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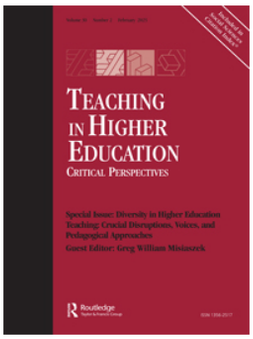

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Towards an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy: putting critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in dialogue

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ABSTRACT

While some have drawn connections between critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, and many educators and activists employ both traditions in their praxis, few studies have explicitly explored their synergies as a substantive focus, particularly through empirical research in Higher Education (HE) contexts. This leaves some of their transformative potential underdeveloped. This article conceptualises an *antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy* for the first time by engaging the philosophies of critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in dialogue with data generated through 29 semi-structured interviews with antiracist scholar-activists based at British universities. In doing so, it argues that scholar-activism's deep engagement with social movements sharpens critical pedagogy's pursuit of social change in HE contexts, while critical pedagogy's emphasis on education enables scholar-activism to embrace teaching as transformative praxis. Ultimately, the article provides a framework for those interested in teaching for social change, whilst cautioning that the potential of scholar-activist pedagogy is constrained by the neoliberal and institutionally racist HE context.

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Introduction

Much has been written about the purpose and mission of higher education (HE) institutions, and their potential to advance positive societal change. The role of academics has similarly garnered attention, specifically concerning whether, or how, they should engage in efforts to effect social justice. These debates have intensified in recent years following efforts from culturally conservative, reactionary and/or populist figures on the political Right to curtail the incorporation of social justice issues and approaches in the classroom, notably in the US, Britain, France and Brazil.[1] Yet whilst some advocate for political neutrality and objectivity in teaching and research (see for example: Ellis 2021; Fish 2008), a rich history exists of critical academics pursuing social justice, particularly within the traditions of critical pedagogy and scholar-activism. This article engages those histories and, in a context where institutional priorities and frameworks

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often prioritise research over teaching (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021), focuses specifically on the potential of teaching in the pursuit of social justice.

Whilst important literature explores the relationship between critical pedagogy and scholar-activism (c.f. Freire 1993; hooks 1994; Horton and Freire 1990), and educators and activists have long employed the traditions of critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in their praxis, there are no studies that we are aware of that explicitly examine their synergies as a substantive focus through empirical research in HE contexts. This article draws on data generated through 29 semi-structured interviews with antiracist scholar-activists in British universities to answer two research questions: What are the key components of the pedagogical practices of antiracist scholar-activists? How do the pedagogical practices of antiracist scholar-activists draw from existing philosophies and approaches, and in what ways can these practices inform and enhance those philosophies and approaches? We conceptualise an *antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy* for the first time by engaging the established philosophies of critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in dialogue with our empirical data. In so doing, the article addresses the respective limitations or the (mis)praxes of critical pedagogy, which sometimes struggles to transition critical thought into action within the constraining contexts of contemporary HE, and those of scholar-activism, which sometimes overlooks the importance of the classroom. The article's contribution is not merely conceptual, however; it also provides a framework for those interested in teaching for social change, while cautioning that the potential of scholar-activist pedagogy is constrained by the neoliberal and institutionally racist HE context. Although the data derive from a British study, it should nonetheless prove useful to a broader international community given that universities across much of the world share a range of characteristics, values and structures that transcend borders.

The article first introduces critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, identifying their key tenets and respective limitations, before considering the HE context, characterised as it is by neoliberalism and institutional racism. After outlining the research methodology, the article introduces the four components of antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy, before considering the barriers presented by the university context.

Critical pedagogy and scholar-activism

Both critical pedagogy and scholar-activism encompass a wide range of approaches and interpretations, each resisting simple definition. The vastness and fluidity of these traditions make them elusive, difficult to grasp fully for the purposes of critique. As one attempts to define them, their plurality reveals itself. This complexity is further accentuated by the dynamic interplay between theory and practice, particularly as they are translated into praxes in contested real-world contexts. Therefore, it is a perilous task to distil or place tight parameters around such broad and diverse traditions, which do not always align today with their earlier conceptualisations. Yet, it remains necessary to engage with them, identifying essential characteristics that allow for later reflection on how a scholar-activist pedagogy may draw from and enhance these traditions. Our goal is not to erase complexity but to foster a shared conversation about how these traditions might be mobilised, in the context of HE.

Despite some of its roots lying outside of the academy, critical pedagogy has significantly influenced HE. Often traced to Paulo Freire's work in Brazil and with antecedents

in the Marx-influenced Frankfurt school, critical pedagogy promotes an explicitly political approach that rejects the myth of neutrality (Breuing 2011), aiming to challenge the status quo both inside and outside the classroom. This involves democratising the classroom by disrupting hegemonic power hierarchies, including those between teachers and students, and fostering critical consciousness to empower learners as agents of social change (Freire 1993 [1970]; 1994; Giroux 2011; hooks 1994; 2003). In this sense, critical pedagogy seeks social transformation through both method and content (Habib 2019), breaking with traditional top-down teaching and a 'just-the-facts' pedagogy. Reflexivity is also central to critical pedagogy; as Ryan and Walsh (2018, 1) explain, 'reflexivity implies a responsibility to critically examine our world, and how we position ourselves, and are positioned within that world' (Ryan and Walsh 2018, 1). This reflexivity allows critical pedagogy to evolve by overcoming constraints imposed by the social, cultural and physical contexts in which it is operationalised, thus offering opportunities to address its own limitations.

Scholar-activism, broadly defined, refers to praxes that combine scholarship and activism in pursuit of social justice.[2] Those engaged in scholar-activism, like their critical pedagogue counterparts, reject the pretence of neutrality and pseudo-objectivity, instead aligning with 'the oppressed'. Scholar-activism emphasises the fundamental relationship between theory and action, urging us not simply to think for thinking's sake but to think in order to do (Sivanandan 2008). This involves engaging in struggle within and against our institutions through an orientation of being *in but not of* the university (Harney and Moten 2013). Central to scholar-activism is a deep immersion in communities of resistance (Choudry 2020; Okazawa-Rey 2020; Rodney 2019), encouraging a shift away from doing research *on* oppressed communities to meaningful engagement *with* and a grounding *within* communities of resistance. This embeddedness, characterised by proximity to struggle, fosters heightened accountability and a concerted effort to work 'in service to social justice' (Collins 2013, 43; also c.f Sivanandan 2019).

Bringing critical pedagogy and scholar-activism into explicit dialogue offers significant potential to address the limitations, while amplifying their strengths. On the one hand, although critical pedagogy rooted in Freirean principles emphasises empowering learning as political actors, scholars have noted that the translation of critique into action is sometimes lacking (Apple 2000; McArthur 2010, 493) or has become 'decaffeinated' through its depoliticisation and dilution in the contemporary HE context (Mclaren 2020, 1243). On the other hand, despite a few notable exceptions (c.f Akoleowo 2021; Cann and DeMeulenaere 2020; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009), relatively little attention has been given to how scholar-activism translates in the classroom. Indeed, the key tenets of scholar-activism largely pertain to the connection between research and activism. As we go on to show, by drawing from scholar-activism's emphasis on direct engagement with and service to communities of resistance (of which there is little compromise), we can sharpen critical pedagogy's desire for social change, thereby answering calls for critical pedagogy to bridge the 'gap between critique and change' in contemporary HE (McArthur 2010, 494). Simultaneously, the focus that (HE-focused) critical pedagogy places on the classroom as a site of activist praxis helps rectify the historical neglect of this space in discussions on scholar-activism. Both traditions are profoundly influenced by their contexts, particularly within university settings. As such, we now consider this context further.

A neoliberal and institutionally racist higher education context

Differences between national HE systems are significant and must not be overlooked, especially considering the enduring influence of colonial legacies on the HE landscape in various regions across the globe (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Mills 2022; Stein, de Olveira Andreotti, and Suša 2019). Yet, given the dominance of global North models of HE worldwide, there are discernible patterns and shared characteristics that transcend borders, situating universities 'within a broader international community' (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009, iv). Previous literature has observed that the contemporary global HE sector is structured by wide-ranging and interlocking processes, including globalisation, internationalisation, digitalisation, and privatisation (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; Bygstad et al. 2022; de Wit and Altbach 2021). Importantly, hegemonic pedagogical models are perpetuated through both macro-level processes – such as international policies, global economics, and institutional frameworks – as well as through local contexts and practices that interact with or resist these broader trends. Nonetheless, critical scholars have consistently contested the assumption that universities operate as bastions of democracy, meritocracy and equal opportunity. Instead, this work reveals how universities maintain and even produce unequal power relations (Back 2004; hampton 2020; Keval 2024).

Neoliberalism is widely regarded as the most significant structuring force within HE, with the 'neoliberal critique' becoming omnipresent in writings on the contemporary university (Tight 2019, 273). The entrenched nature and normative status of neoliberalism – which describes that which 'seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey 2005, 3) – makes it difficult to pinpoint its specific manifestations. It is clear, however, that HE has been repositioned as a commodity across much of the globe. In many countries, the advancement of neoliberalism has eroded the concept of education as a 'public good', instead situating students as customers, education as a purchasable service, and universities and the academics as service providers (Martin 2017; Thornton 2013). This consumer-producer dynamic is reified further still by a pernicious and hyper-competitive metric and audit culture (Feldman and Sandoval 2018; Olssen and Peters 2007).

Most significantly for the purposes of this article, the neoliberal shift – particularly (although not exclusively) through metric-driven processes that specifically impact teaching – has profoundly impacted university classrooms. This shift prioritised research over teaching (Helmes 2022), whilst 'working against and potentially undermining the emancipatory potential of higher education' (Evans 2020, 574; also c.f. Maisuria and Helmes 2020). Furthermore, metric culture, a key feature of neoliberal HE, is understood to discourage pedagogical practices that facilitate deep, democratic learning, depoliticise classrooms, harm the relationship between students and teachers, and lead educators to prioritise metrics over meaningful learning (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury 2019; Feldman and Sandoval 2018; Giroux 2014). While not totalising – evidenced by various forms of (antiracist) resistance on campus – the neoliberalism of HE therefore threatens to limit the transformative potential of teaching for social change, the imaginations of students, and their capacities for engaging with activist struggle (Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury 2019; Helmes 2022). This highlights the heightened challenges faced by critical pedagogy in transitioning from theory to action within the neoliberal HE context.

Neoliberalism is not a separate or entirely new force shaping HE; it is deeply intertwined with coloniality, together actively (re)producing inequalities, particularly as they manifest along racial and colonial lines. The foundations of many modern universities are shaped by colonialism, and coloniality continues to shape the HE sector in ways that align with neoliberal practices. Western universities not only export knowledge that reproduces and justifies colonial hierarchies, but also perpetuate global inequities in the financial resources, stemming from an exclusive system of journal publication that privileges the English language (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; James, Joseph-Salisbury, and Gooden 2021; Smith 2018). Critical voices in HE have also pointed to material ties to contemporary forms of colonialism, such as 'complicit investments' that sustain the occupation and bombardment of Palestinians (c.f. Wind 2024). As Webb (2018:, 96–97) aptly describes, the university sits within a 'network of state apparatuses of control, discipline, surveillance, carcerality, and violence'. These systems are not only products of neoliberal governance but also continue the colonial project, making the university a 'site for trialing new forms of oppression and exploitation, an institution intimately involved in the reproduction of inequalities' (Webb 2018, 97). These inequalities underscore the necessity of a scholar-activist pedagogy, while presenting significant challenges to its practical implementation.

Whilst the colonial logics noted above shape institutional and disciplinary cultures and practices, so too does institutional racism. Despite neoliberal 'cosplay' that would suggest otherwise (Keval 2024), institutional racism manifests in hiring practices, evident in the underrepresentation of racially minoritised staff, particularly in more senior positions (Colby and Fowler 2020; Rollock 2021). It is also evident in student awarding gaps, the reported experiences of students, push-out rates, and in the underrepresentation of students from particular racialised groups at 'elite' universities and in postgraduate study (Libassi 2018; O'Neill 2024; Williams et al. 2019). Institutional racism permeates curricula (Tate and Bagguley 2017) and surveillance and securitisation on campus (Connelly et al. 2024; Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2023), particularly in the UK context via the operationalisation of the Prevent duty (Sian 2017) which mandates public bodies – including universities – to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. This requires university staff to monitor and report those that they suspect are 'vulnerable' to extremism. The duty has faced heavy criticism for its disproportionate impact on Muslim students (Alexander and Shankley 2020). Crucially for our purposes here, these manifestations of institutional racism are not detached from the classroom, which is also shaped by a pervasive culture of defensiveness around and denial of issues related to race and racism (Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2020). We return to examine the impact of these interlocking forces more closely in our findings section when we consider how institutional racism, colonial logics and neoliberalism constrain the potential of an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy.

Methods

This article draws on data generated for a broader research project exploring the possibilities, complexities and challenges associated with antiracist scholar-activism (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-nine people who either worked or were latter stage doctoral students in British

universities. These interviews lasted between one and three hours and were facilitated through purposive sampling from our networks, supplemented by a snowball sampling method. Participants were selected based on their involvement in antiracist organising, with all either self-identifying as scholar-activists (or with scholar-activism as praxis) or being recognised as such by others. As became apparent through the interviews, this orientation shaped their praxes within higher education, including their teaching. Most participants were racially minoritised people and reflected diverse career stages and academic disciplines across the Social Sciences and Humanities. There was also diversity in the specific foci of participants' antiracist academic work and activism (e.g. policing, schooling, housing, immigration). Our sample included individuals from various types of universities, including pre- and post-1992 universities,[3] high and low tariff universities,[4] universities in a range of different geographical locations (including campus and city universities) across Britain, and universities with vastly different student demographics.

Interview data were anonymised using participants' chosen pseudonyms, and professionally transcribed before being returned to participants for checking, data removal and/or editing. Whilst the data was originally analysed for the purpose of a monograph (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021), we re-analysed the transcripts for this article using the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) to examine two research questions: What are the key components of the pedagogical practices of antiracist scholar-activists? How do the pedagogical practices of antiracist scholar-activists draw from existing philosophies and approaches, and in what ways can these practices inform and enhance those philosophies and approaches? This collaborative analysis involved a layered and iterative process of moving between identifying themes in the data related to teaching, theoretical understandings of pedagogy, and reflections on our subjectivity and situated knowledge. The finalised themes form the structure of the findings section of this article, where we also include participants' ethnic/racial self-identification and career stage alongside their pseudonyms as contextual information. This information is non-standardised since we use the information provided to us by participants, reflecting their terminological preferences and political views.

As researchers working within the traditions we are writing about, we recognise that our own positionalities have inevitably influenced the research process. We come to this project as academics engaged in scholar-activism, as grassroots antiracist organisers in our local communities, and as (imperfect) practitioners of critical pedagogy. Connelly is a White woman and Joseph-Salisbury is a Black mixed-race man, both currently working in Russell Group universities in England. Our experiences within the HE system, along with our activist commitments, have shaped not only our approach to the interviews but how we have interpreted and presented the following data.

Findings

This section is divided into two substantive parts. The first delineates four key components that emerged from our reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data. We argue that these components – cultivating critical understandings, promoting dialogical learning, building links with community/activist groups, and teaching beyond the university – make up an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy. The first two align with key tenets of critical pedagogy that we argue are foundational to realising scholar-activism's aims in the classroom. Building

upon these foundations, the latter two components draw explicitly from scholar-activism to overcome the (aforementioned) barriers sometimes encountered in the (mis)praxes of critical pedagogy to actualise social change by prioritising activism and activist movements. An antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy therefore offers a framework that is developed by situating our empirical data in dialogue with these established traditions; one that can be taken up by those committed to social change. The second part examines the context and constraints faced by scholar-activist pedagogy in contemporary universities, which may (necessarily) temper the optimism of the preceding discussion.

Towards a scholar-activist pedagogy: four components

Component 1: cultivating critical understandings

The tradition of critical pedagogy has long emphasised the importance of cultivating critical worldviews amongst learners (Freire 1993; hooks 2010). Giroux (2004, 63–4) posits that this task involves transforming 'how people think about themselves and their relationship to others in the world' (Giroux 2004, 63–4). Many scholar-activists we interviewed echoed these sentiments, insisting on the centrality of classroom pedagogy to scholar-activism. For instance, Aaliyah, a Black, early career academic, stressed the importance of, and value in, teaching '*students about power and social justice and white supremacy and patriarchy*.'[5]

Neville, a white mid-career academic, exemplified the cultivation of critical understanding in his teaching approach. He explained that the essence of his praxis lies not in his research but in engaging young people in the classroom and '*getting them to think about stuff in a way that they haven't thought about it before*'. This challenges the notion identified earlier that scholar-activism is more realisable through research than teaching, highlighting the classroom as a crucial site for scholar-activism. Similarly, Jay, an Asian British Senior Lecturer, noted that a key aim of his scholar-activist praxis is '*encouraging an ethical stance in [students], not forcing one upon them but making them understand their role in broader society*'. For Elroy, a Black established academic, the classroom is '*a space within which [he] can drop the fucking seed*'. For him, the classroom is a place to plant critical ideas in the minds of students to shape their future praxis. Importantly, Elroy explained that for scholar-activists engaged in pedagogy, the classroom is not '*divorced from activism*'. Therefore, shifting our focus to how scholar-activism can further enhance critical pedagogy, the emphasis on involvement in social movements inherent in scholar-activism holds promise. This insistence may empower antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy to introduce sharper critical perspectives into the classroom, enriched by direct engagement with grassroots activism and social movements.

Cultivating critical understandings necessitates rejecting the facade of neutrality inherent in 'traditional' teaching approaches in the global North. This was underscored by Dillon, a British Asian early career academic,

> I'm very blunt in the sense that I tell students that I'm not neutral: there's no such thing as an objective Sociologist. I tell them that I'm coming at this from a particular position. If you don't agree with it, well that's fine, you're more than welcome to question it and challenge it […] To be neutral is to be complicit because social relations are structured in a particular way […] So, you have to be actively resisting and actively pushing back, and I do that with my teaching.

Dillon's stance aligns with critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, both of which emphasise exposing the power dynamics that shape society (Collins 2013; Freire 1993; Mayo 2016). These traditions argue that the veneer of neutrality obscures and maintains power (Freire 1993; 1994; Giroux and McLaren 1991), countering scholars like Fish (2008, 27) who advocate for detaching teaching content from its real-world urgency. Dillon's remarks highlight two important points. First, his classroom praxis extends his broader activism: he is *'actively resisting and actively pushing back'* in various contexts, and he applies this approach specifically in his teaching. Second, he openly acknowledges his partial position to his students, challenging the fallacy of neutral teaching and revealing the mechanics of education. This reshapes student expectations and sets a precedent for pedagogues to transparently communicate the positions and assumptions that shape their teaching, and encourages students to critically assess their teachers' perspectives. In this way, Dillon exemplifies the kind of HE environment he envisions, one that rejects 'neutrality' and fosters critical thought as a key component of scholar-activist pedagogy.

Component 2: disrupting power: promoting dialogical learning

Freire (1993) and hooks (1994; 2003; 2010), among others, insist that critical pedagogy extends beyond content delivery to how teaching and learning occur. Central to critical pedagogy is a rejection of 'banking models' (Freire 1993), which treat students as passive receptacles of knowledge, advocating instead for participatory forms of learning (Helmes 2022; Skelton 2023). This approach strives for an environment in which 'students and teachers interact in the interpersonal space in ways that do not mimic oppressive relationships outside of the classroom' (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2020, 97). Scholar-activism also emphasises similar principles; some commentators highlight the significance of 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics,' focusing on the 'means' through which goals are pursued in activism (Yates 2014). This perspective values processes, relationships, dialogue, and care. The need to disrupt power and promote dialogue, consistent with these traditions, was evident in many of our participants' accounts. Therefore, in keeping with our aim of engaging the philosophies of critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in dialogue with our data, we identify disrupting power as the second element of scholar-activist pedagogy.

Some participants underscored the interdependence between the different components of scholar-activist pedagogy, including this component and the preceding one. Ereene (British Muslim, early-career), for example, emphasised the necessity of creating '*a space where everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a learner, and where we together come up with actions for social change*'. Indeed, as Freire (1993, 265) notes, '[o]nly dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is capable of generating critical thinking.' Similarly, hooks (2010) insists, 'critical thinking is an interactive process, one that demands participation on the part of teacher and students alike'. Thus, as in critical pedagogy, critical content and dialogical teaching approaches mutually reinforce each other in scholar-activist pedagogy. Ereene's prioritisation of *'actions for social change'* reflects an uncompromising and specific preoccupation with action that is central to scholar-activism. Whilst also a feature of critical pedagogy – particularly as grounded in Freire's work – this emphasis has been noted to sometimes get lost in the translation of critical pedagogy (McArthur 2010). Scholar-activism insists on direct engagement, making such

engagement non-negotiable and inseparable from its praxis. In this way, scholar-activism reinforces and intensifies the tenets of critical pedagogy, ensuring that the transition from critique to action cannot be left aside. We develop this point in the next section.

Building on the theme of dialogue, Okoye (Black Muslim, early career) highlighted the importance of structuring the classroom in more dialogical and egalitarian ways. She noted,

> Once I'm in that lecture, once I'm in that seminar […] I feel like it's a space where we make the decisions of what takes place in that one hour, two hours that we have together. We set the tone together.

By positioning her students as co-decision makers, Okoye 'aims to diffuse hierarchy' (Specia and Osman 2015, np). This work is crucial in creating a HE environment that promotes critical consciousness and advances social justice. As we have intimated, the importance of classroom transformation is not merely incidental, nor only about engaged pedagogy (hooks 2010). As Webb notes, dialogical pedagogy can prefigure 'in the very process of collaborative learning the kind of social relations that might characterise an alternative way of being' (Webb 2018, 100). The disruptive potential of such prefigurative political praxis is apparent as Okoye continues,

> If we were really having a dialogue, there would be a sense right from the onset of students being partners in the classroom and that is a risk for any institution because the minute you make students partners and make them invested in their own learning, you remove some of the power from yourself and you legitimise knowledge that you don't always have control over, and that can dismantle the whole institution.

For Okoye, undermining dominant power structures in the classroom can create fertile conditions for social transformation. Beyond critical consciousness discussed earlier, Okoye also argued that it is also necessary to be attentive to the '*uncomfortable*', '*affective*' and '*emotional*' components of critical teaching. As such, within a scholar-activist pedagogy, dialogical learning may also involve centring discomfort and emotion in the classroom (Boler 1999; hooks 2010; Zembylas 2013; 2015) which, when teaching about racism and injustice, is not only unavoidable but necessary (Boler 1999).

Component 3: building links with community groups and activist movements

As earlier sections highlight, the transition from theory to social change is often a stumbling block in the operationalisation of critical pedagogy, particularly in its more recent forms. This is actively undermined by the intersection of processes of neoliberalisation and institutional racism in HE. Scholar-activism, with its uncompromising commitment to social change revitalises the focus on change. Scholar-activism can overcome the shortcoming of critical pedagogy (mis)practise by insisting that 'critical thinking skills must be put to work' (Hytten 2014, 388). Ereene, emphasised this when she said, '*I want [students] to be inspired and passionate and get involved in community organisations […] to fight the battle as well.*' Scholar-activism's emphasis on embeddedness in social movements (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021; Rodney 2019) translates into pedagogy, facilitating connections between students and social movements. Her comment underscores not only the cultivation of critical worldviews but also active engagement in struggle.

In this section, we explore how building links between the classroom and community groups and activist movements,[6]is an integral aspect of scholar-activist pedagogy. Several participants discussed university modules designed to foster explicit and intentional connections with community groups. Aaliyah (Black, early-career), for example, noted,

> Getting students to engage with local community projects and building relationships between the university and the community projects. I think that's really important because I think universities take a lot from community groups, don't they? So, it's about what we can give back. So, I suppose the module that I'm teaching on, that I'm working on, is a way of building relationships.

For Aaliyah, cultivating links with community projects is a way to ensure that universities 'give back' to the wider communities they are part of, recognising the exploitative nature of Western universities (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Smith 2018). Although Aaliyah acknowledged barriers and power dynamics that can lead to exploitation, her modules aim to open pathways to long-term activism by deliberately facilitating student engagement with social movements. Rather than relying on 'some magical force' (Trowler cited by McArthur 2010, 494) to bridge the gap from critical thought to action, Aaliyah's approach is deliberate in facilitating engagement.

Other participants involved students in their own activism to extend learning beyond the classroom. Oliver (Black, established academic) explained,

> My focus is to develop more people who do what I do, for the next generation of scholars. What I do in my teaching, my students actually come and learn and involve themselves in the activist projects that I lead […] I'll even, if I can, pay them as research assistants through [our university student job system] […] I write little contracts for them and say you need to do this, this, this. It will tie into your coursework in this, this, this, this way.

For scholar-activist pedagogues, the skills required for activism and a deep understanding of antiracism are best learned through direct involvement in activist projects beyond the university. Oliver's approach highlights the value of embedding students within activist networks.

Jay (Asian-British, mid-career) also described a Law module that trains students to investigate the cases of people who claim to have been wrongly convicted,

> My own specific experience [in my institution] is that activism can be built into my role. I want to say that's not a general rule, I think I'm quite unique […] there's maybe 60 or 70 academics and there's seven or eight of us who have that embedded in their role.

According to Jay, modules of this nature integrate activism into academic roles, specifically the classroom and the learning activities of students. This not only benefits students but allows academics to allocate university resources, such as time, to community groups.[7]

Drawing directly from scholar-activism, this section demonstrates how scholar-activist pedagogy builds on the components outlined above to actively and deliberately enable students to transition from critical thought to action, particularly into social movements. We might conceptualise this as the cultivation of a 'classroom-to-activism pipeline' – that is the intentional creation of conditions that help move students from the classroom into activism.

Component 4: teaching beyond the university

The final component of our scholar-activist pedagogy extends beyond the university. While the previous component focuses on connecting the university with community groups and/or activist movements through university-based teaching, this aspect involves scholar-activists teaching outside academic settings.[8] This aligns with scholar-activism's ethos of community engagement and echoes critical pedagogy's foundational principles. Termed 'border crossing' by Giroux (1992), this practice entails taking the university as a starting point and 'from there crossing the border into the community and the street' (Webb 2018, 108). It simultaneously recognises that this border is based on a false inside/outside cartography (Martin 2017), and must be transgressed.

Participants widely recognised that their teaching should not be confined to the university classroom. Abiola – an African British PhD student and community organiser – explained,

> I teach wherever I can. Whether it's in a park, whether it's in a community hall, whether it's in a church or the lobby of a police station […] I just love engaging with my community, sharing knowledge, and helping people to become educators themselves.

Abiola highlights the varying locations for learning and challenges the hegemonic construction of the university as the site of legitimate knowledge production and dissemination (Apple 1995), decentring the university in his praxis. Scholar-activism reorients 'working in service' away from institutional allegiance towards communities of resistance (Collins 2013; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021). Abiola's account reflects this ethos. He also contests the notion that formal educators exclusively possess the capacity to teach, suggesting that teaching outside of formal settings empowers community members to '*become educators*' themselves.

Similarly, Thomas – a Black, early career scholar – critiques dominant logics in HE,

> I go to schools and community centres and teach on the same topic as I wrote my highbrow thesis on […] People try to make academia complicated because that's what gets you your next book, but it's not. It's relatively straightforward. So there's no reason why 15, 16 year-olds can't understand it just as well as undergraduate students.

Thomas challenges the idea that only university members can understand scholarship. Zami – a woman of colour and senior academic – echoed this sentiment: *'I'll go out and teach something like Spivak or Audre Lorde, out in the community to people who haven't got a GCSE to their name […] my teaching doesn't change.'* Both Thomas and Zami advocate teaching beyond the physical and symbolic boundaries of the university. While critical pedagogy's roots often lie outside of the academy, the current predominance of HE contexts in pedagogical discussions underscores the importance of intentionally expanding teaching beyond the university setting. As Webb (2018, 108) asks, why 'locate utopian pedagogy in the university', when it can be far more effective in spaces of resistance beyond the ivory tower?

Constraints and barriers in the neoliberal-institutionally racist university

The scholar-activist pedagogy outlined above is constrained by contemporary HE. Each component set out above encounters a range of barriers within this constraining context.

While pockets of possibility in the university for scholar-activist pedagogy remain, these barriers must be acknowledged.

In terms of cultivating critical understandings (component 1), participants highlighted student resistance to engaging with challenging content, particularly around antiracism. Noting that '*a classroom site is transformational*', Khadija (Bangladeshi, early career) continued to explain,

> But also, sometimes, I get the impression some of the students don't necessarily want to be challenged or made too uncomfortable either. Because on our course, researching race and ethnicity, it's myself and another colleague and we're both two women of colour teaching this course and it's been some of our white students who have been giving us a bit of a hard time because of how they've understood race.

No doubt tied to the neoliberal hegemony in HE which engenders a desire for 'educators to be neutral providers of decontextualized information' (Saunders 2007, 4), Khadija's remarks highlight the particular challenges in teaching social justice education. More specifically, resistance to race-related content may be enabled by the institutional racism underpinning HE (Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2020).

Such resistance comes not only from students but also from staff, as Dez (Black, professor) demonstrates. Recalling his efforts to develop a '*conceptual, thematic module*' aligned with critical consciousness-raising, Dez recounted,

> One of my colleagues secretly emailed the head of department and said that I'd just packed it full of this post-colonial rubbish and that I just can't think beyond that and that they need to rescind the module and revert back to what it was last year […] Which is fairly, I mean, it's not that uncommon.

Dez's experience illustrates a recurring theme: scholar-activists often encounter backlash both within and beyond the classroom. This backlash may target their antiracism, activist orientations, and/or their positionalities (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, 115–42). As a result, cultivating critical understandings and practising antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy becomes more challenging.

Whilst overlapping with component 1, barriers were highlighted too in relation to dialogical learning and transforming the classroom space (component 2). The Prevent duty, as outlined in the literature review, serves as a poignant example, given it is emblematic of a broader context of institutional anti-Muslim racism in UK society (Qurashi 2018) and HE (see Akel 2021; UUK 2021). As Haytham (Pakistani, PhD researcher) noted, as a result of the duty,

> Students are less willing to talk about their feelings and their positions within the classroom because they see it as a police space now. They see it as a space that is potentially harmful to them […] So, it doesn't mean that they are not willing to be in that space, it just means that they have to alter themselves, they have to self-regulate based on this gaze that they are under.

As Haytham explains, Prevent-driven hyper-surveillance has chilling effects on the participation of racially minoritised, particularly Muslim, students. In referring to a 'gaze,' Haytham may also be alluding to a broader, racialised white gaze, entangled with the Prevent duty. This 'negatively reframes the pedagogic relationship' (Danvers 2023, 2), and directly undermines efforts to create egalitarian, dialogical classroom spaces.

Addressing how neoliberalisation in HE also undermines classroom transformation (component 2), Neville lamented,

> The whole direction of travel in HE, where it's increasingly being seen as a commodity, and basically you're investing in your human capital, so that you can increase your wages in the future, that's obviously massively destructive and you're always having to struggle against that. In the classroom that is increasingly how students see themselves.

Neville highlights that despite scholar-activist pedagogues' efforts to disrupt hegemonic classroom dynamics, the space remains influenced by the broader neoliberal turn in HE. The commodification of education shapes students' self-perception (as consumers), their relationship with educators (as providers), and their view of education's purpose (an investment in human capital). These are the dynamics that Okoye attempts to transgress in her earlier accounts.

For some participants, the dominance of neoliberal logics and the fostering of student instrumentalism was most evident in students' attitudes towards assessment. Dillion (person of colour, PhD student) explained that as '*paying customers*' students '*expect certain grades.*' Consequently, they expect a 'teaching to the test' approach (Giroux 2014), with deviations causing discomfort, anxiety, and frustration. As hooks (2010, 8) notes, many students in traditional HE settings are conditioned to believe that 'thinking will not be necessary, that all they will need to do is consume information and regurgitate it at the appropriate moments.' Such expectations seriously threaten attempts to transform learning, whether through cultivating critical understanding (component 1), fostering dialogical learning (component 2), or engaging meaningfully with community groups and activist movements (component 3).

Concerning component 3, the building of relationships with activist communities faces challenges in the contemporary university, especially due to the power imbalance between small community groups and powerful universities. This asymmetry can lead to extractive practices, where universities and students benefit disproportionately, while small community groups receive less in return. Such dynamics risk reinforcing the very hierarchies that such engagements aim to challenge, particularly when driven by institutional pressures or academic gain. The neoliberal squeezing of time has incentivised superficial and short-lived connections, prioritising these over more meaningful, time-intensive relationships (Choudry 2020). These challenges are compounded when students see relationships with activist groups only through the framework of a university module, focused on securing grades. Shifting focus to staff, Aaliyah noted that her manager's initial enthusiasm for the community-engaged module waned when they learned '*what kind of organisation would be included, like trans organisations [and] sex worker organisations*.' There may be an alignment here between resistance from staff, and that of the Prevent duty which hinders the cultivation of relationships between students and certain activist groups, with some activist groups placed on a list of so-called 'extremist groups' that universities are obligated to report.

Lastly, regarding teaching beyond the university (component 4), participant's accounts reveal a prevalent perception that universities, and many academics, engage in border work, positioning university 'insiders' as intellectually superior to 'outsiders'. Thomas noted that academics are incentivised to uphold this dynamic, driven by a metric-culture that imposes publication targets that prioritise writing for academic

audiences – often in '*incredibly impenetrable*' language (Galiev, person of colour, early career) – over accessible public scholarship. The framing of the university as the 'legitimate' site (Apple 1995; Smith 2018) of knowledge production exacerbates this further. Moreover, the Research Excellence Framework 'impact agenda' in the UK (with comparable agendas internationally), which ostensibly encourages academics to make better links with communities, may actually reinforce this division. Rather than fostering genuine, reciprocal engagement, the impact agenda often demands that research be instrumentalised to demonstrate measurable 'impact', frequently resulting in hollow or superficial engagement (O'Regan and Gray 2018) and tokenistic short-term projects, prioritising outputs that satisfy institutional metrics over the deep, sustained relationships that scholar-activist pedagogy seeks to build. Combined with high workloads (intensified by the neoliberalisation of HE) and a metric-driven culture that prioritises certain work, these factors create barriers to scholar-activist pedagogy within the university.

Conclusion

This article draws upon primary data generated through interviews with antiracist scholar-activists in British universities to conceptualise a scholar-activist pedagogy. While critical pedagogy has often been critiqued for getting stuck at the transition from thought to action, scholar-activism has focused more on research than on pedagogy. By bringing the two traditions together in dialogue with our data, the scholar-activist pedagogy put forward in this paper emphasises four key interrelated elements: the cultivation of critical understandings, the disruption of power dynamics inside and outside the classroom, the building of links to community groups and social movements, and teaching beyond the university. Together, these components offer a pedagogy that is proactive and deliberate in enabling students to engage in activism outside of the university. Whilst our focus has primarily been on the development of an *antiracist* scholar-activist pedagogy, the framework we offer also extends into a more general scholar-activist pedagogy. A powerful antiracist pedagogy naturally engages with other forms of oppression, given the interlocking nature of systems of power. At the same time, any general scholar-activist pedagogy must also centre antiracism, as racism underpins many structures of inequality. In this way, the two approaches are inseparable, and our activist and pedagogical strategies must reflect this interconnectedness in the struggle against all forms of oppression.

In developing this scholar-activist pedagogy, our intention is not to understate or diminish the radical potential of critical pedagogy or scholar-activism, nor their long histories of liberatory praxis. Rather, we aim to appreciate the benefits of each tradition and show how, when combined, they help to grapple with the complexities of teaching in the constraining contexts of contemporary HE. The vastness and diversity of both traditions mean that there are critical pedagogues and scholar-activists already engaging in praxis cognisant of these components. However, this does not diminish the importance of examining how critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, as broader movements, can inform and challenge each other. By placing them into explicit dialogue, we believe important work remains in theorising how these traditions can collectively enrich educational practices, particularly in the face of the neoliberal and institutionally racist constraints shaping higher education today. It is this endeavour to which we have contributed in this article. Although our data is rooted in the British context, we hope that this scholar-activist

pedagogy will resonate with and benefit the broader international academic community, as universities worldwide share many characteristics, values, and structures that transcend borders. We also hope this framework will support and inspire academics committed to social justice and prompt contestation, adaptation, and refinement by others in HE.

Given that pedagogy is always practised in a particular context, it needs to be understood in context. We have drawn attention to some of the multitude of barriers that the contemporary neoliberal and institutionally racist university poses to scholar-activist pedagogy. Whilst sobering, our intention is not to extinguish hope. We maintain that there are pockets of possibility within the university. Nevertheless, understanding the constraints we face is integral to overcoming them.

Notes

1. In the US, Republican Party state legislators have sought to ban critical race theory (CRT) and social justice issues from being taught in the classroom (Ray and Gibbons 2021). In the UK, Right-wing figures have accused universities of fostering a 'cancel culture' and suppressing conservative viewpoints (Koram 2023). In France, critics have argued that postcolonial studies and concepts like intersectionality undermine French values of equity and secularism (Kanji, Palumbo-Liu, and Bacchetta 2021), whilst in Brazil there have been attempts to cut funding for universities programmes deemed to promote leftist agendas (Juan and Onoszko 2022).
2. Similar sentiment is also encapsulated in a range of related concepts such as, intellectual activism (Collins 2013), activist scholarship (Lennox and Yildiz 2020; Pulido 2009; Reynolds et al. 2018; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009) and academic activism (Connelly and Sanders 2020; Davids and Waghid 2020).
3. Pre-1992 universities refer to institutions that existed before the UK's Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which granted university status to former polytechnics and other higher education institutions, now referred to as post-1992 universities.
4. 'High tariff' and 'low tariff' refer to the entry requirements for students, with high tariff institutions generally requiring higher academic qualifications for admission.
5. The reference to white supremacy is significant here, as it emphasises the importance of understanding racism in critical understandings, in keeping with 'critical race pedagogy' interventions (Solorzano and Yosso 2001).
6. It is worth noting that definitions of community can vary depending on context (Shahjahan et al. 2021), but community groups in this section (as discussed by those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism) may be taken to refer to local activist organisations, grassroots movements, and social justice-oriented networks that engage with broader societal struggles, particularly those aligned with anti-racism.
7. Writing on 'utopian pedagogies', Coté, Day and de Peuter (2007) highlight the example of an undergraduate degree programme called Media and the Public Interest, introduced in 2003 at the University of Western Ontario. The programme was aimed at enabling students to do media related work with social movements and the public sector.
8. We might also think here about the marginal, non-formal, and resistance spaces within universities – such as teach outs at the wave of student encampments for Palestine seen in 2024, and teach outs during HE strikes.

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Ethics statement

This research received ethical approval from Leeds Beckett University's Ethics Committee (reference number: 49436), where Joseph-Salisbury previously worked.

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