

The Learning Collective in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The *Critical Pedagogies* programme at Nottingham Contemporary (2019–20) fostered debates on education's current scenarios, its ongoing neoliberalisation, and the role of cultural organisations in mobilising resources for collective learning. This text reflects upon this year-long programme and the challenges that the awakening of the COVID-19 outbreak poses to education. In this text, Carolina Rito, former head of public programmes at Nottingham Contemporary, delves into the capitalisation of educational institutions and how this process is transforming our learning experience – within and outside academia.

The institutions that we're fighting is not just the school, the police, the clinic, the jail, but it's also the self, the subject.^[1]

We tend to project a lot of hope onto education, as if we have not all been through it somehow and do not know its drawbacks. As someone working in the field of arts and ideas, the possibility of delving into what is not-yet-known always comes to mind as a fortunate and glamorous prospect. However, the ways in which education has become yet another site for the implementation of surveillance and governance mechanisms – supervising the workings of teaching and learning – never fails to disappoint.

Education's current scenario is bleak and bitter. We have become accustomed to the unbridled spreading of neoliberalism into the meanders of education, with infamous student fees in the region of nine thousand pounds per year for domestic and EU students.^[2] The business model of UK universities is crass and clear: students are costumers who pay to acquire professional skills that in turn will increase their employability in a ferocious job market. All the while, educators must strive to meet students' expectations and provide the service they are paying for. This service is carefully detailed in a legally binding agreement signed by both universities and students before the beginning of its delivery. The growing number of managers in higher education institutions, with roles from teaching evaluation to quality control, monitor service delivery compliance. To the disenchantment of most educators, those who are there for the love of teaching, the pressures of student demands and managerial bureaucracy are overwhelming.

The new business model of universities is a chain of profound interdependent cycles. Universities are set off to generate their own income. Student fees provide the main source of income, with international students playing a central role in balancing the books, since they pay in the region of twelve thousand pounds per year at undergraduate level. In turn, and in order to study, students contract debt with the

private firms that the state subcontracts to manage their loans. This is all based on the hope that the professional skills students will acquire will make them employable, equipping them to pay their debts. Student satisfaction surveys keep tutors on a short leash, reflecting students' perceptions of the delivery of the expected professional skills, so important for the life cycle of this chain of command. Regardless of the position one occupies, precarity and instability are shared by all players across the board. But this chain of command is far from being the only one at play in the contemporary financial ecology of universities. Similar to other businesses, universities find opportunities to diversify their income portfolios with sources that are, surprisingly (or not), alien to education, such as real estate.

However, one should not forget that the whole purpose of universities and schools is to provide the resources and conditions (cognitive and physical, pedagogical and infrastructural) for the process of delving into the not-yet-known. In the midst of the financialisation of the sector, what happens to the activity that is arguably at the core of these institutions? What is education under the conditions of neoliberalism?

While Head of Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary, I wanted to explore how these questions resonated with the work of contemporary art organisations. Moreover, I wanted to ask: What role do cultural organisations play in this debate and reflection? What resources can the sector mobilise to foster this inquiry?^[3] In early 2019, I launched a programme of initiatives under the umbrella of *Critical Pedagogies* (2019–2020).^[4] It was a reflection on the impact of almost ten years of student fees and a perceptible shift in the understanding of the role of education in British society at large. The programme was meant not only to support

audience and staff reflection on the current conditions under which we engage with educational activities (including the gallery); but it also aimed to advance artistic, curatorial and pedagogical responses from the standpoint of a contemporary art organisation. These responses were explored with colleagues within the institution, and in dialogue with audiences and local groups. The ultimate encouragement to put these activities in motion came from conversations with my colleague, curator and educator Nora Sternfeld and from her insightful work. Nora's experience in education has long been committed to radical pedagogies that engage with contentious debates on racism and xenophobia in the Austrian context.^[5] Nora stresses the importance of preparing and planning for the future, or for another future, while there is time. Her most recent work explores scenarios in the near future based on the lessons learnt from our immediate past and present.^[6]

It was with these thoughts and preoccupations in mind that I conceived the *Critical Pedagogies* programme at Nottingham Contemporary in collaboration with colleagues and various external partners, complementing the ongoing conversations across the Public Programmes, Learning and Exhibitions teams at the time. The programme entailed a series of curated talks (Alternative, Episteme, Fugitive), the launch of CAMPUS Independent Study Programme (ISP), the public seminars of CAMPUS, an international conference, and two edited issues on *The Contemporary Journal* and *e-flux Architecture*. For the centenary of the Bauhaus in 2019, Nottingham Contemporary co-curated the exhibition *Still Undead: Popular Culture in Britain Beyond the Bauhaus* as part of *bauhaus imaginista*, a research and exhibition project by Marion von Osten and Grant Watson.^[8] *Still Undead* focused on the reception of Bauhaus-derived new media ideas in the UK.^[9] To amplify the inquiry, the exhibition coincided with some of the *Critical Pedagogies*

events and the launch of CAMPUS ISP, a year-long and city-wide programme in curatorial, visual and cultural studies, based on collaborative knowledge production and the exploration of critical methodologies for practice. For a year, CAMPUS welcomed participants from different backgrounds who wished to engage in conversations about contemporary debates and further explore interdisciplinary practices.^[10]

CAMPUS was designed to provide space and time for the collective entertainment of critical thinking and practices – a scarce resource in the field.^[11] To accompany this process, CAMPUS participants were joined every month by a guest speaker, including: Gurminder K. Bhambra, Tina Campt, Céline Condorelli, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Anselm Franke, Quinsy Gario, and Nora Sternfeld. However, as of March 2020, the programme was one of the many scheduled activities that had to reinvent itself in record time to adapt to the new restrictions imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It is also under these restrictions that I have been writing this text, four months since the UK Prime Minister declared the national lockdown. Ceasing one's activity in the so-called 'outside world' while migrating one's means of production into the four walls of one's apartment makes this period feel longer than it has been – as if one could measure time in an objective way. Considering the rapid shifts affecting transportation and commercial services, education and public programming, it strikes me how much of the world we knew has changed in such a short period of time – even so if only considering the first two weeks of lockdown. Classrooms, university corridors, offices, and campuses were emptied overnight. But teaching and learning have not come to a halt – not even for a single day. Universities swiftly migrated their services to online platforms; so too did cultural programmes, including CAMPUS. Live meetings have been promptly replaced by hours of on-screen

mediation. As Mark Jarzombek notes in his contribution to the *Architectures of Education* special issue, 'this shift comes, of course, on the coattails of the digitalization of knowledge that is now a solid decade in the making.'^[12] Jarzombek goes on to note that 'University education has already readily adapted to the digital turn, especially in the realm of print media [academic journals], but education in that broader, say, human sense, for the most part did not have to significantly change.'^[13] The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly resolved this impasse, moving human interactions online.

However, remote education is not new. It was first designed to overcome physical distance for those who could not gather in centralised campuses. As Joaquim Moreno reminds us in his contribution to this issue, the current scenario of remote education has many parallels with the Open University model.^[14] Initially founded in the 1960s in the UK, the Open University was designed to provide 'education and the opportunity to pursue certified degrees to working adults who had not previously had the chance to study'.^[15] As Moreno goes on to evidence, 'this was all a way to address the structural inequalities built into the passage from school to university; of inventing opportunities where there were none.'^[16] The Open University model has astonishing similarities with the current online learning system. In the beginning of the Open University, students were homebound, and learning content was shared via a blended system entailing radio, television, mail and telephone. It was, at the time, a brand-new system of 'disembodied and airborne' learning, as remarked by Lord Crowther in his inaugural speech. Despite obvious differences, such as the social and technological affordances (from TV to the internet), learning under lockdown in 2020 seems like a neoliberal appropriation of the Open University model – or its 2.0 version.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this system allowed some of the higher education barriers associated with race, class, and gender to be tackled, allowing the pursuit of education to those who could not afford to congregate on the university campus. However, there are other elements to be taken into consideration when looking at the benefits and disadvantages of the rapid advancement of digital learning today. One key consideration is how the neoliberal institution is taking advantage of the current crisis, accelerating the gradual, ongoing distancing – simultaneously physical and affective – of individuals already in the making.

Long before the COVID-19 crisis, staff and students saw their time being overloaded with tasks and assignments; their offices and meeting rooms disappearing or being disjointed, affecting time spent together, so important for the debate and dissemination of (new) knowledge. Although physical proximity was expected in lectures, seminars, and meetings, these tended to unfold according to pre-planned agendas or learning outcomes. Senior administration also implemented new management teams, sometimes alien to education itself, brought in to supervise the workings of courses and departments – and, surely, of people (staff and students). Altogether, these changes have contributed to the gradual atomisation of staff and students – not to mention the customer service culture that tears apart the eventual solidarities between tutors and pupils in the face of the increasing precarity of their working and learning conditions.

The fully online or blended learning system (the latter combining online and in-person sessions) are to continue in the 2020–2021 academic year, universities recently confirmed. While we, academics, rejoice at the news (because who wants to risk or put others at risk during a pandemic?), we also wonder about the long-term consequences of physical distancing and,

moreover, physical absence from campuses and corridors, classrooms and meeting rooms. Although some teaching formats (for instance, seminars and lectures) can arguably be delivered via digital platforms, there is something absolutely unique to education that cannot be moved online – the contingency of unexpected encounters in between classes, the informal get-togethers, the unforeseen conversations and debates that ultimately complement the lesson plans and the formal learning activities. Education is not only contained within the pre-established outcomes listed in the universities' proformas, or in the syllabi set up in advance of the academic year. Education is as much about the teaching as it is about what exceeds the course's content, contract agreement, and protocols.

We can argue that education also takes place in the time and space we spend together delving into what is not-yet-known, in the interstices of teaching. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney articulate in their work on Black study: the surplus of education is 'the waste lives for those moments beyond teaching when you give away the unexpected beautiful phrase – unexpected, no one has asked, beautiful, it will never come back.'¹²¹ There is an unspoken, untamed, un-bureaucratized part of the learning experience that is at risk in the 2.0 era. While we experience the ultimate expression of atomisation and containment during lockdown, we need to question the consequences of our physical absence from the sites (and interstices) of learning, and the lasting effects of empty classrooms, corridors, and public spaces.

The racist killing of George Floyd in the hands of the police in Minneapolis shocked the world and, once more, showed the brutality and racial bias of our institutions. The global protests that followed remind us of the political agency of the presence of the collective body in public space, in contrast to the self-atomisation in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The presence

of the body (individual and collective) is not an aesthetic detail. Instead, it is in its actual presence, in solidarity against injustice, that a new reality starts to unfold. It is in relation to this scenario that we should be asking ourselves: what is the potential of the learning collective? Similar to the public collective body, the presence of the learning collective in the physical interstices of the academic campus has a bearing on the political potential of education. To that transformative potential Fred Moten and Stefano Harney called ‘study’: ‘a different kind of speculation, [...] [a] speculative mutuality’.^[18]

Moten and Harney’s propositions share some very interesting similarities with Gavin Butt’s contribution to the *Still Undead* exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary.^[19] In the time of publicly-funded and fee-free education in the 1970s, a number of punk bands and collectives came out of the art schools in Leeds. Contrary to what would be expected in an exhibition about the Bauhaus and its influence in the British context, Butt does not look at the school curriculum and/or pedagogies. Instead, his research focuses on the extracurricular activities of those engaged in free education, what Butt calls ‘being in a band’. Similar to ‘study,’ the experience of ‘being in a band’ articulates the unbounded time and space of the activity of ‘learning’ beyond the classroom and the studio. These bands did not only represent a simple desire to make music,

Instead [they] took on a more social or ontological form: being in a band at this time became a way of living, a mode of existing even, through which an alternative future could be glimpsed, and a path was created out of the cultural and political impasses of the 1970s.^[20]

I wonder how CAMPUS relates to ‘being in a

band’ and ‘study’, and how its adaptation to the online environment affected the experience of unbounded conversations between seminars, at the pub, during lunch breaks. As Phoebe Eustance notes while reflecting upon the experience of CAMPUS: ‘the dialogues that resonated most took place in transitional spaces on the periphery of the programme: driving to and from Nottingham; late night chats in kitsch Airbnb’s; pub intervals; and reflections atop the Basford Beam Engine.’^[21] How the experience of a non-outcome driven activity with others would translate to our current learning scenarios – online or otherwise. We know that, even if absent from the formal curriculum, hanging out and being with others (especially with those one does not know yet) is part of the experience of studying, of entertaining other logics, of co-producing questions, ambiguities and inquiries, often determined by the simple contingencies of where people happen to begin a conversation. In a reflection on the consequences of the pandemic, philosopher Emmanuel Alloa worries about the absence of randomness and contingency in the reconstruction of our post-COVID-19 society. Alloa claims that the issue is not that the pandemic prevented us from meeting. We have all been busy with e-dinners with family, aperitives with friends in different time zones, and online birthday parties. However, the ‘others’ that we meet now are others with whom we are already familiar. As Alloa writes:

While perfecting the planning of our upcoming encounters, we are depriving ourselves of the opportunity to make real ones. By dint of meeting only those we already know (or those promised by dating sites, whose profiles are supposed to ‘match’ ours), one wonders what room is left for something radically different.^[22]

In our immediate future, encounters are deemed

to be monologic, performed by a talking head on a screen (sometimes pre-recorded), where avatars of muted microphones and switched-off cameras listen. The receptive end of online learning is silent and only disrupted by the intermittences of a choppy internet connection. The web holds the mechanisms and conditions of our communication and interaction. The replacement of public space with digital space, and the virtualisation of our domestic space on online platforms have accelerated the ongoing atomisation of individuals. While the rooms of institutions are empty – from universities to Nottingham Contemporary – we need to be thinking of where the political potential of the collective body lies in the new paradigm. Where we will find space and time for this unexpected encounter. And where we are to find the force of the collective body in our physical absence.

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[1]

"Escape"-Bound on Twitter: "The Institutions That We're Fighting Is Not Just the School, the Police, the Clinic, the Jail, but It's Also the Self, the Subject." – Fred Moten" / Twitter', Twitter, accessed 20 July 2020, <https://twitter.com/escapebound/status/1281329092495904775>.

[2]

In the UK, the student fees for EU citizens will be changed to match those of international students in December 2020, with Britain's exit from the EU. The new fees are expected to come to effect in the 2021-2022 academic year. This shift will dramatically reduce the recruitment of EU nationals at UK universities.

[3]

I was Head of Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary from March 2017 to November 2019.

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Nora Sternfeld is a co-founder and part of *trafo.K, Office for Art, Education and Critical Knowledge Production* (Vienna). For more on Sternfeld, see here: <https://documenta-studien.de/en/nora-sternfeld-1>.

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<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/under-ad-pop-culture-in-britain-beyond-the-bauhaus/>.

[10]

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[11]

I have explored the reshaping of cultural organisations' functions under the conditions of neoliberalism elsewhere. For more on this debate, see my contribution to the publication: Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas (eds.), *FABRICATING PUBLICS: The Dissemination of Culture in the Post-Truth Era*, DATA Browser 7 (Liverpool: Open Humanities Press, in press).

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[13]

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[14]

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[15]

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[16]

Ibid.

[17]

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[20]

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[21]

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