Spaces of Possibility and Pockets of Hope

Pedagogy, Practice and Cultural Education

by Dr Chrissie Tiller

***Dr Chrissie Tiller** is an expert in collaborative and social arts practice. As a writer, thinker, theatre practitioner and educator, her work sits at the creative intersection of critical pedagogy, political activism and social transformation in the arts and cultural sectors.*

Here, she explores the critical theory and pedagogies that underpin cultural education. Aligned with the philosophy of Sankofa, she examines the works and thinking of seven educational philosophers – past and present – offering both context to their ideas and practical applications for use with children and young people. Look out for the 'Creating Spaces of Hope' box-outs throughout the piece for practical examples of these ideas in action.

Why does Cultural Education Matter?

Young people face a future where the impacts of technological advancement, the changing climate and a global move away from democratic government are already presenting new and unexpected challenges. The skills they will need to thrive personally and socially will depend less on their ability to absorb knowledge and more on critical and creative thinking and their capacity to analyse, question, interpret and evaluate new ideas, as well as to imagine, explore and investigate new possibilities.

Engagement and participation in arts and cultural activities has been shown to have the potential to foster the creative habits of mind that life in the 21st century increasingly demands: being inquisitive, collaborative, imaginative, persistent and disciplined (Lucas and Spencer, 2017). As UNESCO's recent Framework for Cultural and Arts Education notes, participation in arts and culture not only plays *'a vital role in the flourishing of human imagination, creativity and self-expression' but also provides us with a 'foundation of our values, choices and relationships with one another and with nature, endowing us with critical thinking, a sense of identity, and the ability to respect and embrace otherness'* (UNESCO, 2024: 2).

At the same time, as the report **The Arts in Schools** (A New Direction, 2023) highlights, we are witnessing a growing disparity in young people's ability to access these experiences. This inequity of provision is reflected increasingly in the lack of diversity in our creative industries and cultural institutions. As the Sutton Trust reveals in A Class Act (2024), less than 10% of our creative and cultural workforce are currently from working-class backgrounds: a percentage which has halved since the 1970s. Fresh approaches and new policies are needed to combat this downward trend if we are to really shift the dial.

The potential of cultural education to promote critical thinking, creativity and imagination across the curriculum places it in a unique position to counter the cycle of exclusion and deprivation reinforced by inequity of access. When young people participate in experiences that reflect their own stories, lives, identities and cultures, we create spaces of possibility where we can work

together to challenge and break down barriers of class, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and geographical location.

Pedagogy, Practice and Social Transformation

The struggle for greater equality of opportunity and fairness in educational contexts is not a new one. While the injustices facing young people today may be specific to the times we live in, there is a long and important history of educational philosophers and thinkers engaging with questions of injustice, inequality and the need for social transformation. By revisiting some of their theories and philosophies here we hope to offer insights, approaches and strategies that will help us build on that legacy. To support this, we have included box-out sections aligned to these thinkers, each with suggested actions designed to spark discussion, open debate and create possibilities.

Our primary audience is cultural leaders and arts practitioners working for the benefit of children and young people in social, cultural and educational contexts. As such, we hope this introduction to the principles of critical pedagogy and social transformation will provide a touchstone for anyone seeking to create a sector that is more diverse and inclusive in terms of whose culture it values and whose stories it shares.

Educational philosophers who have sought to challenge the status quo have inevitably influenced and shaped each other's thinking. We have chosen to focus here on those whose commitment to bringing theory and action together has ensured their voices remain relevant and continue to resonate with leaders today. As the intersectional nature of the obstacles facing many young people and the role arts and culture can play in creating those barriers becomes clearer, we have also included some of those thinkers whose theories have contributed to our understanding of intersectionality and the need for cultural democracy.

Theory, Practice and Critical Pedagogy

> ‘Without action or practice there is no knowledge … (but) we have to have a certain theoretical kind of practice in order to know also.’
>
> (Freire, P. 1990: 98)

Progressive Educational Theory and Practice

The notion of pedagogy or what Freire calls a theoretical kind of practice, is not something we have always felt comfortable with in the UK. Educationist, historian and political activist, Brian Simon's notorious challenge, *Why no Pedagogy in England?* (1981), was quickly dismissed by educational policy makers who insisted on the importance of pragmatism in delivering a national curriculum. Sadly, this meant we also lost a sense of the old Greek meaning of the word, which recognises the pedagogue as someone who cares for the well-being of their pupils as well as their formal education.

Leading European pedagogues, including Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Piaget, have all shaped our understanding of the need for more child-centred approaches to learning. But it is US reformer and philosopher John Dewey's vision of education as part of a crucial social framework where young people learn best through doing, and working together in groups, that has probably had most influence on current educational thinking. His advocacy for arts and culture as an extension of all human experience, rather than something separate and unique, has also been an important influence on our understanding of their work in shaping who we are as individuals and how we work together as communities.

We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience.

- (Dewey, J. 1933: 78)

John Dewey

Setting out his belief in experiential forms of teaching in *My Pedagogic Creed (1897)*, Dewey argues formal education should simply be part of a wider social process through which young people learn about the world. Rather than seeing it as a preparation for future living, he urges educators to recognise young people's potential as agents of change within their communities. Dewey proposes that by actively engaging young people in doing, the learning space can become a process of living in itself, enabling them to challenge the injustices they see in the outside world.

Developing his ideas further in *How We Think (1910)* and *Democracy and Education (1916)*, Dewey underlines the contribution education can make to building a robust democracy by encouraging young people to become thoughtful, critical thinkers rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

This means committing to actively involving young people in the learning process through:

- **Learning by doing:** including giving them space and time to reflect on their experience
- **Interactive learning:** ensuring they can contribute to the learning experience
- **Discussion and dialogue:** empowering them to value their own ideas while learning to listen and respect those of others
- **Interdisciplinary teaching:** promoting learning across subject boundaries by choosing shared issues and themes that connect more directly with young people's own lives

We have come a long way from the learning by rote Dewey was struggling to oppose. Few cultural educators or arts practitioners today would disagree with Dewey's basic premise of the need to engage young people more directly in the learning process or in the value of creating time for reflection as part of that process. Nor would most of us object to his notion that everyone should have the possibility to be an artist as well having the capacity to enjoy art. Yet so much of what we offer young people

access to in terms of arts and culture can still seem distanced from their own lived experience and the communities that Dewey wants us to see them as valuable members of – especially when certain forms of knowledge and particular forms of art and culture (from music, drama and dance to visual arts) appear to be valued above others.

Ensuring young people have the possibility to engage with arts and cultural experiences where they see themselves represented and their communities reflected, Dewey would suggest, is a crucial way in which we can begin to challenge the hierarchies that still

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Ensuring young people feel their own communities and cultures are respected and matter is one of the crucial ways in which we can offer them a sense of belonging.

Consider these approaches:

Inspire young people to see their communities and neighbourhoods, including their own homes, as rich resources of creative and cultural expression by encouraging them to capture some of these in any way they choose, including sounds, music and words as well as visual images.

Invite them to consider how they might share or curate these, helping others to understand the meaning and value of their choices by explaining why these particular forms of creativity have resonance for them, reflecting on their similarities and differences in response to the same neighbourhood.

Work with them to identify, record, and map everyday acts of creativity and imagination that exist across their neighbourhood: from graffiti in the streets, to local cafés and restaurants, spaces for creating music or dance to community gardens, murals, window displays in homes and shops.

Create space for them to share this mapping with their local community, either working with local galleries or museums or creating digital guides that people can add to.

Empower them to understand how they can draw on their own sense of what has meaning and value to respond to work they encounter in more formal arts and cultural settings.

The educator also has the duty of not being neutral.

- (Freire, P. 1990: 180)

Critical Pedagogy Paulo Freire

Dewey's thinking on the importance of engaging young people more directly in the learning process and encouraging them to draw on their own experience resonated powerfully with Paulo Freire when he found himself teaching impoverished peasants in Brazil in the 1960s. What he also began to realise was the impossibility of achieving the equality he sought for them within educational systems that remained so resolutely hierarchical.

Freire was not alone in believing that a more radical approach would be needed if change was to happen at a systemic and structural level. Ivan Illich's ideas in *Deschooling Society* (1971), Gramsci's work on hegemony and Vygotsky's arguments about the role of education and culture in perpetuating inequality all influenced his thinking. Rejecting what he called the banking model of education – where objective knowledge is deposited by the one who knows (the educator) into the minds of those who do not (the young people) – he argues this approach simply reinforces existing power structures. Instead, he proposes what he calls consciousness raising.

If formal education is inherently social and political in its commitment to upholding the status quo, then Freire insists educators cannot be neutral. Places of learning need instead to become spaces of possibility by building young people's capacity for critical thinking and engaging them with real life injustices and problems. This means not only understanding the barriers and boundaries that impact the lives of the young people we work with but also seeking ways to work with them to challenge them. Building on Dewey's call for learning to engage actively with the wider process of living, Freire proposes it must also become a practice of freedom, where those whom the system has marginalised or excluded are inspired to imagine a world where things are different.

Setting out these beliefs in what has become a seminal text on teaching as a tool for social transformation, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)*, and his later *Pedagogy of Hope (1992)*, Freire argues compellingly for educational practices that:

- **Encourage shared inquiry:** through collaborative learning processes where educators and young people tackle this issue of creating a more equal world together
- **Value young people's lived experience:** as a crucial source, enabling them to understand they can draw on it to create new knowledges
- **Create space for dialogue:** where the educator or facilitator is no longer seen as 'the-one-who-teaches' and knows the answers, but becomes a co-learner

- **Question dominant narratives:** connecting the learning space to the world outside, enabling young people to envisage a more just and equitable world

Using the language of shared inquiry, collaboration and dialogue, Freire speaks directly to the importance of valuing and trusting young people's creative power and their ability to respond imaginatively and perceptively to social injustices. Through a shared process of posing problems and welcoming everyone's responses learning spaces can become the pockets of hope he suggests they should be. Cultural education can play a pivotal role in creating such spaces.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Ensuring young people feel their ideas are respected and valued is an important way in which we can open up spaces for meaningful dialogue.

Consider these approaches:

Draw on Freire's concept of problem-posing by encouraging young people to propose social injustices or issues they would like to respond to through their own creative work and/or examining the responses different artists have made to these issues.

Share further examples of cultural expression that touch on these issues by arranging (or hosting) visits to museums, galleries, theatres, music spaces that have exhibitions, collections or performances that offer particular insight into the issues they have chosen to explore.

Foster the concept of collaborative and collective solutions by encouraging them to work in pairs or small groups, posing questions for each other about ways they might tackle a particular injustice or issue, including reflecting on how effectively different artists have responded to these issues in the past.

Invite an artist or group of artists whose work touches on their chosen themes or issues to co-create a piece of work with them that captures or challenges their thinking.

Discuss how and why they might use the work that results as part of a display, a placard, a flyer, or a campaign to draw attention to a particular issue and provoke further questions.

I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, a good radical education, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first.

- (Horton, Myles. 1990: 177)

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire: We Make the Road by Walking

In his later years, Freire reflects on education as a practice of freedom with activist and educator Myles Horton. Recorded at Horton's Highlander Folk School, which provided an educational grounding for leading figures in the US civil rights movement, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change (1990)*, offers rich insights into their shared belief in encouraging participation and collaborative practices. It also underlines their commitment to a constant cycle of theory and practice, action and reflection upon the world to transform it – what Freire calls praxis. Bringing about a more just world, Freire explains, can be as simple as recognising that everyone deserves to be respected and listened to. The intentional integration of theory and practice, action and reflection is what enables us to bring that about.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Often, as Horton and Freire suggest, simple gestures can be the most effective in opening up possibilities for change. Space, and where people place themselves within it, can be an important signifier of where the power lies in any learning space or cultural setting.

Consider these approaches:

Examine how the space you work in is usually set out and where you normally place yourself within it. Then try out different solutions, asking for responses from the young people you work with to see if there are ways they feel would suggest greater openness or facilitate a more equal exchange of ideas.

Ask young people to propose their own ways of organising a space and trying these out through a collaborative process of 'action and reflection, reflection and action'. Encourage them to think how simple changes of position can change how power is perceived and to then consider what difference this might make to whose voice is listened to in discussions.

Invite them to visit existing public spaces, including cultural institutions, and then discuss how they might be reshaped or re-envisioned to challenge existing power structures and promote greater access and participation.

Engage them in collectively imagining a public space or cultural institution where everyone would feel welcome and everyone's culture feels equally valued.

The classroom, with all its limitations remains a location of possibility

- (hooks, 1994:207)

Engaged Pedagogy

If *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as Freire confesses to Horton, can be a dense theoretical read, *We Make the Road* by Walking embodies their passion for bringing theory, action and storytelling together to respond collectively to what is needed to bring about change and learning from the reflective process that follows. By consciously interweaving her own story and experience of marginalisation with theory and critical thinking about power, class, race and gender, activist and educator bell hooks builds on this by developing a praxis focused on creating the space to imagine new possibilities.

bell hooks

Already deeply involved with black feminist politics, thought and social transformation when she writes *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, hooks opens her book with a playful rebuke to Freire for his use of 'he' and 'him' in his early written texts. At the same time, she acknowledges the formidable contribution he made to her own transformation. What she proposes her feminism brings to the table, along with a commitment to love as a central part of the reflective process (which she has learned from Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Han) is a certainty that well-being is as important as intellectual growth if we want to bring about real change.

Arguing for an even more 'holistic model of learning', which she names engaged pedagogy (1994:21), hooks insists it will never be enough to simply understand the theory. It must lead us to meaningful action. By creating spaces and possibilities for young people to imagine what a fairer, more just world might look like, hooks argues, we can develop their critical thinking and help them understand what they might need to do to make that world a possibility.

Asking educators to be braver in their commitment to challenging and dismantling the oppressive and exclusionary systems that impact so many young people, she suggests:

- **Being more vulnerable and open:** enabling the young people we work with to understand that individual stories and lived experiences can be a powerful resource and a rich form of knowledge
- **Creating spaces of collective possibility:** imagining what the notion of transgression might mean in terms of breaking down barriers and boundaries
- **Appreciating the imagination:** as the key to developing critical thinking
- **Forming learning communities:** where everyone feels invited and able to contribute and everyone accepts responsibility for ensuring that others can do the same

Developing her belief in the importance of building community as part of making learning a more holistic process, hooks is passionately unequivocal in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* about the importance of teaching with love. She advocates 'combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust' in order 'to create the best climate for learning.' (hooks, 2003: 134)

'What we cannot imagine', hooks insists, 'cannot come into being' (2003: 194). It is this insistence on the potential of the shared learning space to be a place of radical possibility and hope that makes hooks' ideas resonate so powerfully in the context of cultural education. If we believe that art and culture have the capacity to, 'illuminate our inner lives, enrich our emotional world, teach us compassion and engage us in a dialogue about values' (Arts Council, 2021), it feels crucial that we work to ensure every young person has access to spaces where this can happen.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Building learning spaces where everyone feels their contributions are treated with love, care and respect, as hooks suggests, may mean bringing a little more of ourselves into those spaces.

Consider these approaches:

Speak openly with young people about the challenges and barriers they face, especially if you have faced similar barriers, or by inviting members of their communities to share their own stories and histories of social transformation.

Imagine together how power might be shared more equally by drawing on music, song, film, visual art, literature or other cultural expressions from different contexts and cultures to develop their own creative responses.

Encourage hildren and young people to think collectively about what transformation might look like if the spaces they jointly inhabit – like schools, clubs, or cultural institutions – set out to actively build community by becoming more inclusive and caring places.

Raise children and young people's voices by creating opportunities for them to share their lived experience, their thoughts and ideas for social transformation with those in power. This could be done through discussions, debates and public meetings as well as exhibitions and sharing of their creative responses.

Intersectionality

> Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.'
>
> (Crenshaw, K. 2017)

Practitioners who would be drawn to intersectionality as critical praxis seek knowledge projects that take a stand; such projects would critique social injustices that characterize complex social inequalities, imagine alternatives and/or propose viable action strategies for change.

– (Collins and Bilge, 2020: 56)

Radical thought and the struggle for social transformation rarely occur in isolation. They almost always emerge through a collective response to systems and structures that marginalise, exclude and oppress. What hooks' experiences as a black, working-class woman, brought to her pedagogy, alongside her insistence on the power of care and love, was an insistence on the need to recognise the intersecting and overlapping ways in which oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and dis/ability impact young people's lives. If community, hope and love are to be at the centre of making change, as her later book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* suggests, she believes it is crucial that we understand the intersectional nature of discrimination and disadvantage.

Intersectionality as a framework and a tool for action

While the term intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the way black women's experience of the overlapping impact of racism and sexism had gone unrecognised in US anti-discrimination law, the concept emerged many years before. As early as 1851, Sojourner Truth posed the question, 'Ain't I a woman?' to insist African American women's unique experiences must be central to the fight for women's rights. It was an argument reinforced later by the Combahee River Collective's determined exposure of the 'interlocking', 'simultaneous' and 'manifold' nature of 'racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression' (1977: 1).

Since then, intersectionality has provided a framework to acknowledge the interlocking nature of oppressions. Its more recent focus on individual identity rather than systemic oppression has, however, led to its strong roots in political activism being neglected. Educator and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins suggests this distancing from its history has meant it has still not realised its power as a critical tool for social change.

Patricia Hill Collins

Echoing many of the principles and values of Freire, Horton and hooks, educationalist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins highlights how creating space for different knowledges and experiences to be shared can enable young people to imagine alternative realities and resist unjust power structures. For Collins this means drawing on intersectionality to highlight the systemic and structural inequalities many young people face even before they enter places of learning.

She proposes that theory and practice must come together to build strategies for meaningful change, placing her hope in educators and cultural leaders prepared to:

- **Focus on social justice:** addressing the impact unequal power structures have on so many young people's lives
- **Validate different forms of knowledge:** enabling children and young people to understand and recognise the value that their different lived experiences bring to any learning context
- **Embrace self-reflexivity:** continuing to question their own privileges and understand their place within the intersecting oppressions Hill Collins calls the 'matrix of domination' (1990)

Embracing self-reflexivity, as Collins suggests, enables us to recognise the roles we may unknowingly play in perpetuating unjust power structures. By explaining the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal levels at which power operates, the matrix of domination offers us an

important critical tool to map the complex ways in which class, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability and geographical location intersect to marginalise or exclude. It also offers us a means of countering the impact these different levels of exclusion or marginalisation have on the lives of the individual young people we work with. Thinking intersectionally then becomes an integral part of what Collins calls taking a stand: being prepared to address overlapping systems of power by ensuring all young people have equal access to the social advantages and benefits that an education rich in arts and cultural experiences offers.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Adopting an intersectional approach is crucial to enabling ourselves as educators and cultural leaders to understand our own biases and prejudices, as well as those of the institutions we work with. It also strengthens our capacity to question and challenge these. Consider these approaches:

Commit to being more self-reflexive at a personal level and encouraging it within the teams you work with. You can do this by asking yourself and those you work with, to take a moment after any meeting or shared event to recognise what you've noticed and what you've learned. For example, think about how far everyone was able to contribute to the discussion and whether there were invisible barriers or biases that might have held you or other people back. Then consider what you as an individual or a team might try to do differently another time.

Challenge discrimination and bias whenever you see it, especially in learning spaces, and being prepared to question diversity initiatives that feel little more than tokenistic or that are, perhaps unwittingly, reinforcing existing oppressions and inequalities.

Ensure cultural education programmes reflect the diverse and complex experiences of the young people we work with, including thinking carefully about the artists we engage to work with them, the communities we connect to, the narratives that are shared, and the artistic and cultural expressions we promote.

Encourage young people's own understanding of intersectionality by inviting them to consider their own identity through engaging with the work of artists from a range of backgrounds who focus on self through portrait, collage, mapping, video, clothing, and multi-media – especially those who challenge existing stereotypes through their work.

Empower them to create work that explores their own cultural identity in whatever form they choose –from visual or verbal expression to sound, music, and movement – inspiring them to look at the different groups and communities to which they belong.

Create space for them to discuss what they have learned about themselves and others through this experience, and to consider how they might share these reflections within or outside their own groups and communities.

Cultural Democracy and Cultural Capital

> Culture is Ordinary: and that is where we must begin'
>
> (Williams. R. 1989)

Thinking more consciously about the ways in which culture can exclude and marginalise inevitably leads us to the notion of cultural democracy. This means ensuring power is shared more fairly and that everyone has the possibility to enjoy, own, critique, make, produce and share the art they choose. Importantly, Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu have drawn on their working-class backgrounds and experiences of exclusion to combat the systems and structures that reinforce inequity by placing certain 'high' forms of arts and culture above others.

Raymond Williams

Opening with the contention that culture is 'ordinary', Williams argues – in a similar way to Dewey – that art and culture should never be considered as separate but as something rooted in the beliefs, practices and experiences of ordinary people leading everyday lives and making meaning of those lives. Culture cannot and should not, Williams goes on to insist, ever be something that belongs to a privileged elite who deign to share it with the rest of us. Yet so many cultural policies, supposedly aimed at widening participation and access, have continued to begin with that premise. Embodied in concepts such as Arts Council England's Great Art and Culture for Everyone (2013) is the suggestion that greater equality only comes about through the democratisation, or sharing of access, to those elite or 'high' cultural forms found in our traditional concert halls, opera houses, galleries or museums.

Advocating instead for what we have come to know as cultural democracy, Williams insists everyone should have the opportunity to take part in the creation of meaning through their own forms of art and cultural expression, which they engage with on their own terms. Rejecting the need for that to be mediated by existing elites or hierarchies, he argues for systemic and structural change that begins from the ground-up rather than being top-down, and which acknowledges the contribution everyone can make to creating our shared cultural landscape.

This inversion of current power structures has radical implications. If we accept Williams' definition of culture as ordinary and, as such, a basic right to which everyone has equal access, it follows that resources should be shared equally. This requires those in leadership roles in cultural institutions and policy making to be prepared to let go of some of that power and work toward more inclusive and open forms of decision-making. Inviting diverse communities, including young people, to be part of the co-creating, curating and commissioning of work alongside taking on more active roles within governance, is central to this transformation.

Pierre Bourdieu

Recognising that greater democracy and equality is unlikely to come about while power and privilege remains in the hands of certain social classes, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu began to identify what he calls cultural capital as one of the main ways in which dominance is preserved and maintained. Accepting that economic capital or assets are clearly important in maintaining the social order, Bourdieu asserted that cultural capital plays an equally crucial, albeit more subtle, role. Closely linked as it is to family background and the networks and connections this so often affords, it offers those who possess it access to and familiarity with those high forms of culture, such as opera, classical music, ballet, museums, galleries, theatres and literature

that Bourdieu labels as legitimate.

He divides cultural capital into three states, which he identifies as:

- **Objective:** the possession of objects, such as books or art
- **Embodied:** the language and mannerisms that come from this
- **Institutionalised:** the educational and social advantages these habits offer

The ability to be comfortable in discussing art and culture with others often gives young people the confidence to succeed within our current educational systems and future employment. Cultural capital then becomes one of the main drivers of inequality in a system where such knowledge is valued above other forms of experience.

Ofsted has recently proposed challenging this inequity by offering all young people the possibility to develop their cultural capital by introducing them to an existing canon of literature and other art forms that exemplify 'the best that has been thought and said' (2019: 43). In ignoring Bourdieu's insistence that cultural capital is almost always intertwined with economic privilege, this approach runs the risk of reinforcing existing inequities.

By ensuring all young people have access to rich and diverse forms of cultural expression and encouraging them to question who gets to make work, where and how it is shared and who is able to interpret it or give it value, cultural education has the possibility to confront imbalances of power and interrogate whose cultural capital has worth.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

When planning cultural education sessions to develop young people's sense of their own cultural capital, consider these approaches:

Discover more about the diverse forms of cultural expression that young people, their families and communities already engage in. Uplift the cultural capital this offers them by inviting artists and other makers who represent those communities to share their work and creative practices.

Share examples of artists, poets and writers from diverse backgrounds who use their own traditions, heritage and languages within the contemporary work they make. Encourage young people to experiment with similar approaches in creating their own work.

Ensure they have opportunities to visit a wide range of cultural venues, including those smaller more local spaces that may be more reflective of their own history, identity and cultural backgrounds as well as accessing more traditional institutions.

Promote reflection and discussion as part of young people's creative processes and as part of their response to what they see in cultural venues, encouraging them to feel confident to ask questions, pose problems and draw on their own knowledge and experience to articulate their views.

Invest in quality resources for all young people, including exploring what might be shared between educational establishments, cultural institutions and libraries to ensure that every young person has access to the 'best' in making, curating and sharing their own work.

Looking back to move forward

In times of political turbulence and growing economic, climate and humanitarian crises such as those we are living through, it can be difficult to be certain where we might uncover those 'pockets of hope' that Freire speaks about. When Freire asked Myles Horton how he set up a folk school that became so central to the civil rights movement in the US, Horton told him it was simply about being there, opening up the space and understanding that those whom the system oppresses are also the ones who have the deep knowledge needed for social transformation.

The mythical bird that often depicts Sankofa is portrayed as looking over its back while holding an egg in its beak. For the Akan people of Ghana who created this concept, it symbolises the need to sometimes look back and see what we can learn from the lessons and struggles of the past to inform our future actions. It has also become a powerful symbol of reconnecting with cultural heritage and reclaiming cultural identity as part of that growth. Each of the educational philosophers and thinkers presented here have sought to engage with different historical struggles for social transformation through bringing theory and practice together to tackle inequity and injustice. While we acknowledge that many of these struggles continue, we hope – like the egg that offers insights and learning from the past – that their ideas will offer wisdom and inspiration that we can build on to face current challenges.

In creating spaces where questioning and critical thinking are fostered, where trust, respect and care are centred and young people feel confident to draw on their own experience and imagination to define the kind of world they would like to live in, cultural education can begin to offer them pockets of hope. By supporting them in understanding how they can be part of building that fairer, juster world, it can also turn spaces of learning into the locations of possibility bell hooks insists they can be.

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