Article:
Connelly, L. orcid.org/0000-0002-9564-9106 and Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2025) Towards an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy: putting critical pedagogy and scholar-activism in dialogue. Teaching in Higher Education. ISSN 1356-2517

https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2449649

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

Abstract

Despite implicit recognition of the connections between critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, few have seriously explored their synergies, leaving their potential untapped. Taking this as an entry point, the article bridges critical pedagogy and scholar-activism to conceptualises an *antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy.* In doing so, the article argues that scholar-activism's deep engagement with social movements enhances critical pedagogy's pursuit of social change; and critical pedagogy's emphasis on the classroom enables scholar-activism to embrace teaching as transformative praxis. Drawing on data from 29 semi-structured interviews with university-based antiracist scholar-activists, the article charts a practical way forward for those interested in teaching in pursuit of social justice, whilst considering how the potential of scholar-activist pedagogy is constrained in higher education contexts underpinned by neoliberalism and institutional racism.

Keywords: scholar-activist pedagogy; critical pedagogy; higher education; scholar-activism; social justice; classroom-to-activism pipeline.

Introduction

Much has been written about the purpose and mission of higher education (HE) institutions, and the ways in which they can contribute to advancing positive change in society. The role of academics has similarly and relatedly garnered attention, specifically concerning whether, or how, academics should engage in efforts to effect social change. These debates have intensified in recent years, following efforts from those on the political Right to curtail the incorporation of social justice issues and approaches in the classroom, perhaps most notably in the US, UK, France and Brazil.[1] Yet whilst some call for political neutrality, objectivity and detachment in teaching and research (see for example: Ellis, 2021, Fish, 2008), there is a rich history of critical academics working in pursuit of 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 broader academic assessment frameworks are often understood to prioritise research over teaching (Author A and Author B, 2021), focuses specifically on the potential of teaching in the pursuit of social justice.

[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. In the UK, Right-wing figures have accused universities of fostering a 'cancel culture' and suppressing conservative viewpoints. In France, critics have argued that postcolonial studies and concepts like intersectionality undermine French values of equity and secularism, whilst in Brazil there have been attempts to cut funding for universities programmes deemed to promote leftist agendas.

Despite implicit recognition of connections between critical pedagogy and scholar-activism, there is a notable lack of scholarship that puts the two traditions in explicit dialogue, and less still that draws on empirical data. Taking this as an entry point, the article bridges critical pedagogy and scholar-activism to conceptualises an *antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy*. In so doing, the article addresses the respective limitations of critical pedagogy, which is often noted to get stuck at the crucial transition of critical thought into action, and those of scholar-activism, which has not always given due regard to the importance of the classroom. The article's contribution is not merely conceptual, however. An antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy also charts a practical way forward for those interested in teaching in pursuit of social justice, and offers a cautionary tale about how scholar-activist pedagogy is constrained in institutional contexts underpinned by neoliberalism and institutional racism. Whilst the data drawn upon in this article derives from 29 semi-structured interviews with university-based scholar-activists in the UK, the article should prove useful to a broader international community given that universities across 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

Despite at least some of its roots lying outside of the academy, critical pedagogy has exerted significant influence on higher education. Often traced particularly to the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and with antecedents in the Marx-influenced Frankfurt school, critical pedagogy defies simple definition (Apple, 2011). It is recognised, however, for promoting 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 hierarchies of power, including those between teachers and students, and fostering critical consciousness raising to empower learners as agents of social change (Freire, 1993 [1970]; 1994; hooks, 1994; 2003; Giroux, 2011). In this sense, critical pedagogy seeks to instigate social transformation through both method and content (Habib, 2019), breaking with traditional top-down teaching and a 'just-the-facts' pedagogy.

Like critical pedagogy, scholar-activism eludes a singular, simple definition. Yet, it commonly refers to praxes that combine scholarship and activism in pursuit of social justice.[2] There are some key features of university-based scholar-activism that can be observed. Those engaged in scholar-activism, akin to

[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 (Author B and Sanders, 2020; Davids and Waghid, 2020).

their critical pedagogue counterparts, reject the pretence of neutrality and pseudo-objectivity in favour of taking up the side of '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 finding ways to engage 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 steadfast commitment to redistributing resources, whether financial or otherwise, from academic institutions to communities of resistance (Derickson and Routledge, 2015). Furthermore, scholar-activism necessitates a deep immersion in communities of resistance (Choudry, 2020; Okazawa-Rey, 2020; Rodney, 2019), encouraging us to move 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 see: Sivanandan, 2019).

Despite some overlap, the connections between critical pedagogy and scholar-activism have often been recognised only implicitly, with no meaningful attempt to bring the two into explicit dialogue, particularly empirically. There is much to be gained in doing so, not least in terms of overcoming their respective limitations. On the one hand, white critical pedagogy rooted in Freirean principles emphasises empowering learning as political actors, more recent discussions and practices often get stuck at the crucial transition of critical thought into action. Critics question whether critical pedagogy has 'become focused on critique alone' (McArthur, 2010: 493; Apple, 2000) or become 'decaffeinated' (Mclaren, 2020: 1243). On the other hand, despite a few notable exceptions (see, for example: Akoleowo, 2012; 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 outlined above largely pertain to, or have primarily been considered in the context of, 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, we can sharpen and help actualise critical pedagogy's desire for social change, thereby answering calls for critical pedagogy to bridge the 'gap between critique and change' (McArthur, 2010: 494). Simultaneously, critical pedagogy's focus on the classroom as a site of activist praxis helps to rectify the historical neglect of the classroom within discussions on scholar-activism. Both traditions are profoundly influenced by their contexts, particularly within university settings where the HE context becomes paramount. 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 global HE landscape (Mills, 2022; Stein et al., 2019; Bhambra et al., 2018). Yet, given the dominance of Northern European university models

worldwide (Mills, 2022), there are discernible patterns and shared characteristics that transcend borders, situating universities 'within a broader international community' (Altbach et al., 2009: iv). Previous literature, for example, has observed that the contemporary global HE sector is structured by wide-ranging processes, including globalisation, internationalisation, digitalisation, and privatisation (Albach et al., 2009; Bygstad et al., 2022; de Wit and Altach, 2021). Critical scholars have consistently contested the assumption that universities operate as bastions of democracy, meritocracy and equal opportunity. Instead, such work illuminates the role of universities in maintaining and even producing unequal power relations (Back, 2004; hampton, 2020; Keval, 2024).

Neoliberalism is perhaps 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 abundantly clear, however, that across much of the globe, HE has been repositioned as a commodity. In many countries, advancing neoliberalism has eroded the concept of education as a 'public good', instead situating students as customers, education a service that they purchase, and universities and the academics that work within them 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; Helmes, 2022; 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 sees research prioritised over teaching (Helmes, 2022), whilst 'working against and potentially undermining the emancipatory potential of higher education' (Evans, 2020: 574; also see Maisuria and Helmes, 2020; Hall and Smyth, 2016). Furthermore, metric culture, a key feature of neoliberal HE, is understood to discourage pedagogical practices that facilitate deep and democratic learning, depoliticise classrooms, harm the relationship between students and teachers, and lead educators to become preoccupied with metrics to the detriment of promoting real learning (Author B and Author A, 2019; Giroux, 2014; Feldman and Sandoval, 2018). While not totalising, as evidenced by various forms of (antiracist) resistance on campus, the neoliberalism of HE therefore threatens to place bounds on the transformative potential of teaching for social change, the imaginations of students, and their capacities for engaging with activist struggle (Author B and Author A, 2019; Hermes, 2022). This highlights the heightened challenges faced by critical pedagogy in transitioning from theory to action within the neoliberal HE context.

Neoliberalism is not the only force shaping HE; universities also play an active role in (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. Not

only do Western universities export knowledge that reproduces and justifies colonial hierarchies, but global inequities exist in the financial resources of universities and arise from an exclusive system of journal publication that privileges the English language (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu, 2018; James, Author A and Gooden, 2021; Smith, 2018). Critical voices within HE have also noted that there are material ties to contemporary forms of colonialism too, for example through 'complicit investments' that maintain the occupation and ongoing bombardment of Palestinians (see Palestine Solidarity Campaign, no date; 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'. It is a 'site for trailing new forms of oppression and exploitation, an institution intimately involved in the reproduction of inequalities' (Webb, 2018: 97).

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, including 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, 2016) and the surveillance and securitisation on campus (Author A et al., 2023), particularly in the UK context via the operationalisation of the Prevent duty (Sian, 2017).[3] 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 (Author A et al., 2020).

Methods

This article is based upon data generated for a broader research project exploring the possibilities, complexities and challenges associated with antiracist scholar-activism (Author A and Author B, 2021). Semi-structured interviews, lasting between one and three hours, were carried out with twenty-nine people who either worked or were latter stage doctoral students in British universities. Participants were approached purposively through our existing networks and the sample was then supplemented using a snowballing strategy. All of those we spoke to either self-identified as scholar-activists (or with scholar-activism as praxis), were identified by others as scholar-activists, or were active in scholar-activist networks. All were committed to antiracism and this shaped their praxes, including their teaching.

[3] The Prevent duty places a duty on public bodies – including universities – to have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'. This means that university staff are required to monitor and report those that they suspect are vulnerable to being involved in extremism.. The duty has been heavily criticised for a range of reasons, including its disproportionate impact on Muslim students (Alexander and Shankley, 2020).

Participants occupied a range of career positions, and the majority were racially minoritised people. We sought a spread of participants from different types of universities: we spoke to people working in pre- and post-1992 universities, high and low tariff universities, universities in a range of different geographical locations (including campus and city universities) across the UK, and universities with vastly different student demographics. There was also variation with regard to academic discipline (including Sociology, Criminology, Psychology, Education, Geography, Law, Social Work, Business, Anthropology, International Relations, History, and Linguistics) and the specific foci of participants' academic work and activism (e.g., policing, schooling, housing, immigration).

Interview data were anonymised using a pseudonym of the participant's choice, and professionally transcribed before being returned to participants for checking, data removal and/or editing. Data were thematically coded, first manually and then with the aid of NVIVO 11 software. This involved an inductive and iterative process of coding by both researchers, first to pick out general themes and then to zone in on points of agreement and departure within and across the themes that are subsequently examined in a monograph (Author A and Author B, 2021). The research was given ethical approval by [university name] (reference number: ####).

For the purpose of this article, we have re-analysed the transcripts focusing specifically on the broad theme of university teaching, and then identifying sub-themes that have since formed the structure of the findings section of this article. Reflecting what we feel to be useful contextual information, we include participants' ethnic/racial self-identification and their career stage alongside their pseudonym in this article. This information is non-standardised since we use the information provided to us by participants, and thus reflects not only concerns around protecting anonymity but also political views and personal preferences in terminological choices.

Findings

This findings section is divided into two substantive parts. The first delineates four key components that we argue are integral to an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy: cultivating critical understandings, promoting dialogical learning, building links with community/activist groups, and teaching beyond the university. The first two are 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 often encountered in critical pedagogy and to actualise social change by prioritising activism and activist movements. 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; Cann and DeMeulenaere, 2020). 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, emphasised the importance of, and value in, teaching *'students about power and social justice and white supremacy and patriarchy.'*[4]

Neville, a white mid-career academic, exemplified the cultivation of critical understanding in his approach to teaching. He explained that the essence of his praxis lay 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 implicit notion identified earlier that scholar-activism is more realisable through research than teaching, highlighting the classroom as a crucial site for scholar-activism. Jay, an Asian British Senior Lecturer, similarly suggested a key aim of his scholar-activist praxis lay in *'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',* exposing students, if they are not already, to more critical ideas that may shape their future praxis. Importantly, Elroy explained that for scholar-activists engaged in pedagogy, the classroom is not a space that is '*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. This underscored the following account from 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*

[4] 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).

a particular way [...] So, you have to be actively resisting and actively pushing back, and I do that with my teaching and I'm very explicit about that.

Dillon's stance aligns with the traditions of 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 (Giroux and McLaren, 1991; Hytten, 2014), countering scholars like Fish (2008: 27) who call for detaching teaching content from its real-world urgency. Dillon's remarks highlight two important points. First, his classroom praxis extends his general general praxis: 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 own 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 (as well as for students to be critical about the positions and assumptions of their teachers). 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 (Skelton, 2023). Central to critical pedagogy is a rejection of 'banking models' (Habib, 2019), which treat students as passive receptacles of knowledge, advocating instead for more participatory forms of learning (Helmes, 2022; Skelton, 2022). This approach strives for a situation 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). There are parallels from the perspective of scholar-activism too: some commentators emphasise the importance of 'prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics', drawing attention to the importance of the 'means' through which goals are pursued in activism (Yates, 2014). This perspective therefore 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. Thus, we identify it 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',* whilst certainly not contradictory to critical pedagogy (which has often *spoken* about action), reflects a specific preoccupation with action that is aligned with scholar-activism. We develop this point in the next section.

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

> *Once I'm in that lecture, once I'm in that seminar, I'm on my own with the students and 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 and create a sense of community' (Specia and Osman, 2004: np). This work is crucial in creating an environment in HE that promotes critical consciousness raising 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 logics of power in the classroom can create fertile conditions for social transformation. In addition to the critical consciousness raising discussed earlier, Okoye also argued that *'it is also necessary to be attentive to the 'uncomfortable'*, *'affective'* and *'emotional'* components of critical teaching: *'there's always an emotional, visceral response if somebody knows what they're talking about'.* As such, within a scholar-activist pedagogy, dialogical learning may also involve centring discomfort and emotion in the classroom (Boler, 1999; Author B and Author A, 2019; 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 parts of the article make clear, the transition from theory to social change is often a stumbling block in the operationalisation of critical pedagogy, particularly in its more recent forms and not aided by the neoliberal and institutionally racist HE context. Yet scholar-activism's commitment to social change insists upon and can revitalise the focus on action and change. As such, scholar-activism holds

potential to overcome the shortcoming of critical pedagogy: it insists that 'critical thinking skills must be put to work' (Hytten, 2014: 388). Ereene, in keeping with her comments in the previous section, reflected this clearly when she insisted, *'I want [students] to be inspired and passionate and get involved in community organisations [...] to fight the battle as well.'* Here, Ereene illustrates how scholar-activism's emphasis on embeddedness in social movements (Rodney, 2019; Author A and Author B, 2021) translates into pedagogy, through the need to facilitate students to connect with social movements. Her comment underscores not only the cultivation of critical worldviews but also active engagement in struggle. Therefore, in this section, we explore opportunities for building links between the classroom and community groups and activist movements, arguing that this component is essential to move beyond critical thought, and is integral to what constitutes a specifically scholar-activist pedagogy.

Several participants discussed the design of university teaching modules to foster explicit and intentional connections with community groups. Aaliyah (Black, early-career), for example, noted the importance of,

> *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 enables her to ensure that universities 'give back' to the wider community in which they are situated. This praxis is underpinned by a conviction that universities, particularly in the West, are exploitative institutions that '*take a lot'* - recognising that their social and economic capital, prestige, and wealth are inextricably tied to the subordination of others (Bhambra et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). Although Aaliyah acknowledged encountering barriers to setting up such modules and warned against overlooking the power dynamic that can result in the exploitation of community groups, these modules enable students to engage with specific community projects, opening pathways for longer-term activism. 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 with social movements.

Other participants supported students in transitioning from the classroom into activist spaces outside of the university by involving students in their own activist work. Oliver (Black, established academic), for example, 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, learning opportunities extend beyond the classroom. From this perspective, the skills required to engage in activism, and a deep understanding of antiracism, are best acquired through actively participating in activist projects – that is, being grounded within (Rodney, 2019) activist groups and networks beyond the university.

Oliver was not alone in his desire to equip 'the next generation' with the knowledge and practical skills for activism. Jay (Asian-British, mid-career) 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.[5] 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 proposed scholar-activist pedagogy extends beyond the confines of the university. While the previous component focuses on establishing connections between the university and community groups and/or activist movements through university-based teaching, this aspect involves scholar-activists teaching outside of academic settings.[6] This aspect aligns with scholar-activism's ethos of community engagement, while also harkening back to 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 that it is pervasive and needs to be transgressed.

---

[5] Writing on 'utopian pedagogies', Coté, Day and de Peuter (2007) highlight the example of an undergraduate degree program 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.

[6] 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.

It was widely recognised by participants that their teaching is not, and should not be, confined to the university classroom. Abiola – an African British PhD student and experienced community organiser – for example, 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, including community gathering places or potential sites of repression. In doing so, he challenges the hegemonic construction of the university as the site of legitimate knowledge production and dissemination (Apple, 1995), whilst also decentring the university in his own praxis. Central to scholar-activism lies a reorientation of the notion of 'working in service', shifting the service away from those in power or institutional allegiance towards communities of resistance (Collins, 2013; Author A and Author B, 2021). Abiola's account reflects this ethos. Moreover, he contests the notion that formal educators exclusively possess the capacity to teach, suggesting that teaching outside of formal settings can empower members of the community to *'become educators'* themselves.

In a similar vein, Thomas – a Black, early career scholar – challenged some of the dominant logics pervading the HE sector, explaining,

> *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.*

Here, Thomas challenges the notion that it is only members of the university community that can understand scholarship. Zami – a woman of colour and senior academic – shared this sentiment when she said *'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.'* In doing so, Thomas and Zami advocate not only teaching beyond the physical boundaries of the university but also dismantling the symbolic boundaries that universities construct between themselves and the wider communities in which they are situated. While it is crucial to remember that critical pedagogy's development has often lay 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 has the potential to be far more effective in spaces of resistance beyond the ivory tower?

Constraints and barriers in the neoliberal-institutionally racist university

Pedagogy, and specifically the scholar-activist pedagogy set out above, is not practised in abstraction from context. Each of the components set out above encounter a range of barriers within the constraining context of contemporary HE. Whilst there still might be pockets of possibility in the university (Author A and Author B, 2021), 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 here point to how the conditions in HE present particular challenges in teaching forms of social justice education. More specifically, the resistance to content related to race and ethnicity experienced by Khadija may be a consequence of, or enabled by, the institutional racism underpinning HE (Author A et al., 2020).

Such resistance comes not only from students but also from staff, as exemplified in the following account from Dez (Black, professor). Recalling his efforts to develop a *'conceptual, thematic module'* aligned with the critical consciousness-raising objectives discussed earlier, 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 highlighted by participants: those engaged in scholar-activism encounter backlash both within and beyond the classroom. This backlash may manifest against their antiracism, their activist orientations, and/or as a result of their positionalities (see Author A and Author B, 2021: 115-142). The result is that it becomes more difficult to cultivate critical understandings in the classroom, and therefore more difficult to practise an antiracist scholar-activist pedagogy.

Whilst overlapping with component 1, barriers were highlighted, too, in relation to dialogical learning and transforming the classroom space (component 2). The Prevent duty, emblematic of a broader context of institutional anti-Muslim racism in UK society (Qurashi, 2018) and HE (see Akel, 2021; UUK, 2021), serves as a poignant example. 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 makes clear, a culture of Prevent-driven hyper-surveillance has potentially chilling effects on the participation of racially minoritised students, and particularly Muslim students. This 'negatively reframes the pedagogic relationship' (Danvers, 2021: 2), and directly undermines efforts to create egalitarian and dialogical classroom spaces.

Addressing how the neoliberalisation of HE also undermines efforts to transform the classroom space (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 makes clear that despite scholar-activist pedagogues effort's to disrupt hegemonic classroom dynamics, the space will continue to be influenced by the broader neoliberal turn across HE. The commodification of education shapes students' self-perception (as consumers), their relationship with educators (the providers), and their understanding of the purpose of education (as 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 their 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, students have come to expect a 'teaching to the test' approach (Giroux, 2014), with deviations from this philosophy causing discomfort, anxiety, and frustration. Indeed, as hooks (2010: 8) explains, many students are conditioned within traditional HE settings 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 that be through cultivating critical understandings (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 various challenges within the contemporary university. The neoliberal squeezing of time has incentivised superficial, short-lived and extractive connections, prioritising such forms over more meaningful and time-intensive relationships (Choudry, 2020). These challenges are compounded when, in line with the points above, students understand relationships with activist groups solely within the framework of a university module, aimed at securing an assessment grade. Shifting the focus from students to staff (as institutional actors), Aaliyah noted that her manager's initial enthusiasm for the community-engaged module she described earlier waned when they became aware of *'what kind of organisation would be included, like trans organisations [and] sex worker organisations.'* There may be an alignment here between the resistance from other staff, and that of the Prevent duty which threatens to hinder 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 under the Prevent duty.

Lastly, regarding teaching beyond the university (component 4), participant's accounts reveal a prevalent perception that universities, and many of the academics working within them, engage in border work, positing university 'insiders' as intellectually superior to 'outsiders'. Thomas made clear that academics are incentivised to uphold this dynamic, driven in part by a omnipresent 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 scholarship for the public. The framing of the university as the 'legitimate' site (Apple, 1995; Smith, 2018) of knowledge production further exacerbates this dynamic, and combines with factors such as high workloads (intensified by the neoliberalisation of HE) and a metric-driven culture which prioritised certain types of work over others, to create barriers to efforts within scholar-activist pedagogy to move beyond the university.

Conclusion

This article has drawn upon primary data from a study on antiracist scholar-activism to theorise a scholar-activist pedagogy. Whilst critical pedagogy has been noted to often get stuck at the transition from critical thought to action, scholar-activism has focused far more on research than it has pedagogy. Bringing the two traditions together, the scholar-activist pedagogy advanced in this paper aims to be proactive and deliberate in cultivating teaching environments that enable students to engage in activism outside of the university. In developing a 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, our intention is to appreciate the particular benefits of each tradition and show how, combined, they help us to grapple with the complexities of teaching in the constraining contexts of contemporary HE. We hope therefore that in its current guise a scholar-activist pedagogy will prove

useful for academics committed to social justice, but that it will also be contested, adapted, further developed, and refined by others working within HE.

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

Ethics Statement

This research received ethical approval from X University's Ethics Committee (reference number: XXXXX).

Bibliography

Akel, S. (2021). Institutionalised: The Rise of Islamophobia in Higher Education*, Centre for Equity and Inclusion*

Akoleowo, V.O. (2021). Critical pedagogy, scholar activism and epistemic decolonisation, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 40(4): 436-451.

Alexander, C. and Shankley, W. (2020). *Ethnic inequalities in the state education system in England*, IN Byrne, B., Alexander, C., Khan, O., Nazroo, J., Shankley, W. 2020. Ethnicity and Race is the UK: State of the Nation, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 93-126

Altbach, P., Reisberg, L. and Rumbley, L.E. (2009). *Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution*, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Apple, M.W. (1995). *Education and Power*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Apple, M.W. (2000). Can critical pedagogies interrupt rightist policies? *Educational Theory* 50, no. 2: 22954.

Apple, M.W. (2011). Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy and the task of the critical scholar/activist. *Revista e-Curriculum*, 7(3),1-21.

Back, L. (2004). *'Ivory towers? The academy and racism'*. IN: Law, I., Phillips, D. and Turney, L. (Eds.). Institutional Racism in Higher Education, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2004, pp.1–6.

Bhambra, G.K., Gebrial, D., Nişancıoğlu, K. (2018). (Eds.) *Decolonising the University*, London: Pluto.

Boler, M. (1999). *A pedagogy of discomfort: witnessing and the politics of anger and fear.* IN M. Boler (ed.), Feeling Power, Taylor and Francis, 175-202.

Breuing, M. (2011). Problematizing critical pedagogy. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3): 2–23.

Bygstad, B., Øvrelid, E., Ludvigsen, S. and Dæhlen, M. (2022). From dual digitalization to digital learning space: Exploring the digital transformation of higher education. *Computers and Education*. doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2022.104463.

Cann, C. and DeMeulenaere, E. (2020). *The Activist Academic: Engaged Scholarship for Resistance, Hope and Social Change.* Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press.

Choudry, A. (2020). Reflections on academia, activism, and the politics of knowledge and learning. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 24(1), 28-45.

Colby, G. and Fowler, C. (2020). *Data snapshot: IPEDS data on full-time women faculty and faculty of colour. American Association of University Professors*. Washington: AAUP.

Collins, P.H. (2013). *On Intellectual Activism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Danvers, E. (2021). Prevent/Ing critical thinking? The pedagogical impacts of Prevent in UK higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10.1080/13562517.2021.1872533

Derickson, K. and Routledge, P. (2015). Resourcing scholar-activism: collaboration, transformation and the production of knowledge. *The Professional Geographer*, 67, 1–7.

de Wit, H. and Altbach, P.G. (2021). Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 28-46.

Ellis, J.M. (2021). *The breakdown of higher education: How it happened, the damage it does, and what can be done*. New York: Encounter Books.

Evans, M. (2020). Navigating the neoliberal university: reflecting on teaching practice as a teacher-researcher-trade unionist. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(4), 574-590.

Feldman, Z. and Sandoval, M. (2018). Metric power and the academic Self: Neoliberalism, knowledge and resistance in the British University, *tripleC*, 16(1), 214-233.

Fish S.E. (2008). *Save the World on Your Own Time.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1993). [1970]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Giroux, H. (1992). Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education, London, UK: Routledge.

Giroux, H. (2004). Cultural studies, public pedagogy, and the responsibility of intellectuals. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 1(1), 59-79.

Giroux, H. (2014). *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Giroux, H. and McLaren, P. (1991). *Radical pedagogy as cultural politics: Beyond the discourse of critique and anti-utopianism*. IN: Morton, D.E. and Zavarzadeh, M. (Eds.) Theory/Pedagogy/Politics: Texts for Change, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 152-186.

Giroux, H. (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. London: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Hall, R. & Smyth, K., (2016) "Dismantling the Curriculum in Higher Education", *Open Library of Humanities* 2(1), e11. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.66

hampton, r. (2020). *Black Radicalization and Resistance at an Elite University.* Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013). *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.* New York: Minor Compositions.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Helmes, S. (2022). *Critical Pedagogy as a Tool for Resistance in the Neoliberal University*. PhD submitted to the University of Sheffield. https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/31478/1/Svenja%20Helmes.pdf

hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope.* London: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching Critical Thinking*. London: Routledge.

Hytten, K. (2014). Teaching as and for Activism: Challenges and Possibilities. *Philosophy of Education*, 70, 385-394

Habib, S. (2019). *Portraits of Place: Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom*, IN Habib, S. and Ward, M. (Eds.) Identities, Youth and Belonging, Palgrave Macmillan, 177-194

James, C., Author A, R., and Gooden, A. (2021). Differences, contradictions and racial reckoning in Higher Education in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 38(1), 94-121.

Keval, H. (2024). *Whiteness, Racial Trauma, and the University*, SAGE

Libassi, CJ. (2018). The neglected college race gap: Racial disparities among college completers. The Centre for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/neglected-college-race-gap-racial-disparities-among-college-completers/

Maisuria, A. and Helmes, S. (2020). *Life for the academic in the neoliberal university*, Oxon; Routledge

Martin, G. (2017). Scaling critical pedagogy in higher education, *Critical Studies in Education*, 58(1), 1-18

Mayo, P. (2016). *Hegemony and Education Under Neoliberalism: Insights from Gramsci*, London: Routledge.

McArthur, J. (2010) Achieving social justice within and through higher education: the challenge for critical pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15:5, 493-504,

Mclaren, P. (2020). The future of critical pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(12), 1243-1248

Mills, D. (2022). Decolonial perspectives on global higher education: Disassembling data infrastructures, reassembling the field. *Oxford Review of Education*, 48(4), pp.474-491

Okazawa-Rey, M. (2020). Foreword. In: Cann, C. and DeMeulenaere, E. (2020). *The Activist Academic: Engaged Scholarship for Resistance, Hope and Social Change*, Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, pp. xviii –xxi.

Olssen, M. and Peters, M. A. (2007). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313-345

O'Neill, S. (2024). Racially minoritised students' strategies for navigating and resisting racism in higher education. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* [online first]. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2337047

Palestine Solidarity Campaign. (No Date). Apartheid Off Campus. https://palestinecampaign.org/campaigns/apartheid-off-campus/

Qurashi, F. (2018) The Prevent strategy and the UK 'war on terror': Embedding infrastructures of surveillance in Muslim communities. *Palgrave Communications*, 4:17.

Rodney, W. (2019). *The Groundings with My Brothers.* London: Verso.

Rollock, N. (2021). "I would have become wallpaper had racism had its way": Black female professors, racial battle fatigue, and strategies for surviving higher education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 96(2), 206-217.

Saunders, D. (2007). The Impact of Neoliberalism on College Students. J*ournal of College and Character*, 8(5), 1-9.

Sian, K. (2017). Born radicals? Prevent, positivism, and 'race-thinking'. *Palgrave Communications* 3(6)

Sivanandan, A. (2008). 'Catching history on the wing', speech given at the Institute of Race Relations 50th celebration conference (2008). www.irr.org.uk/news/catching-history-on-the-wing/

Sivanandan, A. (2019). *Communities of Resistance: Writing of Black Struggles for Socialism*. London: Verso.

Skelton, K. (2023). Counter-Critical Pedagogy: A Manifesto. *Critical Studies in Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2023.2266522

Solorzano, D. G. and Yosso, T. J. (2001). Maintaining Social Justice Hopes within Academic Realities: A Freirean Approach to Critical Race/LatCrit Pedagogy. *Denver Law Review*, 78(4), pp.595-621

Smith, L.T. (2018). *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2nd ed. London: Zed.

Specia, A. and Osman, A. (2015). Education as a practice of freedom: Reflections on bell hooks. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(17), 195-199

Sudbury, J. and Okazawa-Rey, M. (Eds.) (2009). *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminism and Social Change.* Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Stein, S., de Olveira Andreotti, V., and Suša, R. (2019). 'Beyond 2015', within the modern/colonial global imaginary? Global development and higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(3), 281-301

Tate, S. A. and Bagguley, P. (2017). 'Building the anti-racist university: Next steps'. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 20:3, 289–299

Thornton, M. (2013). The mirage of merit. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(76): 127-143.

Tight, M. (2019). The neoliberal turn in Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 73, 273–284.

UUK. (2021). *Tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred: Practical guidance for UK universities*, London: UUK.

Webb, D. (2018). Bolt-holes and breathing spaces in the system: On forms of academic resistance (or, can the university be a site of utopian possibility?). *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 40(2), 96-118.

Williams, P., Bath, S., Arday, J., Lewis, C. (2019). The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding, *Leading Routes*. https://leadingroutes.org/the-broken-pipeline

Wind, M. (2024). *Towers of Ivory and Steel*, London: Verso

Yates, L. (2014). Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements. *Social Movement Studies*, 14(1), 1-21

Zembylas, M. (2013). Critical pedagogy and emotion: working through 'troubled knowledge' in posttraumatic contexts. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 176-189

Zembylas, M. (2015). Pedagogy of discomfort and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education*, 10(2), 163–174.