



The Popular Education Network of Australia (PENA) and Twenty-First-Century critical education

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Reflections on building a popular education network in Australia.

Tracey Ollis, Deakin University, Jo Williams, Victoria University, Rob Townsend, Victoria University, Anne Harris, Monash University, Jorge Jorquera, PENA.

Abstract

Drawing on the philosophies and writings of Paulo Freire regarding education as activism, this paper will explore the history and activities of the Popular Education Network of Australia (PENA). The network, founded in 2009, involves educators, academics and community workers, working together on issues relating to critical pedagogy and social change in schools, communities and adult education contexts. Two symposia have been organised on critical education in Australia. In 2010, 'Teaching and Learning for Social Justice and Action' was the inaugural gathering. In 2012, 'Freire Reloaded: Learning and Teaching to Change the World' featured a diverse range of workshops and Professor Antonia Darder as keynote speaker and observer. Through the perspectives and experiences of five academics involved in PENA, this paper will explore the group's activities and reflect on the inspiration drawn from the work of Freire, Darder and others. Creating spaces for discussion of critical pedagogy affords opportunities for academics, educators, teachers and activists to reflect on their practice and also leads to further spontaneous networking and planning of action. In this paper we argue that there is continuing importance, in fact urgency, in producing places and spaces for conscientisation to occur, and for examples of critical education to be shared amongst 21st century educators.

History of Popular Education Network of Australia (PENA)

In late 2007, some early conversations were held between Jorge Jorquera, Tracey Ollis and Jo Williams about the need to establish a network of popular educators. We were motivated by the need to find a group of 'fellow travellers' who were working in education from a critical perspective. All three of us were influenced and inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) life and writing, and more broadly the theory and practice of critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano et al. 2009). As activists we were interested in the connection and linkages between critical education work and the revolutionary educational possibilities of learning in and with social movements, solidarity groups and activist communities.

Life in the 'swamp'¹ (working critically as an educator) is not easy in Australia; the neoliberal model of education and its alienating potential has impacted on the many layers of educational spaces and places where education occurs such as primary and secondary schools, adult education, and further (TAFE²) and higher education. We knew however, that as we went about our critical education work, there were other like-minded educators and teachers, working critically across the same systems, and often similarly isolated from one another. What we needed in the first instance was to connect. One of the most important issues for the founding members was to create a space for critical reflexivity for teachers and educators to draw on their own and others' teaching and learning experiences. PENA would be not only a space for networking to occur, but a space to reflect on one's own, and others' practice.

As Freire (1970) so eloquently reminds us:

"For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 53).

¹ See Beckett and Hager (2002), *Life work and Learning, Practice in Postmodernity*, Routledge. London & New York.

² In Australia, the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) sector is roughly equivalent to what is known elsewhere alternatively as the vocational sector, community college and in some countries as 'polytechnic' institutions.

In reality we know that teachers are isolated, poorly resourced and are frequently working in systems where the hegemony of broader political, economic and cultural discourses will inevitably influence many. It takes a great deal of resistance to teach outside of these discourses and to push back against them, especially when working on one's own within a team that doesn't know about or support critical pedagogy. This speaks to why we pursued a popular education network and not a critical pedagogy network.

We were inspired by Paulo Freire's work and its revolutionary capacity for social change. We believed as educators that our work was not only to teach critically, but also to link the possibilities for criticality to the struggles of social and popular education movements. Like Freire we also understood critical education as necessarily linked to social critique and movement. We have seen the revolutionary capacity of education to push for human rights and justice around the world. Perhaps the most public recent example is the protests of the global Occupy movement against corporate excess and their cries for fairness and equity for the 99 per cent. Similar youth and student-led protests in Vienna, Hungary, London, Quebec, Mexico, Chile, Greece and other places have occurred, with communities responding to cuts to social services, rising education fees and other attacks, through resistance to the austerity measures imposed by governments. Many of these student movements have also re-imagined the educational space, countering human needs to corporate objectives in curriculum and school and university organisation, Chile being a pertinent and inspiring example.

We see the revolutionary capacity for social change with the recent uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria, where millions of protesters have fought for a change from the rule of repressive regimes, demanding the right of citizenship and democracy. In essence, PENA was formed to hopefully inspire ourselves and other educators to not only work in the classrooms and other teaching spaces, but also to support educators to push back against an education system, indeed a global social system, that is inherently unjust and unequal. PENA was imagined as a place for educators to broaden the focus of our pedagogy to include linking our local education work to national and global struggles. This was envisioned as a two-way process, both educating and inspiring ourselves about current political struggles to enrich and deepen our pedagogical practices, and also growing alliances and practical networks to actually participate in broader collective action.

As Shaul claims in his now famous preface to Freire's classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, all education work needs to work alongside sites of resistance and struggle:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaul 2000, p.34).

From the early days of the PENA experience, where three likeminded educators discussed over coffee the need for a critical educators' network, we have grown enormously. The last symposium had over 100 people in attendance over two days, with significant attendance and contact from attendees at subsequent organizing meetings. PENA is currently leading discussions around a potential boycott of the NAPLAN³ testing regime in schools and planning for a third symposium in late 2013. It is obvious from PENA's growth in membership that the need for educators to find a place to engage critically with one another is crucial and this is explored further in the next section of this paper.

³ NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, Australia-wide tests conducted in all schools, the most prominent Australian version of the global emphasis on *high-stakes testing*. See for e.g. Au, W. (2009). *Unequal By Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*. New York, Routledge.

Places and Spaces for sharing critical pedagogy

While the spaces and places where this work can and must be done have changed and continue to change over time, our commitment to the principles of learning and teaching for anti-capitalist and inclusive social change are always in evidence, and evolve with the changing landscape of Australian and international public debate, education policy and practices, and activism. This section will offer a brief overview of our activities to date, primarily our two symposia, their themes and highlights. Each year, our commitment to open and equal access for all has mandated that our events remain completely free, with a particular commitment to cross-sectoral, intercultural invitation and participation. Our first symposium 'Teaching & learning for social justice & action' was held at Victoria University (Footscray, Melbourne, Australia) on Saturday October 30, 2010, and focused on the ways in which popular education upholds a social justice agenda and functions within community development. In this first publicly advertised gathering, we sought to overcome the isolating effects of a growing neoliberal agenda in education contexts, and to share insights from our work in practice, research and policy areas.

From this inaugural event, we established publicly and clearly that we wanted to gather and dialogue in ways that were flexible, purposeful, and diverse. While we advertised a 'call for papers', this was no business as usual conference announcement, many of us on the original committee were working in universities with output imperatives impinging on our every move. We were - and are - activists who resist the neoliberal demands for commodification of our intellectual and professional activities. Therefore, we strove from this first symposium and since, to offer a range of options for participating in PENA spaces and places of sharing community, and the first call for papers reflected that, from refereed conference format to a more informal and creative/activist format.

Participants could choose to submit or share a paper for refereeing, if they wanted or needed to pursue publication or refereed conference presentation for their own or their employers' requirements. Alternatively, storytelling, filmmaking, performance, and other interactive formats were encouraged, as well as non-refereed papers. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of contributions remained formal papers, a trend that we sought to address in our 2012 symposium with our 'fresh air dialogues' between each presentation session. The themes touched on dynamic topics such as 'radicalising assessment', 'neighbourhood as a classroom and site of struggle' and 'critical (or 'thick') global citizenship and democratising schools.' The weekend events were opened by well-known Australian popular educator, Dr Rick Flowers, speaking on a History of Popular Education in Australia. Despite being entirely volunteer run, and with next to no resources, the symposium was a dynamic success with upwards of eighty participants, increased networks, and a further development of perspectives and future goals for the group.

The 2012 symposium 'Freire Reloaded – Learning and Teaching to Change the World' was held on April 27th and 28th, 2012. The weekend was opened with two PENA book launches (from recent doctoral graduates). *A Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Education: Learning to Become an Activist* by Dr Tracey Ollis, launched by visiting scholar Professor Antonia Darder, and *Ethnocinema: Intercultural arts education* by Dr Anne Harris and launched by Associate Professor Michele Grossman and Dr Enza Gandolfo. This pre-symposium informal evening at the Footscray Bowls Club (Melbourne, Australia) featured music for social change by the Melbourne-based activists band 'The Conch'⁴, and the kind of interactive, informal and inexpensive sharing of community and ideas for which PENA is becoming widely known.

The Saturday symposium at Victoria University (Footscray, Melbourne, Australia) was opened by

⁴ www.theconch.org

Karen Jackson of the Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit of Victoria University, who inspired participants with a passionate and political sharing of her heritage and the real meaning of offering a ‘welcome to country’ to those of us on Kulin lands. Karen reminded participants of the responsibility that comes with that permission to enter country. Karen’s compelling talk was powerful and moving, and called on us to “make changes where we can...and to work towards giving the ability to all people across the world to walk on country, and to do so together in the true spirit of deep listening and shared understanding.” Karen’s words were taken seriously by PENA members who share a deep commitment to working closely with Aboriginal Australian activists, educators and communities, to learning from them, and to collaborating where possible for justice and change.

The keynote address by Professor Antonia Darder was entitled ‘Reinventing Paulo Freire: a critical pedagogy of love’. Antonia brought the legacy of Paulo Freire to Melbourne, Australia, with an engaging and thought-provoking presentation that encouraged every one of us to consider the urgent need for struggle with and for the world’s most oppressed peoples, and to ground our personal, political and educational practices in a deep, revolutionary love. This inspiring address was followed by approximately twenty presentations linked to the overall themes of ‘schools’, ‘activism’, creative education’, adult education’, and ‘communities’. The program included presentations from people working in a range of sectors, and a dynamic range of perspectives. PENA identifies⁵ as a ‘network of educators, academics, unionists and community workers’, and our activities and outputs reflect this, including strongly at the 2012 symposium. The presentations ranged from Indigenous perspectives in higher education (Mat Jakobi, Moondani Balluk), to Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed (Xris Reardon); from ‘Early school leavers in regional areas’ (Tim Fish, Ballarat Uni) to ‘Using sport and games to educate about human rights’ (Tanja Kovac, ECLC), to name just a few.

In addition to our symposia and other initiatives for creating radical and more traditional spaces and places for sharing (including the internet and social media), PENA continues to decentralise the creation and dissemination of activist educator knowledge amongst our members and more widely. Since that first October 2010 symposium, we have published a special issue of the journal *New Community Quarterly*⁶, established a significant online presence, maintained a reading group, presented sessions at a number of professional teacher association conferences, held regular social events, participated in the recent Australian EduFactory conference for students at the Australian National University, and continued our ongoing campaigning. All of these activities within new and evolving shared spaces and places are volunteer-driven and pulsing with the commitment and enthusiasm of like-minded workers and activists from a truly cross-sectoral community of PENA enthusiasts.

Particularly significant is the number of new schoolteachers who have joined PENA since the last symposium and are now a driving force in considering how and why the group might engage more broadly with teachers in schools. This is positive and fundamentally important if PENA is to grow as the multi-sectoral collective it was originally envisioned to be. That the activist base and leadership of PENA now stems as much from schoolteachers and vocational educators who are participating in current action and policy devises within Australian education systems, is significant. This was always a major intention of PENA, and reflects a consciousness amongst the academic members that existing power hierarches in education must be challenged, and that only broad coalitions of members can be truly representative of all sectors in education.

⁵ On our website at <http://www.populareducation.org.au> and elsewhere.

⁶ Vol 9, No 3, Summer 2011. Issue 35. <http://www.newcq.org/>

Context: the backdrop of neoliberal education systems in Australia

Australian Federal and State/Territory governments have provided much impetus for activism against the neoliberal agenda in recent months. The Australia Federal Gillard Labor government has promised (since its time under previous leader Kevin Rudd) to revolutionise funding for schools. However a recent review into schools funding, known colloquially as “The Gonski Review” (DEEWR 2011) recommended a boost of \$5 billion into the education sectors, 75% to go to public schools, which remains unacted upon. As is the case elsewhere in developed countries, the Australian schooling system is riddled with inequity, and the review highlighted that funding must be allocated according to need with resources increased for lower socio-economic regions, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students and students with a disability. The review also highlighted the need for greater national coherence and consistency in teaching standards, education performance and public accountability. Meanwhile a more recent briefing paper from the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD 2012) failed to mention the Gonski review and instead focused on improving teacher quality as the key to improved learning outcomes, suggesting teacher performance pay and bonuses as the means to achieving that. PENA activists developed and distributed publicly, a response⁷ which pointed out several issues with the arguments being made, as a means to ‘talk-back’ to the neoliberal discourse that underpins all current policy decisions, and an attempt to generate discussion on the real issues. Our response focused on the dangerous narrowing of the curriculum that occurs in an environment driven by performative and standardising measures, the unwillingness to acknowledge very real material (social and economic) barriers faced by our most marginalised communities in accessing quality education, and the ongoing omission of teacher, student and community knowledge about what works, what is needed, in terms of the kind of quality teaching and learning we are all aspiring towards.

Concurrently the vocational education and skills training sector in Australia continues to undergo restructuring from Federal and State/Territory governments but mostly in opposite directions. The starkest example is that of the Victorian conservative Baillieu government’s stripping of \$300 million from the local vocational education and skills training sector in favour of supporting cheaper and less publicly accountable privatised training organisations. It is estimated that up to 2000 teaching staff will be made redundant over the coming year, several vocational campuses across two eastern suburbs institutions have announced closure and regional institutes are in talks about a possible state-wide merger of all regional campuses of vocational institutes into a consortium, only so they can survive. Many have noted the dire consequences this will have for equity in further education, particularly amongst women and other disadvantaged sectors.

The vocationalisation of higher education, where learning equals work, seems to be the only purpose of education and learning. In this context PENA seeks to challenge such a notion and publicly ask “what about the social purpose of education/learning in Australia?” Universities throughout Australia are continuing to restructure, dumping entire programs and courses, reviewing faculty and school structures, offering places on demand and so on. Again we ask, for what purpose? The professionalisation of education systems has led to a ‘managerialist’ framework of education where managers, accountants and marketing outside of the academic disciplines manage university teaching programs, timetabling, learning support, technology requirements, ‘knowledge transfer’, copyright and publishing, administration and in some universities, even academic workload management. This has led to a disconnection between the philosophies of learning, the evolution of learning pedagogies and practices and the types of programs/courses we all offer.

In the face of such chaos, with highly insecure and disempowered staff and student bodies, the higher education sector is either stagnant with continued use of lecture/tutorial type frameworks

⁷ Our response to the DEECD briefing paper can be accessed here <http://www.populareducation.org.au/?p=361>

which reflects what Freire (1970) decried as banking or knowledge transfer, or universities are giddy with visions of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) which seem, without sound evidence, to be now driving policy agendas. For PENA, searing questions remain; where is the scholarship of learning, and where is the commitment to equity, inclusion and creativity in education, let alone the valuing of the social purpose of education for transformation or liberation?

The stories will ring true with activist educators resisting the neoliberal agenda globally. The question is how to fight back, both within and beyond our classrooms.

The future: critical pedagogy and the legacies of Freire and Darder

From the outset, the decision to form the organisation that eventually became PENA was informed by the theoretical traditions of critical pedagogy and in particular by the work of Paulo Freire and Antonia Darder. Although Paulo Freire's work is born of struggles in South America and Antonia Darder's writing focuses primarily on the United States, the messages and learning we take from both of these profoundly internationalist writers and activists are deeply relevant to our struggles here in Australia. Moreover, critical educationalists understand that education can only be understood through a critique of a world where education policies internationally are shaped and restructured by an increasingly integrated and crisis-riddled international economy (Apple 2010). As Darder suggests,

...(a)lthough Freire's historical, regional and class experiences were different from many of ours, his political purpose was clear and consistent. To achieve a liberatory practice, we had to challenge those conditions that limit our social agency and our capacity to intervene and transform our world (Darder 2011, p.185).

Freire's and Darder's perspectives on the possibilities for education and social change, and moreover their challenging provocations for radical activist educators, provide useful and in fact urgently necessary ideas for the development of the theoretical framework we need in talking back to the neoliberal onslaught in education. Just as importantly their work is full of real-life practical signposts to guide and indeed inspire those seeking to reclaim an activist space amidst the horrors of deepening inequality and injustice locally and across the globe.

The idea of a network of popular educators arose out of our frustrations and alienation working in higher education, in an environment of competition, individualism, marketisation and privatisation. We wondered where the meaning was in what we were doing. All of us were engaged in 'good work' in terms of educating our students from a specific pedagogical framework. We all shared Freire's vision of a world free from oppression. We brought to the collective our practices as critical educators, our histories in a range of activist organisations and our stories of ongoing attempts to carve out space to work against the tide. However it had also become clear that academia could all too readily see our good work depoliticised, fragmented, isolated and disconnected from actual communities, or as Apple puts it, academia

with its own hierarchies and disciplinary (and disciplining) techniques, the pursuit of academic credentials, bureaucratic and institutional rankings, tenure files, indeed the entire panoply of normalizing pressures surrounding institutions and careers – all of this seeks to ensure that we all think and "act" correctly (Apple 2011, p.242).

So we had questions around the difficulties of collaboration, how to reconcile the 'rules of the game' with our aspirations and values as critical educators seeking meaningful change in the areas of our work be it adult education, teacher education, racism in schools or other. Our aspirations for the new collective were two-fold: to strengthen our intellectual capacity to develop sharp critique of a fundamentally flawed system and give voice to emerging alternative visions and

ideals, and second to build solidarity through collaborative practice that saw us theorising and most critically – acting together, in the most powerful way possible, to bring those alternative visions to reality. We saw PENA as a means to “establish, cultivate, and support humanizing relationships [as we collectively struggled for]...social and economic justice... [able to]... break down the debilitating alienation and isolation” (Darder 2011, p.157) we often experienced in education institutions. Darder evokes Freire’s vision for democratic, participatory alliances where “...progressive teachers can participate in counterhegemonic political projects that do not dichotomize their work as cultural workers and social activists.” (pp.155-156)

PENA was also based on a rejection of the traditional power hierarchies between universities, schools and other educational settings, and sought to make the case for shared learning and struggle across the sectors. We were keen to respond to Darder’s (2011, p.156) call for “alliances where a solidarity of differences is cultivated, [where] teachers from diverse communities and class positions can work together to create unifying, albeit heterogeneous and multifaceted, anti-capitalist political strategies to counter conservative efforts to destroy public schooling”. Fortunately most of the institutions we were working in allowed some space for critical practice and ‘engaged’ activity, and most sought to foster genuine and respectful relationships with schools.

The hegemony of neoliberal policy however, sees much of that work constrained, falling short of the kind of deep, political and economic analysis that both Freire and Darder argue is critical to understanding the material bases of the inequity and exclusion in education and social systems globally. Furthermore, the seemingly intractable borders between educational sectors meant that all too often, and despite our best intentions, our activity within the formal boundaries of institutions remained strained, with limited trust and understanding between us and colleagues in schools and communities. We recognised that teachers trying to enact a critical pedagogy in schools shared our sense of alienation, and that in an education system plagued with guilt and powerlessness, solidarity was the antidote. We wanted to align ourselves with teachers out there struggling under the same conditions as us, and through activist driven collaboration outside of the formal walls of academia and schools, we found a space for collective consciousness-raising and felt able to channel our rage and despair into bold courage to speak out against social and economic injustice (Darder 2011, p.156).

PENA provides us with an opportunity to model democracy and to model solidarity. The kind of collaboration we are undertaking has a micro importance in terms of ongoing work to develop liberatory and empowering practices for diverse classrooms, but also points us to the types of social movements required to make meaningful change. Darder (2011) explains that deep in Freire’s work is the understanding that the struggle for just and empowering education is intrinsically linked to the broader project for human liberation, and that moreover, alliances that foster movements capable of growing political strategy are critical, given that strong and democratic social movements are ultimately the only thing capable of forcing significant institutional change.

Conclusions and the future of PENA

Currently, PENA has regular organising meetings of around 10-15 people and maintains a presence online and through social media. Our priority is the aforementioned campaign to initiate a boycott against the NAPLAN tests which has involved collaborating with an activist grouping within the teacher union, and a group of literacy educators who have prepared a significant body of research documenting the problems with the tests. These alliances are enabling us to reach a broad group of people concerned with the testing regime, and we are hopeful an upcoming public meeting will generate sufficient support to plan action for 2013. While the campaign against the tests is in itself a significant attempt to challenge the common language of neoliberal

education, the collaboration and networking is likely to have positive consequences beyond the months ahead.

To date, PENA has been an inspiring experience for us, successfully bringing together a diverse group of educators across sectors, and providing a vehicle for increased networking, solidarity and collaborations. For activist educators, the present challenge is to fight the marketisation of education and learning. In this struggle, PENA has proven a useful framework for developing our critique of a view of knowledge and learning that is bound up with commerce and productivity. Instead, together we are collectively considering and re-framing our ongoing work in education as emancipatory practice, based on a view of knowledge and learning that values justice, authentic democracy and fundamental social change.

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<http://www.populareducation.org.au/>

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