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Article

Democracy in Action: Experiencing Transformative Education

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Abstract: Our time is one of permacrisis, affecting the economy, the environment, and everything in between. In this context, UK higher education faces an existential crisis, where the university sector has been transformed into a marketplace, turning students into consumers and limiting the critical potential of education. In moving beyond these limits, this article explores Democracy in Action (DinA), a final-year undergraduate module offered in a UK university that creates spaces for critical and transformative education through democratic theory and practice. Grounded in traditions of transformative learning, community-based pedagogies, academic activism, and prefiguration, DinA positions students as democratic agents working in solidarity with staff and the wider community. Drawing on in-depth interviews with students, we analyse the interplay between theory and practice to understand how learning can be understood as a form of democratic participation. The article makes an original contribution to the fields of democratic education and critical university studies by offering a novel framework for integrating academic activism, community-based learning, and prefiguration in higher education. We show how students' experiences of building community, campaign planning, and prefiguring change generate not only deep transformative learning but also new forms of civic agency and collective action. We argue that, through community organising, students embark on a process of learning that involves three key transformative moments: effecting a perspectival shift from the individual to the common, foregrounding the activist dimensions of democratic politics, and envisioning the world we want through prefiguration. This pedagogical model demonstrates that higher education can become a space of lived democratic possibility, where hope, critique, and collective transformation are not only imagined but enacted.

Keywords: transformative learning; pedagogy; community organising; prefigurative practices; academic activism; radical democracy

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1. Introduction

We live in a time characterised by crises. Since the financial crisis of 2007, we have found ourselves in what some have termed a state of permacrisis (Gibson-Graham, 2014), an extended period of instability and insecurity sustained by crises in a wide range of fields: economy, environment, migration, health, war, and energy, among many others.

Simultaneously, political leaders, media, and global organisations, each from their own perspective, are quick to frame the responses that citizens might take towards such crises as threats to democracy, even as they refrain from any meaningful action to address them. Despair, however, has not stopped people, communities, and social movements from seeking to address social injustice, inequalities, environmental degradation, and the weakening of democratic institutions by engaging with alternative, more direct approaches and logics of political organisation.

A space in which this sense of hope has found itself expressed, albeit with considerable difficulty, is the university. In theory, of course, UK universities position themselves as spaces for critique and the reimagining of our world. In practice, however, they have often been complicit (willingly or not) in neoliberal governance and finance structures, deploying managerial technologies obsessed with performance targets and Uber-like ratings of teaching and research (Fleming, 2021). Neoliberal governance techniques are evident not only in such widely publicised and circulated metrics but also in the financial decisions introduced into UK HE over the past 35 years (Fleming, 2021). It is no surprise, then, that the recent history of UK universities has been marked by extended periods of industrial action (e.g., 2018–2024), involving struggles around pensions and the so-called "four fights": pay, workload, equality, and casualisation (UCU, 2025). Moreover, since the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, it is also students (both UK and international students) who have been affected, as they are drawn into a highly marketised educational environment that encourages HE actors to treat them as consumers.

The university sector has become an exemplary case illustrating how neoliberalism grips and moves, by dominating the production of knowledge in society as one of its main mechanisms (Aronowitz, 2001). Scholars in critical university studies have examined the neoliberalisation of universities over the past four decades, offering detailed analyses of the shift in the sector towards commercialisation, competition, management hierarchies, customer satisfaction, individualism, and profit (Ginsberg, 2014; Readings, 1996; Tapper, 2014). Such critiques draw attention to the contradiction these trends give rise to within universities today, given the challenges they create for universities that are meant to be a place of learning, development, transformation, community, care, and hope (Gavin et al., 2023). It is within this increasingly neoliberalised field of HE, which 'seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey, 2005, p. 3), that the university, rather than providing a space of hope and transformation, instead ends up being coopted, reinforcing existing power relations and social injustices and inequalities, and reproducing race-, gender-, class-, and ability-based systems of oppression and domination (Parker, 2018).

In dealing with such dehumanising systems and discourses, Cooper and Majumdar (2023) call on scholars to make critical consciousness and solidarity central when inhabiting, practising, and theorising academia and its organisational structures. Alongside them, we contend that the university can, and should, be seen as a space of possibility to enact better futures. While largely coopted by neoliberal governmentality, we maintain that universities still contain spaces within which it is still possible to rescue what today has been reduced to rhetorical or marketing buzzwords: hope, critique, and transformation. We therefore see within the university sector the potential to reach beyond the curriculum towards transformation. Indeed, Hooks (1994) had already identified as a key aspect of education its capacity to transgress. How, then, can we explore and extend the democratic potential that *the classroom* holds within the limits imposed by neoliberalism? How do we turn democratic theory into practice? Or, better yet, how can we let democratic practice inform our theory?

These were the questions that inspired the idea of Democracy in Action (DinA). DinA was first developed in 2018, through the cooperation and collective work of PhD

researchers and academics working in the fields of political discourse theory, social movements, critical accounting, critical management studies, and community organising. It was designed as an undergraduate module for final-year students, bringing together academics, students, and community organisations to create a pedagogical community through direct engagement with the ideas, values, and practice of democratic politics. Inspired by 'Essex Transform', a student-led project that brought together academics and activists to reimagine democracy and active citizenship in the university (New Pretender, 2018), as well as the Essex-based interdisciplinary pedagogical initiative 'Democracy in Schools' launched in the academic year 2017–2018, we sought to create an alternative learning experience beyond a simplistic focus on learning objectives and employability targets, shifting its focus towards democratic praxis and community.

In this paper, we conceptualise this pedagogical community-in-the-making as a form of prefigurative academic activism that does not just challenge the dominant model of university education but also enacts change in the here and now. We understand academic activism (also sometimes named intellectual activism or scholar activism) as a practice that combines the production of ideas and knowledge with action in the pursuit of social justice (Collins, 2013; Contu, 2020), and we understand prefigurative politics as the performance of those social relations, practices, ideals, and experiences that embody our 'future' goal in our day-to-day life (Boggs, 1977, p. 2).

We draw on our experiences of developing and teaching DinA, covering a period that extends from the time of the pilot in 2019–2020 to its delivery as a formal, credit-bearing module (2021–the present day). As we will show, the module combines calls for intellectual activism and social justice-orientated educational practice (Contu, 2018), in line with political, ethical, democratic, and humanistic approaches to education (Freire, 1968; Barros et al., 2024), to foster service and transformative learning (Dal Magro et al., 2020; Sterling, 2011; Blake et al., 2013). This combination enables us to make an original contribution to the fields of the democratic education and critical university studies literature through an empirical investigation of the impact of community-based education on students. We also extend existing understandings of transformative education by foregrounding the concept of prefigurative performances, drawn from social movements and community organising practices. Ultimately, we conceptualise community-based teaching as something that helps to advance the frontiers of work-based learning programmes for both students and the university alike, as it encourages a reimagining of the university as a democratic institution in dialogue with the wider community. We conceptualise this approach as consisting of three interrelated components that entail a shift in focus towards the significance of local context, power analyses, and prefiguration. In the following section, we offer a more detailed picture of how DinA works, its main components, and its community organising approach. We then present our theoretical framework and methods, before we move into the analysis of DinA student experiences to understand the impact of transformative community-based learning.

2. Democracy in Action

The module was created as a space for active participation and experimentation with democratic politics. As we will outline shortly, DinA depends on democratic campaign planning with the wider community. Through a student-led approach, this process involves identifying issues of concern, deliberating over campaign priorities, developing an understanding of decision-making processes and power dynamics at different levels, collecting information and material that will help to better understand the nature and impact of particular issues for the community, and building a campaign to bring about change through community organising methodology.

DinA is a module option for students across the University of Essex. Deeply interdisciplinary in nature, DinA is open to students from different disciplines and departments. For those who choose it, it serves as their final-year project, equivalent in value to the standard research-based dissertation module. We wanted students to have the option of concluding their studies with a project that had a practical focus. DinA, since its inception, offered a learning experience aiming to enhance knowledge and skills that are central components of public life through direct engagement with democratic situations and processes in dealing with real-world problems. In addressing the complexity of democratic life, it was important to create an interdisciplinary space that appreciates the rigour of individual disciplines and would allow students' 'disciplinary languages' to support a learning exercise of mutual enquiry and critique through encounters with diverse forms of knowledge (McArthur, 2010).

Furthermore, a key aspect of the module design involves an emphasis on processes through which students, teachers, and the community learn to work together. Each voice in the discussion is accorded equal value, and every discipline is recognised as a valuable source of knowledge and ideas. Accordingly, the ethos that drives the module has always been intended to break both the hierarchical structure of the university and separations of disciplinary divisions, allowing for a space where academics and students participate and learn together. This is an essential element of democratic deliberation, and a key component of the community organising model that DinA uses. We now turn to an overview of this model, which allows us to further unpack the importance of equal participation in democratic situations within and beyond the learning process.

DinA Curriculum and the CUK Model of Community Organising

There are a range of approaches to community organising across the globe that follow different principles and practices (Christens & Speer, 2015; Fisher & Shragge, 2000). The approach that we focus on follows the methodology practised by Citizens UK (CUK), which adapts the model developed by Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (Alinsky, 1989; Wills, 2012). This model has become well established across the UK with many organisation-based alliances working on a range of social justice issues (Wills, 2012). CUK was founded in 1989 as the Citizens Organising Foundation on the principle that "everyday people have power" and, because of this, should be "broad-based" in its approach (Citizens UK, 2024b). CUK is broad-based both in the pursuits of its campaigns, from zebra crossings to the Living Wage campaigns, and in the alliances that it forms between its members and others engaged in common struggles, from schools to faith communities and charities (Citizens UK, 2024b). As of 2024, CUK has seen 600 organisations become members, 4000+ community leaders trained, 13,000 organisations become Living Wage employers, and hundreds of campaigns won since its foundation (Citizens UK, 2024b). The University of Essex is a member organisation of a CUK local alliance, which allowed us to partner with them in the development of DinA, as well as establish relationships with various communities and local organisations.

CUK's community organising concentrates on multiple-issue politics to address both local and national challenges. Through broad-based community organising practices, CUK aims to build alliances between various community actors to work together on issues of common concern, for example, migrant justice, hate crime, or schools-based counselling (Citizens UK, 2024c). One of the most successful and well-known CUK campaigns resulted in the establishment of the living wage foundation (Living Wage Foundation, 2024). CUK campaigns, in general, however, have had many successes at national, regional, and local levels, from campaigning for Cymru Wales to become living wage accredited, to pushing local councils to fixing streetlighting on local streets (Citizens UK, 2024a).

Citizens UK describe themselves as 'a people power alliance of diverse local communities working together for the common good' (Citizens UK, 2024b). In adopting what they describe as a non-partisan approach (Bolton, 2017), CUK community organising aims to make concrete change happen on issues of social justice by bringing those impacted in communities together and holding those in power accountable (Wood, 2023; Legg & Citizens, 2021). Their methodology involves listening, building relationships and commitment, performing power analyses and power-building exercises, performative demonstrations of power and accountability, and processes of evaluation and debriefing (Bolton, 2017, pp. 15–17, 66–67, 78; Warren et al., 2024; Wood, 2023).

Whilst this approach to community organising has had many successes in the US and the UK, it has also attracted criticism. For example, some argue that it relies on reforming systems that are themselves fundamentally problematic and broken, failing to reach 'genuine alternatives' (Symbiosis Research Collective, 2018) and thus reinforcing the status quo rather than challenging it (Greene, 2022; Lynd, 2015). While these, and other, critical points should be taken seriously at theoretical, methodological, and strategic levels, the focus of this paper is instead on the ways that we have used CUK's methodology in developing learning and teaching environments that engage participants in forms of activism where learners and teachers enact visions of democratic change and future.

Students and staff, through the module, become involved in community organising training, in line with CUK's five steps to social change: 1. Organise, 2. Listen, 3. Plan, 4. Act, and 5. Negotiate. Through the training, we learn how to identify an issue, turn it into tangible demands that can be won, analyse power structures and identify power holders to whom targeted demands can be presented, and build alliances and organise power to hold them to account. This is combined with ethics training so that the collective experiences can be explored in their assignments and reflected on. The following 'skeleton title list' gives an overview of the module structure and some of the main sessions that are in line with the way that Citizens UK teach community organising while also drawing on broader perspectives and the academic literature throughout: Ground rules for the space and how to work together relationally; What makes you angry?; Moving from dominant power to relational power; Undertaking 121s to build relational power; The power analysis tool; Understanding self-interest; Listening to the community and field trips; Negotiation role play; Radical accessibility of leadership; CUKs cycle of action; The power of stories; The power of emotions; Broad-based organising; and Taking action.

Most students on the module have limited or no experience in community organising, thus offering an opportunity to interact with the wider community environment for the first time. Throughout their training, students are encouraged to leave the classroom and test their knowledge and skills in practice within different university spaces and local settings. This allows students (and staff) to develop an understanding of the community and build relationships with local residents and organisations, in collaboration with the Citizens Essex alliance, which is crucial in identifying the ways in which communities experience certain challenges or issues and the ways they would like to see change. Real-life experiences in the module through campaign work enable students to see the world and their role in it in a way that is clearly distinct from experiences that students might have engaging with their community through, for example, volunteering or placement schemes. The module, in contrast, allows them to embark on a journey that starts with the identification of an issue, going through a set of important steps that ends with proposing solutions and taking action. DinA students have thus engaged in a wide swathe of campaigns, ranging from violence against women and girls, migration justice, environmental issues, mental health support for students, students' guarantor policies, living wage, and affordable housing.

Some campaigns are more relevant to the student experience while others touch on issues of more direct relevance to the wider community. Regardless of the focus, students are taught to focus on listening, ensuring that the campaigns that they take forward are community-led, and making sure communities across the alliance are fully engaged in defining issues that are important to them and how they want to address them. It is within these connections, built with the student body and local community, that allow for meaningful transformative learning. As we will see in later parts of the paper through the interviews, students and staff on the module learn from each other and the local community while working with them, in solidarity, to make changes to real-life problems. They also develop detailed power analyses linked to a campaign issue so that they can take asks to power holders and hold them accountable. Their detailed and in-depth engagement with community organising leads to their final presentations that are not only formally assessed but also constitute public actions, where community members and relevant power holders are present.

3. Theory

So far, we have outlined the context and main components of DinA as well as an account of the specific type of community organising that the module is based on. This section presents the main theories that inform our empirical investigation and the methods of data collection and analysis. The motivation behind DinA has been made explicit: wanting to envision a different type of education; an ethos that embraces the possibility of translating radical democratic theory into practice; and an opportunity to enact change through community building (Amsler, 2015, 2014; Avery et al., 2024; Dewey, 2012). Each of these aspects are in themselves inspired by theory, which is embedded in the module. DinA offers the possibility to see the dialectical relationship of theory and practice at two levels: it is not only that the module allows students to practise and critique theories of democracy and power but, also, that the module itself was conceived as a way to put theory into practice, concerning, in particular, theoretical frameworks of transformative and community-based learning as well as theories of prefigurative politics and academic activism.

3.1. Transformative and Community-Based Learning

Transformative learning focuses on empowering students to create their own learning environment, choosing which issue they want to focus on and how they want to address it (Könings et al., 2014). Students are encouraged to challenge dominant beliefs, social habits, and normative practices (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012). In their research, Dal Magro et al. (2020) advance a combination of service and transformational learning through their example of critical experiential learning in Brazil by developing a pedagogy of pragmatism and reflexivity to change the way that the participants see the world. In this sense, transformative education is arguably addressed as the deepest form of learning, as it influences ways of thinking, knowing, and acting (Sterling, 2011). This approach aims to shift students' way of being in the world, their understanding of the self, and their relationships with others (Sterling, 2011; Freire, 1972; Morell & O'Connor, 2002; Shoukry & Fatien, 2023; Dewey, 2012).

By extending this work to focus on community-based learning, DinA seeks to create a transformative educational environment. Through community organising, students can take part in an experiential form of education, in which they are not simply passive in the process of learning but are active in making change (Jarvis, 2024). Sterling (2011) argues that the level of transformative learning is not just about 'doing things better' or 'doing better things' but about 'seeing things differently' and changing one's world view. For Lange (2004), this involves seeing the dominant culture through a critical position, whilst

also allowing those who have been oppressed and marginalised 'to communicate from their own frame of reference' (Harari & Pozzebon, 2023, p. 2). It is in this way that transformative community-based learning involves a movement towards self-determination, which invokes a critical questioning of the self and the social systems in which one lives (O'Leary, 2017).

3.2. Academic Activism

In addressing different ways of undertaking academic activism, Flood et al. (2013, pp. 17–18) provide a fourfold typology: (1) research that produces knowledge towards social change; (2) research that involves social change (e.g., action research and participatory action research); (3) engagement with teaching and learning practices for social change; and (4) a way to challenge existing power relations within academia (through self-reflection and critique) and promote more bottom-up and student-inclusive agendas in working with people and communities (as opposed to universities' subordination to state and corporate agendas). Focusing on the third and fourth forms of academic activism, DinA is primarily a teaching project that asks students to think critically about various injustices, forms of privilege and power within society and institutions, whilst also equipping them with tools and strategies of community organising that offer opportunities for more practical forms of engagement towards social change.

In thinking about teaching as activism, Hytten (2017, p. 387) argues that the classroom is an activist space where students are encouraged to act on the world and become thoughtful democratic citizens; and where activist teachers facilitate a process of unpacking students' 'assumptions, to consider alternative viewpoints, to dismantle problematic beliefs, to make careful arguments, and to defend their perspectives'. The focal point of the different evocations of academic activism is social justice and it is associated with progressive politics and a commitment against systems and relations of oppression on the grounds of class, race, gender, religion, ability, etc.

3.3. Prefiguration

As such, the activist–scholar shapes a space for 'radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm' (Chatterton, 2008, p. 241) to promote a critical understanding of the workings of power. Thus, within the activist classroom, students are asked to see, think, and act for themselves. It is this form of learning and knowing that Hooks (1994, p. 12) sees as creating new visions and enabling transgressions against and beyond boundaries, a movement 'which makes education the practice of freedom'.

A conceptualisation of education as the practice of freedom thus resonates with the claim of The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, p. 265) who state, 'that if we are serious about changing the world and emancipating ourselves from capitalism, then we have to be prefigurative: practice the principles we espouse in our everyday working lives and persuade others to do so too'. The concept of prefiguration points towards a commitment to the creation of a new society based on principles of social justice. Prefiguration can be thought of as the effort and attempt to *perform* that which we want to achieve, and by doing so, bringing about the change we yearn for. Through this practice, we create pedagogies of possibility and hope (Schwittay, 2023; Avery et al., 2024). As Boggs (1977, p. 2) defines it, prefiguration is precisely about 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal'. Combining prefiguration and academic activism in teaching means that processes of learning do not only challenge dominant ideas and norms but also provide the space for experimentation with democratic politics by enabling experiences of non-oppressive relations to flourish in the learning

environment within and outside the classroom. Accordingly, Fielding (2007, p. 544), in thinking about radical education, prefigurative practice, and democracy, suggests that the

'…anticipation of future modes of being through processes and relations, not just structures, that exemplify and embody the viability and desirability of radical alternatives is one of the most important past and continuing contributions of the radical traditions of state education to the furtherance of democracy in this country'.

The context and theoretical framework outlined evidence that DinA does not only allow students to practise and critique theory, but also to put theory into practice. In the following sections, we will argue that the above frameworks and concepts allow us to demonstrate the impact of DinA on students' theoretical and practical engagement with tools and strategies towards social change. Our analysis will show that the classroom can become an activist space of radical possibility and transformative learning through community organising methodology, participatory approaches, practice-based activities, and community fieldwork.

4. Methods

Our empirical analysis focused on the lived experience of DinA students in the first three years (2021–2022, 2022–2023, and 2023–2024) of its existence as a credit-bearing module. Our data consist of 37 semi-structured interviews with students from a range of different disciplines and backgrounds. Interviews occurred at the end of each academic year and focused on encouraging reflection and recollection across the year. We encouraged students to go back to the start of the module and reflect on each of the stages, asking them specific questions about experiences that they had during the year. To assist the analytical process, each interview, which lasted between 30 min and 60 min, was fully transcribed and summarised.

We undertook a hybrid thematic analysis in which data-driven inductive coding was supported by deductive coding, guided by the three tenets of our theoretical framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach ensured that the core theoretical principles underpinning our pedagogical approach acted as a prism for interpreting the data—highlighting elements of transformative learning and the impact of community-based action and prefigurative practices on students—while allowing inductive themes to emerge directly from the interview material. Our analysis was also informed by our participatory engagement with the module and ongoing observational reflections.

Through this process, we identified a set of descriptive themes: the importance of real-life campaign experiences, students' role in community and collective work, empowerment and power, passion and motivation, emotions, obstacles and challenges, and political and social awareness. We then undertook a second level of analysis, linking these emergent themes to our theoretical framework and focusing on three core dimensions of transformative learning: students' role in the community, empowerment and power, and political and social awareness. Drawing on the relevant literature and our theoretical framing, we identified transformative shifts in students' experience: "*from frustration to practice, from the individual to the common*", "*challenging power: from the experiment of democratic politics to activism*", and "*from a module to the world we want*". These three themes served as analytical pillars that allowed us to explore and articulate the transformative potential of the module through the lens of students' lived experience. The next section unpacks each of these in turn.

5. Findings

5.1. From Frustration to Practice, from the Individual to the Common

> I was like really struggling… because I was writing essays about capitalism about things like that, and I was just getting really stressed… I've always cared about… politics and… when I saw the module I was like oh, I can actually maybe do something… I thought well maybe this will kind of help—I think disillusionment might be the word I would use—to help me… feel a bit better about the way the world is and I guess… I felt like this module was… an opportunity to do something (Interview 3).

Turning frustration into practice was not only a driving factor for the creation of the module, but it was also a sentiment that attracted students to the module. We see from the opening quote above that a key aspect that arose from the interviews was how the module allowed students to move beyond sentiments of exasperation and find relief in the possibility to act. Students made this explicit and, as the above quote shows, they also contrasted this to their previous learning experiences in higher education.

This feeling of impasse and stagnation links back to what we have described as a key element of transformative learning: the movement towards self-determination and critical questioning of the self, the structures and relations within which we act and interact. Here, drawing from Lange (2004), we also see how transformative learning invites participants to become active citizens, changing not only their thinking about the world but also their way of being in the world. In the same quote, the student also highlights the practice-based nature of the module, the opening of the possibility—in apparent contrast to other learning experiences—of being able 'to do something'. This was not an isolated feeling; other students also shared similar thoughts:

> I was attracted to this module because… all of my courses were more theoretical so I didn't have the chance to learn more in the practical sense… so I really wanted to learn more about the practice and how I could apply the information I already have in the practical sense […]. I think this module was definitely the one module that affected and, if it's right term, broadened my horizons, in the sense that I was always kind of aware of what's going on around me but as I mentioned because everything I was learning was more theoretical and not practical and I wasn't in the field, it was kind of hard to realise what's going on and it was kind of hard to actually know that these are facts—I mean you know that they're facts but at the end of the day, in my opinion, if a person doesn't experience something or if they don't at least try to see what's going on and observe what's going on it's really hard to actually understand and actually know what's going on (Interviewee 14).

This quote encapsulates the ways in which transformative learning attempts an epistemological shift, where participants 'change the very form by which they construct their meaning' (O'Leary, 2017, p. 24; Kegan, 2000) alongside an ontological shift where participants experience their being in the world in a different way (Lange, 2004; O'Leary, 2017). Having practice at the centre of the module enables the possibility for a certain type of political *experience,* which is a vital component in gaining and raising awareness about the world. The active cultivation of vigilant awareness, as Hooks (2003, p. 36) puts it, is a key requirement in building community within the classroom and in the educational activity more broadly.

To build community through theoretical and practical engagement with democratic politics, crucially, can only come to fruition through contact with others. To frame the shift from the individual to the common, we draw on the concept of education as commons, a collective good created and governed by its participants through principles of equality,

cooperation, and democratic participation (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020). Education as commons moves beyond individualised learning to emphasise relationality, mutual support, and shared agency. This perspective helps illuminate how students in DinA came to reimagine themselves as part of a collective political project. One of the key ways this was envisioned was through the module's non-hierarchical, co-constructed nature, where students were not only interacting with lecturers in a different way than in other modules, but were also going beyond the classroom, speaking to their community and with key power holders for their campaigns. This practical experience opens opportunities for students and teachers to expand our social world. This entails an effort to imagine new forms of socialisation and develop an ethos of receptive generosity or radical openness that will allow these forms of socialisation to come into being (Hooks, 2003, p. 36; Coles, 2016). As we move beyond just meeting each other in the classroom or in our local community, towards the creation of a space in which we share narratives and accounts of issues that affect our lives and ways to tackle them, a sense of emergent solidarity shapes the way we relate to each other:

> Actually, it was great because it led to some really deep conversations… it kind of allowed me a way of understanding more about people, realising that we have a lot more in common. By the end I just felt a real sense of solidarity with everyone else because I understood that we were all angry about things and that there's a lot of overlap with the things people are angry about and even if they're not necessarily as passionate as you are about a particular issue, they get it and they understand why you are and they might have other issues they're equally as passionate about (Interview 9).

In this quote, the student expresses how the learning environment allows for these new forms of receptive relations and solidarities to be articulated through shared understanding, realising that if you express yourself, others express themselves, finding shared commitments across differences in experience. In this sense, the importance of fostering the possibility of practice links to the possibility of a community. It is not only that it matters for students to have an outlet to be able to go beyond the theory they learn, but also that they take a critical step into practice that requires going beyond the individual. Practice exists only in the many, in a plurality of active citizens coming together. As we come together, as we juxtapose our experiences with others, we humanise one another. Throughout this particular collective experience, students are not only able to humanise the issues and the outside world through their learning, but they are also able to humanise themselves and each other:

> I think it's a very personal thing, and I think it really humanises the issues, because a lot of issues, people in a classroom setting see as it like a very two-dimensional issue. But as soon as we start personalising it and making the issues—humanising them—I actually can see it how it affects real people… we can see these issues and if we're starting to talk about them, that's a very useful tool, because once again it ties back into storytelling. So [in the case of] lighting… people… knew people that were affected by it, or they [were] affected themselves… [or in the case of] violence… against women, everyone knows a story… that has occurred. So, I think from that first meeting, that classroom setting, personalising, humanising these issues is something that was very apparent, and that was very useful (Interview 7).

The shift from the individual to the common is further witnessed in the module as students engage in individual and group reflections. As interview 7 describes, it is through this reflective practice and engagement with others that they gain a deep understanding and awareness of different forms of oppression and injustice that they might not

have articulated, experienced, or even realised. The practical, real-world experiences that students are listening to, sharing, and trying to change are enlivened by new interactions and forms of being and acting in common. This is intertwined with the ways we challenge ourselves to engage with difference, newness, and the unknown, and our ability to critically reflect on systems and relations that perpetuate inequality, oppression, and injustice.

A key aspect to emphasise here is that the shift to ideas of the common was not exclusively restricted to the way the student–community relation was conceptualised. It extended also to a critique and reimagining of the traditional teacher–student hierarchical relation. We knew that if the module was to live up to its ethos, it needed to ensure that students and teachers participate as equals in the learning practice and in building community as the outcome of this process. In this way, both students and teachers had to unlearn dominant ways of being in the classroom and the forms of learning related to them. This was something that students noticed and reflected upon as follows:

> I felt like you were on the same level as us, it wasn't like a teacher-student atmosphere, it was like we were all a whole, and you [the teacher] were just there to help and support us rather than sort of lecture us, in a way. It was perfect, I think, yeah. (Interview 23)

This was not only undertaken to experience a different way of teaching and learning, but more so, to begin to lay the groundwork, to prefigure, the possibility of focusing on the common rather than the individual. DinA offers the possibility for students and teachers to experience a learning environment where voices are of equal importance, and to carry this aspect out into the community. This journey, from frustration to practice, the individual to the common, is the first pillar of the transformative learning within DinA. It is through this journey that the experience of solidarity begins to arise; a relational solidarity that calls out to be experienced through deliberate attention to the deconstruction and critique of existing relations and power dynamics (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2022, p. 254), a solidarity that allows them and us 'to experience their vulnerability among a community of learners who will dare to hold them up should they falter or fail when triggered by past scenarios of shame—a community that will constantly give recognition and respect' (Hooks, 2003, p. 103). The following section builds on this foundation to show how collective action and activism shape students' learning in designing campaigns to bring about change.

5.2. Challenging Power: From the Experiment of Democratic Politics to Action

We have mentioned earlier that DinA was born out of a yearning for practice and community, two aspects that students in the module also experienced and gravitated towards. We now turn to discuss how that centring of practice and community in the educational experience allows for the opening up of imagining possibilities and transformation. As stated, DinA was not solely intended to challenge dominant university practices and their content, but to create a space that will allow for an active engagement with the experiment of democratic politics and activism. This experiential and political dimension is vital in generating affective ways of learning. A paramount part of achieving these dimensions, and evidencing the possibility of going 'beyond', follows from the interaction with community organisers and ambassadors that are invited into the classroom, which enables students to gain insight and become 'exposed' to key issues that directly affect the life of people and communities:

> I think the things that stand out the most to me when we had… the guests in to share their own experiences, to kind of supplement everything we were already doing was really, really interesting and it really contributed to the overall learning… and then having that extra just really kind of cemented how important

> some of the issues we're tackling are… I think that … was kind of one of the bigger things that made it feel more real as well, rather than just feeling like a, you know, a university module that doesn't mean anything (Interview 4).

The inclusion of these varied voices from "the outside" matters not only because it allows for grappling with different points of views and experiences, but because it allows students to hear about how experiences of struggle can be turned into action through community organising, making the lessons "more real" and cementing the importance of collective action and activism. These opportunities and styles of engagement give students a sense of purpose, and enable them to see collective action as a process that generates new political subjectivities and possibilities:

> …the whole idea of working as part of a group towards a goal and actually making, creating, working towards making an impact on the local community and society as a whole, really gave me a sense of purpose. And obviously like a lot of times even when I have like a calendar full of meetings for the week, I'd still be quite excited to do that because I know that it's something positive, it's something that's going towards—it's going to be better for a wider society… (Interview 2).

It mattered for students not only to create a community amongst themselves, but to also understand and practise community building beyond the classroom. However, voices from the "outside" not only underscored and offered different experiences but also confronted students with a key aspect of community building: power. Through community building and through turning frustration into practice, students began to unpack their preconceived notions of power, coming to terms with this notion as a pillar in political action. Students need to engage with the concept and analysis of power in a way that goes beyond the coercive and repressive aspects we usually associate with it. In DinA, we invite students to think of power more relationally. Within CUK community organising, relational power centres on one-to-one conversations that allow the sharing of stories, identifying the ways change should happen, and agreeing on next steps. Power analysis builds on this and focuses on mapping the key stakeholders relevant to a campaign, how much power they have, and if they will likely agree with the campaign or be in opposition to it. One of the students offered the following reflection:

> So, the first session I can remember was about the—your—you know, one's relationship to power. You know I've always had a kind of cynical outlook on power so I used to think power was terrible, but you know the module's taught us that power's essential to change even though it's, power's often connotative with corruption and just wrongs (Interview 22).

DinA enabled many students to view power in a more complex manner, not as solely coercive but also as having the potential to create and produce. They witness how power works, how it shapes dominant conducts and practices, or might be used to advance counter conducts and alternative practices:

> I think, building power, and how to get into contact with people, and how… one person can connect you to three people, and they need to be connected to more people. And how this is like build[ing]… a whole circle that you could use (Interview 8).

Before DinA, students had had limited opportunities to explore power in practical terms. By first challenging their previous experiences and understandings of power, engaging them with relational power and power analysis exercises, theories, and activities, DinA students are then invited to put such learning into practice by building the networks and alliances that are vital for creating social change, negotiating with power holders, and

holding them to account. As Mouffe (2000, p. 14) suggests, the question of democratic politics and action 'is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values'. Through DinA, students can become engaged as citizens in their communities, driven by a desire for more democratic forms of sociality and collective action. The following reflection from interviewee 14 illustrates this sentiment of finding hope through solidarity and activism:

> [A]t the time I started this module… I lost my passion, and I lost my belief if that makes sense? My faith as to the political experiences that I had… I didn't really personally believe that it will result in a change… but as I started to work with not only my peers but with all the people that came into the module and helped us and taught us, I realised that no, I am not alone, there are a lot of other people actually who are also trying for change… some for the same reasons, some for other reasons, but I realised that contrary to what I thought, it is possible and there are people who are actually achieving it. I realised that yes it is a complex process which may not result in success always which was kind of a problem [for] me because I like to know that if I do something it is going to end up a success, but what I realised was, by working with other people and learning about their experiences that even if you work on something for so long and try to help let's say a group of people or another aspect of life and you try to improve and it doesn't end up in an immediate success, the process you've done and the research you've done will end up contributing to the end goal, no matter if you succeeded now or you succeed later, so I think it really helped me gain faith in the process, and it really helped me gain confidence in the sense that it is actually achievable (Interview 14)

Contrasting preconceived notions of power also allows for rethinking the idea of democratic action focusing not so much on the final goal but on the process. Through the process of coming together and struggling together, we can see that activism is not about solving the issue once and for all, but about the need to keep moving forward, taking action, and doing something in the direction of the goal that we want to achieve. In this sense, experimentation with democratic politics and collective action is not restricted to a definite goal, but rather it becomes a process of lived citizenship (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018) where students, through horizontal and collective forms of deliberation and decision-making, are confident to enact their democratic agency:

> I would say particularly when we made the scripts for like the PFCC [Police Fire and Crime Commissioner] meeting and the Assembly, there was so much organisation that went into that and so much of that built on what we had already learnt in the module and being able to write a script and actually deliver it and feel so empowered that was such a big moment for me in terms of confidence building especially because it's the kind of stuff that I've always dreamed of doing[:]… standing up to people and speaking to powerholders about issues and about people that aren't heard… I can still remember how it felt like at the PFCC meeting when I was sat there and even though I had a script and I was reading off it, I still felt really powerful and I felt like people were listening to me and I felt like my voice was actually being heard and I could write words that had so much power and try and really deliver them with so much conviction that it felt like it was making change (Interview 9).

Throughout the module, by engaging with campaigns that can lead to real action and change with power holders, students can thus experience shifts in the power dynamics in society. The module challenges the preconceptions that students enter the module with and empowers them to recognise their own position, power, and potential to build power

and engage with seemingly previously inaccessible institutions and actors. Interviewee 11 describes the feeling experienced when their actions are seen to have an impact:

> …with the police and with our final presentation when the PC stood up and said "we pledge to help" and it felt really cool because… we no longer felt… like students on a module, it was just… a group of people who are bringing forward something really important and have done all the research and done all the groundwork to get it moving and so it felt nice (Interview 11).

This section discussed how through their engagement with democratic politics and community organising ideas and theories, and by *doing* or *performing* community organising, students (and teachers) are able to develop spaces for collective deliberation and action. It is in the creation of spaces for democratic experimentation and activism where a sense of critical hope emerges, enabling students and teachers to recognise their power as individuals and as a collective in challenging systems of oppression and their capacity to produce social change (Amsler, 2014, 2015; Avery et al., 2024; Schwittay, 2023). We have considered the need to pay particular attention to deconstructing previously held notions of power. For students to feel and act as if they can be active citizens, they first needed to shed a notion of power that would have led to stagnation. In moving from frustration to practice, from the individual to the common, students already begin to appreciate that reimagining arises from experience, but that realisation needs further amplification by allowing and inviting students to understand the key role that power has in wanting to achieve political action. Furthermore, dismantling repressive conceptions of power, and envisioning it as relational and productive, also allows for the realisation that in experiments like this one, of democratic politics, there is no one end goal.

Transformative learning, driven by democratic education and activism, opens up opportunities for students' engagement in a political process without a single predetermined aim, one that 'is no longer a process driven by knowledge about what the citizen is or should become but one that depends on a desire for a particular democratic mode of human togetherness' (Biesta, 2011, p. 97). In other words, students and teachers become agents of democratic politics within and through direct experimentation with the tools and concepts that are discussed in the classroom and practised in community settings. This highlights the importance of not just being taught the theory and methods of democratic politics and community organising, but also collectively working on planning campaigns, decision-making, and actions.

So far, we have addressed the key movements that DinA offers, towards practice and community. Such movements must be accompanied by an analysis of power, which, in turn, allows for the foregrounding of the activist dimension of political action, understood as an ongoing process, not as an end goal. In the next section, we continue along the path of political and democratic possibility, showing how this can be further amplified by the acting and practising of the world we want to see. In order to bring about the world we want, we propose to reimagine HE through the idea of care. It is through the practice and experience of care, we suggest, that students were able to visualise how they would move towards the world they yearn for. When this acting and practising, i.e., this prefiguring, stems from relational solidarity, we centre education around mutual care (Flores & Román Alfaro, 2022, p. 385).

5.3. From a Module to the World We Want: Prefiguration

DinA recomposes practices and relationships within the classroom or, more broadly, within the academic learning environment. Firstly, it redefines the learning process and its setting as a space of community creation. Secondly, it offers the opportunity for a different understanding of power, one which allows for active experimentation with

democratic politics through the campaigns that students plan and act upon together with other relevant actors and organisations. Now, we discuss how these aspects come together. The teaching and learning within this module shift the students' way of being in the world, their understanding of the self, and their relationships with others, allowing for alternative forms of being, doing, and saying to materialise in the here and now.

The interdisciplinary nature of the module was a key aspect in underscoring the prefigurative nature of the module. Students were not learning tools for the purpose of using them *after* they complete their degree. Instead, the module offered the opportunity to deploy those tools *during* their degree and to gain experience in doing so, as they engaged with diverse communities and shared ideas with people working in different disciplines. The interdisciplinary aspect allowed students and staff to appreciate different perspectives, and to work with people from a range of diverse backgrounds, hearing different voices and engaging in a learning process in which a variety of approaches and ideas fit:

> I didn't know [that] whatever you're doing you can join the module, that is a pleasant surprise, because if it was all law people, I think we would have thought on the same lines, instead, we had people from different courses so that was good. And initially the first time, when I joined the module, the first introduction was really good, because we were given the option to tell what problem we saw in the communities… it wasn't like we were being given problems and we were being asked to work on these problems… it was completely free (Interview 5).

The disciplinary diversity of the module also meant that the freedom students had in choosing the topic of their campaigns, which interviewee 5 references, meant that campaigns were enriched by the variety of voices and disciplines. Again, students did not have to wait until after the module to act upon what they had learnt, but they were already doing so as they created structures of deliberation and free-flowing thought. The future we want to see is now: creating a community where diversity and difference are embodied in the analysis of and decision-making about issues that affect our lives. But, of course, these are not simple nor straightforward processes, and the unlearning of traditional notions of power is key once again. Prefiguration does not entail that conflict will not arise but, rather, that when conflict arises, it must be dealt with, precisely, through the channels that we are exercising and bringing about. By trusting participants' abilities to negotiate difference and conflict, we start to understand that the 'conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict' (Hooks, 2003, p. 64) as part of a radical democratic ethos in the making. Interviewee 3 speaks to this as follows:

> Yeah because I feel like, in the module it felt like there was no wrong answers like I feel like you could say something, and it's not going to be like "no"… I felt like everything we had to say had value, so it made me feel much more comfortable sharing ideas… because I didn't feel like I was going to be shot down or wrong about anything… and I found like a lot of the speakers that came in [appeared to validate] what I believed … in my life with my parents and my family. I feel like whenever I say stuff…, political things or philosophical things, they [would] just shoot me down straight away, they don't agree with my thinking whatsoever, and then I always think like "I'm wrong" and then so yeah I found the class quite validating as well that, like I didn't know that it's not wrong to question how we are living life (Interview 3).

The emphasis on the cultivation of an environment where difference is addressed with respect and all voices are worthy enables students to shift their understanding and perspective on power and on their role in the community including their ability to make change:

> I could be an active member of the community in a way that I didn't think I could do, because I thought, you know, I'm just a student I'm 23 years old, why are they going to speak to me; and they did, they did speak to me, I mean we literally spoke to councilors emailed local politicians, councilors, and staff… it's crazy I spoke to people who held lots of land, people who have far, far more money than I have—they were willing to listen to me and [it]… like kind of blew my mind, a little bit (Interview 1).

In all the quotes included in this third section, we can see how transformative learning can bring changes in frames of reference and shift world views. Prefiguration allows us to underscore the importance of the correspondence between visions of a future society and the embodiment of these visions already in the practices that we perform and the spaces that we inhabit. Throughout the module, students found themselves empowered through the very aspects they were learning. Moving from frustration to practice, building community within themselves but also connecting to the outside and understanding this to be a key aspect of exercising democratic politics and activism, each and every one of these aspects meant that what students were practising in the module was already performing the alternatives and possibilities they are striving for. And this realisation, then, culminates in empowerment, where students now know that this module goes beyond the timeframe allocated in their university degree, it is one that they carry on with as they "go out" into the world.

6. Conclusions

This article offers a novel framework for integrating academic activism and prefiguration in higher education, showing how students' experiences of creating community, campaign planning, and prefiguring change generate not only deep transformative learning but also new forms of civic agency and collective action. Through this, we have proposed a model of education as a democratic, community-rooted practice that can challenge the neoliberal university from within. In this paper, we have outlined the learnings and possibilities enabled by DinA. We began by discussing and arguing that higher education is a space coopted by neoliberalism, which strips away the university's role in advancing critique, hope, and transformation. University education in the UK has increasingly moved towards a focus on profit maximisation, individualism, and marketisation (Parker, 2018). In this environment, the role of the university and the way that it interacts with the communities within which it resides and those it creates is called into question (Grant, 2021). As experiences in the university are considered to play a crucial role in students' experimentation with democracy, we believe that transformative learning, community-based pedagogies, academic activism, and prefiguration pose important and critical tools in pursuing an interrogation of the citizenship activity of students and teachers and their potential for social change.

Democratic citizenship cannot be just taught and learned, but rather shaped through a continuous engagement with the experiment of democratic politics (Biesta, 2011, p. 152). Such ideas provided the ground for the development of DinA: democratic citizenship needs to be practised and experienced. How is it, then, that DinA allows students and teachers to act in a way that opens up the possibility of reigniting the transformative potential of education? In this paper, we have identified at least three factors. Firstly: foregrounding community. If we are to turn *frustration into practice,* we must start with the specificity of the local context; if we are to move from *the individual to the common*, we must turn to the community and understand it. In a marketised HE context that tends to encourage students to view their experiences as individual experiences and their degrees as ways to advance their individual careers, there is a need to draw attention to those parts that make up the student community both in and outside the demarcation of the

institution. Secondly: attending to power in new ways. We have seen that for DinA to function, it must be accompanied by a complex idea of power, one that sees such notion not only as repressive but also as relational, productive, and creative. Power is understood through DinA, as a force that moves through every part and member of society, and it is only then that we can move from experience to action. This leads to the third factor: prefiguring our acting and being, performing them as if we have already reached the end goal of the social change we want to see. This is only possible if we account for our context and within it understanding the flow of power as relational and productive.

We need, however, to acknowledge the structural and ethical tensions as between the current context of HE in the UK and critical pedagogy, and we must unpack and explore these tensions in our teaching (Fenwick, 2005). We are, after all, bound by university policies and procedures and so we do not suggest that DinA does not face important challenges and limitations that it has to confront on an ongoing basis. Indeed, the learnings that stem from this experience, as just outlined, are heavily context-dependent. Furthermore, the structure of UKHE as a sector that, as described briefly at the outset of the paper, has lost its critical edge and purpose will not welcome without friction DinA-like initiatives and experiences. Yet, we take it that the essence of the DinA experience has shown there is real scope for student-centred transformative change even in what appears to be a rather hostile environment. While it is true that enacting radical democratic politics through transformative education will never not be met with difficulties, this should not be an excuse to stop attempting to practise alternatives.

The findings and framework developed through DinA have relevance for higher education policy, civic education practice, and third-sector engagement. The model demonstrates how UK universities can reimagine final-year projects not only as academic assessments but as vehicles for community-based democratic participation and public impact. By forging partnerships between universities, students, and local organisations—including through alliances such as Citizens UK—DinA offers a transferable blueprint for advancing civic literacy, participatory democracy, and student wellbeing. It has already informed pedagogical practices within the University of Essex and could be scaled or adapted to other institutions seeking to embed democratic citizenship, social justice, and community engagement into their curriculum design. DinA enacts, as Contu (2018) says, that academics should walk the talk of critical work, where it is not enough to publish critical pieces without taking action to transform disciplines and put those criticisms into action. DinA offers precisely that, an outlet where both the teaching and learning experience morph into a prefigurative praxis. DinA started as a pilot module with 20 students, growing bit by bit each year, each student now having finished their degree and, hopefully, living up to the experiences that DinA allowed them to live. We cannot wait for the world to change, we must bring it forth ourselves, acting as if we have already done so.

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