

Reflections of a migrant academic on a Development Education skill-sharing session

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Praxis Workshop

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Background & Purpose of this workshop

Visual artists Laragh Pittman and Hina Khan were invited by academic researchers Nita Mishra (NM) and Gertrude Cotter (GC) to facilitate a session for lecturers and staff at UCC looking at creative ways to apply methodologies in the classroom from an anti-racist perspective and with the promotion of ideas of inclusive global citizenship. The purpose was to introduce creative tools for educators to make classrooms more inclusive for non-white, non-Irish students. To open up discussions around race and migration without making anyone uncomfortable in class. According to the facilitators, the purpose was -

we can get participants thinking about what their assumptions and stereotypes about people are and to be aware of the 'invisible whiteness' all around (emails between LP, NM, HK, June 2021).

Structure & Methodology

Through a dialogical method, we (GC & NM)¹ have analyzed our reflections, written in this paper, using the session structure described below, informal discussions and chat messages during the zoom session. At times, the dialogue appears to be very crude, but it is open, honest, brutal, and raw. At the same time, we discussed the possibility of using our dialogue as a method to open transparent ways of discussing a difficult topic, that of race, inclusion, and 'invisibility' of it all. If the task of development education is to be transformatory then we seemed to be on the right track. Thus, we lay bare our thoughts and ask for trust from participants, researchers, educators & development practitioners acknowledging our differences, our positions, our opposing perspectives on the same event from various angles. One sees it as a process which evoked a lot from its participants while another thought more needed to be said and done to engage educators at a higher level. Both positions are valuable to taking this conversation further.

We had around 12 participants joining us for the workshop. We expected more if not all to join in. But that is never possible. We opened the floor to the two facilitators who made their presentations on the work they are engaged in. Hina's fascinating journey and insights were captured visually, while Laragh's was more through organizing exhibitions along with migrant communities at various levels.

What I have done with this document is to first present my original report, followed by GC's response to various bits of my report of the workshop.

¹ We are hoping to invite all participants in the next phase, to join/react/add/edit our dialogic reflections without prejudice, with their own reflections, counter-thoughts, reactions to this dialogue between NM and GC. The idea is to be transparent and make visible all that is invisible in our responses which has been beautifully captured in NM & GC dialogue. Invisible White Assumptions versus Invisible non-White Assumptions or invisible whiteness talks with invisible non-whiteness? We could shape this together in the next few years. A dialogue. My sincere apologies to one and all in case you do not agree with any of this or all of it.

The report

1) Introductions

Our introductions took half an hour as we went off tangent discussing different aspects of our lives, artistic and non-artistic. We found musicians, actors, artists, amongst the academic and staff of UCC. We also had a migrant participant who is spearheading a movement on the absence of migrants in development organizations in Ireland. In other words, racism in the development education sector reveals itself.

2) Short visual presentation about Art Nomads.

The aim was to challenge the idea that there is ever a static culture in any nation state and to provide ideas and resources for curriculum development.

Hina showed how through her art she has situated herself in the Irish context. Her painting on the gunning down of the Army Public School children in Pakistan by the Taliban a few years ago found resonance with the Irish mother-baby homes' tragedy. Her other works portrayed a split in ordinary lives, and how segregation has always been the case in societies. For instance, cities still have a designated 'red light' area which is set apart from ordinary folk residential sections. Thus art could be used to draw creative maps where we, in classrooms, can situate ourselves within the four walls or outside of it.

Similarly, in schoolyards, when parents come to pick up children, they involuntarily formed different groups and waited for the children. The Irish stand quite chattily, the Indians and Pakistanis' stand together talking in their common language, the Polish chat with the Estonians, Bulgarian and others separately, the Bangladeshi mother stands quietly in a corner, the parents who come from the 'flats' or 'council houses' are perhaps the furthest away. The school does nothing to bridge these gaps. A very few parents weave in and out of different groups. These segregated spaces are everywhere. How do we negotiate these spaces?

3) What is your name?

This was a short exercise for everyone in drawing, colouring and making a design about your first name as large as you can on an A4 sheet of paper. This can also be using whatever script you use in your mother tongue. The aim was to respect and bring attention to learning a person's name, it's spelling and correct pronunciation whatever the cultural origin.

An interesting way to negotiate these segregated spaces in a schoolyard context, a classroom or even in conferences where educators gather is to use the name 'game'. It sounds banal and a childish approach. However, the session itself reveal hidden prejudices of the friendly group of educators in the room. It started with discussing meanings behind names and went to question the validity of the use of this approach. Interestingly, the efficacy of this approach was questioned by one who was struggling to 'tell' fellow colleagues in the institution that the English alphabet 'J' is actually pronounced as 'Y' in her name. The reasons behind not 'correcting' fellow colleagues reflects a personal choice and must be respected. It was, however, a moment of reckoning because we as educators do not realize how we are used to 'assimilating others' in our own culture because it may be dominant. A second reflective point arising from this is that it may not be easy for a person of colour to ignore the fact that 'others' are not making an attempt to learn to pronounce her name. So, one gives up, changes, or shortens one's name. There were examples of this from the group itself again. Such examples

are telling of 'invisible whiteness' because we do not question it. We take it for granted that a migrant will probably need to change her name because it's a practical option for her. More interestingly, if we as educators do not question why we give up, turn a blind eye, or never focus on a name which is a core identity of a person, why will ordinary folks give it a second thought. The young student in classrooms is probably more open to these questions, and our role is to facilitate that.

Names have a way of connecting. A few of us lamented upon the fact that our names had no stories, and no meanings. Why were we not named after goddesses locally or globally? However, as we went ahead in our discussions, in the chat appeared 'my granny's name was also*!'. Whoever would have thought the name of a brown migrant woman academic was also the name of the white Irishman's grandmother's name? A name which was rendered meaningless, suddenly had meaning, a link with the past, and helped situate the person in her Irish-ness. It gave comfort. And this is the takeaway from this session.

4) What have you brought with you?

This short exercise was about everyone sharing with the group any small hand-held item that is important to them. This can be any material object that has some significance that we could talk briefly about to the group. Has this object travelled? where has it come from? What is it for? What does it remind you about? The aim was to learn and share from one another and to be open to discovering something new about other people.

A few of us were ready with our objects for discussions. We heard beautiful teacher-student stories from another part of the world around a wooden figurine which the participant values and looks at in times of academic chaos. We had memories around gifts of a bakelite granny brooch, grandma's measuring cup, to the music of a flute, a father's antique watch, the irreplaceable spectacle case, bells, wooden ladle and spoons, and lead pencils. Conversations led to discussions around how wooden spoons would "terrify any Irish child of a certain generation' to why 'slippers' would do that for children in other parts of the globe! There was potential to discuss on how children were 'managed', what should be considered 'abuse', and what is acceptable in current times. However, child rights and parental discretions can be the subject-matter for global citizenship discourse on another day. A Tibetan bell led to a brief discussion on cow bells and the beauty of Irish church-bells. One could possibly pick on this as an opportunity to delve deeper into temple-bells, other bells, and bring in memories of a distant past, of religious practices, of sharing, of discrimination, of exclusions, race and ethnicity.

More importantly, one of us shared resources on name-coach which explicitly tells us how we should help 'the other' to be able to pronounce our names. We realized that 'identity is complex, multi-layered and not static indeed'.

Discussions and a Conclusion

This session was interesting and an eye-opener. General reflections arising from the session were as follows.

Many of us went into this session with preconceived notions of what to expect, and what a facilitation process should be like. These were challenged as the two artists, instead of leading

the group of 10 academic (and otherwise) educators, let the process lead itself. After the session, many expressed dis-satisfaction, and this was conveyed to the organizers. This in itself was a process of learning. An interesting aspect of development education as we reflected upon it. DE is a transformatory process. Challenging one's own expectations and preconceived notions in a safe environment is not for others to embrace, but for us as well. We as educators are not always open to fluid ways of learning. We want techniques, methods, approaches in clear structured ways. And it falls apart when we have an unpredictable, shifting, take something from this session type of learning. We need to be able to rake through the discussions, and debates of the two-hour session, or any such facilitation process, use a fine comb and distill our learnings. Development education has to be rooted in such a process if it has to transform itself for the goals it outlines to serve. We as educators must un-learn our biases, prejudices, and fixedness.

Many a times, we facilitate education sessions saying that 'let the process lead itself' and emerge from the class. We realized that we always mean it for 'others' as we facilitate. However, when we are in the hands of a fluid facilitator, we realize we are actually not going with 'the flow', and we are resilient to the process. We may be experts on Freirian methodologies, but we sometimes miss it when it is in action in spite of participating in the process. This is an important learning for us as educators.

A concluding point that arises in our minds which we did not dwell upon because we thought it was not openly and clearly facilitated upon. However, I argue that it was there, all the time. And that is 'invisible whiteness', and how we react to, or scrutinize, what is in front of us. In the session, educators of color were sharing their experiences of using the two approaches in the class, and they shared resources from where they have learned the same. They were excited and willing to share. Others, with no malice at all, reacted later questioning the approaches as something that is not what they expected of the session as they were not 'middle-level' educators, and needed a higher level of stimulation/ presentation/ facilitation. During the session, one could see that a few were reticent to share personal stories as this is not what they expected of it. However, from our point of view, how can educators who have reservations of sharing their own personal stories expect their students, especially migrants, to share in a foreign setting including a 'white' classroom, and a 'patronizing' attitude?

To hear intimate stories of a gifted necklace, a little doll gifted by students at a very difficult juncture in one's personal life, a book that defines one's worldview, a Tibetan bell that rings in your head everytime you fall into a rut- these were very intimate memories of objects that life is made of. To openly discuss these intimate memories merges the gap between the teacher and the student. The educator also becomes the learner. The subject becomes the object. And that is the essence of this session.

[Dialogue between GC & NM on NM's Report](#)

This section is of immense value to Development Education, and/or Global Citizenship discourse. This is an open dialogue. It is 'open' in terms of laying bare our first impressions of the workshop, the text, and to each other's insights. It is 'open' because we want to be transparent with complete respect for each participant's perspectives without naming anyone. It is 'open' because we understand the value of open dialogues and to lay bare 'invisibilities' on our parts. Invisibilities lie at the bottom of many of our interactions and we

Commented [MN1]: I have tried to take out names. See if you want to edit this section a little more.

are all culpable of engaging in it notwithstanding the color of our skin. And that is the strength of this document. Join us on this journey--

NM: I think it would be useful to send it to the participants for discussion.

GC: I think you make a lot of assumptions. I have for instance been very open to your critique in our sessions and I welcome them. I still do. But you do come across as a bit defensive when your session received some critique! I think some of your conclusions are coming from a defensive place and a set of assumptions!

NM: *Many of us went into this session with preconceived notions of what to expect, and what a facilitation process should be like.*

GC: If you apply this to my position for instance and I can really only speak for myself...I didn't come in with preconceived notions of what to expect. or of what a facilitation process should be like. I have attended hundreds of such sessions for the past 35 years. I am very open to what might arise and many many have been facilitated by people from places which are different to my own place of origin.

NM: *These were challenged as the two artists, instead of leading the group of 10 academic (and otherwise) educators, let the process lead itself. This in itself was a process of learning.*

GC: I understand that point and I make it to my own students in different ways. However, there was no real opportunity to reflect upon this. As participants we are learning. So even if we are using the process led approach then we need to reflect upon it as a teaching methodology. Otherwise it could be anything. People don't necessarily 'know' automatically. There is a pedagogical context. There was no reflection on the process of learning. The reflection is happening here in your reflection now, but we did not have any opportunity to really reflect on the 'nature' of what was happening. I do get what you are saying. I say this to my students not just in the first class but on canvas before the class starts. I ask for this openness to process learning. My issue is that we didn't enable that understanding. I think these two women are great, but I also think that we do them no favour by not helping them to learn how to help the group to understand what they are experiencing. So maybe someone feels a discomfort...what is the value of that in a learning environment...we need to talk about it. That is where the gems of wisdom are.

NM: *After the session, many expressed dis-satisfaction, and this was conveyed to the organizers.*

GC: This is not true. One person sent an email. I did get another today but when we spoke I had only received one. And two is not "many".

Commented [MN2]: We can delete this

NM: *An interesting aspect of development education as we reflected upon it. DE is a transformatory process.*

GC: But we did not talk about that.

NM: *Challenging one's own expectations and preconceived notions in a safe environment is not for others to embrace, but for us as well. We as educators are not always open to fluid ways of*

learning. We want techniques, methods, approaches in clear structured ways. And it falls apart when we have an unpredictable, shifting, take something from this session type of learning. We need to be able to rake through the discussions, and debates of the two-hour session, or any such facilitation process, use a fine comb and distill our learnings. Development education has to be rooted in such a process if it has to transform itself for the goals it outlines to serve. We as educators must un-learn our biases, prejudices, and fixedness.

GC: As a general point I do agree. I have seen students and staff really struggle with this idea. I talk about it quite a lot. Indeed, I have learned a lot this year about Dev. Ed. as I have seen the process itself play out...students in particular who struggled a lot earlier on and could see the value of it later on.

However, being subjective again, I think you make a lot of assumptions in context of this particular learning environment. I did not for instance have 'reconceived notions' of a safe environment. In fact for me personally the more out of the box something would be the better and as I said I agree with your point in a broader sense. It is not that I am not open to something or would not challenge my own expectations even today....and not that I don't get what you are trying to say. But I did not have preconceived notions. I find that a bit patronising. Some educators are open to "fluid ways of learning". Just because I for instance critique something does not mean you can come to a conclusion that I am not open to 'fluid ways of learning'. You cannot jump to that conclusion and you too need to hear what the other is saying.

Yes I agree about "*We want techniques, methods, approaches in clear structured ways. And it falls apart when we have an unpredictable, shifting, take something from this session type of learning*".

Which is why in Dev. Ed. we try different approaches and I totally get the point your making in a broader sense. The problem is that none of this was reflected upon. This is my point about facilitation. If we are trying to raise this point that you make here, we cannot assume that people 'get it'. What you are doing in your critique here IS the facilitation part. If this kind of discussion had happened in the session it would have made it a better session. There was a little but it was more one sided...and others needed to be part of the discussion.

I believe that if we are learning about how to embrace unpredictability, process learning and discomfort, we need to name it. Like if someone expresses a discomfort, then hold them in that place, they also need to be held, not sort of berated and told that they need to be more open to a process. We need to discuss the process, we need to hear the discomfort, we need to hold it with them. But I think we have to also name it too in the context of learning about process learning.

NM: *We need to be able to rake through the discussions, and debates of the two-hour session, or any such facilitation process, use a fine comb and distill our learnings.*

GC: Well, you asked me what I thought of it.

But even so, I think that distilling learning is a good thing. Why not distill our learnings? is that not part of an educational process? Why would that not be a good reflective practice?

NM: *Development education has to be rooted in such a process if it has to transform itself for the goals it outlines to serve. We as educators must un-learn our biases, prejudices, and fixedness.*

GC: That is true but I for instance don't think my own critique was coming from bias, prejudice or fixedness. I think there is an assumption being made that we can apply this conclusion every time there is a critique.

It is based on your assumption. We did not discuss this at the session. It is a personal observation of what you think might be happening. If it is your experience then that needs to be named as your experience.

NM: *Many a times, we facilitate education sessions saying that 'let the process lead itself' and emerge from the class. We realized that we always mean it for 'others' as we facilitate. However, when we are in the hands of a fluid facilitator, we realize we are actually not going with 'the flow', and we are resilient to the process. We may be experts on Freirian methodologies, but we sometimes miss it when it is in action in spite of participating in the process. This is an important learning for us as educators.*

GC: As I said above I think that is a major assumption and I don't accept it - not because I cannot accept a sort of critique - as you well know I have welcomed your critique many times and actively ask you to do so. I think it is an unfair conclusion, it does not listen to for instance my experience, my perspective or indeed my own critique. It is quite defensive. And frankly untrue. In my own case it could not be further from the truth and that is not because I am in denial or because I have 'missed something' in action, or because I cannot as a facilitator 'go with the flow'. Again there are major assumptions. I also do not consider myself to be an expert in anything. Far from it. It is a personal observation.

NM: *A concluding point that arises in our minds which we did not dwell upon because we thought it was not openly and clearly facilitated upon. However, I argue that it was there, all the time. And that is 'invisible whiteness', and how we react to, or scrutinize, what is in front of us. In the session, educators of color were sharing their experiences of using the two approaches in the class, and they shared resources from where they have learned the same. They were excited and willing to share.*

GC: Quite frankly this is a major assumption and quite untrue. And you is "our minds"? You mean your mind?

You cannot just conclude that if a white person questions a session then it is because they cannot embrace the approach of educators of colour. If that was the case, the many many sessions I have attended from people of all walks of life, places in the world, religions, colours etc, cannot be critiqued without being described as being because of 'whiteness'. I can see my own whiteness in many places, I have no doubt at all that I go around the world completely blind to my whiteness, I have no doubt that I could spend my entire life unpacking my white knapsack and never succeed in unpacking it fully...because I think it would be almost impossible. However, I do not think that that is what was going on in this particular context. I know it was not. Critique does not equal 'invisible whiteness' and to say so is not helpful.

NM: *Others, with no malice at all, reacted later questioning the approaches as something that is not what they expected of the session as they were not 'middle-level' educators, and needed a higher level of stimulation/ presentation/ facilitation.*

GC: Again that refers to our discussion on the phone. I simply don't agree with you. We advertised the event in a certain way. I did by the way raise this when we met originally with the two facilitators. My experience at that moment was you cut me off and said to the other two "I have seen your work and I trust you". I did feel uncomfortable. Because I know you and like you to work with, I did say "ok I trust you"...and I do trust you now too. I also didn't want to push it because I was late and had delayed you all and also because frankly it was not a priority in my life in comparison to the conversation I had just before that with my mother's doctor. If you were happy with it I was going to run with that. But I did actually say that we needed a bit more. One of the facilitators also said "be open to doing something in a different way". I was open to it but there is still a question of context.

There is such a thing as needing a higher level of stimulation....or indeed at least a linking of what we are learning to our own context. Some people there, including myself, do need to be challenged. If we have used an activity or approach and debriefed on it with students many times, then we want to be brought to the next level. Everyone needs this. This is something I am trying to figure out in this entire process because I do think that a lot of resources online for example are suitable for less experienced audiences. I did feel this when I met the facilitators.... although I thought one of them was very insightful and felt she would challenge me... her work is superb and I would love to work with her to find ways of distilling and facilitating learning from it.

Maybe I should have done more on Friday but I didn't want to interfere. Sometimes both you and I did have to come in because it was not moving forward. You saw this too. At times there was literally no facilitation!!

I don't necessarily agree with your analysis of what happened on Friday. I think it is a very subjective reflection which needs to be named as your reflection...no-one else in the group has been able to reflect on this. You are entitled to your reflection and it is good to have it but it needs to be named as your own reflection based on your own assumptions and your life experience.

NM: *During the session, one could see that a few were reticent to share personal stories as this is not what they expected of it.*

GC: How do you know that? This is subjective. You have no idea what people were expecting or if they were reticent or why they might have been. If they were, they are entitled to be. They were giving 2 hours on a Friday afternoon to try to learn something about Dev. Ed. Rather than critique them we need to ask them how they were, what they thought, maybe they loved it! Plus they were not asked to share personal stories. They were asked to share an object which was meaningful to them.

NM: *However, from our point of view, how can educators who have reservations of sharing their own personal stories expect their students, especially migrants, to share in a foreign setting including a 'white' classroom, and a 'patronizing' attitude?*

GC: Can I ask when you say "our point of view" who do you mean? You mean from "your" point of view?

Your reference to 'patronising' comes across as patronising to everyone else there. I understand the point about telling 'own stories' and indeed I can send you some work I did on digital storytelling where the students (and I have links to the student stories) had to tell their personal stories and not the stories of 'others'. I think it was one of the biggest learning points for that group...and there was deep reflection as a result, by all concerned. So it is not that I don't get your point, I spent three days just on that point with a group of students.

But (1) we were not asked to share personal stories (2) only one person expressed a reservation and it was not about her personal story, she questioned about her name not necessarily having a meaning (3) you assume that they would have only asked the non white in the classroom...which is your experience and worth naming as a participant, but not necessarily what each educator there would do. I think you need to say that it is your assumption based on your experience. But you cannot assume that that is what the people in this group would do. One person actually said that she would not have asked only the migrant people in the class. I know for certain that I would not do so either.

NM: To hear intimate stories of a gifted necklace, a little doll gifted by students at a very difficult juncture in one's personal life, a book that defines one's worldview, a Tibetan bell that rings in your head everytime you fall into a rut-- these were very intimate memories of objects that life is made of.

I agree with that.

NM: To openly discuss these intimate memories merges the gap between the teacher and the student. The educator also becomes the learner. The subject becomes the object. And that is the essence of this session.

GC: But nobody said that. This is my point. If we are to learn you can't again assume that people know what you are trying to do. That is the facilitation part that I am talking about. There is a context. We want ourselves and other educators to understand why this is important. It may very well be appropriate to leave a process hanging sometimes but in the context of us as learner educators trying to learn about process learning we can't just say nothing at all...that is what I mean by the facilitation part. In a way what you have written here is the facilitation part that was missing and if we add it as a reflection and discussion point then I feel the session would have more educational value for the context in which it is happening.

I do love how you take things seriously and are willing to have hard conversations and that is why I love you in the praxis group. But I am quite like you so I will challenge you back too!!! It is a mutual challenge which is good for both of us I think. I have learned so much from what you have put forward. I am willing to challenge my own positioning but I just think that in this particular context it is, for me at least, misplaced!

But I would love if everyone would take education and reflection as seriously as you do. This is so refreshing. Love talking to you.

Appendix

ART NOMADS

Art Nomads was formed in 2020 for artists from migrant and diverse cultural backgrounds to stage art exhibitions, create collaborative projects, facilitate talks and workshops. Their unique position and experience gives them a connection to global art making and links to international art galleries, museums, curators, education and research. They gain strength through group action as well as working individually; they live in counties Cork, Dublin, Sligo and Louth and come from diverse art backgrounds including architecture, product design, painting, photography, film, performance, socially engaged practice, poetry and miniature painting.

Hina Khan: Born in Pakistan in 1980, I completed my MFA with majors in Miniature Painting from Pakistan. I am using a mixture of traditional and innovative techniques in Miniatures. I portray social issues, immigration, humanitarian crises like prostitution, gender discrimination, gender restrictions, trauma, child abuse & killing etc in my work. I have chosen Miniature because of its intricacy and delicacy of brush work which tends their unique identity. Most of my work is a mixture of traditional and contemporary miniature. My work is the constant search for the best way to interpret the ideas expresses my own ideologies through symbolism. Shifting my practice to installation, videos, 3D. My art pieces are also in the permanent collection of Arts Council Ireland.

Laragh Pittman: A visual artist with BA and MAs in Fine Art and Digital Media, she uses multiple media for socially engaged and participatory art making and builds spaces for creativity, dialogue and exploration of the fluid and transcultural nature of life in Ireland today. Laragh also works as a curator and project manager with Art Nomads, a collective of migrant artists. She is now working on 'The Invisible City' an exhibition for 5 Lamps Festival in July 2021. Her artwork also includes 'A Perfect Global City' a collaborative and participatory project with WEMIN: Migrant Women Empowerment and Integration, a European funded project in 2019 and 'The Invisible Museum' in Kilmainham Courthouse as part of the 'Citizen Artist' project with Common Ground in April 2019 www.invisiblemuseum.ie

Resources

<https://www.invisiblemuseum.ie>

<https://developmenteducation.ie/100objects/browse-the-objects/>

<https://onehe.org/eu-activity/introductions-story-of-your-name/>

<https://www.name-coach.com/sanaa-khabbar>

<https://onehe.org/equity-unbound/>