Editorial
Educating Informal Educators

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As Youth and Community Work courses in Higher Education dwindle across the UK, following years of austerity and cuts to Youth Services, the diverse pedagogies of informal education are more needed than ever. Any society that values learning and recognises learners' diversity needs these approaches. This Special Issue focuses on how informal education pedagogies, practices, and principles are engaged with, modelled, taught, or shared in Higher Education. 'Educating Informal Educators' draws on the range of expertise in Higher Education courses across the UK and seeks to emphasise the value of informal education, its values, and practices not only for students of education or informal education, but for society as a whole. This Special Issue seeks to capture the particular pedagogies of youth and community work courses that sustain distinctive informal education practice.

This series of 13 articles celebrate the distinctive contribution of youth and community work pedagogues to the development of informal education pedagogies, covering themes of collaboration, creativity, student–lecturer dialogue, anti-oppressive practice, pedagogy of discomfort, critical and social pedagogy, and critical race theory as theoretical perspectives.

The authors in this Special Issue responded to an invitation to reflect on their practice as educators (usually university lecturers) of Informal Education. While reflection would be familiar to informal educators, although not always comfortable, we asked them to do so in an academic journal—*Education Science*—that expects an objectivist epistemology and empirical article structure. Reviewers were, therefore, sometimes disappointed with reflective meanderings through concepts from 'old' literature, and authors were dismayed at critical feedback that was about their structure, rather than their reflection or insights. We think we found a middle ground in the end. For a Science journal, this collection will be more philosophical, more political, and sometimes more personal than usual.

In a two-part contribution, Batsleer, Bowler, Green, Smith, and Woolley explore anti-oppressive practice. The first article, Batsleer [1] traces the genealogy of anti-oppressive practice as an approach in the UK to youth and community work, examining six fields of practice, from Paolo Freire and Critical Praxis to New Managerialism. The second element of this contribution from Bowler, Green, Smith, and Woolley [2] draws on research undertaken as part of a Collective Biography project generated by a group of activists and lecturers teaching and researching in youth and community work. Exploring the current context and contemporary challenges for teaching anti-oppressive practice in UK-based universities, the article investigates the role of these concepts for teaching and learning. The article concludes by starting to scope out possibilities for a grassroots strategy for learning about anti-oppressive practice alongside young people and communities.

Howell's article [3] presents an autoethnographic case study on Interprofessional Education and the pedagogical practice youth workers bring to Higher Education. He explores the challenges and opportunities of genuine collaboration based on youth work principles of group work, relationships with shrinking professional distance, critical pedagogy, genuine agency, and an emotional connection made between the professionals and service users. Howell brings our attention to the ways in which youth workers bring their pedagogical practice to a broader range of spaces within and beyond Higher Education

(HE). Another student–lecturer collaboration comes from Sheridan and Mungai [4], through an autoethnographic and reflective piece that takes the form of conversation between a lecturer and a graduate. Together, they emphasise a value-driven approach in enabling informal educators to celebrate cultural diversity. Acknowledging that we are always 'becoming', Sheridan and Mungai explore critical consciousness through praxis as educator and informal educator.

Whilst Youth and Community Work education works to prepare practitioners for demanding and responsive work in an ever-changing society, alternative pedagogic modes need to be introduced. In their article, Cullen & Whelan [5], reflect on difficult and challenging moments of learning, exploring the emotions, ethics, and challenges of facilitating training for youth practitioners to tackle gender-related violence. They draw upon Boler's work on pedagogy of discomfort in order to think productively about designing and delivering training for informal educators on sensitive issues with ethical integrity. Achilleos, Douglas, and Washbrook's article [6] presents approaches to raising issues of race and inequality for informal educators. Drawing on the Youth and Community Work programme at Wrexham Glyndŵr University, they argue for the value of Critical Race Theory for deconstructing learning and assessment, student voice, and support, in order to explore critical consciousness, challenge, and change.

As well as capturing experiences and insights from Youth and Community work lecturers and academics, the Special Issue presents research undertaken with students on these courses. Gormally, Coburn, and Beggan's article [7] draws on perspectives from current and former students in the UK, in order to find out if teaching, learning, and assessment practices in professionally approved programmes adopt the principles they espouse. Their findings indicate that despite a strong and coherent understanding of core theories that supported students in articulating emancipatory practice, teaching and learning was more aligned with traditional and formal methods than alternative or informal methods. A way forward through this issue, they suggest, is the provision of more flexible and creative assessments over the persistent use of standardised assessment methods within HE. A further step towards applying our preferred theory in informal education comes from a contribution from Spanish colleagues. All our authors might share a consensus regarding the value of learning through experience and from personal experience, but this paper illustrates the value of a highly intentional form of this in historical re-enactment that seems highly successful in learning about history. Historical re-enactment societies are booming in Spain, and Español-Solana and Franco-Calvo [8] present findings from over a hundred participants of its success in promoting learning about history and culture, military, and Medieval history in this case.

The critical stance regarding educational practice in universities is taken further in the contribution by Jeffs and Smith on the Education of Informal Educators [9]. They argue that youth and community work courses are stuck in silos, and lacking an educational imagination, and with little grounding in social sciences and moral philosophy. The full implications of this, Jeffs and Smith suggest, is that students are being sold short in terms of their ability to be teachers and pedagogues, and have also lost the chance to develop their subject knowledge. However, this perspective is counter-balanced by the wide range of alternative pedagogical practices demonstrated through the articles in this Special Issue. For example, Howard [10] reflects on creative pedagogies within youth work education, sharing examples of music, filmmaking, and board games with feedback gleaned from students. Highlighting the symbiosis of creative pedagogies with relational and experiential learning as key tenets of youth work practice, she argues that there is much to learn from youth work courses within HE, not only in terms of engaging and encouraging students through creativity.

Smith and Seal [11] explore the contested terrain of Critical Pedagogy within Higher Education. Focusing on practical examples of enabling Critical Pedagogy in the teaching of informal education, they argue that it is crucial for the teaching of informal educators, enabling lecturers and practitioners to interrupt the hegemony of neo-liberal and

neo-managerial thinking in their practice, re-orientate themselves, and examine their positionality within their institutions. Jones and Brady [12] develop this strand by exploring Social Pedagogy and its synergies with informal education. They present social pedagogical concepts whereby informal educators can 'practice the practice' through a transcendence of pedagogy. Their article signposts the value of these pedagogies within the post-COVID environment. This future-facing theme is also taken up by Curran, Gormally, and Smith [13] in their article on re-imagining approaches to learning and teaching post COVID-19. Drawing on their experience as members of a Community of Practice—the Professional Association for Lecturers in Youth & Community Work (PALYCW)—their article argues that these programmes should be preparing students for navigating practice in the society where new formations of social injustice are unfolding post COVID-19. Together, they argue that working collaboratively deepens democracy as the basis for taking action in communities with conscious intent.

Informal Education, as a sub-discipline, may be understood as on the cusp of Education, perhaps overlapping or formed by elements of Community Work, Youth Work, Social Pedagogy, and Social Work; certainly that is how it lies in the UK context, which is what this Issue reflects. We therefore invite articles to either respond to this Special Issue or to extend the discussion more widely by sharing their perspectives on informal education. This Special Issue explores how informal education (or these contributory elements) are brought into play in our practice as educators in Higher Education. Some of us were lucky enough to present the Issue and to discuss with some of the contributors at annual conferences of some of the professional associations that bring lecturers together. The 'BERA' (British Educational Research Association) and the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work annual conference sessions on these themes highlighted to us the value of working collectively in dialogue with colleague-teachers and learners and our shared values. We hope you enjoy it and that it prompts innovative teaching towards socially just ends.

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