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Research article

Creating a community of praxis: integrating global citizenship and development education across campus at University College Cork

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Abstract

The Praxis Project, established at University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, in 2018, seeks to assess possible models of best practice with regard to the integration of global citizenship and development education (GCDE) into a cross-disciplinary, cross-campus, interwoven set of subject area pedagogies, policies and practices. This study – the first part of an eventual three-part framework – asserts that the themes, theories, values, skills, approaches and methodologies relevant to transformative pedagogical work are best underpinned by ongoing staff dialogue in order to build communities of support around such systemic pedagogical change. This article is based on a collaborative study with the first cohort of UCC staff (2020–1), which demonstrates many ways in which staff and students realised that smaller actions and carefully directed attention to specific issues opened doors to transformative thinking and action in surprising ways. From this viewpoint, the striking need emerged for taking a strategic approach to how GCDE is, and should be, integrated into learning across subject areas.

Keywords development education; praxis; global citizenship education; global education; global citizenship; citizenship; transformative pedagogies; radical pedagogy; higher education interdisciplinarity; critical pedagogy

Introduction

This article analyses the findings of a 2020–1 research study which sought to understand how global citizenship and development education (GCDE) was, or could be, integrated within University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. The lead researcher was a UCC lecturer in GCDE and the academic coordinator of the Praxis Project. Praxis is an Irish Aid-funded project located at the Centre for Global Development, UCC. It aims to integrate GCDE into academic, research, administrative and campus-wide activities. The second year of the study focused on both staff and student experience; however, this initial year-long study focused on the work of the first cohort of staff who engaged with what is now termed UCC's 'Community of Praxis'. It explored what a group of 20 staff, from 18 departments and disciplines, learned as they took part in the project.

The work of the Praxis Project and this accompanying research study are original, ambitious, timely and the first of their kind in a higher education institution (HEI) in Ireland. HEIs have in recent years enhanced both GCDE pedagogy and research in primary and secondary initial teacher education (ITE), but the same is not the case for HEIs as a whole. This study focuses largely on staff from non-ITE disciplines or in other capacities across campus. Irish Aid (2022)'s *Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2022–2025* acknowledges the imperative for this work by asking for a strengthened higher education global citizenship education (GCE) sector, including the need for increased support to staff continual professional development, targeted resource development and other relevant supports. To date, Irish Aid's support has been focused on the integration of global citizenship into student societies working with the non-profit organisation SUAS and the Union of Students in Ireland and into ITE. The Irish Aid (2022: 22) plan also points to an 'increased interest in GCE across HEIs' as 'reflected in their commitment to advance the SDGs and their identification of global citizenship as a core graduate competency'. There are, it says, many opportunities to engage leadership and management of HEIs, as well as academic staff, to strengthen integration of GCE into all aspects of campus life.

The article begins by reviewing relevant literature, particularly as it relates to GCDE and higher education in Ireland. It then describes how critical participatory action research methodology was used, as UCC staff learned together through a series of six workshops. Staff developed a set of case studies, categorised under Pedagogy, Research and University-Wide, identifying ways in which they could integrate GCDE into their work and the work of the university as a whole. Field notes from the six workshops, case study narratives and interview notes from two interviews with each participant, by the lead researcher, yielded a rich dataset, resulting in an analysis of our findings as set out below along with a summary of our recommendations.

Literature review

The study is grounded in a critical pedagogy theoretical framework with a GCDE lens. The objective of critical pedagogy is to empower students to help themselves, with the educator's role becoming one of facilitating learning (Freire and Macedo, 2021; Bank Street School for Children, 2014). A central concept to this pedagogy is 'praxis', defined as 'reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed' (Freire and Macedo, 2021: 126). Learners are encouraged to develop an ability to reflect and think critically, rather than engage in the traditional 'banking system' (Freire and Macedo, 2021: 72), where teachers deposit information into students' heads.

In an Irish context there is little research, outside teacher education, which focuses specifically on the integration of GCDE across HEIs. However, where literature is in evidence, a number of interlinked themes emerge. The first relates to the impact of neoliberalism and globalisation on GCDE in higher education. Khoo (2012: 200) problematises the 'postcolonial moment' asking if global citizens can really be educated in a post-colonial world through the university, since internationalisation practices can reproduce ideals of exceptionalism, entitlement and (market) expansionism as they de-emphasise issues of global ethics. Khoo and McCloskey (2015) address the difficulty faced by transformative higher education educators in addressing the fact that economic growth is the single overriding goal of every government, and of every economy, the world over. Gaynor (2016: 1) sees education as being at a critical juncture whereby 'talk of civic values, justice, transformation, and flourishing has been replaced with talk of efficiency, performance, competition, and employment'. Higgins (2016: 1), the president of Ireland, refers to an ever-increasing focus on producing graduates for the market, bringing universities down a 'precarious road' at the expense of fostering life-enhancing skills such as critical thinking and creativity. Universities, he says, need to be allowed to flourish as spaces with the intellectual courage to reject dominant ideologies and encourage the seeking of truth based on fact.

Another debate (Andreotti, 2006; Bourn, 2015) reflects on the professionalisation and deradicalisation or softening of pedagogical approaches to GCDE within educational institutions. McCloskey (2014) suggests that while state agencies might envision social action as the desirable outcome of development education, it is likely to be conceptualised as individualised consumer-oriented responses such as fair trade rather than the potentially radical responses envisaged by Freirean pedagogy. However, Waldron (2014: 1) argues that we should not 'give in to' what Freire calls 'annihilating pessimism'. Khoo (2006) argues that mainstreaming offers greater credibility and resources to teachers and learners, but it will also involve greater commitment, higher expectations and the

possibility of being co-opted. Critical and reflective concerns are gradually emerging around the moral, affective, emotional and processual dimensions of development education, and these contrast starkly with professionalised, strategically-driven visions of mainstreaming. Gaynor (2016) argues that while it is difficult to integrate development education, spaces do exist within universities. What matters, she says, is that in attempting to implement development education in formal spaces, it is imperative that we do not damage basic principles but examine our approaches and practices in the context of the wider power relations, structural imperatives and institutional structures, discourses and practices with which they interact. While supporting the view of McCloskey above, Cotter (2018) argues that higher education does still offer some hope of independent thought. Development educationists have a responsibility to 'nail our flag to the mast and fly it high', to be clear about our purpose and 'to find spaces and opportunities to sail the ship through the murky neoliberal waters that are third level education at this time' (Cotter, 2018: 127). Cotter attempts to clarify terminology in the field, which is contested, and argues that conceptual clarity is important if we are to achieve these aims.

In terms of the practice of GCDE in higher education there is again little to assist. Dillon (2016) offers some guidance for the third-level educator. The website developmenteducation.ie is an excellent GCDE resource for GCDE practitioners, but it offers fewer resources for the higher education sector than other sectors.

Cotter (2019) explores what educators and community partners can learn by integrating community-linked learning and multimedia education into development education at third level. She finds that for students, linking to the real world of communities both at home and abroad helps to develop core development education competencies. For community partners, telling their story is cathartic and transformational at a personal level and part of a wider narrative at a community level. It is both a personal and political act. She finds that while many ethical and practical considerations arise with the use of multimedia education and community-linked learning, returning to development education roots keeps the educator grounded. The role of the educator changes but is critical as facilitator and guide through the body of knowledge that is development education.

Beyond the Irish context, Jorgenson and Shultz's (2012) review of the literature on GCE in post-secondary institutions shows that many of these same debates are emerging more widely. It highlights the multitude of definitions and conceptualisations that are, at the least, contested, and in many cases, in significant tension with one another. Quoting Shiel (2008) on the role of senior managers, it notes that there is a stronger focus in HEIs on the economic and competitive aspects of globalisation than on addressing global justice and injustice issues. However, the review also finds that universities are beginning to make explicit their commitments to accept that there is a pivotal role for higher education in resolving the current and emergent global problems. GCE has been suggested as a way in which universities can respond to the demand for opportunities to engage in relevant, meaningful activities that enhance students' global perspectives and help them to contribute to a more peaceful, environmentally secure and just world. If the large and globally interconnected issues of our time are to be addressed, we are challenged to create educational institutions that remain relevant to students as they find their place within this global context.

Methodology

The central research question in this study is: How can we integrate the theory and practice of GCDE into the work of UCC across all disciplines and across the work of the university as a whole and what are we learning as we do so? Additional questions include: What approaches to GCDE are most effective in engaging higher education staff from across the university? What are the key challenges in integrating GCDE across the university and how can we best address such challenges? What is the impact of integration of GCDE into the work of the university?

The theoretical perspective of the study as a whole is framed within a critical pedagogy approach with a GCDE lens. Aligning with this critical perspective, the study takes a critical participatory action research methodological approach. Fine and Torre (2021: 3) describe critical participatory action research as 'a framework for engaging research with communities interested in documenting, challenging, and transforming conditions of social injustice'. Through a conscious learning process and by not experiencing social injustice ourselves, we are accepting a global society that is not just essentially unjust, but that society is capable of change, and we have a role in driving change.

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This article is based on the findings of year one of what is a three-year study on the integration of GCDE across UCC. Year one focuses specifically on staff and a bottom-up approach, engaging self-selecting staff in a process of learning, reflection and action. Recruitment was an open process of emailing the all staff email circulation list at the university and inviting those who wished to participate to join the project. Some potential participants were also approached directly by the principal investigator. The aim was to have as diverse a range of participants as possible, from different disciplines and departments across campus, including lecturers, researchers, administrative staff, and any other interested staff member at UCC. As detailed in Table 1, this process resulted in a group of 20 UCC staff from 18 departments who participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Four were male and sixteen were female. Ten academic staff focused on their classroom-based work for this study. They are categorised under the heading Pedagogy. Their focus was on how they might incorporate GCDE into their teaching. Four academic staff focused on how they might integrate GCDE into their research work. These participants are categorised under Research. The third group are those who work in a range of positions across UCC, one is in an academic position, five are in a range of administrative or policy positions within the university. These are categorised under University-Wide.

Table 1. UCC staff disciplines, departments and case study type (Source: Authors, 2022).

Pedagogy	Research	University-Wide
1. Asian studies	11. Study of religions (2)	13. Accommodation and community life office
2. Digital humanities	12. Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) (2)	14. Centre for global development staff 1
3. Economics		15. Centre for global development 2 (Biological, Earth and environmental sciences)
4. Francophone African studies		16. Civic engagement programme
5. Human resources management		17. Sustainable development (building and estates office)
6. International development		18. Senior executive assistant (three case studies)
7. Occupational therapy and occupational science		
8. Nursing studies		
9. Sociology		
10. Theatre studies		

Participants attended six workshops of two hours each where they were introduced to core GCDE concepts, theory and practice. There were also sections on interdisciplinary, whole-discipline approaches and partnership approaches to GCDE. There were an additional two seminars with guest speakers on themes of Pedagogy of Hope and Neoliberalism. The study is therefore both a living project aimed at supporting staff to engage with GCDE in their own work and a research project documenting learnings. Each participant also met with the principal investigator at least twice. The study was cond- ucted during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and so all workshops and interviews were online, using the Microsoft Teams platform.

Data collection and data analysis

Data was collected in two ways. The first was the use of field notes based on proceedings and learning from workshops and individual interviews. With consent from participants, proceedings of all workshops, interviews and seminars were recorded. Detailed notes were taken by the principal investigator and participants; these were collated and sent to participants after each workshop or individual interview. Our understanding, learning and questions were processed at each session, with at times robust and highly engaged discussion.

The second method of data collection was the creation of a set of case studies whereby each participant produced a case study of their work, outlining how they would plan for the integration of

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GCDE into their work during the following academic year. A template was provided to help participants focus on the themes, skills, knowledge, values, methodologies, theories and actions they would engage with in their own work. The creation of the case studies allowed the group not only to understand what we are learning as individuals but to also draw conclusions from cross-case analysis (Ryan, 2006). The case studies, with permission of staff, were also showcased on the Praxis website.

Data analysis was a cyclical process of discussion, reflection and action. Data was collated and analysed at different stages with final deep discussions to agree on final conclusions. Data analysis also involved integration of literature and an emphasis on academic rigour and ethics. The data analysis involved seven steps. Step one resulted in a summary of key findings being collated and agreed after each workshop. Step two, conducted in parallel with step three, involved agreement with individual staff on learning from individual interviews. During step three, a first-order set of findings were drawn from both interviews and workshops. These provided a thematic analysis and individuals were not identified unless they wished to be. A working document was shared with all participants who could comment at any time. Step four involved collation of learning from case studies, again through a thematic analysis and ongoing reflection and agreement with participants. This process allowed us to understand both individual and collective contexts. Step five was a team meeting for further discussion to develop a set of second-order constructs, combining and subsuming first-order themes and adding deeper insights and consideration to the subtext of narratives. The synthesis process moved beyond comparison to examining the relationships between themes and team members' perspectives, toward integration of themes. Step six involved ongoing collective (in shared document) interpretation and negotiation of these iterative cycles and development of third-order interpretations. At this stage of the process the research team identified what can be said of the data sets as a whole. This is where we drew overall conclusions. Step seven involved writing the final analysis of findings and conclusions. An initial and then a final draft were agreed with participants.

There were a number of limitations to this study. These include the fact that participants were self-selecting and therefore not representative of all staff who may be less interested in GCDE. The most significant limitation, however, was time limitation of staff in busy work schedules.

Summary of findings

Analysis of findings

For the purposes of this article the findings have been categorised under three broad headings: pedagogy and research; university-wide; and overarching issues.

Pedagogy and research

The work of the higher education academic involves both pedagogy and research. In this study, most academic participants had a lecturing role and put forward case studies relating to their teaching/lecturing work. Others focused on their research activities. While difficult in some cases, most found it possible to introduce GCDE themes either to their teaching or research. For some this was more difficult than others and some careful planning was required.

Important too in the higher education context is theoretical positioning. GCDE tends to emphasise on post-colonial analysis, critical pedagogy, critical global citizenship and critical post-structuralism for instance. Educators reflected on how these might apply to their work. It was enriching too to discover philosophies and ideas from a range of disciplines which align with the aims of GCDE, in both teaching and research. Examples include 'cross-cultural and intercultural communications with a social justice focus', human rights and intangible cultural heritage, global outlook digital humanities, digital activism and advocacy, digital and platform rights, open access, theories of power, theories relating to 'Sinicisation', 'imagined communities', 'invented traditions, and 'Lumpenproletariat' (in the sense of 'active structuring' of stigmatised groups in society). This direct quote from one lecturer highlights the importance of theory:

> We are swimming between theory and practice, between critical thinking and the felt sense of inventive theatricality, is actually achieving the goals of engendering reflexive, activist and grounded thought about the place of the GCDE themes and goals in its learning spaces and

> outcomes might be up for debate. There, so far, has been no explicit emphasis in our course on questions of interculturality, of post-colonial dynamics, or on the development of what we might call a critical, global, perspective, on what it means to use theatre to transformative messages or involve audiences in transformative feelings and actions vis-à-vis the cultivation of better global empathy, justice, and action.

On the question of skills, we found, as with all aspects of GCDE, that the intent is important. Learning a skill with a justice, human rights or sustainable development approach in mind is different from learning a skill for other purposes. One lecturer commented:

> On global citizenship, the tendency by a lot of universities that promote the term is to see it as a marketing tool, of encouraging all their graduates to be global citizens – which means in reality being able to get a job anywhere around the world. Some add references to skills and competencies but what is often missing is any reference to actual student engagement in terms of societal change, of developing a sense of global social and environmental responsibility. This is what we should mean by active global citizenship to distinguish it from a lot of what happens in many universities.

We found that while people had strengths in some areas, for instance critical thinking, research and communication skills, some found it difficult to integrate skills which will support them and their students to be social justice advocates.

These concerns also related to active citizenship aspects of GCDE. Many find it difficult to include a civic engagement aspect in their pedagogy. Some of the barriers include 'lack of time within a busy module', 'no experience of doing such work' and 'it would mean changing the book of modules and this is difficult'. Nevertheless, there is a recognition that linking learning to societal challenges is important and an acknowledgement that students themselves want to engage and we need to respond to their leadership. There is a desire to overcome these barriers and an enthusiasm for possibilities.

This staff cohort was very interested in the 'values' aspect of GCDE. Therefore, values were discussed in some way at most group meetings. It is acknowledged that values are contested. At the same time, it was argued that GCDE does have a broad set of principles that promote social responsibility, global justice, human rights and student-centredness. There are certain values which are not for negotiation, but within that as global citizens, we understand that there are different perspectives on how to achieve goals and we welcome what can often be negotiated spaces and relationship building. We concluded that naming a set of guiding principles or values for our own work as a community of Praxis would be useful.

It is also evident that there is a profound appreciation of the need for critically orientated engaged methodologies. One academic summarised her teaching methodologies as follows:

> Class discussions are led by GCDE-informed methodologies. In order to structure discussions, I use methods from didactics in higher education such as 'Brainstorming', 'Concept-mapping', 'Case study', 'Role game', 'Simulation game', 'Kick-off presentations', 'Pro-and-contra argumentation', 'Partner interview', and 'Active structuring'. With help of these methods, I aim at enhancing students' experience with and understanding of power relations and how they influence inequalities between different ethnic, class and gender groups. I also hope to increase awareness and empathy with discriminated and disadvantaged groups, and further broaden this to a move towards the political and analytical assessments of each situation.

It is also apparent that others find it difficult to use participatory methods. Reasons cited are: it is difficult in 'my discipline'; it is hard to find time; it is difficult 'online'; 'I don't really know enough about these methodologies but would like to learn more'. It was felt, too, that while pedagogy has changed, it is not always the case that educators and students are open to such approaches. A move away from the banking system of education requires a collective shift. If students are introduced to different approaches to education from the beginning of their time in college, then they will not feel so strange to either the student or the educator. It is about developing a pedagogical culture from the beginning.

It was agreed that GCDE approaches to research methodology were equally important. Further learning is needed so that our research practice is aligned with our overarching positioning. For instance, we need to move beyond positivist approaches to scientific enquiry to understanding social meanings (Ryan, 2011). The study takes a qualitative research approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

It was sometimes difficult to identify the interconnection between local and global issues. Some participants and observers provided examples of community-linked learning and active citizenship; however, the extent to which local and global connections were being made was not as clear. It was of great benefit to have a staff member from UCC's civic engagement programme who wished to continue to explore what this means in the work of her programme. Again, examples and understandings are needed so that staff can explore in a safe space how we can help ourselves and students to link the local to the global and vice versa. It was felt, too, that Andreotti's (2006) influential article 'Soft versus critical global citizenship education' may help us to explore how critical global citizenship can be an effective way to support learners in that process. Her argument is that if we fail to understand these local/global complexities in GCE:

> We may end up promoting a new 'civilising mission' as the slogan for a generation who take up the 'burden' of saving/educating/civilising the world. This generation encouraged and motivated to 'make a difference', will then project their beliefs and myths as universal and reproduce power relations and violence similar to those in colonial times. How can we design educational processes that move learners away from this tendency? (Andreotti, 2006: 41)

University-wide examples

What is encouraging about the outcomes of this study are the numerous opportunities to introduce GCDE themes and approaches to all aspects of college life. Clearly the perception by staff is that there is great interest in this agenda by third-level students, but this study shows that leadership is also happening at staff level. UCC staff are open and willing to engage with global justice issues. We have seen one staff member finding creative mechanisms for engaging with GCDE through a book club, a tree-growing project and a staff dialogue group. One participant said: 'We need to find ways "in" for all staff, not just for academic staff. There would be a great interest, but we need to show by example, what can be done.'

Two staff members who joined this study are engaged in programmes that cut across the work of the university. One is a member of staff at UCC's civic engagement programme and the other worked on UCC's sustainable development programme. Both programmes are leading the way nationally and internationally in terms of good practice in both fields and their contribution is welcome for the Praxis Project. One participant made this point: 'In practice, this close alignment makes it easy for me to continuously push for a GCDE perspective and approach when carrying out my own civic engagement activities and when supporting colleagues to make progress in this area.'

This collegial approach is crucial, and it is clear that by working together we can more effectively achieve our mutual objectives. In addition, it is important that the GCDE work of the Praxis Project works alongside programmes that are part of UCC's institutional approaches and policies. While working in a bottom-up manner with individual staff and disciplines is fundamental, so too is working to influence policy and practice within UCC.

Overarching considerations

The collaborative nature of this study has enabled us to reflect on a number of issues that we feel apply to GCDE as a whole and not just individual disciplines or departments. It was felt that the terminology used within the field of GCDE is confusing. There was agreement on the need to clarify the terminology we use as a community of Praxis. It was felt too that while interdisciplinary approaches and 'integration' of GCDE across campus is important, so too is the study of GCDE itself. It would be helpful if GCDE were an academic discipline within the university, since this would enable UCC to develop academic expertise and discourse, conduct research and develop thinking in the manner in which other disciplines are recognised. This in turn would raise the profile and understanding of GCDE approaches across the university. For GCDE to flourish in all disciplines more support is needed for staff, capacity building, resources, seminars, conferences, networking, and so on. Ultimately it is about creating a culture across the university. This brings about the other important issue raised by staff. A core issue is not the lack of will, especially for this self-selecting group, but the lack of time, resources and issues relating to making changes to a Book of Modules to which lecturers must adhere. One contributor made this comment: 'We are situated within an environment where our work has pivoted from being about education to being a business. So much so our heads are falling off.'

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We developed a Digital Badge as part of this process so that staff could at least gain some micro-credential for their contribution and co-writing this article has also been important for recognition. 'With all the goodwill in the world, I think this work should be rewarded for staff and for students. I think it should be a compulsory part of all undergraduate learning.'

These considerations in turn raised questions, which we explore further, on institutional policies and the need for collective advocacy within the university itself. One participant referred to the need to 'normalise this work': 'It should be like reading, writing and digital literacy, global justice literacy should just be normal; the underlying issue here is the need for a wider cultural shift in how we perceive both the role of a university and the nature of pedagogy and assessment.' One of the strongest findings is the need to include the student voice, engage for instance with the Students' Union, invite students to join the Praxis advisory group and generally be led through the open door which is the interest this current generation of students has in GCDE.

What proved very difficult, yet worthwhile, at a later point in the process, was working in small groups on specific themes or purpose. For instance, in the case of two disciplines there is now an ongoing effort to take a deeper approach within their schools and begin a process of having a conscious 'whole-discipline approach'. This will take long-term work. Likewise, some participants naturally wished to collaborate on specific themes or projects and again this was an important finding in terms of 'what works' in taking a cross-university approach. At the same time continuing to meet as a community of Praxis into the future offers hope for future collective endeavours.

Finally, participants embraced the notion that GCDE is a pedagogy of hope. The enduring power of GCDE as a consciously political, transformative and relevant approach to education was appreciated by participants who recognised the potential of GCDE to respond to changing times, new ways of relating to the world and new technologies that enhance and challenge our work.

> I liked the idea of Education in Hope. It is not as wishy washy as it sounds. In fact, the way Professor Bourn (2021) explained it, I found it not merely hopeful, but radical. It could transform education if we all worked 'in' hope. Really working towards changing culture, education and the purpose of the university.

Looking to the future

Looking forward we have identified a number of key issues in the short and longer terms. The issue of terminology needs to be addressed. GCDE needs to find its place in UCC so that it is understood in its own right, while at the same time aligning with other disciplines, policies and initiatives with similar aims. It would be helpful if GCDE were recognised as an academic discipline in its own right, so that courses, research and initiatives could become mainstreamed and supported through funding and other resources. Ideally Praxis would develop as a centre of GCDE excellence for pedagogy, research and university culture as a whole, developing expertise within and between disciplines and departments. The practical needs of staff should not be underestimated. The interest in this field by both staff and students is not in question but achieving our full potential so that GCDE is not seen as an 'add-on' or a burden on staff, requires further resources for individual champions as well as for the Praxis as a collective. This means more administrative, research and teaching assistance, along with funding for collaborative projects. It is recognised too that the creation of resources, case studies and examples of GCDE approaches in higher education is also desirable. As a GCDE centre we would also like to document what is working for us in terms of research and teaching methodologies, theoretical perspectives from across the college, skills development and capacity building for ourselves and students. It is recommended that the Praxis Project introduces specific seminars and workshops, both generic capacity building, and to support specific interests of departments, schools or disciplines.

We see our relationship with one another, with allies within UCC and in the wider academic and GCDE sectors as crucial to our success. Some of our biggest allies within the university are the students themselves, and we strive to listen carefully to them and work closely with them. This means establishing structures for the Praxis Project, which include the student voice, from different disciplines and from representative groups such as the Students' Union and societies.

We also believe that meaningful, if slow, relationship building at these early stages will lead to success in the long run. We want to be authentic voices for GCDE, continue to reflect on and name

our core values and embed those values in our work. Expanding on a sentiment expressed above, one participant encapsulated the collective position in this comment:

> While we share values of social justice, active citizenship and human rights, our work is being carried out within a context. We are situated within an environment where our work has pivoted from being about education to being a business. So much so our heads are falling off. Our work is moving away from higher education. It is about bums on seats. We need to out that. So, we need to interrogate the values of the university in the first place. We also need to be cognizant that we are coming from a predominantly high income, white neoliberal perspective.

This reflects a general consensus that we need to stop, to slow down and to listen carefully to the wisdom of experience alongside the voices of new generations of learners. We want to reclaim the role of the university as a space for reflection, dialogue, dreaming, courage and theorising; a space where we can co-create a present and a future for ourselves and our wider communities. Whether through art, digital media, music, dance, play, literature, ancient classics, medicine, business, law, humanities, engineering or the Irish language, let us reclaim a space, not in frenzied action but in thoughtful, reflective, courageous and radical hope.

Final words

This has been a deep journey between a group of colleagues who hitherto had never worked together, came from different disciplines and departments in UCC, but who shared a curiosity and an openness to learning together. They were willing to experience discomfort. There were challenging questions about the purpose of education, the role of a university and their positioning as academics and administrators. For instance, Freire's (1985: 122) comment, 'washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral', is a challenging idea, even a frightening idea when faced with the realities and responsibilities of freedom of speech. Developing a community of Praxis brings together students and staff who do want to learn how they, in their positions in a third-level institution, can think, talk and act to transform the world and the world around them. This may be in small ways or at a wider institutional level. Perhaps the Irish saying 'Ní neart go cur le chéile' (there is no strength without unity) can also sum up the sense of belonging to this learning community. The study has brought educators, researchers and administrators together to think about the culture of the university. It has provided us with many insights, questions and learnings. There have been both transformative and challenging moments in what has also been a very busy schedule for all concerned.

At third level it is important that theoretical positioning accompanies the practice of GCDE. If this does not happen, the discipline becomes a set of uninformed actions with no clear emancipatory or transformative intent. No academic discipline or community perspective is static, and frameworks can change and be refined, but the core tenets of GCDE do come from a deep-rooted commitment to social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental justice and equality, and from a human rights perspective. One of the strengths of this study has been the richness that bringing different disciplines and other parts of UCC life can add to GCDE as a discipline. We can shine a GCDE light on all aspects of UCC's work but GCDE can also learn from the array of critical theoretical positions in other disciplines and initiatives. Such solid philosophical underpinnings are important. Imagine the tree that can grow from critically informed seeds which can nurture one another. We all have plants that fail to grow because they were not watered well in their early stages. If those of us with an interest in GCDE are really committed to strong branches, we need strong seeds and strong roots. From there our leaves will emerge and we can build new narratives about the role of education and the role of a university. We can link learners, educators and the local and global communities in which we live and disrupt dominant narratives which do not serve the needs of so many people around the world, and the planet of which we must be stewards.

GCDE is a pedagogy of disruption, but it is also a pedagogy of hope. Hope that comes from the courage of communities and individuals who act in the name of justice; hope that comes from the aspirations and concern for the future by third-level students and staff; and hope that comes from the enduring power of GCDE as a consciously political, transformative and relevant approach to education. GCDE continues to respond to changing times, new ways of relating to the world and new technologies that enhance and challenge our work. In the final analysis, we do come back to the basics, and the foundational values and characteristics of GCDE have lasted the test of time, because they matter.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

This being part 1 of a three-year study, the collaborators engaged with a deep initial process, including how to approach the research methodology. It would not have been possible to apply for ethical approval from our university in advance, because our critical participative methodology would have been compromised. However, we did apply at the end of this part 1 of the process and we now have ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee for the research study as a whole for parts 2 and 3.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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