



# Transforming Communities Through Academic Activism: An Emancipatory, Praxis-led Approach

ISOBEL HAWTHORNE-STEELE

Ulster University, Northern Ireland

ROSEMARY MORELAND

Ulster University, Northern Ireland

EILISH ROONEY

Ulster University, Northern Ireland

**ABSTRACT** *This article tracks the engagement of university faculty in academic and community activism during thirty years in conflict-affected Northern Ireland. Over time, the team of three academics who wrote the article developed programs to help tackle educational disadvantage in a deeply divided society riven with violent conflict. Our pedagogical approach was driven by social justice principles in practice. In the process, students became what Ledwith & Springett (2010) describe as participative activists in the academy and in their own communities. The aim of this collective activism was to foster transformative change in a society that is now in transition from conflict. Key examples of critical practice are described. We use a case study approach to describe challenges faced by faculty and participants. We argue that academic activism and community partnership can play a positive role in community transformation in the most difficult circumstances.*

**KEYWORDS** transformational education; emancipatory praxis; critical reflection; community-academy engagement

*Correspondence Address:* Isobel Hawthorne-Steele, School of Sociology & Applied Social Studies, Ulster University, Shore Road, Newtownabbey, BT37 OQB, Northern Ireland; Email: [i.hawthorne@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:i.hawthorne@ulster.ac.uk)

ISSN: 1911-4788



## **Introduction**

The links between educational underachievement and poverty in the UK are widely known and evidenced (e.g., House of Commons, 2014; Department for Education, 2009; Machin, 2006; Willis, 1977). In the North of Ireland,<sup>1</sup> these links persist despite the Northern Ireland Assembly's commitments to tackle poverty and inequality (OFMDFM, 2006; OFMDFM, 2010). This article argues that academic activism can play a significant role in transforming marginalized and disadvantaged communities by creating innovative educational opportunities that seek to challenge norms, question inequalities and discrimination, and develop the social capital of disadvantaged communities.

Set in the deeply divided context of the North of Ireland, where communities of identity are often tightly interwoven into the fabric of geographical areas, the case study presented in this article examines the impacts of activism undertaken by the authors, who comprise a Community Development team in the Faculty of Social Science at Ulster University (formerly University of Ulster). Recruitment of students from marginalized backgrounds has been a key feature of the University's strategy for widening access (University of Ulster, 2012/13). A primary focus of our activism has been to work directly with disadvantaged communities, in order to provide educational opportunities to those who would not normally gain access to higher education. This enhances quality of life and positively impacts on the life-chances of individuals in those communities. Founded on the radical community education approaches of Professor Tom Lovett, a key figure in adult and community education in Northern Ireland, the cornerstone of this work for the past 10 years has been the delivery of a part-time BSc Hons Community Development exclusively to adults working or volunteering in community or voluntary organizations (e.g., a neighbourhood community centre, a women's group) or public bodies (e.g., Department for Social Development, Department of Health, Social Care & Public Safety). Although the degree was established primarily to develop a professionally accredited higher education qualification for those working in community and voluntary organizations, public bodies increasingly have a community development remit, which has led more employees from the public sector also to seek places in the program. As partnership is central to community development work, the synergy developed by students across public and community/voluntary sectors is one of the program's key strengths.

The majority of students recruited to the program are the first members of their families to access third-level education. They usually live or work in areas of deep-rooted socio-economic disadvantage (Hawthorne-Steele &

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms 'North of Ireland' and 'Northern Ireland' alternately in the text in recognition of the contentious nature of sovereignty and of naming the jurisdiction.

Moreland, 2014), and a significant number are ex-political prisoners and ex-combatants. Over the last five years, the program has been particularly successful in recruiting Protestant working-class males, which is among the hardest groups to re-engage in education (Harland & McCready, 2012). In Gramsci's (1971, p. 9) terminology, the program's students are in fact "organic intellectuals," in that their learning in the program about structural causes of poverty and disadvantage resonates strongly with their lived experiences. Having experienced the transformative learning process for themselves within the Community Development Program, they are well placed to be the forerunners of transformative learning within their local communities in a post-conflict North of Ireland.

Over the course of three years of part time study, student cohorts develop communities of learning with their peers, sharing information, learning, and providing support to each other through a challenging but rewarding journey. Taking this journey while also living and working in a society emerging from conflict provides additional challenges and opportunities for students and faculty. The curriculum is embedded in the local context, encouraging students to critically reflect on their community's long-held beliefs and values, and to develop critical models of practice. In this article we argue that university-based programs such as this can provide a neutral and critical space where students from varied and often diametrically opposed political positions are able to engage in difficult social justice conversations, and create a dialogical space in which transformational learning can take place.

Recently, there has been renewed interest by UK government bodies to tackle the educational underachievement of marginalized groups. The Higher Education Funding Council for England, which is also the regulatory body for higher education in Northern Ireland, is committed to widening access and improving participation in higher education for hard-to-reach groups who are traditionally under-represented. The current strategy of the statutory body responsible for delivering on this commitment across the North of Ireland – the Department of Education and Learning – aims to encourage and support those "...who are **MOST ABLE** but **LEAST LIKELY** to participate... to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them" (DELNI, 2012, p. 2; emphasis in original). Whilst in the past our activist effort to engage mainly non-traditional students from communities that experience high levels of poverty, inequality, and disadvantage has largely gone unnoticed, this new policy context, and especially the current Northern Ireland government policy on Widening Access and Increasing Participation, has placed greater value on this important area of our work.

The Community Development team's success in attracting and retaining 'hard to reach' students, many of whom graduate with a First-class or Upper second-class honours degree, is clear testimony to the role of academic activism in bridging the huge gulf between universities and working-class communities. This case study illustrates how we, the Community

Development team, continue to contribute to Lovett, Clarke & Kilmurray's (1983, p. 159) vision for creating "an alternative adult education system or institution, committed to the twin processes of uniting the working-class and resolving the deep social, economic and political inequalities and injustices inherent in this society, through collective action bridging the sectarian divide."

Part one of the article briefly outlines the historical and social context for our academic activism, which builds on the previous commitment of faculty members and is being continued by long-standing and newer members of the team. Part two provides examples of this praxis, in order to argue that engendering transformational learning that extends beyond the individual, to impact upon wider geographical communities and communities of interest, is central to our academic activism. Part three describes how academic activism such as ours has the potential to create synergies between local communities and the university, and can result in the creation of models of best practice (e.g., the Transitional Justice Toolkit Program). The article's conclusion argues that academic activism has an important role to play in the transformation of communities, especially those who find themselves in the most difficult circumstances, and that the commitment of faculty members to developing and engaging in this practice can make a difference to the lives of the individuals and wider communities experiencing injustice, inequality and marginalization.

### **Historical and Social Context of Academic Activism**

Ulster University currently has four campuses across the North of Ireland in Coleraine, Jordanstown, Derry/Londonderry,<sup>2</sup> and Belfast. In the early 1970s, the University of Ulster established an Institute of Continuing Education at the Magee Campus in Derry/Londonderry, the main focus of which was to re-engage adults with education, particularly those who had left school with few or no qualifications. A key figure in developing the Institute was Professor Tom Lovett, whose own experience of leaving school at a young age without qualifications and obtaining a scholarship as a trade union activist to study at Ruskin College, Oxford, fuelled his vision to provide education that would connect with the issues affecting working-class communities. His objective was to ignite a movement for social change that focused on broader critical engagement with inequality (Lovett, Clarke & Kilmurray, 1983). People who were living in disadvantaged areas during the outbreak of civil disturbance in

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<sup>2</sup> We use this terminology – Derry/Londonderry – because the name of the city is contested, and each term has different political/religious/cultural connotations. Whilst the legal name for the city and county is Londonderry, the legal name for the district council is Derry and Strabane. The name Londonderry is mostly favoured by those with Protestant/Loyalist/Unionist identities whilst Derry is mostly used by those with Catholic/Republican/Nationalist identities.

Northern Ireland during the 1960s experienced its worst impacts; over 80 percent of violent trauma during the conflict occurred in the most poverty-stricken urban areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry (Fey, Morrissey & Smith, 1999).

Given that this educational process was taking place in a deeply divided area devastated by conflict, Lovett, Clarke & Kilmurray (1983) emphasised that the key challenge for faculty was to provide a neutral space for students from opposite sides of the conflict (i.e., predominantly Catholic Nationalists and predominantly Protestant Unionists) to engage in dialogue, particularly on common issues such as poverty and inequality, which affect working class people on both sides of the political/religious/cultural divide. In this neutral space students could begin critically to analyze structural causes of poverty and inequality in order to understand alternative perspectives and build solidarity around collective issues.

In addition to working with Nationalist and Unionist communities in Derry/Londonderry, the Institute of Continuing Education engaged with local communities on either side of the nearby border between the North of Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to develop programs that responded to their self-identified needs, including workshops on human and welfare rights, poverty, and housing. By developing innovative learning programs, the Institute fostered community-university relationships that helped transform these communities and dismantle the 'ivory tower' image of the academy. This commitment was maintained when the Institute moved in the late 1970s to the Jordanstown campus (10 kilometers north of Belfast). For over 20 years, a small group of faculty delivered accredited and non-accredited programs on this campus and in a range of community venues across the Greater Belfast area, including in the innovative Ulster People's College, founded in 1982 by community activists and academics led by Lovett. Taking inspiration from Myles Horton's Highlander Centre (Horton & Freire, 1990), the Ulster People's College was established as a non-formal education center to provide opportunities for cross-community dialogue around social, cultural, and economic realities in an educational space that was accessible and safe for both Nationalists/Catholics and Unionists/Protestants (Lovett, Gillespie & Gunn, 1995). The Institute of Continuing Education closed in the late 1990s; however, faculty sustained their commitment to academic activism, largely by establishing the Community Development Program in the Faculty of Social Science at Ulster University.

The need for a professionally accredited higher education program in Community Development gained impetus from the historic and transformative development in political relations between Britain and Ireland, manifested in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 1998). In the Agreement section on Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity, the British Government made a distinct commitment to promote "social inclusion, including in particular community development" in the North of Ireland (Northern Ireland Office, 1998, p. 20). This reference to

community development formally recognizes the critical role played by local neighbourhood groups and community networks in Northern Ireland in sustaining the work of peace building over the course of a long conflict. This recognition was subsequently built upon in the publication of documents such as the *Compact Between the Voluntary & Community Sector and Government* (Department for Social Development, 1998) and, later, the *Concordat Between the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government* (Department for Social Development, 2011).<sup>3</sup> The importance placed on community development as an approach to working with disadvantaged and disaffected communities is further reflected in other government policy documents (Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, 2010; Department for Social Development, 2012, 2013; OFMDFM, 2013), all of which represent working in partnership with local communities as pivotal to creating a lasting peace and sustainable future for the North of Ireland. These key documents, which legitimize and support the work of the community and voluntary sector, have been developed largely as a result of three interconnecting features, which continue to dominate the context of community development in Northern Ireland.

Firstly, the legacy of historical division between the Nationalist/Catholic and Unionist/Protestant communities continue to shape and impact community development programs. Virtually no program within the community or voluntary sector, whether it be a parenting course or return to work skills program, can afford to ignore segregation, which continues to impact where people live and work and their sense of safety in accessing areas perceived to be of the 'other' side. The second feature links to this, in that substantial European and US funding has been provided to the community and voluntary sector to promote peace and reconciliation. The third feature is that those who played a part in the conflict (i.e., ex-combatants and ex-paramilitaries) have been actively supported by the State to work in their communities, and in doing so to contribute to building a peaceful and stable society (Rooney & Swaine, 2012). Shirlow and McEvoy's (2008) research identified the community and voluntary sector as one of the few areas of employment open to those previously involved in the conflict and indeed many ex-prisoners/ex-combatants are keen to work in their communities, to help build reconciliation, and to act as positive role models to young people to prevent them from engaging in anti-social behavior and joining paramilitary organizations. In addition, Shirlow and McEvoy (2008) argue that whilst some political parties have had difficulty

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<sup>3</sup> The *Compact* (1998) and *Concordat* (2011) are policy documents drawn up by the Department for Social Development, which is the Northern Ireland Government department charged to oversee the community and voluntary sector. A number of key organizations in this sector contributed to writing these agreements, which have provided the foundation for the development of partnership approaches between statutory and community/voluntary organizations to tackle social problems.

accepting this, it is largely recognized that building a peaceful and stable society requires the re-integration into society of people who previously played a part in the conflict. These three features impelled an increased demand among community workers and activists for professional qualifications in community work, which the part-time BSc Hons Community Development was designed to meet.

In this context, our academic activism is centred on the principle that community education and learning are key to community development (Logue, 1990). By providing space for engagement to those who might otherwise not be heard, the community of learning that developed around the program is evidence that in situations of conflict, community development can be a means of empowerment (Lovett, Clarke & Kilmurray, 1983). Whilst Craig, Mayo, Popple, Shaw & Taylor (2011, p. 7) suggest that “the broad church nature of community development” can include anything “from state-sponsored, well-resourced programs to small-scale, poorly resourced, but independent community action,” the academic activism undertaken by faculty members in the Community Development Program has always sought to situate “educational purpose in a wider social and political analysis that entailed critical engagement with the policy context as it related to the reality of people’s lives” (Shaw & Crowther, 2014, p. 4). Thus the underlying ethos of the program is premised on creating space and opportunities for critical exploration of poverty, social exclusion, alienation and resilience in local, national and international contexts. In order to prepare community workers who have been engaging in practice for many years – without any qualifications – to have the academic capacity to study at university, the Community Development team developed the Accreditation for Prior Learning (APEL) Community Development Pathway, which recognizes and builds on the experiential learning this constituency has gained through their community work and activism. We describe this APEL Community Development Pathway, and the Community Development Program itself, in the next section.

### **Transforming Communities Through University Education**

The fundamental principle of promoting social change is at the core of the Community Development Program. The program operates according to the premise that opportunities for grassroots inclusion and collective action can be realized through educating local community development workers to become “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 9) who promote effective social transformation initiatives that inform policy and social and economic investment, particularly within disenfranchised and marginalized communities. In this section we shall explore some of the innovative academic activism that we have developed over the last decade. These practices are rooted in an ethos of community engagement and inclusivity.

One of the most successful innovations to date has been our APEL Pathway, which has recently gained recognition at a national level through the STAR award conferred by AONTAS (The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation). The STAR awards are presented to outstanding, learning-centred adult education projects.

### *The APEL Pathway*

This initiative originated in response to requests from community activists and from paid community development workers for easier access to degree level qualification. In recognition of the tremendous experiential learning and informal education gained by these individuals, Rosemary Moreland (2009a; 2009b; 2007) established the APEL Pathway to the BSc Hons Community Development. This pathway accords validity and formal credit-bearing recognition to students' community-based experiential learning, thus enabling community activists and paid community workers to reflect on their knowledge, understanding, and grassroots experience of community practice.

Experienced community workers and activists are invited to attend a short course on APEL, in which they are introduced to models of experiential learning, critical reflection, non-formal and informal learning. In addition, they are introduced to the National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work that provide the basis for a reflective portfolio,<sup>4</sup> which they are required to submit for entry into the Community Development Program. This has the benefit of alerting faculty to those students who may require additional support, whose academic writing may not yet be sufficient for entry to the degree, and who may be advised to take preliminary qualifications first. The reflective portfolios submitted by applicants to the program are assessed by faculty members according to university guidelines on accreditation of prior learning. If the evidence presented in the portfolio is deemed sufficient, applicants can gain direct entry to Year Two of the Community Development degree. Where this is not the case, applicants have one further opportunity to resubmit their portfolio, and if they are unsuccessful on their second attempt they are guided towards other more appropriate levels or areas of study.

The APEL Pathway is founded on Freire's (2001) pedagogy of hope, which views education as a learning process for all involved. It is thus deeply embedded in the concept of making a difference by enhancing community and social justice through developing consciousness that "has the power to transform reality" (Taylor, 1993, p. 52). Moreover, Freire's (1996) maxim

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<sup>4</sup> The National Occupational Standards in Community Development Work act as a guiding framework for this emerging professional area (see <http://www.fcdl.org.uk/learning-qualifications/community-development-national-occupational-standards/>).

that, ‘we must start where people are’ is taken seriously by faculty members who guide the learning process. In this vein, Gramsci’s (1971) concept of the “organic intellectual” affirms the capacity of those who have not previously benefited from formal education to critically analyze and challenge the status quo, and to articulate alternative paradigms. It is also a reminder that frameworks of understanding are critical sites of power that are produced, practiced, and critiqued within the academy (Knapp, 2005; Cleary, 2003).

### *BSc Hons Community Development*

Building upon the ethos established in the APEL Pathway, the Community Development Program is firmly rooted in a pedagogical framework that supports innovative and learner-led creative spaces that foster collaborative working and learning for both faculty and students. The primary aim of the program is to infuse academic commitments with Freirean (Freire, 1996) praxis in order to provide a platform for faculty and students to engage in a shared learning space. This aims to raise levels of conscientization through critical reflection, which is essential to emancipatory learning. The role of the faculty is to facilitate critical reflection and learning as a democratic process of dialogical interaction between participants and educators. This is consistent with Biggs’ (1996) focus on the centrality of student learning as a process of constructional alignment, where the students are equipped with the necessary skills to construct meaning from their learning.

Faculty provide the scaffolding to support this process by aligning the learning activities with the learning outcomes. We do this by creating a safe space where students can engage and practise these tools for reflection. Faculty members are cognizant of the physical environment and recognize the importance of creating a growth-promoting climate that is conducive to shared learning. We agree to a contract with students, establishing rights and responsibilities within the class that typically includes things like actively listening to one another, having respect for others’ opinions, values, and beliefs, and having respectful regard of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, cultural traditions, religion, and political perspectives. An important basis of the contract is that each participant refrain from aggressive or oppressive language and behaviour. This also allows for students to call ‘time-out’ if they feel unable to continue with a discussion at any time, or if they believe that the contract has been breached. These practices are embedded in the core values of the National Occupational Standards for community development (e.g., equality, anti-discrimination and empowerment) (Federation for Community Development Learning, 2015). Our goal, in equipping students with the tools for transformational learning, is to enable them to utilize these tools within their communities so as to create local learning spaces that foster inquiry, dialogue, reflection and action. Students practise active listening that develops authentic relationships where each individual enters the internal

frame of reference of the other, and that has the propensity to promote unconditional positive regard. Based upon a person-centered approach (Rogers, Kirschbaum & Land, 1990), these transformational learning tools enable individuals to see the world through the other person's lens and to challenge their own constructs.

The vast majority of students find this an illuminating process, whereby they can name their practices (e.g., campaigning for or lobbying against the current contentious issue of flying flags) and recognize other practices akin to their own. They gain a conceptual language to describe the processes in which they are involved, and more importantly, they develop tools to analyze at a deeper level the broader structural causes of inequality and injustice, which they tackle on a daily basis. This process alerts students to how frameworks of understanding can aid the post-conflict transformation of communities where they live and work. One of the ways in which this happens is through the pedagogy of post-conflict peacebuilding. By using Rooney's (2014) *Grassroots Transitional Justice Toolkit*, students and faculty engage in critical discourse that explores and challenges produced by deeply rooted cultural perspectives. Using the conceptual framework of the toolkit has helped students to map some of the momentous milestones in the journey towards a peaceful society in the North of Ireland.

Students are challenged to reflect on and articulate their practice and apply newly learned skills to practice situations as employees or volunteers in community organizations, and as such they participate in the world as effective and creative decision-makers. Schugurensky (2002, p. 64) argues that when this transformation takes place, adult learners can then "move towards becoming socially responsible citizens and will have acquired the skills of helping others to move, from oppositional dialogue, to collaborative discourse." The program's aim, therefore, is to help develop active, socially responsible, democratic, and compassionate community development workers and activists. This form of pedagogy is a means by which students can move towards questioning the limitations of familiar knowledge based on local culture, family structure, and mainstream societal systems and institutions. The value of critical questioning is also supported by Freire's (1970/1996) model of conscientization, whereby learners move from a state of naivety, or apathetic acceptance, to a point where they begin to question the mainstream frameworks of understanding within the wider constructs of society. According to Mezirow (1991, p. 155), the onus is on educators to democratize the educational environment, by adopting a more "inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective." This is a seismic shift away from the traditional power base of the educator as sole owner of curriculum knowledge, and toward shared learning in which the relationship between learner and educator is one of equal and mutual engagement.

Trying to encourage students to engage in this form of self-reflection can be very challenging and it does not always work. For example, one male student stated in class that he had absolutely no desire or intention to engage

in self-reflection. He was vociferous in his protests and responded with either anger or humour when challenged by peers or faculty. Although this student was required to complete reflective learning logs as part of his assessment for a work placement, he engaged minimally with the task and demonstrated little movement on the transformative learning trajectory. However, there have been many other students who initially resisted self-reflection but having engaged in the process, found it to be valuable. These examples are captured in comments made in the ten year course evaluation (Cownie, Hawthorne-Steele & Moreland, 2014, pp. 9-16) as follows:

Reflective practice! I used to shudder...but when you get your head around it, when you apply it...you completely see it as core to your work.

...well, all the modules were good but reflective practice was probably the one I got most out of. Mind you, I was not saying that at the start...I just could not get it...I know now why...I just listened and went 'no, I don't get it'...

Reflective practice took a long time to sink in...it's about continuous improvement ...I see it now and I use it now.

Another challenge for faculty employing a transformative learning approach is bringing students together from polarized ends of the political spectrum. The student group often comprises high profile ex-combatants who are currently striving to bring their respective communities into a peace-building process in Northern Ireland. This can be a difficult journey for both students and faculty as many of the opinions expressed are diametrically opposed, and it can be extremely challenging to gain an appreciation of alternative perspectives on the conflict. We appreciate that transformational learning cannot occur unless students desire to engage in the reflective process, and this is not something that can be forced. Thus, whilst faculty strive to create a growth-promoting climate (Rogers, Kirschbaum & Land, 1990), we recognize this does not always work and there have been times when we have had to be extremely sensitive to live issues, such as disputes over territorial boundaries in contested spaces, that permeate the learning environment.

Furthermore, faculty recognize the difficulty that some students have in grasping the essential tenets of the subjects being taught. Meyers & Land (2006, p. 22) describe such gaps in understanding as "liminal spots." To address these gaps, the team introduced a reflective journal template that challenged students to reflect on their learning, and in particular, to address their emotional experiences throughout the course of the program (Hawthorne-Steele, Moreland & O'Donnell, 2009). In piloting the reflective journal template, we identified an important limitation: students did not explicitly articulate the concepts they did not understand (i.e., the template was a 'reflecting on' model, which only enabled students to identify gaps in their learning toward the end of the course). In order to address this problem,

Isobel Hawthorne-Steele introduced a Critical Reflection of Learning (CRoL) pro forma. The CRoL is a two-page document with question and answer boxes for students to fill in. Students are asked to first reflect on the taught class, and specifically to think about what concepts and language they found particularly difficult to understand. They are then asked to describe what measures, if any, they took to rectify the problem. Prompts such as “write your own ‘to do’ task list for this module (reading, sourcing materials, critiques, essay plans, meetings, etc.)” and “what source/s did you use to help overcome this liminal spot (peers/tutor/articles/texts/professional practice teacher/internet resource),” are used to encourage students to engage in self-help and peer-support mechanisms. Having undertaken this process of self-help, they are then asked to describe their level of understanding regarding difficult concepts and terminology. After engaging in this process, students are given an opportunity to comment on other aspects of their learning and to indicate whether they would benefit from attending further group or individual tutorials. From this information, core liminal spots are identified, which in turn inform what further teaching and tutorials are required for the module.

Students using this CRoL model have thus been able to identify what Perkins (2006, p. 137) describes as “troublesome knowledge,” and have expressed appreciation for being given a non-threatening method of asking questions about theoretical concepts and academic or professional language. In practice, this often results in students engaging in peer group social media fora (e.g., Facebook groups), exchanging sourced materials and sharing learning. Some of this learning is evidenced in reflections from past students, elicited from the program’s ten year evaluation noted above (Cownie, Hawthorne-Steele & Moreland, 2014, p. 9-17):

You can get bogged down [stuck] in your own community....In a mixed group you are likely to be challenged and this makes you question your biases and prejudices. I must admit, I had not sat down and heard the ‘other’ perspective. I am a lot more confident now in dealing with different views.

To say that the course broadened my reading is an understatement ... I really never thought I would get the chance, or have the ability to understand writers such as Gramsci ... deprived communities need to know about hegemony!

There is definitely a perception in the sector that that [sic] many community posts are ‘boxed off’... now I can say ‘I have a degree and I deserved this position.’

Cranton (1994, p. 22) describes this process of reflection as “a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience.” However, the outcomes are unpredictable and in some instances unintentional. Educators engaged in this process must therefore reflect on the ethical and professional aspects of providing safe spaces, in which individuals engaged in problem-posing are

able to question the status quo and challenge paradigms are afforded the support they need to reconstruct their meaning schema.

### **Community-University Synergy**

We have emphasized the wider implications of our teaching praxis in the local context of deeply divided neighbourhoods in a society emerging from conflict. We each continue to engage in community activism alongside teaching and research. This engagement is central to the Community Development Program's emancipatory principles.

On occasion, initiatives that have their origins in the community can lead to remarkable community-university synergies. Eilish Rooney's voluntary work with Bridge of Hope in North Belfast, for instance, has involved conversations about dealing with the past and the local impacts of post conflict transition.<sup>5</sup> This led her to develop a community based Transitional Justice Grassroots Program to facilitate these conversations (Rooney, 2012a). At the university this resulted in major curriculum changes to the Community Development Program with the introduction of a module entitled, Grassroots Transitional Justice. This module is based on the community initiative and is taken by all Community Development students in the second year of degree studies. The community based initiative led to community/academy engagement in a partnership between the Bridge of Hope and Ulster University's leading law research institute, the Transitional Justice Institute. The partnership originated when Bridge of Hope contacted Rooney and asked her to join with them and former political prisoners from local nationalist and unionist districts in a conversation about transitional justice (Rooney, 2012a).<sup>6</sup> The exchange between people with opposed political positions was made possible by Bridge of Hope's long-term therapeutic work and positive relations with victims and survivors of the conflict in North Belfast. The working-class areas of North Belfast are amongst the most disadvantaged districts in Ireland and Britain and have suffered disproportionate conflict-related trauma. Local protests, from the Holy Cross blockade in 2001 to recent 'flags and parades' protests at Twaddell Avenue, regularly turn the

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<sup>5</sup> Bridge of Hope is a department of Ashton Community Trust that provides services to victims and survivors of the conflict across the north (see <http://www.thebridgeofhope.org/>). Dealing with the past involves creating 'safe' spaces where those from different perspectives can talk about their experiences of the conflict and the hurt that has been inflicted on them or that they have inflicted on others. The main purpose of this work is to gain an understanding of other perspectives in the conflict, in order to acknowledge the hurt that has happened on all sides, and to begin to move forward to building a more peaceful, shared society.

<sup>6</sup> The term 'transitional justice' refers to a range of legal and non-legal ways a society moving out of violent conflict deals with past human rights abuses. The strong focus on the past is matched by a concern with the future. It is also an area of academic research and civil society advocacy.

area into a battleground that disrupts local life and threatens the peace. North Belfast seems the unlikeliest of places for the learning exchange that originated in Bridge of Hope over five years ago (Rooney & Swaine, 2012; Rooney, 2014).

At the heart of this initiative was local people's willingness to engage with each other and with Rooney about their diverse experiences of conflict and transition. Faculty members in the Transitional Justice Institute joined others from leading community and voluntary organisations in seminars to share research and advocacy experience with local people. Louise Mallinder, Professor of Human Rights and International Law, for instance, contributed her expertise on how amnesty is deployed in diverse transitional justice circumstances (Mallinder, 2014a; Mallinder, 2014b; Mallinder and Hadden, 2013). The local enthusiasm for this learning exchange led Rooney to design a community based Toolkit program, and to author the *Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit* (Rooney, 2012b) and *Transitional Justice Grassroots Guide* (2014) to accompany the program.<sup>7</sup> The program is designed to empower, equip, and encourage people in disadvantaged areas to use the *Toolkit* and *Guide* as a way to engage in critical conversations about the impact of conflict and transition in daily life in their community. These two resources are also now key texts in the Community Development degree's Grassroots Transitional Justice module. Thus, an initiative that began life as a local, community-based conversation inspired the Community Development team to integrate grassroots praxis into the degree curriculum.

On the research side, this community program was included among the research impact case studies the Transitional Justice Institute submitted to the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. The Transitional Justice Institute's submission achieved the number one ranking for research impact in law among UK universities. The submission made the case that this Grassroots Transitional Justice Program, based in one of the most divided and volatile communities in the North of Ireland, produced an internationally recognized participatory program for former political prisoners and combatants, for local women and members of advocacy organizations. The Transitional Justice Institute's scholarly inputs on truth, institutional reform, reparations, reconciliation, and amnesty have led to direct engagement with community activists at the coal face of transitional processes. The submission also cited feedback from participants that indicated an eagerness to investigate transitional justice in local and international contexts.

The Bridge of Hope/Transitional Justice Institute's partnership has now delivered a university accredited Toolkit Training Program for community and civil society organization activists who plan to provide the *Transitional Justice Grassroots Toolkit* to local groups and within their organizations.

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<sup>7</sup> The *Toolkit* and *Guide* are available online at [www.thebridgeofhope.org](http://www.thebridgeofhope.org) and at [www.transitionaljustice.ulster.ac.uk](http://www.transitionaljustice.ulster.ac.uk)

This will allow others to join in and broaden the critical conversation about transitional justice started in Bridge of Hope in 2011. The university accreditation for trainees also means that anyone completing the Toolkit Training Program will be eligible to gain admission to Ulster University's Community Development Degree Program.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that committed and persistent academic activism can make a difference when lives are changed by conflict, and people proactively engage in building a more peaceful society. The academic activism outlined in this paper is evidence of academy-community engagement that makes transformative differences, which, when added to the multitude of efforts made elsewhere in Northern Irish society, helps to change the script of community empowerment and peace building. It arguably helps to reinterpret the narrative of past political hostility and violent conflict. Individual and collective meaning systems are thereby altered in ways that can positively influence wider social relations and ways of life (Martín-Baró, 1996). The Community Development Degree Program and its allied Toolkit Program do not, however, alter concrete, coercive inequalities. These programs do not change the deepening levels of deprivation or the failures of political progress in Northern Ireland today. Yet, in the spirit of the grassroots transition work, these efforts are about believing and acting as though “we can always do something” (Rooney, 2014, p. 10). This involves those of us in the academy accepting the responsibility to create and respond to opportunities for alliances with community activists. The benefits are mutual and radical.

## **Acknowledgements:**

Eilish Rooney acknowledges support from the Political Settlements Research Programme.

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