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Researcher as cognitive activist and the mutually useful conversation

Denzin (2010: 25) tells us that “the perspectives and experiences of those persons who are served by social justice programs must be grasped, interpreted, and understood, if solid, effective, applied programs are to be created”. This point is perhaps a poignant starting place to (re)ask what research is for in our current socio-political juncture. Do we indeed wish educational, sociological and political research to be part of the process that creates, as Denzin assumes it should, ‘solid, effective and applied programs’ for change? If so, as researchers we need to (re)think our positions and our aims.

This autoethnographic paper was born out of the thinking about research methods from research that focussed on the pedagogy in the London Occupy movement in 2011-12 and in particular the encampment outside St. Paul’s Cathedral in the centre of London, UK. The thoughts that are contained within this paper were begun through the process of understanding my own positionality as an educational researcher working both outside a social movement and in solidarity with it. Understanding how to create critical distance from the happenings witnessed whilst attempting to assist the movement from the position of researcher and academic activist. This is not an easy place to live and this kind of work often stands one side or the other of the interstice between hope and despair, solidarity and frustration, and love and bitterness.

In this paper I will make use of my fieldwork from the original research to assist the reader to understand how the thoughts were brought to life during that freezing cold winter of 2011-12 on the pavements outside St. Paul’s, by a ragtag group of committed people trying to change

the way we relate to each other, trying to find a way to understand their current situation, and trying to understand that there is, indeed, an alternative to global capitalism.

Debord (1977: para. 90) writes that

the fusion of knowledge and action must be realised in the historical struggle itself, in such a way that each of these terms guarantees the truth of the other. The formation of the proletarian class into a subject means the organisation of revolutionary struggles and the organisation of a society at the revolutionary moment: it is then that the practical conditions of consciousness must exist, conditions in which the theory of praxis is confirmed by becoming practical theory

It is an emulation of this fusion that this paper attempts to persuade should be examined, to create the confirmation of the theory of praxis, and create of it a practical theory. Research and the researcher can be positioned, if they chose to be, in a place from which this fusion can be achieved through action research type work with activists. This is an adaptation of the usual action research cycle, as political actions are often fluid and fast paced with little time for reflection by those involved. This is where a methodology of cognitive activism is set, in that fast moving world of the occupation, the encampment, the protest or the sit-in, the world of the other, who is also trying to make sense of things and change the world. However, there is a need to carefully think through this position as a collection of new ways of researching activism which accounts for the shifting sands of the newest new social movements and the anarchist turn in their praxis (Blumenfeld, et al, 2013; Day, 2005). Holloway (2010: 12) cautions thus, “if we apply the old concepts, there is a danger that, whatever our intentions, however militant our commitment to communism (or whatever), our thinking becomes an obstacle to the new forms of struggle. Our task is to learn the new language of struggle and, by learning, to participate in its formation”. This could be seen as the task of the activist researcher, or cognitive activism, to *participate* in the formation of new struggles, rather than

follow the old methods, as Holloway says. Merely reporting on the struggles of others with a supposed objective distance or joining unions to better our own terms of employment, are methods that have been tried and tested for many years and whilst these methods are important, we have watched conditions for all but the wealthiest few get worse. Research as ally, and what Denzin (2010) calls critical secretary to social movements and community groups, is founded on the notion that as Schratz & Walker (1995: 2) suggest, “research ... is not a technical set of specialist skills but implicit in social action and close to the ways in which we act in everyday life, for we find increasingly that the worlds of academe and social life, theory and practice, work and family are not really so different but constantly interrupt one another, often in complex ways”. How, then, can researchers fail to return to the notions, well recognised, that social research is not an objective endeavour, researchers are not removed from the effects of the social synthesis that capitalism creates (Holloway, 2010)? Researchers too are affected by the changing political landscape, possibly now, more than ever. In addition, many researchers report feeling, as Holloway (2010) suggests many other people do, particularly those who partake in social and political activism, a misfitting; a misfitting with the capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) of everyday life and a misfitting with the neoliberal institutions in which they find themselves working (Coté et al., 2007) and ever increasingly so. In these terms, and under these conditions, researched and theorised knowledge, and the everyday political actions in the social world, have a responsibility therefore guarantee the truth of the other. Why would researchers who care about such things not join the struggles from their own place in the academy? This position recognises that objectivity too is a value and not one that is subscribed to, as in much feminist research and critical theory (May, 2001). Lather (1986: 64) states that “research which is openly value-based is neither more nor less ideological than is mainstream positivist research. Rather, those committed to the development of research approaches that challenge the status quo and

contribute to a more egalitarian social order have made an epistemological break from the positive insistence upon researcher neutrality and objectivity". In other words, research that is indeed openly-value based is no more or no less the truth of the social world, it merely accepts that research, like the social world and like forms of transformative pedagogical practices, is awash with value judgements, opinions and individual interpretations. Openly value-based research also recognises and accepts that reliability and validity become problematic issues, even though this type of work rejects the more positivistic values associated with these notions, there is a need to address what researchers do instead of strive to apply the positivist methods of ensuring trustworthiness of data. Addressing this could have the effect of uniting research work with a myriad of struggles and actively participating in movements for change both in and outside of academia, thus connecting and allying academia to the constellation of struggles forming outside in real and robustly connected ways. Some suggestions that may assist the thinking in this direction might be Lather's (1986: 66) insistence that we become "vigorously self-aware" in our research design; or Guba's (1981) idea that we use systems of triangulation and reflexivity; or Reason and Rowans' (1981) advice that we do indeed borrow the concepts of validity from traditional research but extend and refine them to become "an interactive, dialogic approach" (p. 240). It also has to be accepted that research work of an activist nature and what other activists learn from their social movement processes is not generalizable, the phenomenon under investigation will probably never happen again and certainly not in the same way or under the same circumstances, activism is very rarely like this. Therefore, we should perhaps not look for the results to be reproduced elsewhere, but rather the learning taken from the event, in other words the research findings, to be thought about, to be modified and reinvented for other times and contexts, by both activists in the traditional sense and those working in solidarity with them, the cognitive activists. This stance recognises the important of a

militant/co-production (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007) between academics and activists as equals and allies. Not merely researching or educating people out of their oppression, but joining them there on the front lines to usefully witness their efforts in solidarity and to analyse the results of those actions, to produce useful knowledge for the next push against the enclosure of neoliberalism. Therefore, activist research work is an attempt to learn the new language of struggle and to create that theory of praxis so that it might, one day, become a practical theory, assisting activist struggle in clear and robust ways. Perhaps then there is a way to assist in the formation, through research activities and dissemination, of the proletarian class into a subject, therefore, assisting, through pedagogical processes delivered in various radical and autonomous spaces, in the organisation of revolutionary struggles, and the organisation of a society at the revolutionary moment? This stance, conviction, point of view, however it is termed, can be justified because

the myth of the objective observer has been deconstructed. The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to the process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the public and private issues being studied

(Denzin, 2010: 23)

Therefore if the researcher is an intrinsic part of the social milieu, as was often attempted in Occupy London in particular, then it is the researchers right, and possibly responsibility, to assist in the (re)formation of that milieu to include equality, justice and choice for all, rather than stand as objective observer carrying out extractive research to swell the archives.

Kincheloe and Berry (2004: 38, my Italics) argue that

when advocates of a critical form of inquiry use the term ‘transformative action’, they gain a deeper sense of what this might mean using the enactivist concept of readiness-for-action. *Knowledge must be enacted*- understood at the level of human beings’

affect and intellect. In a critical context the knowledge we produce must be enacted in light of our individual and collective struggles

otherwise, I ask, what is it for? The findings of this type of research, which serves as critical friend to the social movement, are read, already, by activists as a way to understand from an outsider point of view, the failures and successes of the movement action. This is not a new idea, but adds to the growing literature on the subject and again, is about assisting as ally in movement struggles, rather than ‘culturally invading’ (Freire, 1993) as an outsider researcher. This feedback system, when valued by all parties, allows for the movement to improve its efficacy in the next action, the findings of the research should, of course, always be open to challenge, but they are valuable to the movement and to academic thinking nonetheless. This echoes Stake’s (2000: 19) idea that “we expect an inquiry to be carried out so that certain audiences will benefit – not just to swell the archives, but to help persons toward further understandings”, but the idea proposed here takes the notion further, beyond understanding, and into action or more importantly, *enaction*. For example, Shukaitis and Graeber (2007: 14) argue that “what makes Holloway unusual is not that he is writing theory but that he is writing theory that explicitly argues that writing theory is not enough”. The cognitive activist should write theory, of course, but if that theory is of no use to anyone but other theorists, then it loses its social usefulness. If it is not theory developed or co-produced with activists, then how would it be helpful in their struggles? Shantz (2013: 15) adds that “real opposition to states and capital requires more than momentary joy. It requires foundations and infrastructures that contribute to significant advances while maintaining a basis for ongoing struggles”. This is where the cognitive activist comes in; taking the spontaneous learning from those eruptions of momentary joy, of elated movement, of fluidic, organic learning, and initiating a reflective and critical examination of what was imagined, what was hoped for, what was brought about, and what went by the wayside to be used in other moments, or

abandoned all together by these and other movements and initiatives. In turn, this would contribute to building resilient infrastructures to maintain ongoing activist and social struggles in specific ways. The value of research needs to become apparent outside of the academy, to those who should be, but often currently are not, benefitting from it, in order to ensure these specific ways in which research can assist the struggles: cognitive activism is the theory and reflection stage of the praxis of theory and action and this is a necessary part of movement building and learning. There is, all too often, an insider/outsider dichotomy in research with social movements, which need not be so if research with these groups and individuals is thought of by both parties as activism in and of itself. However, as long as most research work is locked behind journal paywalls rather than freely shared, this may not be possible. Freire (1998: 30) insisted that “critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply blah, blah, blah and practice pure activism”. Therefore, the mix of social action by social movements and critical theorisation of that action could enable this relationship to be realised. Activists are often, as explored earlier, too busy with the flow and fluidity of their movements to undertake theorisation, and many are so passionately committed to their cause that a critical stance is difficult, if not impossible. Holloway (2010: 12) concurs that, “social change is not produced by activists, however important activism may (or may not) be in the process”. He also generalises important social change to “the outcome of the barely visible transformation of the daily lives and activities of millions of people” and the question begs how those barely visible transformations occur in the lives of ordinary people, and moreover, how could their occurrence and visibility be maintained to eventually produce more fundamental changes that constitute transformation? Holloway insists that “we must look beyond activism, then, to the millions and millions of refusals and other-doings, the millions and millions of cracks that constitute the material base of possible radical change”, surely, research should be part of

those cracks, of those other-doings? It should also be part of the knowledge which assists and enables those cracks, those barely visible transformations to occur, grow, find each other, and become transformations.

This activist form of research can be understood, perhaps, as a form of what Whitehead and McNiff (2006: 39-40) call living logics:

living logics are logics of the imagination. They are the kinds of logics that see the potentials in everything, and that see everything as in relation to everything else....living logics are living in the sense that they have emergent property, the capacity for self-recreation in infinite and innovative ways....they are the logics of imagination because they see future potentials within present forms, they celebrate visions, the realisation of values, and the redemptive qualities of transforming pain into joy....moving into living logics however can be risky. You are always on the brink, never knowing what the next step will be. This is a commitment to learning, embracing the unknown future and accepting that the present is all we have....this is an open-ended, acceptant form of life, a commitment to risk, but which also has untold rewards

As Kindon et al. (2010: 13) suggest, “the key is an ontology that suggests that human beings are dynamic agents capable of reflexivity and self-change, and an epistemology that accommodates the reflexive capacities of human beings within the research process”; particularly if the concept of the research process is thought of more widely to encompass a ‘grand’ action research cycle, forming a feedback loop to the social movements and other doings under investigation and assisting them to change their practice as a result and invite the researcher in to their future actions to theorise around those too. The living logics of Whitehead and McNiff containing the use of imagination, or fictive elements, in Kincheloe and Berry’s (2004) words, that allow the researcher not only to report on and understand the social world, but also to imagine how the practices employed to change it might be bettered and improved to therefore be tested in the activities of those activists with which these cognitive activists work, this is the value of cognitive activism. It would be accurate then that the researcher would always be on the brink, not knowing what the next step might be, there

would be risk, but as Kincheloe and Berry (2004: 31) say “the appreciation of the complexity of everyday life and the difficulty of understanding it demands humility on the part of researchers. Bricoleurs understand that certainty and interpretive finality are simply not possible given such complications”. This certainly does not mean, however, that ‘findings’ are not of interest here, but that any findings from research have to be open to different interpretations and the researcher has to have the humility to understand that others, both academics and activists, may see the same thing differently, or add to their original analysis in creative and innovative ways. The interest of the findings in this concept of research can often be to generate new questions for others to answer, questions for the social movement under study to think about in preparation for their next big push. Therefore, a research epistemology, which embraces this risk, this boundary work, and most importantly the humility required to not have the answers but constantly generate questions and more risks to be taken, would have the potential to take us to places that would previously have been unimagined and unseen in past research work done without this activist commitment.

It also has to be remembered that, as Schratz and Walker (1995: 16) rightly remind us, “we each perceive objects and events differently, and having perceived them so we are likely to disagree about which direction we should go in search of what might seem the same quarry”. This may seem to further complicate issues, however in order to add to discussions and diverse analyses about past actions, and those yet to come, this need not be seen as a problem for academic nor activist. As Brydon-Miller (2009: 253) asserts, “research that expands our understanding of the world in any way should be valued, and it is this very diversity of ways of generating knowledge that allows us to deepen our understanding of social issues and to develop effective strategies for addressing common concerns”. Consequently, it does not matter that we will all interpret things differently because our different interpretations will result in all those involved, researcher and traditional activists, having a wealth of directions

to discuss, try out, dismiss, debate. In other words, agonisms and confrontation, the key to a healthy and radical democracy (Graeber, 2013; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2013).

Shukaitis & Graeber (2007: 11) similarly describe the notion of research activism resulting in multiple ways of seeing and knowing this way:

it is a process of collective wondering and wandering that is not afraid to admit the question of how to move forward is always uncertain, difficult, and never resolved in easy answers that are eternally correct. As an open process, militant investigation discovers new possibilities within the present, turning bottlenecks and seeming dead ends into new possibilities

Another advantage to this more activist stance to research is that it, “constructs a far more active role for humans in shaping reality and creating the research processes and narratives that represent it. Such an active agency rejects deterministic views of social reality that assume the effects of particular social, political, economic, and educational processes”

(Kincheloe & Berry, 2004: 2-3). Why would politically concerned researchers not want to do this? Denzin (2009: 216) reminds us that,

As researchers, we belong to a moral community. Doing interviews is a privilege granted us, not a right that we have. Interviews are part of the dialogic conversation that connects all of us to the larger moral community. Interviews arise out of performance events. They transform information into shared experience. They do more than move audiences to tears. They criticize the world the way it is and offer suggestions of how it could be different.

It also has to be remembered that “research is personal, emotional, sensitive, should be reflective, and is situated in existing cultural and structural contexts” (Coffey 1999: 12). As such, knowledge produced through research has a right and a duty to be something that can result in an enactivism, even if that enactivism is a mere ‘trying out’ of the imaginary of the theoretical ways in which we can conceive of the future made better. This was evident in Occupy, for example with the predominately anarchist prefigurative politic that they attempted to practice. They enacted a form of participatory democracy, based on theory.

They, however, did not critique this enactment, but it was critiqued by many outside the movement (and some within). The nuances that were discovered by this enactivism were further theorised and will be helpful, should this model of direct democracy be enacted again. This is why bricolage is one of the suitable conceptualisations of research methodology for this form of cognitive activism:

bricoleurs seek to identify what is absent in particular situations.....seek to cultivate a higher form of researcher creativity that leads them, like poets, to produce concepts and insights about the social world that previously did not exist. This rigour in the absence can be expressed in numerous ways, including the bricoleurs ability:

- To imagine things that never were
- To see the world as it could be
- To develop alternatives to oppressive existing conditions
- To discern what is lacking in a way that promotes the will to act
- To understand that there is far more to the world than we can ever see

(Kincheloe & Berry, 2004: 20)

This is what makes bricolage an inherently activist research methodology, maybe even a disposition of the cognitive activist, these commitments to see what is absent and bring them to the fore for debate and deliberation with those being researched and other interested parties. Of course, as Arditì (2008: 89) declares “it is difficult now to identify what counts as emancipatory politics in a landscape dominated by politics-as-usual and sprinkled with outbursts of principled indignation about the state of the world”, which is why, I argue, researchers should heed Holloway’s (2010: 141) assertion that “any society depends on some sort of connection between people’s activities. There must be some sort of knitting together of what people do”, in the case examined here, the activist and academic communities, learning together what it might take to collectively change the world. Yet, it is not enough to work only with activists, not if this type of research work is to be truly radical. Schostak and

Schostak (2008: 17) prompt us to recognise that “the opportunity to engage in research radically involves identifying what is at stake for people engaging in ‘normal’ everyday practices, those practices of ‘fitting in’ and getting others to ‘fit in’ or engaging in strategies in response to their refusal to fit in”. At first glance, this may seem as if those not actively participating are being ‘mined’ for information for some sort of intellectual vanguardism. This is a position that I would argue needs to be avoided if researchers are to truly create a more active role for those being researched and a more equitable and socially just research paradigm that is able to respond to refusals to fit in, and not only respond, but *to assist*. Here I argue that this vanguard position and the mere ‘mining’ of research participants is not present in this activist paradigm, because

it is indeed the political that is at stake here, and the possibility of its elimination. And it is the incapacity of liberal thought to grasp its nature and the irreducible character of antagonism that explains the impotence of most political theorists in the current situation – an impotence that, at a time of profound political change, could have devastating consequences for democratic politics

(Mouffe, 2005: 1-2)

In other words, there is an imperative at work here that means that the information about the life-world of one of the actors in the praxis of action and theory must be acknowledged by the other who is in a position to make changes, whichever way around that might be at the precise moment. This is of course not to say that these identities are fixed and unchanging. There is always room for a person to pass from one stage, for example that of passive participation, into another, for example that of activist, should a flame be ignited that incites them to do so. This applies not only to the passage from non-active to activist, but also from either of these positions to researcher, or cognitive activist, and vice versa. This is because if research is to be produced that is not elitist, we should acknowledge and appreciate that to make bricolage, or indeed any research methodology, “the exclusive province of

professionals and scholars ... is to perpetuate the same forms of elitism that have marred and scarred everyday life in Western societies for centuries” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004: 18-9). If justice and equity are the goal, then perpetuating that elitism with our ‘expertise’ and theoretical knowledge, should be replaced with sharing this way of knowing and exploring other ways of knowing equally. As Kincheloe and Berry go on to say,

humans are meaning-making life forms and need to be involved in experiences that help us sophisticate our ability to do so. The bricolage provides a beginning framework for helping all people in all walks of life construct systems of meaning-making. Such systems grant us ways of producing knowledge that helps us make sense of our species’ past as well as our own personal past. Such knowledge empowers us to construct a more equitable, exciting, just and intelligent future

If we wish to move toward this position of the more equitable, exciting, just, and intelligent future, then we may have to accept that “true revolutionary knowledge would have to be different. It would have to be a pragmatic form of knowledge that lays bare all such pretensions; a form of knowledge deeply embedded in the logic of transformational practice” (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007: 12), this view is evidenced by the prefigurative turn that the newest social movements are taking and learning from. This new form of learning, of educational engagement, through a prefigurative politic, shows a new way of not just thinking about, but enacting and re-theorising through lived theorisation (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007), revolutionary knowledge that could lead to advancements in all sites of learning. In turn this could bring education back into the realms of a public good, rather than an individualised personal investment for a future within capitalism. I would argue, as Shukaitis and Graeber (2007: 12) do, that there is a need to understand in our research and activist endeavours that “what we perceive as fixed self-identical objects are really processes. The only reason we must insist on treating objects as anything else is because, if we saw them as they really are, as mutual projects, it would be impossible for anyone to claim ownership of them. All liberatory struggle therefore is ultimately the struggle against identity”. Many

researchers' identities as the producers of knowledge and theorists would have to change if they were really to become *co-producers* of knowledge, to commit to live, collective theorising with others, and to share their knowledge of research practices and methods as part of a revolutionary process. This requires letting go of the old and stale idea that our 'scientific knowledge' is somehow superior to the lived knowledge of others, because as Debord (1977: para. 82) insists, "the revolutionary viewpoint of a movement which thinks it can dominate current history by means of scientific knowledge remains bourgeois". This has far reaching effects for researchers, not only in the social world, but also in their own profession.

Kincheloe and Tobin (2006: 5) have this to say about the abstraction of knowledge in educational research:

in the epistemological domain we begin to realise that knowledge is stripped of its meaning when it stands alone. This holds profound implications in education and research because more positivistic forms of educational science have studied the world in a way that isolates the object of study, abstracts it from the contexts and interrelationships that give it meaning. Thus, to be a critical researcher that takes the complexity of the lived world into account, we have to study the world 'in context'

However, in addition to the abstracting of the object of study, the positivistic view of research has the effect of abstracting the researcher from the interrelationships in the world that make up society, separating the researcher from the Other under investigation. This supports the view that researchers should think of themselves as, and become, cognitive activists in order for them to become part of those interrelationships with others and not stand alone outside of society trying to reach that illusive objective distance. As Holloway (2010: 133) asserts, "an 'other politics' must be based on the critique of the very separation of politics from the rest of our everyday activity, on the overcoming of the separation of politics from doing", here I would add research to 'politics', as the two practices cannot be disentangled. There is no tension between the insider (activist) and outsider (researcher) perspective for some, often only life stages separate one from the other, individuals can do one thing at one point in their lives and another at a different point, lives are a tapestry to be sewn. However, in this

paradigm, what it means to be activist or researcher begins to blur and consequently, each can work in solidarity with the other in the pursuit of the same goal. In addition, Howe & MacGillivray (2009: 577) tell us that “what social researchers ought to do in the name of deliberative democracy has to be judged in terms of what they can do”. This extends to the researchers own life situation and what contribution they can make at any point. Merrifield (2011: 4) puts it this way:

interestingly, my generation’s Marxism is a tale of two Marxisms, because we are both young and old enough to have our feet in both camps: we understand the need to read Capital as well as the desire to put bricks through Starbucks’ windows; we forty-somethings understand the political purchase of sober critique and slightly mad destructive acts

This idea of understanding action as both of these things: ‘mad destructive acts’ and as ‘sober critique’ and not one or the other allows individuals to “take seriously our creative responsibility to break the lenses of present ways of viewing the world” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004: 19). This is a part of a radical and activist research ethos because it is understood that “such lenses need to be broken ... because such frames have caused such heartache and suffering on the part of those who fall outside the favoured race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and ability-related demographic” (ibid). Kincheloe and Berry go on to insist that “the blurred genres of bricolage highlight the mode of difference that creates new respect for the subjugated and the knowledges they produce”. This potential new respect from the bricoleur, or activist researcher, for subjugated knowledges pertains not only to activists and people in the ‘outside world’, but in the academy too. Some disciplines are thought of as more prestigious than others, a notion which reflects the recent attacks on the UK education system at all levels by a highly ideological government (for discussions of this see for example Bailey, et al, 2011; Collini, 2012; Cowden & Singh, 2013; McGettigan, 2013; Williams, 2013). Yet, as education (and other) researchers, we know how important what we

do is. However, I would argue that that importance is redoubled if the research carried out is grounded in the reality and context of the current socio-political world, otherwise it is just alienated, commodified labour: “labour, as alienated labour, is separating ourselves from ourselves, a tearing asunder of ourselves and our activities” (Holloway, 2010: 88).

(Re)creating academic labour as cognitive activism grounds researchers in our relationship with the social world and thus reconnects us to our doing. This can also extend from research work to pedagogical activities, as they are intrinsically connected to the ‘world-outside’ academe as well. Students in higher education, who are now paying high fees to attend, deserve to have those conversations about why this is so, and what might be done about it. To reconnect, in both research and teaching activities, Graeber (2004: 11) insists, that we “reject self-consciously any trace of vanguardism. The role of intellectuals is most definitively not to form an elite that can arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then lead the masses to follow”. Denzin (2010: 19-20) advises that researchers should “in the spirit of inclusion . . . listen to our critics. But in doing so we must renew our efforts to de-colonize the academy, to honour the voices of those who have been silenced by dominant paradigms. Let us do so in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration and mutual self-respect”. In doing so there is both a creation and learning of “a new language of an emerging constellation of struggle” (Holloway, 2010: 12), within our research work, our classrooms, work places, and connected to the wider struggles outside. It is about making connections that we, as researchers, might take reasoned theory, as well as theoretically constructed fictive societies, into the classroom and out to the public and create an invigorated and lively intellectual public from the thus largely hidden set of public intellectuals. As Schostak and Schostak (2013: 3) quite rightly say, “this is not about imposing one’s will on the world about and upon others. Rather if the use of reason is to be in public, then it is about the courage to create the organisations necessary for the public to use reason freely in all matters”, including universities. Holloway

(2010: 3) is correct, “we protest and we do more. We do and we must. If we only protest, we allow the powerful to set the agenda”. The years of doing things the old ways have proved this time and again. This agenda setting now must change, the agenda should be opened up to the fictive and utopian, the radical imagination (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014), thinking of research as resistance (Brown & Strega, 2005) and producing living knowledge (Roggero, 2011). Bringing this back into the many classrooms across the world and using it to enliven debate about what got us here and where might we now go as societies and peoples. This entails thinking through and enacting our research as activism, and our offices and classrooms as activist spaces, using as Levitas (2013) might say, utopia as method.

One of the ways in which the notion of the cognitive activist and the research act can be integrated is to examine how we interact with our research subjects, in particular here, within the interview situation. I concur with Kvale and Brinkman (2009: 2) when they say that “the research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee”. Therefore it can be seen as the *interaction* creating the knowledge in those situations, especially where the researcher is aiming to contribute to the struggle. This is not about the researcher ‘educating’ the participant through the interview process, but about mutual storytelling and adding to each other’s knowledge equally and with respect, with the skills and understanding each have about the situation. Coffey (1999: 23) adds, “fieldwork involves the enactment of social roles and relationships, which places the self at the heart of the enterprise. A field, a people and a self are crafted through personal engagements and interactions among and between researcher and researched”. The important point here is that interaction rather than patient listening produces two-way research knowledge, rather than ‘extracting’ information from the ‘informant’. During my research with Occupy in particular, many of the people I interacted with asked whether they could

record our ‘interviews’, a request which has never been declined. Therefore as part of this ongoing notion of cognitive activism, I want to explore the interview as a ‘mutually useful conversation’. A reminder, then of Denzin’s words:

Doing interviews is a privilege granted us, not a right that we have. Interviews are part of the dialogic conversation that connects all of us to the larger moral community. Interviews arise out of performance events. They transform information into shared experience. They do more than move audiences to tears. They criticize the world the way it is and offer suggestions of how it could be different

(Denzin 2009: 216)

Kvale and Brinkman (2009: 33) assert that “we should not regard the research interview as completely open and free dialogue between egalitarian partners”, overall I tend to agree.

There can be many power plays throughout the course of interviews but predominantly the interviewer holds the majority of the power in the specific research situation as they initiated the interaction. Kvale and Brinkman do concede however that there may be some exceptions, wherein “some interviewers attempt to reduce the power asymmetry of the interview situation by collaborative interviewing where the researcher and subject approach equality in questioning, interpreting and reporting” (p. 34). However, they also go on to assert that “an interview is literally an inter view, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009: 2). It is these two final assertions that are possibly of most interest to the notion of the mutually useful conversation.

In my research I am interested in what people participating in alternatively organised education are learning and have to say about it, not only about the education but also about the context of that education, how do they engage with the socio-political context, the aspirations for that education, and the hopes and desires that that education had induced? I consistently find that people are not only interested in talking about these things, but they are also interested in reflecting upon what has been said within an interview and learning from that too, particularly in activist contexts. I have also felt that in order to lessen the inequality

between us, and hopefully get the interviewee to open up and not to censor what they said, I should converse rather than interview: we both have information, knowledge and experience that is useful to the other in our respective journeys. This transforms us both from interviewer and interviewee into collaborators in the act of knowledge building and production. Wolcott (2005: 57) suggests that “there are always questions about the nature of the relationship between fieldworker and informant: why was one willing to talk to the other, how much confidence can be placed in what was revealed, and how each has benefitted from the exchange”. These are again, important questions. However, I think in this context an attempt at an answer can be made. It is often reported during conversations with activists and community organisers that people are willing to talk because they feel that they are doing something important. They want to explore that further through the conversations which give them a chance to reflect. On occasion, researchers are thanked for producing the space and witness that this situation allows. In addition, I think that a great deal of confidence can be placed in what is therefore revealed due to the answer to the third question asked by Wolcott; each of us benefit from the exchange, and not just the exchange but also the artefacts, reflections, new learning, and ways of thinking that result from it. Much effort is made to relieve the inequality that interviews often entail; the interview is set up as a form of storytelling, with interaction. The interaction is as honest and candid as possible and often the researcher is able to inform the activist (or other interviewee) and their thinking with interjections of how theory supports their experience, how they had reinvented forms of education that were theoretically sound as interventions and interruptions into the status quo. This is where the praxis of theory and action begins: as academics we read theory and apply it in our research, as practitioners they practice, as mentioned, usually in fluid and fast-paced situations. Often, the practitioner knows the theory that underpins their political practice, so the researcher is able to interject theory that allows the activist to think about their practice in

other ways, in pedagogical ways, in the case of my specific research. Shukaitis and Graeber (2007: 37) insist that “these moments embody not just practices but are in themselves ways of understanding the world and forms of research in action”. Kincheloe and Tobin (2006: 6) put it this way, “to be in the world is to be in relationship. People are not abstract individuals who live as fragments, in isolation from one another”, the hope here is that “in these moments, borders that separate people burst open into renewed periods of social creativity and insurgencies” (Shukaitis & Graeber, 2007: 37). I hope that through my research I am creating the possibility that we are no longer researcher and respondent, but human beings collaboratively finding a way to assist each other in making the world a better place through creative conversation and reflection. There is, however, a need to maintain a sense of strangeness during fieldwork (Coffey, 1999), this can be achieved in activist/educational research by merely using the politics of the movement or organisation being researched as contextualisation and the pedagogical aspects as the central focus, this knocks off balance the usual inquiry into these spaces. I argue that this allows educational researchers to work in solidarity politically, whilst maintaining a critical distance through a strangeness for the research subjects: enquiry about the pedagogy, thus creating an estrangement from the emerging ‘normal responses’, which activists are used to giving to political theorists and social movement scholars. An additional reasoning for this approach however, is that, as The Invisible Committee (2009: 14) suggest, “the past has given us far too many bad answers for us not to see the mistakes were in the questions themselves”, maybe the questions were wrong before, maybe more connection, more subjective understanding, more human solidarity is what is needed to really understand research knowledge as a tool of radical change and educational engagement? Similarly, Kincheloe and Berry’s (2004: 74) bricolage focussed response may well be that “bricolage is dealing with ... a double ontology of complexity: first, the complexity of objects of inquiry and their being in the world; second,

the nature of the social construction of human subjectivity, the production of human ‘being’”. In other words, we are both, the interviewer and the interviewee, being produced in some way by the interaction, our subjectivities being (de/re)constructed in the moment of interaction, in however small or significant a way.

The ‘mutually useful conversations’ also create a reported feeling of inclusion in the research, because a dialogue has been initiated between the research and the research topic which may go beyond interviewing to engage participants in critical give and take (Howe & MacGillivray, 2009). This critical give and take is what has the potential to create the mutual usefulness of the conversation. Moreover, as Stake (2000) upholds, we expect audiences to benefit from our research, our research should not just to swell the archives, but help toward further understandings between people. This idea further justifies the dialectic nature of the mutually useful conversation as it invites not only descriptive accuracy and critical give and take but helps persons to better understand their own actions, as well as *understanding the critical power of research*. This has the effect of creating a more useful witness to the life worlds of the research collaborators by feeding back in a form of praxis to the movements and communities the research addresses. I would argue that this recognition of the “complex ontological importance of relationships alters the basic foundations of the research act and knowledge production process” (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004: 73-4) to a kind of ‘grand’ action research cycle, wherein the fluidity of the activism does not allow for an actual action research project, but does have all the traits of one on a slower, more disjointed cycle. In turn, this creates better understanding of the role of the Other in the critical reflection of one’s own position. Kincheloe and Berry (2004: 27) also assert that “in this context an autopoietic process is constructed as new modes of knowledge emerge in the interaction of these multidimensional perspectives”. This allows “the adept bricoleur to set up the bricolage in a manner that produces powerful feedback loops – constructs that in turn synergise the research

process”. Thinking of the overall process in this way has the potential to make the research report an analysis *and extension* of what happened. This would then be ‘fed back’ to the movements that the research was attentive to. This sits on an ontology explained here by Whitehead and McNiff (2006: 23); “if you see yourself as part of other people’s lives, and they of yours, you may adopt an insider approach, which would involve you offering descriptions and explanations for how you and they were involved in mutual relationships of influence”. This explanation potentially makes obsolete the insider/outsider tensions expressed by many activists and involves taking a fresh look at the necessary role of the researcher as part of the activist circle in the context of radical research for social change.

The mutually useful conversation is, of course, just one aspect of the cognitive activism that this paper seeks to explore. But in the ethos of the activism explored here, other aspects can, and indeed should, be added by others whose wish is to contribute to the constellation of struggles for a better world with the tools, ideas and theories that they have at their disposal. Thinking through the lived and perceived dreamlands and dystopias, constructing theoretical and lived new futures and forms of praxis. We are currently living in interesting and dangerous times and a socially useful way of conducting, disseminating and utilising research work needs to be found now, more than ever.

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