*

Fear of 'getting it wrong' is often used to shore up resistance to using digital technology and, despite our own resistance to being too 'wordy', we have identified a clear need for more written guidance. The appreciation of the 'Unguided Tour' of our 'uncourse' #TDRflex14 (see below), underlines the need for this combination of the written word and friendly vodcast.

*"Could there be a weekly digest of events and hot topics, perhaps compiled by someone and sent out as a notification? with a date, title, where and when listed. It might be too expensive to regulate and manage but would keep everyone up to speed with the main topics or conversations, especially when related to diversity, reflection, or teacher education."*

Some voices held an echo of panic as people worried about not 'keeping up':

*"The annoyance I feel when I get left behind on Yammer – I want to keep up but by the time I think of a response (not being an articulate spontaneous writer) sometimes the threads have moved on - why am I annoyed? because I feel I should be able to contribute - but get stymied. Then I feel unworthy, a bit. Then I have to balance my frustration with the fact that I am a working mum and can't do everything - but others can, I think, and I maintain a nagging 'can do better here' voice in my head. So that is unfortunate and the situation hasn't improved*



*for a while.”*

In fact, no-one can keep up with everything and letting go of that expectation is key to digital confidence. The skill of digital curation is something which is not, in our experience, explicitly taught as an 'academic' or 'life' skill. We intend to find ways of addressing this, so that participants can let the conversation move by, with more confidence. We also intend to address the issue raised by a smaller number of participants, that the number of logins and passwords they were required to use had become bewildering.

Engaging in a blended community of face-to-face and online communication seems to have grown empathy around the diverse ways in which people engage with one another.

*“I was puzzled why some people didn't contribute. Realising that it is for the same reasons that I don't always contribute in f2f [face to face] discussions was a revelation.”*

In fact, diversity was mentioned by many participants as a benefit of the multi-faceted community:

*“Thank you for sharing, for showing compassion to your learners, for helping us engage with people we probably would have never met. Thank you for making me realise that as educators we all have something to give, the heart of the community of praxis is infectious and I spread the word as much as possible, whenever possible.”*

Discussions during the rhizomatic 'uncourse' (see below) led to a collective revelation about the role of the 'lurker'. We explored this in a blog post (Mycroft, 2014) and this led to positive discussions as people 'came out' as lurkers:

*“It has helped me to explore my teaching through blogging, lurking and discussion.”*

It has been interesting to see a more positive spin being attached to this concept, with one participant saying verbally that lurking was “just like reading a book. You wouldn't expect to write anything on the page.”

Some frustration was expressed that not everyone took the opportunity to get involved:

*“When the participation drops off in the digital spaces. I know people love the physical spaces but there is a reluctance to fully engage with the logical digital extension of them. Pity.”*

Others puzzled over the behavior of individuals in the online spaces.

*“Certain people have not engaged and shown inflexibility or lack of self-awareness. One person who has so much to offer left in a haze of self-pity and you could argue distorted pride. I felt that relationships had been built up and then selfishly severed by an unhealthy amount of public pride.”*

Interestingly, it seems largely taken for granted that not everyone behaves well in a face-to-face learning group. External rhetoric (eg in news media) seems to expect higher standards of online engagement, perhaps because of its openness. Certainly, the group agreements negotiated in class, to also cover engagement online, seem to have contributed to an overwhelmingly supportive environment, where transgressions are attributed to a lack of self-awareness, rather than malice:

*“People are really dedicated and continue to surprise me how often they keep in touch. How much people give of their own time. Previous experience with courses and groups made me think that people would lose touch with each other and life just gets in the way. As I am writing this I feel connected with the Community of Praxis even though I haven’t seen anyone in person for over six months. I really count on this support.”*

Although we did not specifically ask about the interplay between face-to-face and online spaces, several participants made reference to the importance of having initial opportunities to physically meet.

*“I am really interested in rhizomatic learning, so I think the main thing I will take away from it (apart from the wonderful conversations it sparked) will be an example of how an ‘uncourse’ might function from start to ‘finish’. Having it be created by people I knew in real life meant a lot in that learning.”*

The ability to ‘tag’ people into conversations (on Facebook, Yammer and Twitter) deepened initial face-to-face rapport building attempts, to engage individuals. It is worth noting that some participants had never attended Northern College (indeed a handful were based overseas).

Face-to-face opportunities often involve Thinking Environment (Kline, 2009) applications and these stress the importance of letting silence lengthen, to deepen thinking. Silence can also be powerful in asynchronous online spaces.

*“When I posted something and waited for a comment, silence can be so open to interpretation and is very powerful. Great learning for me as someone new to using social media as a teaching method for the future, prompted deep reflexion!”*

Another advantage of the Community of Praxis has been the cross-pollination between cohorts, across year and qualification groups, between graduates,



current students, tutors, colleagues and critical friends who, in some cases, we've never met. Combined with explicit attempts to incorporate even more diverse viewpoints (via a Twitter strategy, for example), this is at the heart of the community's most welcome diversity:

*"I love the support within all the groups between members. It's great - selfless and so encouraging."*

## COMMUNITY

In this section we explore three of the many definitions of 'community'.

Putnam's ideas about the importance of community and the building of social capital – the networks between individuals which foster trust and mutual support – provide a useful backdrop against which to explore concepts of community. Social interaction, in Putnam's view, provides the building blocks for a wealth of communal benefit, including improved health and well-being, and greater economic prosperity, (2000). There are many examples of how participants felt that their involvement in the Community impacted positively on education:

*"Being part of the community of praxis has changed the way I teach, how I feel when I am teaching and given my classes a real heart place. My feedback from students has become much better, they are more engaged and it helps us all every day."*

The emphasis here on interaction and networks translates well to social interaction across virtual communication spaces; and exploration of how participants interact online and face-to-face, the role of listening, 'lurking' and writing, as opposed to speaking, how relationships may be forged in a virtual space, are issues of interest to us.

*"My tutors and peers have grown me, validated me, supported through difficult times and still recognise something to offer me wonderful opportunities."*

The idea that interaction within, and across, Social Purpose Learning Spaces may afford individual and collective benefits, (which go beyond those related to the instrumental exchange of information), is exciting and fits well with our concept of win/win/win.

A further, more complex analysis of community that interests us, is provided by Biesta (2006). He differentiates between the 'rational community' which '...affords individuals a way into communication...' (p56) and 'communities of those who have nothing in common', where '...when I speak to the stranger...I have to find my own voice, then it is me that has to speak' (p64).

*“Allowing people to be ‘present’, present as themselves and encouraging them to rid of assumptions of their learning, their role.”*

Biesta’s point here is to do with the value of interaction with a diverse range of peoples. The ‘rational’ community, he argues, supplies us with a pre-defined and constrained discourse through which to communicate.

When speaking to a ‘stranger’, Biesta suggests, we have to do so without relying on the internalized and shared understandings of our rational community, the language and jargon of our tribe, group or profession. Dialogue with ‘others’ provides us with the opportunity to communicate as ourselves, rather than as representatives of our community. Social media platforms, in particular, may offer spaces to communicate as a ‘community with nothing in common’ and provide some exciting possibilities to exploit the opportunity for speaking with ‘strangers’ and to investigate how participants experience finding and using their own voice in different media.

*“Accepted me and my diversity of opinion. Until now I feel there has not always been space for my perspectives, but here I have really found my voice. I feel my diverse voice is not only accepted, but also truly valued.”*

To extend this point further, Biesta also writes about the power of communication to share and create new meanings, to provide the conditions through which individuals ‘...grow, change and transform...’ (ibid, p129).

*“The environment created on the Cert Ed/PGCE teaching days means every time I step into that room I am present and engaged. This is because everyone is given a chance to speak and I have learnt so much from listening to others, sometimes it has challenged my opinions and assumptions and I have been able to think about reviewing my assumptions and beliefs.”*

We hope that the process of participation in a range of social media and face-to-face contexts will create the conditions ripe for transformational learning to evolve.

Biesta also helpfully cites Michel Foucault,

*“There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.”*  
(1985, in Biesta, 2006, xi)

Foucault’s comment here has clear resonance for the aims of our project. We want to explore how to create open and democratic community learning spaces, in which participants can speak in their own voices with ‘others’; to

provide space for shifting perspectives and paradigms, and to promote reflexive thinking, one of the key cornerstones for social purpose teaching.

A third concept of community has also been highly inspirational. This is Lave and Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice', together with 'legitimate peripheral participation'. (1991). Lave and Wenger make the point that to be human is to learn: learning takes place all the time, even when it isn't recognized as such. They describe learning as more than just absorbing facts, however. For them, it is a social process; learning happens through engagement in the world, with others and through creating and voicing ideas.

The extended metaphor of travel had resonance for one participant:

*"It looks like a map of Europe, where people can travel freely from village to village, visiting friends, or from a small village in Normandy to an island off mainland Greece. One or two set off from the Orkneys and end up in Rome. People are criss-crossing in all directions. On the way, some people get lost and encounter new things, diverse people and experiences; some travel courageously on side roads, collecting memories and sharing views; and some travel speedily along motorways, only stopping off when necessary to find nourishment. All have a unique experience and all are richer for making the effort. "*

This shared and collective activity, when sustained, creates a community and the ideas created translate into practice: hence 'community of practice'. When newcomers join a community, they participate on the periphery, gradually learning about how the community works, its culture, its traditions, practices and rules of engagement.

*"For a long time I felt like I was only able to press my nose to the window and just look in. I now feel like the window has been opened and I've been invited in..."*

As they participate, they also learn to use the specialist language of the community, growing in confidence as they share in learning with more experienced practitioners, and graduating to full participation. This, we suspect, is mirrored in the participatory environments within Social Purpose spaces, where we hope to explore how participants' engagement changes as they grow more confident.

*"(I'm surprised) that I was reluctant to join in initially. The value I can see that I get from the community of praxis is startling."*

Biesta (ibid) also cites Dewey, who suggests that "...we only become who we are through participation in a social medium. (p130). Focussing on identity is part of the work we do around embedding diversity; this acknowledges the

multiple nature of an individual's identity, values this variety and the richness it brings to discussion, but also asks participants to consider not only identities present, but those who may be absent also. The issue of identity and authenticity in different communities is something that is of interest to us, together with the way different forms of identity can overlay one another and can shift and change over time and space.

*"It has helped me to develop a teacher identity, and embed social purpose into the foundations of leadership. This is essential to ensure unique selling point and to offer leadership courses that can and will make a difference."*

The notion of communities of practice is one that has particularly resonated with many of our students. It is the foundation of our project, to bring together students, teachers, participants, learners, practitioners – however they may identify themselves – to create and develop knowledge, to build solidarity and spaces for dialogue and discussion.

## **RHIZOMATIC LEARNING**

The idea of Rhizomatic Learning was developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2004, cited in Cormier, 2011). Their work conceptualizes learning as something organic, something which, like a rhizome, can spread in any direction for which there is a fertile growing medium – in the case of learning, learners' interests and curiosity. The metaphor is particularly appropriate, because a rhizome, like learning, has no beginning and no end.

The development of technology alongside Rhizomatic Learning, has seen the development of a number of 'un-course' online enterprises, including Massive Online Open Courses, or MOOCs. Although MOOCs may well include a curriculum and lead to formal qualifications, they have also contributed to the creation of an environment in which the notion of community-led learning can flourish. The concept also connects with the five principles of Open Space Technology (Owen, 2008), where:

1. Whoever comes is the right people.
2. Whenever it starts is the right time.
3. Wherever it happens is the right place.
4. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
5. When it's over, it's over.

The first principle notes that if people are interested enough in the content, they will contribute; numbers two and five suggest that people will contribute when they are ready, and when they have nothing left to say, then it's time to move on, unlike a traditional lesson with fixed timings. Number three suggests that new spaces for learning, for dialogue and for change are opening all the time. This challenges the concept of institutions as the primary

site for learning. Four urges participants to accept whatever happens during the process, much in the way rhizomatic learning develops organically.

*"My interests have diverged a lot from where I started. I am beginning to think about the potential for action research projects based on interests the community of praxis has sparked. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't first brought to it thinking from other parts of my life."*

This idea of knowledge as something that is led by the interests of participants, as 'community as curriculum' (ibid) also underpins ideas about Communities of Practice. Cormier's blog argues that, "...having a set curriculum of things people are supposed to know encourages passivity." Our experience as teachers and learners supports this view; a set curriculum can encourage knowledge and learning to be seen as a product, as something to be acquired, as something that the teacher possesses, which is passed on to the learner.

This passive view of learning relates closely to Freire's critique of the 'banking' concept of education (1996), where knowledge is considered to be concentrated in the teacher and is merely deposited into students. Sfard's work on the two general metaphors of learning, is also helpful here (2008). She argues that the language used to describe teaching and learning shapes how the process is understood, either as one that considers knowledge as a product to be acquired, or one that views learning as participation, as a community endeavour.

*"(It surprised me to realise) how much of a community can be sustained on line, as it creates energy and keeps relationships, ideas alive. The network provides such a 'reference' of immense experience, skills and critical thinking literally at the finger tips."*

A further quote from Bietsa (ibid) expands some of these concepts further; he suggests we should think of learning as responding to a question, rather than being able to recall that which already exists; instead, learning happens,

*...when she responds to what is unfamiliar, what is different, what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs. Here learning becomes a creation or invention, a process of bringing something new into the world: one's own unique response. (p68)*

This concept of learning as a response to a question is something crucial to the dynamic nature of our Social Purpose Spaces; through the joint creation of new questions that may arise out of a sense of disturbance, of challenging assumptions, participants may be enabled to 'bring something new into the world'. The work of Brookfield (1997) also resonates here, with his focus on recognizing the power of hegemony and ideology through challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and learning. Brookfield

acknowledges too, that effective learning may involve disquiet for learners as they are encouraged to dismantle their own and socially created assumptions about the world.

*“Some of the conversations on Yammer have been challenging, but in a very positive way. I certainly feel confused regularly, especially when talking about diversity. I think this is because we are able to have conversations that engage with difference, which exposes my ignorance. This is uncomfortable, but one of the things I most value about TeachDifferent, especially in the online spaces.”*

Social Purpose Spaces seek to encourage learners to have agency over their own learning, to participate and to craft their own curricula, to create knowledge, and a landscape for their own, and others', learning, in a place and at a time that is right for them.

*“Attending the diversity day, excellent way to meet new people, make connections and be able to relate to own practice, chance to ask questions openly to gain insight and ideas to infuse other environments untouched in the way that the diversity creates ideas and thinking.”*

The concepts of Rhizomatic Learning fit well with the cornerstones of Social Purpose Teaching – there can be ‘wins’ for teachers and learners and communities as the curriculum grows from the hopes, dreams and interests of participants; diversity is fostered through the open nature of participation and the variety of platforms available – participants are encouraged to be ‘present as themselves’; values are explicitly discussed and implicitly present as the content evolves and when participants are ‘disturbed’ by new thinking. Reflexion can then also become part of a communal dialogical process around a dilemma or question that arises.

*“Attending sessions at Northern College. Being valued as an individual and inspired by course leader/tutors. Participating in thinking rounds of mutual respect where I am actively listened to and I listen and learn from peers. Participating in critical friendship groups where issues/questions are raised, shared, discussed and solutions/conclusions arrived at in a safe space.”*

Exploration of rhizomatic learning was further stretched by experimenting with a four-week ‘uncourse’, inspired by Dave Cormier’s #rhizo14 (Cormier, 2014). During this time, without closing down any spontaneous lines of discussion, learning was more intentionally shaped by a) suggesting a theme for the week and b) focusing facilitative energy on the four week period. Themes arose each week, to be considered for the next, largely focusing around the initial concept of ‘voice’:



*"The uncourse was/is brilliant & I hope it will continue. It has a permanent presence on the internet. It is available at any time to look back on, to reflect & to add further comments."*

Between 20-30 participants were deeply involved in the uncourse, contributing to real-time and asynchronous discussions and meeting to both blog and appreciate in the Google+ writing room:

*"The appreciative comments I've received in the blogging group has helped my confidence and made me feel that I have something worthwhile to say."*

Game-changing insights such as the role of the lurker emerged from this deeper, more focused thinking and it is evident that others were following the progress of the thinking:

*"I 'lurked' but didn't engage, following with interest from afar."*

The 'uncourse' experiment will certainly continue and hopefully find a regular place in the curriculum, for focused reflexive attention. Broadening involvement in rhizomatic learning holds the key to mitigating another concern raised by participants:

*"I would like to see this grow and spread. I have concerns that a couple of people work incredibly hard to maintain this and what would happen if they experimented with letting go for a while, would it continue?"*

Our relatively small-scale experience this year gives us hope for the future of this approach.

## **EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY**

The principles of Education for Democracy influence both the process and the product of teaching and learning. This means that as well as the desire to create an environment for learning based on equality, there is a broader aim to foster social justice in the world.

Newman (2006) argues that,

*"...in every moment of our teaching we should encourage ourselves and others to defy anyone laying out an unwanted future for us. I am suggesting that we should teach and learn how to wrest our lives away from the control of others and take charge of our own moment."*

Social Purpose Spaces seek to provide an environment where participants can actively take charge of their own moments free from the control of traditional holders of power.



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*"I (now) treat people in any classes that I take as an equal and working in the NHS (this) is often frowned on due the culture. I engage, empathise, go that extra mile and make myself available by mobile phone/text and email and none else seems to really do that...(being involved has) given me the confidence to be the person I want and how I want this feeling to 'infect' to the learners I have and for them to then spread this openness and helping instinct to others."*

Our Teaching for Social Purpose teacher education programme has been profoundly influenced by Newman's writings, as well as by the Learning for Democracy principles developed by the Learning for Democracy Group. Their "Ten Propositions and Ten Proposals" (2008) set out an agenda that argues for freedom, equality and justice. It highlights the role of dialogue and dissent in the pursuit of creating a better world, and the value of solidarity and participation in developing shared aims. The first proposal is "Taking Sides". Here, educators are asked to be "...clear about what they stand for..." because, they argue, a claim to be neutral merely supports the status quo of existing power structures. The proposals also argue that Education for Democracy should "cultivate awkwardness", so provide the opportunity to think critically about life circumstances and take action to make changes.

*"Comments following contributions in the #TDRflex14 writing room & on Twitter are most encouraging & supportive. These are helpful in keeping me in touch with the opinions of others & in promoting the use of critical thinking."*

The principle (or value) of diversity is an important one. All too often, 'academic writing' means stating an opinion and then searching texts for affirmation. Diversity is at the heart of critical thinking, and embracing it seems – according to participants and our own thinking – to depend on being confident in your own values, first of all:

*"The value of discourse and discussion, formally or informally and the support I can take for this is really powerful. I am thinking with more purpose and have become more confident to challenge others as I realise I am not the only person who shares my values."*

These ideas have helped to underpin the cornerstone of 'Teaching to your Values'. This recognizes that teachers carry their values with them into their classrooms, whether they acknowledge this or not. Newman (ibid) also argues that the notion of neutrality "...[allows] the teacher to refuse to take sides even in the face of the unpleasant, the gross and the unjust." Uncovering personal and political values, then, is crucial, not only for teachers to be truly present as themselves, but also for fostering learning as, and for, democracy.

*"In times of political greed, media portrayal of greed,*



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*it has been fantastic to see that most people are good, kind and even if they don't call it such - socialist in their sharing and support."*

The power of education to impact on individuals and communities, within a moral and ethical framework, has also been explored by Kemmis, (2014). For individuals, he argues, education is partly about learning to relate to one another and the wider world. For the benefit of communities, education is about "...securing a culture based on reason", as well as creating a "...just and democratic society."

*"The integrity of everyone involved, because I have very rarely met a group of people who believe in what they do."*

Kemmis's ideas focus on action in the world, as well as modes of understanding, and his explanation of the Freirian concept of praxis is helpful here. He suggests it involves both "...educational action that is morally committed and informed by traditions in a field..." and "history-making educational action." The notion of traditions in a field relates to the role of theory, and connects to ideas about the knowledge and traditions that exist within communities of practice. The concept of "history-making" action is inspirational and clearly articulates the power of education to bring about social change.

*"How much of myself I have brought to it, and how much that has revealed about how I operate. That's surprising because it was unexpected and has changed the way I engage."*

Principles of democracy and freedom underpin the foundations of Social Purpose Spaces. Biesta (ibid) argues that, "Democracy itself is, after all, a commitment to a world where freedom can appear." (p 151). Our development of Social Purpose Spaces is unashamedly part of our wider commitment to creating change in the world, to unsettle the balance of power and to create an environment where all participants' voices can be heard.

*"The community of praxis is a powerful setting for people from different backgrounds to come together and lean and share their opinions and experiences. When I am in the room I feel that our social purpose mission is so strong and that something really special will come out of us all being together and wanting to make a change. I hope this desire and strong feeling to make a change does not leave us all when we end the course. It would be great if we could inspire others to teach with a social purpose."*

## Conclusions

The aims of this research were:

- ★ To establish what works about the TeachNorthern 'Community of Praxis'
- ★ To evaluate what could work better to increase the impact of democratic education
- ★ To identify new and impactful innovations in blended learning, which don't require lots of funding/technological expertise

We believe that the voices of participants have echoed through this research report and have given us confidence and hope in this way of working. During the writing up phase, an Ofsted Inspection (to be published July 2014) provided additional affirmation that the advantages we identify can find a place in 21<sup>st</sup> century adult learning in the UK, as part of a blended, rhizomatic approach which increases confidence and self-agency amongst social purpose educators at all stages of their training.

All good research identifies further questions and actions and we welcome the learning from this project, which will encourage us to:

- ★ Refine the information we produce, to help people navigate with more confidence during their early engagement with social media.
- ★ Continue to explore and promote the role of the 'lurker'.
- ★ Explore ways of addressing the bewilderment caused by securely accessing a variety of platforms.
- ★ Encourage equality of participation and responsibility for managing both face-to-face and online spaces.
- ★ Investigate assessment based on participation eg via blogging.
- ★ Develop a curriculum of rhizomatic learning.
- ★ Continue to investigate ways of measuring impact on practice, and on communities.
- ★ Take collective control of our blended learning strategy in the FELTAG age.
- ★ Develop new ways of strengthening digital literacy.
- ★ Keep abreast of technological developments by horizon scanning fit for purpose innovations.
- ★ Maintain an approach driven by pedagogy, rather than technology.
- ★ Continue to balance online teaching with face-to-face approaches grounded in the Thinking Environment.
- ★ Continue to view diversity as both a driver and essential value of online work.

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## Appendix 1

### Whereabouts in the Community of Praxis do you feel most engaged?

	1-	2-	3-	4-	Total-	Average Rating-
TeachNorthern Courses	8.33% 2	0.00% 0	20.83% 5	70.83% 17	24	3.54
Training Days (eg Diversity)	9.09% 2	9.09% 2	22.73% 5	59.09% 13	22	3.32
Community of Praxis CoffeeMeets	36.84% 7	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	26.32% 5	19	2.32
Summer Conference	19.05% 4	9.52% 2	19.05% 4	52.38% 11	21	3.05
TDReflex14 Writing Room (blog)	25.00% 5	10.00% 2	25.00% 5	40.00% 8	20	2.80
Bespoke Meetings (eg WEA Project)	44.44% 8	16.67% 3	11.11% 2	27.78% 5	18	2.22
Yammer	14.29% 3	14.29% 3	33.33% 7	38.10% 8	21	2.95
Twitter	18.18% 4	18.18% 4	22.73% 5	40.91% 9	22	2.86
Facebook Group	21.74% 5	17.39% 4	30.43% 7	30.43% 7	23	2.70
LinkedIn	63.16% 12	31.58% 6	0.00% 0	5.26% 1	19	1.47
Pearltrees	57.89% 11	31.58% 6	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	19	1.53
TeachNorthern Blog	26.09% 6	13.04% 3	13.04% 3	47.83% 11	23	2.83





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