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Challenging Neoliberal Discourses as 'nasty little theories': Co-Creation in Higher Education

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Abstract

The current operating context for higher education in the UK is of neoliberal consumerism and competition. This drives 'efficiency' measures such as high class sizes, low staffing and low contact hours. In direct contrast to this context the Marginalisation and Co-created Education research project funded time for rich, relational, co-created learning with academic staff and undergraduate and postgraduate students from three European nations. Four mixed method surveys were conducted over an academic year in order to understand the impact this way of studying could have. The results from a sample of three students is used to support a move away from the dominant neoliberal agendas.

Keywords

Higher education; co-created; co-produced; research; teaching and learning.

Introduction

The Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE) project was developed between the University of Southeastern Norway, VIA University in Denmark and the University of Cumbria in the UK and is funded by Erasmus+. The project aims to understand school students' experience of marginalisation in education in order for the European team of academic and student researchers to co-create solutions for education and other sectors that support young people. This paper steps back from the prime focus of the project, school students, to explore the experience of the university students who co-created the research project with the academic staff.

UK Higher Education Context and Underpinning Literature

Neoliberalism has become a dominant force in Higher Education, particularly in the UK and the USA (Spooner and McNinch, 2018). The neoliberal discourse is evident in the cultivation of students as consumers, a 'free-market' of higher education provision, competition between institutions, drive for economic efficiency and performance measurement through metrics. As Spooner and McNinch state: "Even the harshest critics and most prominent scholars cannot easily escape our de-funded, highly individualised, hyper-competitive, and perversely incentivised moment. We live in an age in which value is often equated with accountancy, in which we are increasingly governed by and through numbers, incentives, de-incentives and competitive benchmarking" Spooner and McNinch (2018, p.xxiv).

As institutions compete to attract students in the UK, national metrics such as the National Student Survey drive perverse behaviours. Scott (2015) found; "Universities, jittery about how they will score in the National Student Survey, have invested in iconic new student centres, airy atria containing banks of mac [computers] (ideally). They offer more and more 'customer services' and do 'feedback' to death". Investment in higher tutor to student ratios or increased personal tutoring (Stuart, Willocks, Browning, 2019) is not as immediately apparent to consumers and therefore rejected yet could actually be the key to improving student satisfaction. We might question what use is a top of the range computer or swanky building if you have not received adequate taught time on your degree.

Citation

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In 2015 in the UK, the government announced a new agenda to open access to more young people to enter university called ‘Widening Participation’ (House of Commons Library, 2018). This was argued to increase equality and to boost social mobility. The impact is that UK universities welcome students from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ and a wider social strata and demographic of young people commence degrees. Paradoxically alongside this, support for individual students has been rescinded and class sizes have increased in order to make teaching more ‘cost-effective’. The impact of these two opposing agendas is that WP students may be accepted into a university but given no additional support. Bathmaker et al. (2018) suggest the WP agenda does not increase social mobility, but rather; “reproduce[s] class structures, dominated by an aggressively self-promoting elite, which justifies its existence by utilising the neo-liberal values of ‘choice’, meritocracy and entitlement” (Bathmaker et al., p8). Dorling (2018) takes the argument further, pointing out that a “nasty little theory” has been underpinning educational policy in the UK. The nasty theory being that ‘non-quality people’ are not worthy of investment and that the quality people can no longer afford to carry them (p.219). This is the epitome of a meritocratic view of education – those that do well have deserved to do so, and those that fail equally deserve their fate.

As WP students are from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, many are first-generation students with no familial educational habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Nash, 2002). As a result, ‘upper’ classes whose family members have always been to university experience ‘habitus-field congruence’ (Ingram, 2009), whereas many WP students feel like ‘fish out of water’ (Bathmaker et al., p31; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). This should prompt additional support for WP students, however Dorling’s ‘nasty little theory’ seems to play out in universities, and WP students are left to fend for themselves once they have handed over their cash. Bathmaker et al.’s., (2018) study of student bodies in two very different universities within Bristol concluded that “although the culture and language ... may have altered towards themes of widening participation, democracy and inclusion the underlying structures of inequity have proved remarkably persistent” (p.153). They recommend that universities make the practices of ‘doing HE study’ more clearly visible and understandable (p.154).

This leads us to the starting point for this paper, the design of the MaCE project which explicitly rejected the neoliberal agenda and with Erasmus+ funding was able to support students of all backgrounds with time and dialogue rich teaching, experiential learning, co-creation on the basis of everyone’s skills and experience. This paper explores the extent to which this teaching style impacted on three students throughout one academic year.

Methods

The project involved 40 people co-creating research into marginalisation in education. The group comprised ten academics alongside 40 undergraduate students and postgraduate students from the three participating countries. The breakdown of these is detailed in the table below.

Table 1. MaCE Project Participants.

	Norway	Denmark	United Kingdom
Academics	4	3	3
Undergraduate students	7	3	0
Postgraduate students	9	2	9

The project involved students in participating in a research project with the academic staff. At times the academic staff led the process and provided key trainings and at other times the academics participated with the students in conducting, analysing and writing up the research. The entire project was therefore not co-created with students, however staff did learn experientially and engage in

taught sessions with the students when not leading them, and they engaged in all the research activities, analysis and writing with the students.

Table 2. Project Overview.

Aspect of the Project	Detail	Type of co-creation	Hours
Online learning September 2018	Four online sessions x 3 hours each delivered within two weeks.	Co-designed and co-delivered by academic staff to students.	12 hours
Research methods residential in Norway October 2018	Five days of research training and first hand experiences of interviewing.	Co-designed and co-delivered by academic staff to students.	40 hours
Ethics applications November 2018	Each individual completes relevant ethical process.	All participants.	Varied
Secure access to research participants Jan 2019	Each individual negotiated access to relevant communities of participants.	All participants.	Varied
Interviewing Jan - Feb 2019	Each individual conduct one to five interviews with young people, transcribes and codes data.	All participants.	Varied
Writing seminar in the UK Feb 2019	Five days of coding, writing and tutorial support.	Co-designed and co-delivered by academic staff to students.	40 hours
Write academic assessments June 2019	All students write assessed pieces of work.	Co-marked by academic staff.	Varied
Write journal articles July 2019	Write up research for publication in the project journal.	All participants.	Varied

In order to understand the university students' experience of the project four mixed methods surveys were co-designed and administered electronically. The surveys were conducted at the start of the project (October 2018), at the end of the research methods residential (November 2018), at the end of the writing residential (Feb 2019) and at the end of the project (June 2019). These four data points provide evidence of the prior educational experiences of the students and the experience they had within this project.

Surveys were adopted methodologically for their time convenience. Whilst the programme may read as time rich, every minute was filled, and we could not generate space to interview the students. As such, a range of quantitative and open qualitative questions were designed which the students could respond to in their own time. Whilst convenient, this was also a limitation to the research in that individual narratives may have provided richer and more nuanced understanding of students experiences, and would have been congruent with the research method used with school students. The response rate for the four surveys is shown in table three below.

Table 3. Survey Response Rate.

Survey point	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
October 2018	32	80%
November 2018	17	42%
February 2019	13	32%
June 2019	11	27%

Of the 40 participants and 32 who first responded, only three completed all four surveys, a 7% response rate. Whilst a low response rate created a limitation, the three complete survey participants are from the three different countries and have been used to illustrate the journeys of three students as a purposive sample in that they are each a complete single data set from each country.

The aim of the higher education research was to establish if and how the co-creative approach embedded within the MaCE project contrasted to the university students previous educational experiences and benefitted them. The research questions were:

1. What are the students' prior higher educational experiences?
2. What are the students' experiences of the MaCE project?
3. What, if any, are the benefits of the MaCE projects for students?

The four surveys were co-designed by the academic team and administered electronically. The surveys combined quantitative rating scale questions with open ended qualitative answers in order to understand the scale and nature of educational experiences. All four surveys also contained standardised quantitative scaling tools in order to assess the gains made against the project outcomes. Each of the surveys is a data set in its own right providing interesting insights into the cohort and learning experiences at that point of the project. In this paper, however, the data corpus has been set to one side in order to focus on the journey of three students through the project, one from each country. The resulting data is therefore illustrative of the impact of the MaCE project. This approach enables us to provide illustrative case study data. Whilst this is a small number of cases, Flyvbjerg (2006), states that case studies offer a systematic production of exemplars which have five strengths:

- Practical knowledge is as important as theoretical knowledge
- It is possible to generalise from a single case
- Cases enable generation and testing of hypotheses
- Case studies can be free from bias
- Case studies are whole narratives that should not be summarised.

We deploy three of these strengths as we intend to use these three cases as illustrative data to show the practical experiences of the students, testing of the hypothesis that additional time, dialogue, experiential learning and co-creation would enrich learning, and to provide evidence which may be generalised to draw out meta-level principles for learning.

Findings and Discussion

The findings include vignettes from each of the three students with reference to the overarching research questions. Student A is from Denmark, student B is from Norway and student C is from the UK.

Prior higher educational experiences

The students' experiences of Higher Education were varied; the Danish student was experiencing Higher Education for the first time, the Norwegian student had once started but not completed an

undergraduate degree programme and the UK student had already completed an undergraduate and some postgraduate study and had taken time out during those studies to travel and work around the world.

The Danish student rated their Higher Education experience as 5 / 5, the Norwegian and UK students gave a 4 / 5 rating overall.

Student A: Good teachers, good curriculum, good "peers". For now!! - I haven't been studying that long :-)

Student B: I give 4 instead of 5 because I wish that we could have more practical experience.

Student C: I was able to experience higher education as an international student in the US and Australia. It was these experiences that made higher education so positive. Poor resources during the two years in the UK bring the score down to a four.

These comments show Higher Education, broadly, seemed to be a positive experience. However student B and C's comments allude to the importance of having enough resources to enable learning to happen. In the UK these have been stripped out as 'economic' models of delivery are sought. An extreme example of this is the impoverished personal tutor time offered to each student, a mere 1.5 hours per student in Kaz's institution (Stuart, Willocks and Browning, 2019).

With regard to the quality of the teachers, the Danish and Norwegian student rated theirs as 4 / 5 and the UK student rated theirs as 5 / 5. The comments reveal that Higher Education staff have a wide range of pedagogical approaches which the students appreciate:

Student B: I like that the teachers [have] got different ways to teach.

Student C: The teaching was more creative and practical, which suited me.

Generally then, students seem to value the quality of the teaching staff in universities. Relationships with the Higher Education staff, however, showed more variation in ratings. The Danish student rated them as 3 / 5 as they "*had not had chance to get to know them yet*", the Norwegian student rated them as 4 / 5 as it was both "*professional and friendly*", and the UK student rated their overseas lecturers as 5 / 5 for the following reasons:

Student C: There was time and opportunity to get to know them, and after doing this, I realised I liked them. One influential lecturer in Australia held a seminar on his land with the students allowed to camp and BBQ there. It was a formative session that allowed all students to bond and it made for excellent working relationships.

Here we have the evidence of the neoliberalisation of higher education laid bare. Whilst the experience might be overall okay, and the teacher good quality, the lack of time available in universities, increasing class sizes and traditional hierarchies of power conspire against the students feeling their tutors know them or are invested in them. It is only the UK student who reflects positively on relationships, but from a period ten years ago in Australia, before neoliberalism really bit deep.

As a result of their reflections, the students identified the following factors as significantly helpful in their Higher Education:

- Peers
- Working with other students from the same class as me, my teachers, support from home
- Participating in an international exchange program was a pivotal moment in my education and subsequent career.

Factors that detracted from Higher Education learning included:

- My own insecurity - thoughts like I will never make it through, I am not good/smart enough - But then the peers helps by having the exact same thoughts :-)
- No big barriers, but sometimes time and motivation to sit down and study
- Although I was a reasonable student, I never felt that I really belonged in academia, because my family had no history in it.
- My parents were able to heavily support me during this time. My friends' parents were not and therefore they did not have the same experience of higher education.

These comments show the interplay of individual thought processes and self-esteem with human capitals and support from home. Entering Higher Education had provoked feelings of being an 'outsider' or 'not good enough' for the Danish and UK students correlating to the theory of habitus field congruence discussed earlier. In this respect, the experiences of being an outsider are then embodied in the university confirming the student indeed does not belong. This is potentially exacerbated by the lack of relationships and the lack of time which conspire against these interpersonal issues being dispelled, and the hierarchies of higher education which may reinforce a subservient powerless position. So the traditional university programme may reproduce inequalities without ever intending to do so (Bourdieu, 1999).

Current experiences of Higher Education through the MaCE project

The students were asked to reflect on the programme after the first MaCE residential research methods training course. They identified the best things about the residential as follows:

Student A: I think the lectures were good and I think it was nice to practice the indirect approach. It was also nice with the fun-games monday - to get to know each other.

Student B: Exchange experiences, conversing and learning together. The social meetings, having meals together. Getting to practise the indirect method.

Student C: The opportunity to practice the indirect approach with peers and young people. The opportunity to meet peers from Norway and Denmark.

The gains of working with other students rather than individually in a socio-cultural setting and learning across cultures emerges here as a strength of the programme. The time invested in this programme is immediately noticed by the students and facilitates relational work that is not present in traditional academic programmes.

The students were also asked to comment on the range of pedagogical approaches used in the programme; icebreakers, theory, and interviewing experience.

With regard to the socio-cultural icebreakers the students commented:

Student A: They were perfect - just sad I was so tired...

Student B: Great...

Student C: They served their purpose brilliantly. Our own social activity, curling, was also excellent.

The focus of the week was understanding the specific research methodology employed in the project, the Indirect Approach (Moshuus and Eide, 2016). With regard to methods the students commented:

Student A: I liked it. It was really helpful to actually do (or at least try) the indirect approach. I also liked the session with "ethics" because there was a lot of co-creation.

Student B: Nice that we could to try it out on a fellow student first

Student C: Really effective, particularly the 'hands on' approach to trying the indirect interview.

This shows the value of both experiential and co-creative learning in socio-cultural settings. The students really applied and made sense of theory in the light of experience. Reflecting on this together they drew out key points which they used in future interview situations. The investment of time in experiential practice of this key learning point proved worthwhile with students leaving feeling confident in how they would use it. This contrasts directly with the experiences these students had of higher education prior to MaCE where they had wanted 'more practical experience'.

The students reflected on what they had learned from the week long residential and commented that:

Student A: The knowledge about and the experiences with the indirect approach. I really like that approach.

Student B: The difference between facts and lived experience. Tips of using indirect method.

Student C: How the indirect approach can deliver valuable insight into people's experiences of education. How readily people are prepared to engage with this approach and tell their stories.

These results show the socio-cultural, relational and experiential approach was valued by the students and seemed to impact positively on student learning.

The survey review exercise was also repeated after the writing residential in February 2019. This week featured more structured co-creative time and free time as minimal didactic 'input' was needed. The academic team, therefore, expected this week to have greater impact from a co-creative perspective. Short inspirational inputs were planned with rich practical experiences that bridged everyone into their own writing practices. The students identified the best things about the week as:

Student A: The structure of the week was quite satisfying - To start the day by somehow getting inspired and then to go write on our own or in groups- that was very very efficiently.

Student B: The fact that we're learning together and co-create. The social, making friendships cross borders.

Student C: The opportunity to concentrate and explore avenues and angles for the study. The chance to talk to colleagues and tutors about ideas. To co-create, I suppose. The fact that there was no pressure to work in a certain way.

These comments clearly signpost the value of co-creation, which takes time, space and trust to fully undertake. Again different aspects of the week were rated. The 'mini' inspirational inputs followed by co-creative experiences were highly valued:

Student A: I loved them - they were very inspiring and helpful. The inputs gave different direction and opened up for some new thinking.

Student B: I liked that the days started with short inputs. For me it was particularly helpful the session about inductive, deductive and abductive method.

Student C: Perfect length and time of the day.

It seems that students do want input from tutors, but this need only be small amounts of input that lead to practice, reflection and co-creation. From my experience of my institution, the opposite is the norm in academic programmes – long lectures in large groups, little discussion time and no opportunities for co-creation.

Rather than offering these students 1.5 hours of help across the year, unlimited tutorial space was provided at the writing residential. Staff made themselves available for 12 hours a day for the students to seek advice and support formally or informally from one another and from academic staff. This seemed to work well:

Student B: I liked that you could sit and work where you wanted, and that it was easy to get help when you needed it. Someone was always available.

Student C: The availability of the tutors to answer questions was great.

Social activities remained a strong feature of the week in order to keep promoting international dialogue and understanding. These were not 'tag-on' or 'nice to have' activities, rather, they were positioned as key socio-cultural opportunities to build relationships and trust, exchange ideas, and develop cross-cultural awareness. These too were valued by the students who commented that:

Student A: It was nice - and perfect ways to spend the time between working on the article. I think these activities was very important for the trip and the process and it was nice to do things cross nations.

Student B : Really great.

Student C: A great balance. Something for everyone. Perfect location to explore a fantastic area. Interested to witness the Norwegian students baffled by pre boating health and safety briefing. "Why did they tell us the floor could be wet?"

Despite the small data set, the comparison of these students learning in higher education prior to and after MaCE indicate the time invested was a good use of resources, the socio-cultural and relational approach supported learning, co-creative processed built confidence and enabled students to feel they belonged as valued colleagues. As the students state:

Student A: I have made learnings about coding interviews - learnings about being in such a project and about being a researcher. And some learnings about England as well :-) I really enjoyed this trip - and I came home with both personal, social, professional and practical gains in my bag.

STUART: CHALLENGING NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSES AS 'NASTY LITTLE THEORIES': CO-CREATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Student B: I've learned more about method, coding, analysis and much more of what the others are writing about, their findings. I also feel that I have a better overview of the project. Many of us talked about that we all should try to get together when the project is finished.

The final survey was sent out at the end of June 2019 when the project had ended. As a result of the year long project the students stated they following gains and benefits:

Student A: Most of all the whole experience. Trying to perform an interview, analysing it and writing an article - so nice to have tried the whole fieldwork process.

Student B: How to use an indirect approach, how to code and analyse, skills to co-operate and co-create.

Student C: Good spirit brings you half the way - important issues needs to be addressed properly. mutual discussions and reflections are very important. We can all learn from each other. Hierarchical structures can be challenged.

The three students had clearly advanced in their ability to research and in their views of themselves as researchers. Their statements communicate they were part of something, part of a community, and their learning was enriched as a result.

The MaCE project had an ambitious suite of eleven project outcomes. We hoped to increase the students' abilities to:

- Read and understand the literature
- Understand equality and equity theoretically
- Work with other co-researchers
- Meet and talk to young people
- Indirectly interview young people
- Conduct ethical research
- Code and analyse data
- Develop findings from the data
- Write up an academic paper
- Co-construct solutions to educational inequality and inequity
- Complete an academic assignment.

The students were asked to self-score each of these outcomes at four intervals throughout the year on a 1-5 point likert scale. The aggregated change from the start to the end of the project for the three students are shown in chart one below.

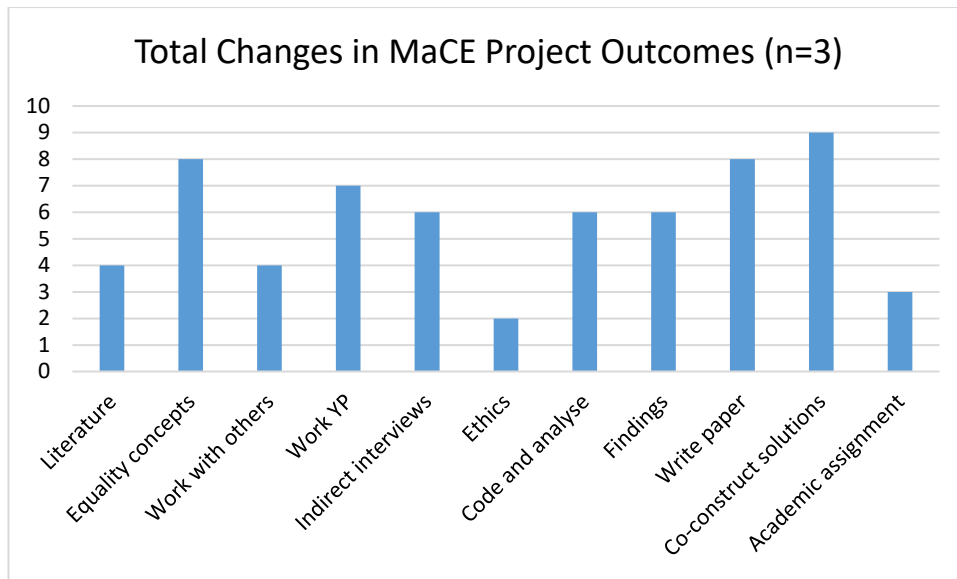


Figure 1. Changes in MaCE Project Outcomes from Start to End of the Project.

This shows that positive change occurred for the three students across the three countries. The area showing the most positive change was that of co-constructing solutions to social issues (9 / 15). This was a heartening finding given that the co-construction was the programme's key pedagogical approach. Understanding and applying equality and equity concepts and writing papers both showed a high level of change (8 / 15) indicating that the programme had increased the students' understanding of educational equality and ability to write about it. The area showing the least change was ethics, which only increased 2 points of a potential of 15. This could indicate the students had a high level of understanding initially, or that the ethics session was not particularly impactful. The ability to write an academic assignment also changed little, which may have been due to the students not having received their grades for their assignments by the time they completed the final survey.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research questions were:

1. What are the students' prior higher educational experiences?
2. What are the students' experiences of the MaCE project?
3. What, if any, are the benefits of the MaCE projects for students?

The data has shown that the students all had generally positive experiences of higher education before MaCE despite variations across countries, subjects and level of study. The reasons for the high scores were good teaching, an appropriate curriculum and peers. Potential improvements were, however, identified in the areas of practical experience and resourcing which were both deemed to be lacking. A relevant and interesting curriculum and relationships with lecturers were seen as strengths of higher education, and peers and family viewed as important support structures. Intrapersonal factors such as low self-esteem and self-confidence were seen to detract from learning in this setting as well as a lack of interpersonal or contextual factors such as family support.

Given this positive self-reporting of prior higher education experience, it would seem difficult to improve things to create a positive impact in the MaCE project. Key distinguishing factors in the project pedagogy were socio-cultural co-constructed learning, experiential learning and dialogue, relational learning and trust, all of which took a substantial investment of Erasmus+ funding to implement.

The data shows the students highly valued this pedagogical approach and we believe it accounts for confident, successful students who feel they belong in academia as colleagues with us. Our anecdotal experience of teaching in traditional university programmes suggests to us that this would not have been the case had MaCE been taught in a 'normal' way. However we cannot 'prove' this claim. Confirmatory data is that despite the amount of time spent in the project, the students expressed a desire for more time and space for activities and discussions. The debate and dialogue we engaged in allowed students to develop their own solutions alongside and sometimes with others, knowing that no one fixed answer existed for our shared social concern. We hope this has enhanced their critical thinking and self-confidence going forward. Working with tutors as equals within the research, getting to know them as people and being able to access them easily were also characteristics of the project the students valued.

We conclude therefore that whilst the students all had positive prior experiences of higher education, the MaCE project further enhanced that due to its resourcing and pedagogical features.

In terms of the final research question, which sought to identify the benefits of participating in MaCE, the students identified the following benefits in free text comments; learning about being a research and research skills, cross cultural learning, social skills, personal development and social change. Quantitatively surveying the project outcomes corroborated these findings. There were positive gains for all three students across the suite of eleven project outcomes. The most significant gains were in learning how to co-create solutions to social issues, understanding and applying equality and equity concepts and writing papers.

It would seem that the extended resources and pedagogical approach of the MaCE project was able to ameliorate significant demographic differences between the students such as country of origin, age, gender, social class and level of education, enabling them all to enjoy learning and succeed. The educational habitus of these students may have varied, however, the co-creative approach adopted in the project enabled everyone to feel a valued member of the research team with a key perspective or experience to contribute.

We therefore propose that 'non-traditional' students can be supported effectively in higher education and have an equally valid contribution to make to learning environments as those who have an educational habitus. The challenge is to operationalise this within standard university structures, without additional funding. Some changes might be achieved by our attitude towards students, and how we create learning environments within our classrooms, however many of the changes that must happen are at an institutional level. We believe it is incumbent on higher educational establishments to invest in relational, co-creative and experiential learning in order to maximise learning for all and by all. This is not new, the critical pedagogy movement has been transmitting this message for a long time, but good messages are always worthy of transmission in the light of new data (Fine and Weiss, 2003), Giroux and McLaren, 1989). It is this approach rather than neoliberal competition and efficiencies that will transform league tables, attract students, and enable equitable outcomes, should that be our concern in the short term. Taking a longer view, it is only through such transformative learning that students will learn to create such emancipatory and equitable spaces themselves, leading us towards a better future without toxic discourses and 'nasty little theories' (Dorling, 2018).

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