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CAMP SAOIRSE AND DIRECT ACTION AS RADICAL PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: In the summer of 2024, students at University College Cork (UCC), alongside students across Ireland and internationally, established a six-week encampment to protest their university's institutional and financial links to companies complicit in Israel's actions in Gaza, which United Nations bodies and major human rights organisations have determined constitute genocide under international law (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). The encampment emerged in response to a military campaign that, by the time of writing, had resulted in the deaths of more than 72,000 Palestinians and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and residential areas (OCHA, 2026). At UCC, students demanded institutional transparency, divestment from companies and partnerships complicit in Israel's occupation, colonisation of Palestinian land, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza, and a public condemnation of these actions from university leadership. Camp Saoirse ('freedom' in Irish) was established on the university's central quadrangle (the 'quad'), a symbolic ceremonial space traditionally reserved for graduation. Supported particularly by members of the student Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) group, the encampment functioned both as political protest and as a sustained 'living classroom'.

Drawing on interviews with nine students and visits to the camp as a supportive member of staff, this article focuses on Camp Saoirse from a pedagogical perspective. All students at the camp were invited to participate in this research and nine students accepted the invitation. It argues that the camp offers a compelling case study of radical pedagogy within critical global justice education (CGJE), showing how student-led direct action can foster critical consciousness and transformative learning. Drawing on Freire's (1970: 36) concept of praxis and theories of critical pedagogy, the article explores how students co-created knowledge, practiced democratic decision-making, and

engaged in a pedagogy of discomfort. It also situates Camp Saoirse within wider traditions of student activism and proposes that direct action offers not only political resistance, but also a radical pedagogy for empowering learners as agents of change.

Key words: Critical Global Justice Education; Direct Action; Radical Pedagogy; Student Activism; Genocide; Higher Education; Praxis; Transformative Learning.

Introduction

Across the world, students have increasingly reclaimed streets, parks, and university campuses as sites of education and struggle, transforming public spaces into arenas of political learning, collective inquiry, and democratic experimentation within movements such as climate strikes and Palestine solidarity encampments (Choudry, 2015; Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). From school climate strikes to encampments opposing war and injustice, youth-led movements have asserted that learning does not begin and end in the classroom. These actions are not distractions from education but powerful enactments of it. They are forms, too, of radical pedagogy that fuses reflection and resistance. In this moment of overlapping global crises - including war, climate emergency and inequality - critical global justice education, as understood in this article, is called to re-engage with its radical origins, and to embrace the role of direct action in fostering transformative learning and agency.

This article examines Camp Saoirse, a student encampment at University College Cork (UCC) in summer 2024, as a case study of direct action as pedagogy. The encampment was established during Israel's military campaign in Gaza, which, at the time of writing, had resulted in the deaths of more than 72,000 (OCHA, 2026). United Nations bodies and major human rights organisations have determined that the large-scale destruction of civilian infrastructure and killing of civilians in Gaza constitutes genocide under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). The encampment in UCC formed part of a wider wave of global student protests extending solidarity to Palestinians and demanding their universities divest from any institutional complicity in Israel's genocide. At UCC, students occupied the central 'quad'

and called for the university to divest from companies and partnerships complicit in Israel's occupation, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza. The encampment became a sustained six-week action, blending protest with community, grief with determination, and theory with practice.

The article focuses on pedagogy rather than the details of negotiations between the students and UCC. Drawing on interviews with participants and site visits/observations as a supporting staff member, the article argues that Camp Saoirse functioned not only as a site of resistance but also as a radical learning environment. It explores how students collectively engaged in Freirean praxis, reflection and action aimed at radical transformation, and how the encampment became a space of co-created knowledge, democratic decision-making, and a pedagogy of discomfort. These embodied experiences are situated within broader traditions of student activism in which protest functions as a site of political learning, from anti-apartheid divestment campaigns (Soule, 1997) and fossil fuel divestment movements (Ayling and Gunningham, 2017), to #FeesMustFall (Mavunga, 2019) and the global youth climate strikes (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). The article explores how they share pedagogical themes of solidarity, emotional engagement, and radical hope. Ultimately, the article explores how direct action can be recognised by CGJE as a legitimate and important form of education. It invites educators and institutions to reimagine their roles, not merely delivering curricula, but facilitating conditions for learners to confront injustice, build collective power, and act in the world. Camp Saoirse offers a compelling vision of what that can look like in practice.

Methodology and positionality

This article draws on qualitative data generated during and immediately following the Camp Saoirse encampment. Data sources included written student testimonies collected after the occupation concluded, informal reflective debrief sessions, observational field notes taken during the encampment, and publicly available materials produced by the students such as statements, posters and social media posts. The aim was not to produce a comprehensive ethnography, but to document and analyse the learning processes emerging through direct action in a higher education context. Student testimonies were voluntarily submitted following the encampment and anonymised for the purposes of this research.

Pseudonyms are used where appropriate. Care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose students to additional risk given the politically sensitive context of the action. The author occupied a dual position during the encampment: as a member of staff at the institution and as a supportive observer of the student-led action. While not involved in decision-making within the camp, the author engaged in reflective observation and occasional supportive dialogue when requested. This positionality shaped both access to the space and interpretation of events. The analysis, therefore, adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging that the account is situated rather than neutral.

Data were analysed thematically, with particular attention to moments of transition, tension, and decision-making that illustrated processes of transformative learning. Rather than seeking to evaluate the political success of the encampment, the analysis focuses on pedagogical dynamics: how students articulated learning, how democratic processes evolved, and how care and conflict functioned as educational mechanisms. The intention is not to generalise from a single case, but to use Camp Saoirse as a situated example through which to examine the possibilities and tensions of direct action as CGJE in practice.

Direct action and critical pedagogy

Direct action can be reconceptualised as a form of radical pedagogy within CGJE, where the act of protest becomes a process of learning and empowerment. It embodies a transformative meeting point of reflection and action in the struggle for change. Freire (1970: 52) defines praxis as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it', highlighting that it is not enough to critically understand the world, one must also act to change it. In direct-action contexts like student encampments or protest movements, participants engage in praxis by critically analysing conditions of oppression and simultaneously taking action to address them. This approach frames activists as co-learners who generate knowledge through the very process of resistance. A protest thus turns the street into a classroom of critical consciousness, exemplifying Freire's (1970) idea that education becomes a practice of freedom when learners actively participate in transforming their world.

bell hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy deepens the understanding of direct action as education. hooks argues for a holistic, participatory approach to learning that values students and teachers as 'whole human beings' (Ibid.: 14) with minds and emotions. Unlike traditional pedagogy, engaged pedagogy 'emphasises well-being' (Ibid.: 15) and insists that teachers and learners commit to their own and each other's growth. In an activist context, this means protest spaces often become caring communities where participants support one another's learning and empowerment. Direct actions frequently result in co-created, dialogical learning environments and attempt to have non-hierarchical approaches to decision-making. In the case of Camp Saoirse, everyone's voice was heard in daily meetings and decisions were made collectively. This horizontal, dialogic structure reflects Freire's ideal of replacing the top-down 'banking' model of education with a process in which knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue. By engaging fully, intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually, in the work of social change, activists enact what hooks calls education as the practice of freedom, linking learning with concrete action to transform society.

Giroux's work on public pedagogy and civic courage provides another lens for viewing direct action as pedagogical. Giroux sees education as occurring not only in classrooms but in the public sphere through culture and activism. Direct-action movements function as forms of public pedagogy, by highlighting social injustices and modelling democratic engagement. Giroux argues that educators must help students develop the 'language, knowledge, and social relations' to translate private troubles into public issues (Giroux, 2004: 75). This translation is precisely what activists do when they turn personal experiences of injustice into collective demands for change. Engaging in protest thus teaches participants how to connect the personal and the political, fostering what Giroux describes as civic courage, the willingness to speak and act on one's convictions in public. Such acts make the pedagogical more political, linking critical thought to collective action. As a result, a demonstration or encampment educates both its participants and society at large. It invites critical debate and exposes onlookers to new perspectives. Through public acts of resistance, students learn not only about social change but how to practice it; a living civics lesson in democracy.

Direct action also resonates with what Boler and Zembylas (2003: 110) call a pedagogy of discomfort. Deep learning often requires unsettling one's assumptions, and activism inherently involves this kind of discomfort. Boler and Zembylas (2003: 110) note that critical inquiry 'often means asking students to radically re-evaluate their worldviews', a process that can trigger anger, grief or resistance. Likewise, participating in a protest or occupation pushes individuals out of their comfort zones, confronting them with the realities of injustice and their own positionality. This discomfort can ultimately spur unlearning, as critical pedagogues urge. For Spivak (1990: 13), privileged learners must relinquish the sense of certainty and entitlement that blocks them from truly hearing others. Andreotti (2012) likewise calls on students to 'learn from below'. Direct-action solidarity work puts these ideas into practice. Participants are compelled to decentre their own perspectives, unlearn paternalistic attitudes, and listen to subaltern voices. In this way, the theory of critical pedagogy becomes lived practice, protest becomes a forum for critical self-reflection, dialogue, and the challenging of hegemony. The emotional upheaval and discomfort are not side effects but integral to the learning process, as activists collectively work through uncertainty towards new understanding and agency.

Another radical perspective that enriches the pedagogical view of direct action is the idea of fugitive learning from the Black radical tradition. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten describe fugitive learning as the subversive, unofficial education that oppressed people engage in 'under the radar' of dominant institutions. They suggest that the marginalised learner might 'sneak into the university and steal what [they] can' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 25), capturing how those excluded from power often acquire knowledge informally and against the grain. Direct-action initiatives create exactly this kind of parallel learning space, outside the formal curricula, in occupied parks or campus plazas, activists gather to share knowledge, strategise, and study issues together. These movement spaces function as underground classrooms where people teach each other histories, tactics, and critical analyses that may be absent in mainstream education. This approach represents a refusal to accept official narratives, choosing instead to learn on their own terms. The ethos here resonates with global South traditions of popular education, where learning is rooted in community empowerment and often happens within social movements themselves. Activists

in these spaces learn how to build communities of trust and how to 'study' in a way directly tied to survival and liberation. Thus, direct action exemplifies how education can occur in the wild, an insurgent pedagogy that prefigures the more just social relations activists are fighting for.

Furthermore, direct action shows the importance of the embodied and affective dimensions of learning. Feminist and decolonial thinkers have long emphasised that true learning engages the body, emotions, and spirit, not just the intellect (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 1994; Lugones, 2010). In protests, knowledge is quite literally embodied. Marching shoulder to shoulder in a demonstration, chanting slogans, or holding a banner in a public square are acts that teach participants experientially (Taylor, 2020). Emotions run high in activism, outrage at injustice, grief for suffering, joy in solidarity and these emotions themselves become pedagogical (Zembylas, 2015). In many global South movements, song, art, and ritual serve as powerful pedagogical tools that carry knowledge across generations (Darder, 2015; Motta, 2011). Such cultural practices highlight a nonlinear mode of activist learning, lessons emerge through storytelling, collective memory, and the blending of past and future visions (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Indeed, the temporality of activist education is different: a flash of insight during a protest might only fully make sense later, or the spirit of past struggles may inform the present through shared memory (Choudry, 2015). Direct action thus invites a more expansive view of pedagogy, one that embraces the body and the nonlinear rhythms of social change alongside critical reflection.

Finally, the notion of radical hope ties together the pedagogical power of direct action. Jonathan Lear defines radical hope as a hope directed toward 'a future goodness' that one cannot yet fully grasp, beyond the horizon of current understanding (Lear, 2006: 103). In the context of activism, this translates to the resilient, visionary hope that sustains movements even when immediate outcomes are uncertain. bell hooks (2003: 110) likewise chooses hope over despair in order to continue the struggle. Direct action is fundamentally an exercise in radical hope. Every protest, sit-in or encampment is predicated on the belief that the world can be different, even if we cannot exactly imagine how. This hope is radical because it persists in the face of adversity and nourishes the courage to act without guarantees. In a practical sense, engaging in collective action teaches hope

by allowing participants to experience moments of empowerment and community. By organising prefigurative spaces that model cooperation and solidarity, activists practice hope by turning ideals into lived experience. Through direct action, learners cultivate radical hope as they witness that their collective agency can bring about change, however small. Taken together, these diverse critical perspectives show how theory and practice merge in protests and encampments, revealing the transformative learning that unfolds through collective action. Direct action is not an interruption of education but its extension, a legitimate and powerful form of learning. In protest spaces, the divide between theory and practice dissolves; participants become critical co-educators who collectively produce knowledge through praxis, directing reflection and action toward social transformation.

Camp Saoirse: a case study of learning through solidarity

In the summer of 2024, amid Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, students at UCC established a six-week encampment on the university's historic quad, naming it Camp Saoirse. Initiated by the student Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) group and supported by a broader coalition of students, staff, and allies, the encampment demanded that UCC divest from companies and institutional partnerships financially or materially complicit in Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, apartheid policies, and genocide in Gaza (OHCHR, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). Students also called for greater transparency regarding university investments and for a formal public condemnation of these actions by university leadership. The occupation of the central quadrangle, a space typically reserved for ceremonial use, was both symbolic and strategic. It disrupted the aesthetic neutrality of the university and transformed a site of institutional prestige into a site of moral questioning. Yet while the encampment functioned as political intervention, it also evolved into something else: a sustained, collective site of critical learning. Students lived in tents, organised daily demonstrations, hosted teach-ins and film screenings, engaged in negotiations with university management, and welcomed visitors from across the university community. What emerged was not simply protest but a living pedagogical space, one where learning unfolded through action, tension, dialogue, and shared responsibility.

Learning in the middle: messiness and democratic praxis

The most significant learning did not occur in public-facing moments alone, but in the internal life of the camp. Daily assemblies, late-night strategy discussions, disagreements about tactics, emotional exhaustion, and negotiation with institutional power all became sites of education. Students encountered, often for the first time, the complexity of democratic organising under pressure. Internal meetings were not always harmonious. One student reflected:

> "The meetings were not always straighforward. What was good is that we took time to make sure everyone was heard and it was respectful. But it was also messy and of course there were differences of opinion on strategy etc!"

Such reflections matter. They reveal that Camp Saoirse was not a romanticised model of activism but a lived experiment in collective decision-making. Students learned that solidarity is not automatic; it requires patience, emotional labour, and continuous negotiation. They grappled authentically with core democratic questions: who speaks? who decides? how are disagreements resolved? how do we remain inclusive while acting strategically?

Tensions also emerged around informal authority, especially with one incident involving students from another university. Reflecting on an interaction with experienced activists, one student wrote:

> "I wonder why we took the (other university) students' suggestion so easily and followed every step they suggested, I guess some of us, at least I, did fall into some kind of false authority logic".

Here, learning extended beyond critique of institutional power to examination of power within the movement itself. Students recognised how hierarchy can re-emerge even in spaces committed to horizontalism. Such moments illustrate praxis in Freirean terms: reflection and action intertwined, not as theory but as lived ethical struggle. Debates about structure versus full horizontal leadership further deepened this learning. As one participant noted:

> "Infighting is inevitable in large groups... overall I think we had a good horizontal process but sometimes I wondered if having a more centralised committee would have stopped some egos from rising to the surface... there is a difference between those who are true leaders and those who are ego-centered! I do not think there is an easy answer for this".

Rather than weakening the movement, such reflections demonstrate political maturity. Students were not simply demanding justice; they were interrogating how justice is organised. They learned that democratic practice is iterative, imperfect, and sustained through dialogue rather than certainty.

From participants to organisers

Camp Saoirse brought together students with varying levels of activist experience. Some had previously organised; others had never participated in protest. This diversity created an informal apprenticeship model in which learning occurred through participation. Many students began with logistical roles, managing supplies, maintaining the camp, preparing materials, welcoming visitors, before gradually taking on more visible responsibilities. Leadership was not confined to spokesperson roles; it included care work, coordination, and sustaining morale. These 'small but essential tasks' became entry points into collective agency. Students described the reality of consensus-based decision-making as demanding yet empowering. One participant reflected:

> "Trying to let everyone say their piece and contribute towards the decision making process is time consuming and can feel frustrating at times, but I often came away from meetings also very glad ... I usually felt that every point worth considering was brought up and discussed by the group".

Here, democracy shifts from abstraction to embodied experience. Students learned that participation requires listening, compromise, and endurance. They developed confidence, political fluency, and organisational competence in real time.

Experienced activists shared practical knowledge about media engagement, negotiation strategy, and protest safety. As one student described:

> "They were important in providing intel from their previous experiences… and helped us on how we should behave from now on, especially in difficult situations for examples if the police arrived".

Learning flowed in multiple directions. Newer participants brought ethical questions and fresh perspectives; experienced organisers contributed tactical insight. Together, this created a collaborative learning ecology grounded in action.

Care, wellbeing, and the role of staff

Sustaining the encampment required more than political strategy. It required care. Students lived outdoors during an exceptionally wet Irish summer. It did not stop raining for the entire time they were there. Fatigue, emotional strain, and constant exposure to distressing news from Gaza intensified the experience. In response, the camp formalised structures of support. A code of conduct was developed, and Wellbeing Officers were appointed from within the group, to monitor burnout and ensure respectful communication. One student reflected that discussions were generally led 'with empathy'. A burnout roster was introduced so that core organisers could rest. Shared meals, late-night conversations, and even moments of joy, karaoke under tarpaulins, tea shared during storms, became practices of resilience. Students learned that sustaining justice work requires tending to emotional and relational wellbeing. Welcoming visitors with tea and a chat was also part of the experience. As a visitor, the author felt privileged to sometimes sit and talk to what she considered the most courageous, well-informed and kind students she had ever met. She sent an email to all UCC staff expressing this sentiment.

Supportive staff played an enabling role. Early in the encampment, a staff member facilitated a session on democratic decision-making, communication, and de-escalation strategies. This intervention strengthened student autonomy rather than directing it. A small number of staff also provided quiet, ongoing support, occasionally remaining physically present at the camp to ensure safety and solidarity. These interactions blurred traditional boundaries between

educator and activist. They raised ethical questions: how can staff support without controlling? how can institutions allow dissent without neutralising it? Such tensions became part of the pedagogical landscape.

Direct action as transformative learning

Camp Saoirse demonstrated that direct action can operate as a profound site of higher education learning. Students did not passively consume information about occupation or human rights; they engaged critically through organising, strategising, negotiating, and reflecting. Creative protest tactics, memorial graduation ceremonies, public art, tea stalls for dialogue, functioned as public pedagogy. Students became educators within civic space. They invited speakers, analysed corporate complicity, debated concessions offered by university management, and deliberated collectively about compromise and accountability. When UCC offered a partial concession mid-way through the occupation, students engaged in intense deliberation. Some feared losing momentum; others insisted that symbolic gestures without structural change were insufficient. Ultimately, they held firm until a student-led working group was agreed to review institutional ties and transparency processes. This moment reflected growing political sophistication: students were learning how to negotiate power while remaining accountable to principle.

By the end of the encampment, many participants described deep personal transformation. One student reflected that 'it was the first time I truly understood what solidarity feels like… and that understanding came not from a book but from living it'. Even in debriefing circles after the camp closed, students critically assessed shortcomings and tensions. They acknowledged that the outcome was 'not a clean win', yet emphasised what they had learned about collective resilience, democratic practice, and the complexity of change. Camp Saoirse demonstrated that higher education can extend beyond formal curricula to encompass collective political action as a legitimate site of learning. It integrated theory and action, intellect and emotion, critique and care. Several identifiable turning points within the encampment illustrated how learning unfolded through transition rather than abstraction. The first turning point emerged during early internal conflicts, when the group confronted disagreement over tactics and informal authority; what began as frustration became an opportunity to critically

examine power within the movement itself. A second threshold moment occurred when university management offered a partial concession. The ensuing deliberations required students to weigh symbolic recognition against structural change, forcing them to articulate shared principles and long-term strategy. A third moment arose as exhaustion intensified during prolonged bad weather, prompting the creation of a burnout roster and wellbeing roles — a practical recognition that sustaining justice work requires intentional care. These moments were not peripheral to the encampment's aims; they constituted its core pedagogical engine. In each case, students moved from reaction to reflection, from uncertainty to collective decision-making. Learning did not occur despite difficulty but through it.

Drawing the learning together

Camp Saoirse illustrates that learning through direct action is not incidental but structured around identifiable pedagogical processes. Students engaged in democratic deliberation under pressure, confronted informal hierarchies within their own movement, negotiated institutional power, developed organisational competence, and constructed systems of collective care. They moved from participation to agency, from frustration to strategic reflection, and from abstract solidarity to embodied political responsibility. The encampment also revealed that transformative learning in higher education can occur beyond formal curricula when students are permitted, and supported by at least some, to act collectively in response to injustice. Learning was cognitive, affective, relational, and political. It involved discomfort and disagreement as much as conviction. It required both courage and care. Most importantly, it demanded reflexivity: the willingness to examine power not only in the university or in global systems, but within the movement itself. Camp Saoirse therefore demonstrated that critical global justice education is not confined to classroom discourse. It can emerge through organised civic action where theory and practice converge, where students become political subjects rather than recipients of knowledge, and where institutions themselves become sites of democratic interrogation. Rather than existing outside education, the encampment deepened it.

Global movements as radical pedagogical spaces

A substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that contemporary student movements function not merely as political interventions but as alternative pedagogical sites that extend and contest the boundaries of formal higher education (Choudry, 2015; Hall et al., 2012). Rather than operating at the periphery of academic life, such movements transform public and institutional spaces into arenas of collective inquiry, where students analyse power, debate strategy, negotiate difference, and experiment with democratic decision-making. In these contexts, streets, university quads, occupations, and protest camps become sites of praxis — understood in Freirean terms as the dialectical process of reflection and action directed toward social transformation (Freire, 1970: 36). Learning emerges through participation itself, not as an abstract exercise but as embodied engagement with structures of injustice.

This dynamic resonates with hooks's (1994: 14-15) conception of engaged pedagogy, which insists that education must address learners as whole human beings and integrate intellectual, emotional, and ethical dimensions of growth. Within movement spaces, learning is relational and dialogical rather than transmissive. Research across diverse contexts supports this framing. Studies of the anti-apartheid divestment campaigns demonstrate how student protest generated both political pressure and critical political education (Soule, 1997). More recent analyses of fossil fuel divestment activism show how students developed institutional literacy, strategic framing skills, and democratic organising competencies through sustained campaigning (Ayling and Gunningham, 2017). Similarly, scholarship on the global youth climate strikes identifies protest as a form of public pedagogy in which young people collectively constructed knowledge about climate science, governance failures, and intergenerational justice (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). Across these cases, activism operates simultaneously as resistance and as education.

The #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (2015-2016) offers a particularly clear illustration of this pedagogical dimension. While initially mobilised around the demand for affordable higher education, the movement rapidly expanded into a broader critique of colonial epistemologies, structural racism, and neoliberal governance within universities (Mavunga, 2019: 88-98).

Campuses became spaces of sustained debate and collective theorising, where students organised assemblies, reading groups, teach-ins, and strategy forums that interrogated the reproduction of inequality in higher education. These practices constituted what Freire (1970: 125) terms *conscientização* - the development of critical consciousness through dialogue and struggle. Participants did not simply analyse injustice; they experimented with alternative organisational forms, negotiated horizontal decision-making processes, and practised prefigurative models of institutional transformation.

Parallel dynamics can be observed in the global youth climate strikes that began in 2018. By walking out of classrooms, millions of young people signalled that conventional schooling was insufficient to address the existential realities of climate breakdown. Protest became a 'living classroom' in which participants engaged with climate science, researched policy failures, articulated systemic critiques, and developed collective demands (Neas, Ward and Bowman, 2022). In several contexts, activists established Public Climate Schools — grassroots educational programmes centred on climate justice — further blurring the boundary between activism and curriculum. Importantly, emotional responses such as grief, anxiety, anger, and hope were recognised as integral to learning rather than peripheral to it. In line with Zembylas's (2007: 1) pedagogy of discomfort, unsettling affective experiences were transformed into ethical and political commitment. Across these diverse movements, a common pattern emerges: activism generates pedagogical spaces in which students cultivate critical consciousness, organisational competence, and democratic agency through participation. Rather than existing outside education, such movements expand its meaning, demonstrating how collective struggle can operate as a form of radical learning grounded in praxis (Freire, 1970), relationality (hooks, 1994), and transformative political engagement (Choudry, 2015).

Historical movements offer further insight into how activism becomes pedagogy. During the anti-apartheid divestment campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, students across the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe, erected symbolic shantytowns, organised mock trials, and staged sustained sit-ins to challenge university complicity with South Africa's apartheid regime. Soule's (1997) analysis documents how these 'shantytown protests' spread rapidly,

dramatising the living conditions of Black South Africans and mobilising moral outrage. These performative actions fused symbolic representation with political critique, transforming campus quads into pedagogical spaces where participants and observers learned about racial injustice, global capitalism, and international solidarity. Contemporary reporting and subsequent scholarship emphasised their educational function, with shantytowns serving as visible, embodied critiques of apartheid that forced campus communities to confront institutional complicity (Soule, 1997).

These actions were also pedagogical in a practical sense. Students developed organising skills, learned to formulate strategy, build coalitions, negotiate with university administrations, and engage the media. Soule's analysis shows that the shantytown tactic diffused rapidly across US campuses between 1985 and 1990 as students monitored one another's actions and adopted tactics through indirect channels and shared identification, even where direct organisational ties were weak (Soule, 1997: 856-857; 861-862). In this way, protest repertoires circulated through peer learning and imitation, producing waves of mobilisation that turned campus space into a visible site of moral and political education (Soule, 1997: 859-860). Many participants later described such experiences as formative, shaping their political consciousness and ethical commitments. The legacy of anti-apartheid campus activism continues to inform contemporary divestment movements, including campaigns targeting fossil fuels, arms manufacturers, and corporations implicated in human-rights violations (Pappé, 2016).

Across these movements, certain pedagogical themes recur. Protest spaces become hubs of co-created knowledge, where learning emerges through dialogue, debate, storytelling, and shared labour. Leadership tends to be horizontal, emphasising mutual aid and inclusive decision-making. Emotions become pedagogical: anger illuminates injustice; grief exposes the human cost of violence; hope sustains collective struggle (hooks, 2003, Zembylas, 2007). Students become what Gramsci (1971) describes as organic intellectuals, producing theory grounded in lived struggle and shaping the ideological and ethical trajectories of their movements. These practices resonate strongly with traditions of popular education in the global South, where learning often unfolds

within social movements rather than formal institutions. Harney and Moten's (2013) concept of 'fugitive learning' captures this dynamic: marginalised communities cultivating undercommons of study outside institutional surveillance. Student movements frequently replicate such practices, building parallel pedagogical infrastructures, collective libraries, nightly discussion circles, shared research drives, kitchens, and care spaces that sustain both political and educational work. Such spaces challenge conventional definitions of legitimate knowledge and emphasise learning as embodied, relational, and insurgent (Harney and Moten, 2013; Andreotti, 2012).

These dynamics are especially visible in the current wave of Palestine solidarity organising. Across universities in Ireland, the UK, North America and beyond, encampments have functioned not only as protest sites but as deliberate spaces of political education. Reporting on Irish campus occupations, RTÉ noted that public talks formed 'just one of a series of "teach-ins" and "discussions" organised by students, addressing themes such as decolonisation, racial capitalism and international law' (O'Kelly, 2024). Participants framed their demands in explicitly legal and historical terms, describing Israeli policy as a 'violation of international law' and situating their activism within broader critiques of colonialism and militarism (O'Kelly, 2024). Reflections from US encampments similarly emphasised sustained engagement with 'the interconnected global and local scales of resistance against an increasingly transnational military-industrial complex' (Law and Political Economy Project, 2024).

Beyond formal teach-ins, students describe learning the ethics and practice of solidarity itself - negotiating allyship, addressing burnout, confronting representational politics, and managing the emotional toll of witnessing mass violence (McCloskey, 2025). In this sense, hooks's (2003) pedagogy of hope becomes tangible: protest operates as a refusal of despair and as an embodied commitment to imagining alternative futures. These movements therefore demonstrate that activism is not external to education but constitutive of it. Through collective struggle, students cultivate political literacy, ethical responsibility, and democratic agency, challenging universities to recognise direct action as a legitimate and generative form of learning.

Implications for CGJE

The pedagogical practices emerging from student-led direct action offer significant implications for critical global justice education. At its core, CGJE aims to cultivate critical understanding of global injustices and empower learners to act for social change. Yet mainstream educational structures often prioritise cognitive knowledge and abstract analysis, neglecting the embodied, affective, and political dimensions of learning. Movements such as #FeesMustFall, the climate strikes, and encampments like Camp Saoirse demonstrate the need for CGJE to re-engage with its radical, action-oriented roots. First, CGJE must broaden its understanding of legitimate learning spaces. Transformative learning often occurs beyond classrooms, in occupations, vigils, picket lines, and community spaces. These spaces foster forms of inquiry and reflection that cannot be replicated within conventional pedagogical settings. Recognising activism as an authentic site of learning requires educators to adopt more facilitative, collaborative roles and to value students and activists as co-educators.

Second, CGJE must foreground the emotional and ethical dimensions of learning. Movements such as #FeesMustFall and Camp Saoirse mobilise grief, anger, hope, and fear in ways that generate ethical insight and political clarity. Zembylas (2007) argues that engaging with discomfort enables learners to confront privilege, complicity, and structural violence. CGJE practitioners can support this by creating pedagogical spaces that hold emotional complexity and encourage sustained, uncomfortable reflection rather than closure or simplification. Third, student movements highlight the importance of co-created, horizontal learning. Protest camps rely on collective decision-making, mutual aid, and shared leadership, practices that align with Freire's dialogical model of education (Freire, 1970). CGJE can integrate such principles by incorporating popular education methodologies, student-led curriculum design, and collaborative action projects that bridge classroom and community. This challenges hierarchical 'banking' models of education and affirms learners' agency as political actors.

Fourth, CGJE can confront institutional complicity. Student movements often target universities themselves, questioning investments, partnerships, and governance practices that reproduce injustice. Camp Saoirse's challenge to UCC's ties with companies complicit in Israeli apartheid (B'Tselem,

2021) exemplifies how students scrutinise institutional ethics. For CGJE to remain credible, it must cultivate the willingness to interrogate its own location within systems of inequality and to take principled positions rather than adopting neutral technocratic stances. Fifth, CGJE could embrace the value of embodied and experiential learning. Activist spaces engage the whole self, body, senses, emotion and intellect. Sharing meals, organising vigils, crafting banners, negotiating with administrators and management, all are forms of learning. CGJE programmes can incorporate such experiences by supporting student activism, facilitating community organising opportunities, and legitimising direct action as a form of research or assessment. This requires institutional advocacy as well as creative pedagogical design.

Finally, CGJE must reclaim its radical imagination. Activist spaces are not only sites of resistance but of prefiguration, they model new forms of community, care, and democratic practice. Camp Saoirse, like many such encampments, rehearsed alternative futures in microcosm. As hooks (2003) reminds us, visionary pedagogy is rooted simultaneously in material conditions and in the imagination of new possibilities. CGJE must nurture this capacity to imagine otherwise and work collectively toward structural transformation. In sum, student movements demonstrate that education for global justice must be dialogical, embodied, relational, and politically engaged. They show what it looks like when learners become agents of change and when pedagogy aligns with struggle. For CGJE, the challenge is not simply to study these movements but to learn from them, to listen, to be unsettled, and to join the work of transformation.

Conclusion

The case of Camp Saoirse, situated within the longer histories and contemporary expressions of global student activism, demonstrates that direct action is not a disruption to education but one of its most powerful forms. Across movements, from anti-apartheid shantytowns to climate strikes, decolonial uprisings, and Palestine solidarity encampments, students have repeatedly transformed public space into pedagogical space. These actions blur the boundaries between protest and learning, theory and practice, intellect and emotion. They enact what Freire (1970) describes as praxis, the continual interplay of reflection and action through which people come to understand and transform their world. Camp Saoirse, like

the movements that precede it, shows how critical consciousness develops not only through texts or lectures but through embodied, relational, and risky participation in collective struggle.

This article has argued that such movements exemplify the radical pedagogical possibilities at the heart of critical global justice education. They offer students opportunities to co-create knowledge, practice democratic decision-making, engage in ethical deliberation, and cultivate solidarity across lines of difference. They nurture what hooks (2003) calls a pedagogy of hope, an insistence on imagining alternative futures even in moments of despair. They also expose the emotional labour of justice work, grief, rage, vulnerability, and exhaustion, but also joy, belonging, and courage. These dimensions of learning are too often marginalised within formal education, yet they are central to the development of engaged, ethical, and critically conscious citizens.

For educators and institutions, the implications are profound. If activism is a legitimate and vital form of learning, then universities must rethink how they understand their responsibilities to students, society, and global justice. This includes recognising protest as a site of knowledge production, supporting rather than policing student organising, and interrogating the university's own entanglements with systems of inequality. CGJE, in particular, must resist depoliticisation and reclaim its roots in transformative, action-oriented education. As the example of Camp Saoirse demonstrates, students are already doing this work. The question is whether institutions will learn from them. In an era of intersecting crises, war, ecological collapse, austerity, and rising authoritarianism, we urgently need educational practices that empower learners to analyse, imagine, and act. Direct action offers precisely such a pedagogy: experiential, collective, critical, and hopeful. Camp Saoirse stands as one small but powerful example of what education can become when students refuse passivity and step into their roles as agents of change. It invites all of us, educators, students, and institutions to consider how we might teach, learn, and live differently in pursuit of justice.

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