

## Research articles

# How research into citizenship education at university might enable transformative human rights education

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## Abstract

This article presents a new research design for pedagogical research at university. The design demonstrates how personal and cultural citizenship education can be a form of transformative human rights education by nurturing citizens who challenge patterns of exclusion. It draws on shared traditions of citizenship and human rights education that have focused on lived experiences of injustice and uses spaces that mitigate prevailing power structures. These ideas have shaped a new pedagogical action research design that uses theories and practices of transformational learning, authentic reflection, and participatory theatre to stimulate 'becomings' in civic identity and agency. 'Becoming' is a form of dialogical knowledge arising from profound moments of empathy and solidarity. In these moments participants recognise the human dignity of excluded others and share experiences of injustice, which expands their sense of community and agency. The research design is a potential alternative to more market-driven global citizenship education at university.

## Keywords

Civic identity and agency, higher education, pedagogical research, personal and cultural citizenship education, transformative human rights education

## Higher education at a crossroads

Adopting transformative education for human rights is one of the ways in which higher education can respond to rapid social and planetary change (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). The International Commission has challenged universities to prioritise pedagogies that promote core values of ‘respect, empathy, equality and solidarity’ (International Commission on the Futures of Education, p. 59). Personal and cultural forms of citizenship education (Osler and Starkey, 2005) that focus on transforming civic identities through empathy, compassion and solidarity can contribute to this agenda. This is one way in which the practices of education for citizenship and human rights are symbiotic; understanding of the one complements realisation of the other (Jerome, 2018).

Whilst there is good evidence that the learning of civic norms and values at university can support respect for the rights of others, there is comparatively little examination of how academics can research and design pedagogical interventions to achieve these outcomes (Sloam et al., 2021, p. 23). Where universities run global citizenship education programmes, civic values are diluted by an emphasis on skills for employability (Hammond & Keating, 2017) and this leads to a disconnect with students’ everyday lived experience (Sen, 2021). This predominance of neoliberal power structures in higher education was not addressed in the International Commission’s report (Elfert & Morris, 2022). This problem was evident in my own practice. Despite being taught human rights law, students wished for time and space away from performative pressures to explore each other’s civic beliefs and practices (von Berg, 2019; see similar findings in other social science disciplines – Muddiman, 2020).

Therefore, this study was devised to test how certain pedagogical research methods could stimulate learning of civic identities and agencies that respect rights, whilst being sensitive to university students’ concerns and interests. It draws on two specific shared approaches to citizenship and human rights education: i) looking at the students’ lived experience, especially injustices in their own communities, (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018); ii) distancing research participants from formal pressures in liminal (Swerts, 2017) or ‘third’ spaces (Blanchard & Nix 2019, p. 73). These approaches were incorporated into a novel action research design that used transformative pedagogical practices as research methods to stimulate reflexivity on how students see themselves in relation to others. These practices encompassed authentic and critical reflection on civic identity and agency, transformational learning through critical incidents, and Forum and Image Theatre (explained in detail under ‘Pedagogical practices and methods’ in the section on research design below). This is proposed as a new transformative research design for ‘pedagogical research’ (Starkey et al., 2014) where a teacher-researcher enables young participants to explore what matters to them in an ethically transparent and participatory way. It is novel because these methods are combined in order to complement each other.

This type of intervention is particularly needed in higher education sectors such as that of the U.K., which prioritise the student as a consumer and worker (Della Porta, 2020) rather than viewing him/her as ‘an interdependent, caring and other-centred human being’ (Lynch et al., 2007, p. 2).

The paper first explains the conceptual framework and relevant literature. It then describes the research design at length, before turning to findings and conclusions.

### **How young people see themselves as citizens and how this can be transformed at university**

In order to understand transformations in students’ norms, beliefs and practices, a conceptual framework of civic identity and agency is considered first. This is justified in normative terms by a sociological theory of human rights and citizenship. This framework is examined against the empirical research to generate the research questions.

Citizenship education and human rights education complement one another by nurturing democratic societies, either through cultivating citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities or through the promotion and protection of human rights (Keet and Zembylas, 2018). Separate strands from citizenship education and human rights have underpinned this study. These are, firstly, the importance of young people having space to explore their own everyday understandings of citizenship (Biesta and Lawy, 2006) and, secondly, the acknowledgement of the human dignity of the other as a way to expand the moral community of rights-holders (Turner, 1993). Citizenship is, descriptively, membership of a political community. Normatively, citizenship refers to attributes that help sustain a particular version of a political community (Kymlicka, 2002). Scholars of civic identity have identified personal and collective elements of personal reflection and civic engagement (Viola, 2020; Youniss et al., 1997). This understanding is twofold: firstly, beliefs, values and norms concerning citizenship as civic identity; secondly, the ability and self-belief to act to further these as a citizen as civic agency. The cultivation of agency is fundamental to citizenship and human rights education (Jerome, 2018; McCowan, 2009). Agency involves the setting of goals based on values drawn from a personal identity that invests activities with meaning (Archer, 2000; Bandura, 2001; Osler & Starkey, 2005). A challenge in using the concept of identity is that individuals are not always capable of understanding and representing themselves, and so interpretation of the data must account for this.

The beliefs, values and norms of civic identity are constructed by the individual through the process of reflection and the drawing out of meaning from social experience (Haste, 2004). Constructivists understand values as the ‘lens through which individuals filter and process information and experience’ that carry ‘explanations for events, narratives, norms, and

prescriptions' (Haste, 2010, p. 163). Norms are understood as social rules supported by either empirical or normative expectations of how others will act (Bicchieri, 2006). It is suggested that the values and norms of citizenship are those that explain how one should act as a member of a political community towards others. This is based on Turner's (1993) sociological theory of human rights and citizenship, which argues that moral communities that respect human rights are created through collective empathy and compassion for the plight of others. This is achieved through respect for human dignity, whose core idea is that all human beings have intrinsic value (Barrett, 2022).

This normative and theoretical position is justified by the social, political, and economic context of modern Britain. Civic identity and agency in the UK is moving towards greater individualised practices of citizenship (Henn & Foard, 2014) and a far greater diversity in social mores and identities (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). This is accompanied by officially sanctioned hostility towards immigrants and refugees or 'bordering' (Yuval Davis et al., 2018), against a background of persistent relative poverty (Cribb et al., 2021, p. 87). Such rapid movement towards greater intolerance and inequality is pertinent to my research site, and community tensions caused by this injustice should be addressed by citizenship and human rights education.

As far as the evidence base is concerned, it mainly consists of young people, as they form the majority of the undergraduate population (OECD, 2018, p. 426). Young people's civic norms and values are learned in their early years, from family and peers (Quintelier, 2015) and through schools and extracurricular activities (Keating et al., 2011). Studies of young British people's civic identities show that they reflect a range of beliefs, values, and understandings that are not necessarily consistent or coherent (Hylton et al., 2018). This is because civic identity comprises both an understanding of one's place within the community and prospects for action (Viola, 2020), understood here as civic identity and civic agency which are 'contingent and continually negotiated... [and] reshaped in response to practice and experience' (Smith et al., 2005, p. 440). My own law students synthesised hybrid civic identities. These were comprised of norms of equal treatment of others, influenced by close friendships at university, and employment-oriented values influenced by the institution (von Berg, 2019). We know little about how this dynamic process can be affected by an educational programme in one of today's UK universities.

There is an emerging literature on education at university for human rights and citizenship. Largely, human rights education provides more radical alternatives (Blanchard & Nix, 2019) than global citizenship education (Fanghanel & Cousin, 2012; Hammond & Keating, 2017; Sen, 2021). Little research has been done on citizenship education at university (McCowan, 2012). Universities' efforts to teach global citizenship have been criticised for overlooking students'

everyday experiences (Sen, 2021) and being overly influenced by employability (Hammond & Keating, 2017). Consequently, I chose not to use global citizenship education in order to encourage students to engage with the everyday spaces where they experienced and lived citizenship or their citizenship-as-practice (Biesta and Lawy, 2006), and I acknowledge other more critical approaches to global citizenship e.g., Andreotti (2006). There is a need for studies of how citizenship education can enable students to critically address the culture in which they live, rather than be co-opted by it. Radical pedagogy for human rights at university provides a better route for transformative learning by engaging with injustice in students' own lives and seeking more ethical relationships with the marginalised (Blanchard & Nix 2019, p. 66-67).

Citizenship education shares core commitments with human rights education; to develop an informed critical understanding of the world, to treat young people as active learners, and to empower them to make positive change (Jerome, 2018). This study draws on personal and cultural citizenship education (Osler & Starkey, 2005), and acknowledges that cultivating knowledge and competences should form part of any larger intervention. The transformative tradition seeks to shape students' own personal beliefs and potential for action (Banks, 1995; O'Sullivan et al., 2002). Transformative learning is rooted in profound changes in one's 'thoughts, feelings and actions' (O'Sullivan et al., 2002, p. xvii), and this leads to the active participation of students 'to make their classrooms, schools, and communities more democratic and just' (Banks 1995, p. 20). In essence, the transformation of the learner predicates transformative action. This occurs in a dynamic process where there is 'greater understanding, appreciation, empathy, and capacity for critique on the part of students' of injustice in their immediate communities (Boland, 2011, p. 105).

In sum, a conceptual framework of civic identity and agency, premised on a normative justification of respecting human rights of different others, can help us to understand any transformations in students' reflexive understandings of their relations with others. This leads to research questions about how student experiences within such an intervention might affect their civic identities and agency, and whether this has any impact on how they construe their relations with others.

## **A research design for transformative pedagogical research in higher education**

### ***Research design and ethics***

This section explains the research design and methods/practices in considerable detail, as it is the key contribution of the study. The design aimed to provide transformational experiences as both a research exercise and a teaching activity, known as 'pedagogical research':

Pedagogical research creates spaces that facilitate the expression by young people of their views and experiences. [It] aims to provide authentic learning experiences as

well as to provide data to inform policy and practice. (Starkey et al., 2014, p. 428)

The teacher-researcher is communicating participants' experiences whilst simultaneously facilitating those experiences. This research design fits the conceptual framework because it allows participants to tell their own stories about citizenship and rights and explore new iterations of them.

Transparency is vital in using a 'rights-based epistemology of pedagogical research' to allow for reflexivity and provide a basis for an ethical and democratic form of research (Starkey et al., 2014, p. 429). Transparency means reflecting on and communicating the teacher-researcher's own civic identity and civic agency as a teacher-researcher. In the information form I stated my belief that citizenship education should be taught at university and the participants' thoughts and criticism on this was welcomed (and received). Participants were informed at the outset that the teacher-researcher derived meaning from helping others, especially those less able to help themselves. This might imply an ability to help others by virtue of a superior position derived from oppressive structures (Jefferess, 2008, p. 28). However, the purpose here was for participants to understand how they viewed others and whether they recognised them as rights-holders (see findings below). The wider purpose of the research, to consider whether citizenship education was needed or viable at the university, was explained to participants. Students were also informed about the dissemination of their data, which was anonymised, kept confidential and provided on the basis of voluntary, informed consent. Participants could refuse to participate and/or withdraw their data at any time (this was explained at the start and repeated later).

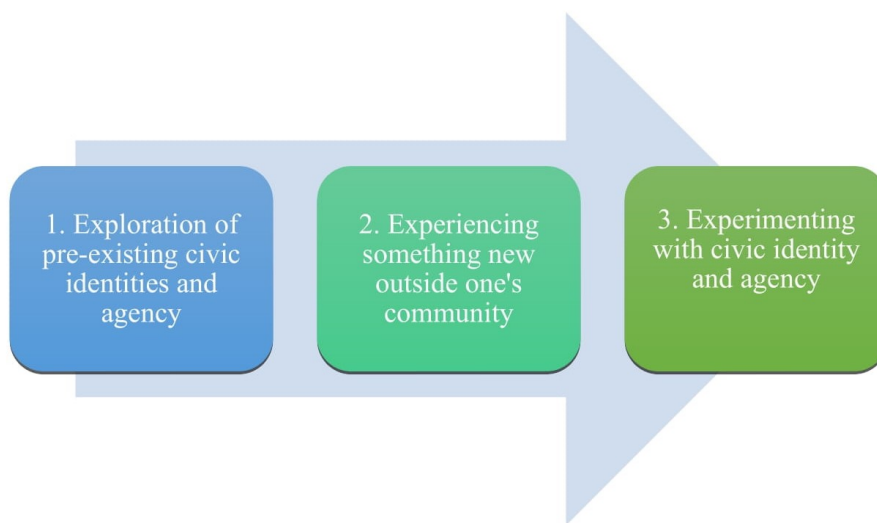
In learning for democracy, and in working with young people, one must try to base the power relationship on mutual trust, dialogue and allowing participants a voice in the research processes (Starkey et al., 2014, p. 427). The research design was informed by the students' wish to explore their civic identities away from performative pressures. This led to using a space decoupled from their studies, similar to the 'third space' that Blanchard and Nix (2019) find helpful for human rights education at university. Also used were spaces at the edges of the community in charities that support the vulnerable, areas which Swerts (2017) describes as 'liminal spaces', essential for nurturing citizenship when it is marginalised by power structures. These settings provided opportunities to reflect critically on the prevailing cultural norms of employability and individualism in the university, and diversity and exclusion in the wider civic society. Consequently, I also emphasised to the students that this was not a class, and their contributions and attendance had no bearing on how I related to them if they happened to be in one of my modules (most were not).

The emphasis on critical interaction led to the use of ideas of authentic and critical reflection

(Freire, 1970), transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990), and Image and Forum Theatre (Boal, 2002). Respectively, these approaches were intended to help students to question assumptions behind beliefs, encounter new experiences outside of university, and rehearse and critique behaviour (see below). These were organised as follows: authentic reflection exercises in small groups (Stage 1); experiential learning with marginalised groups in the surrounding city (Stage 2); and experimenting with social problems in Forum Theatre (Stage 3) – see below.

**Figure 1**

*Combining authentic reflection (1), transformational learning (2), and Forum Theatre (3).*



In Stage 1, discussion in small groups drew out the students’ civic identities and the familial and peer contexts in which these had been formed; this was supported by Image Theatre exercises to build trust. In Stage 2, the students volunteered in one of three charity organisations that they chose themselves (see below). Here they experienced critical incidents which stimulated authentic reflection and questions about their assumptions about others. In Stage 3, the students collectively identified issues of concern in their everyday lives and designed a Forum Theatre play to problematise them and engage with them agentially. The data comprised of my observations written up immediately after each session to record events and reflect on them, anonymous feedback, participants’ responses in focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and a reporting-back session on the key findings. Therefore, my data consisted of not only how participants saw the questions at the start and at the end, but also how they responded during the process and reflected on the findings in the report-back session several months later. In the interviews, participants were asked about their personal and educational background, how they found their experiences of the workshops, and what,

if anything, they thought they had learned from the various activities, with a focus on how they saw themselves as citizens and acted as citizens. The focus groups initially reflected on the activities as a whole, then looked at how they saw themselves as citizens and acted as citizens before, during and after the research activities.

This research design suggests a new form of pedagogical research because it combines theories drawn from reflective practice, experiential learning, and participatory theatre in liminal and third spaces to examine any effects on civic identity and agency. Participants and researcher co-constructed the data in creating new stories around civic identities and experimented with behaviours rather than simply unlocking pre-existing ideas (Starkey et al., 2014).

### ***Pedagogical practices and methods: critical incidents, authentic reflection and Forum Theatre***

Transformational learning theory is about individual personal change through the construction of new meanings (Mezirow, 1990, 2009; Taylor, 2009). The theory has been modified to take account of criticisms by those more closely aligned with Freire (1970), whose work gives a better account of power structures.

Mezirow posits the need for a disorienting dilemma or critical incident that leads to a critical re-examination of the normative assumptions underpinning beliefs. Later iterations (Taylor, 2009) argue that dialogue is used not as an analytical tool, or for debate, but as personal self-disclosure in trustful communication with others. Dialogue helps form bonds by validating personal experience when individuals find 'they are not alone' (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 55-56). This leads to a greater sense of control and belonging, increasing the potential for building solidarity through empathy.

Mezirow's view that objective, informed and rational standards are implicit in human communication underestimates the need to create a safe and trusting space to help students cope with the emotions engaged by dialogue around the edges of understanding and experience (Taylor, 2009). This has led to combining transformational learning exercises with playful Image Theatre activities, in a space free from any educational assessment. Secondly, transformational learning also lacks an appreciation of how structural inequalities may affect conditions for learning (Collard and Law, 1989). Freire's concept of authentic reflection is used, which considers people 'in their relations with the world' where they 'develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves' (Freire, 1970, p. 81-83). Authentic reflection was employed after the students' experiences in the charities because encountering diverse persons can help to re-examine values and assumptions.



Mezirow and Freire have much to say on the roles of teachers and learners (see McCowan, 2009). What I draw from their theoretical models is the importance of criticality (through critical reflection) and conscientisation (through authentic reflection) as a basis for emancipatory action or praxis (the dialectic of reflection and action). Students and academics can co-construct this together as ‘teacher-students’ and ‘student-teachers’ (Freire, 1970, p. 80), thus developing the ‘teacher-researcher’ concept of pedagogical research (Starkey et al., 2014).

These ideas of transformational learning and authentic reflection were combined with participatory theatre so that learners could experiment with forms of agency against shared senses of injustice. The forms of participatory theatre used were Forum Theatre and Image Theatre. They are part of a larger tradition called the Theatre of the Oppressed, a form of participatory theatre created by Augusto Boal. Influenced by Freire, Boal believed that theatre could emancipate through dialogue and learning because the critical consciousness of actors and audience is provoked by interacting with stories close to real life (Strawbridge, 2000). Image Theatre is a collection of group exercises for individuals to use their bodies to express different images of problems in society, as well as to become accustomed to acting (Boal, 2002). The images portrayed are of emotions, experiences, lives, and oppression. The process of thinking with one’s body is intended to bypass social norms and inhibitions. Forum Theatre is a form of theatrical game where a problem from the actors’ lived experience is presented to the audience, who are invited to propose and enact solutions (Boal, 1998, 2002). The problem is a form of oppression with an identifiable oppressor and victim (the protagonist). The audience or ‘spect-actors’ are invited to intervene by assuming the role of the protagonist if they think they can address the oppression, whilst the remaining cast stay in character and resist any change. The result is an experimentation with different possible solutions to a social issue that both actors and audience have experienced, or can identify with. Image Theatre exercises help the cast devise their own script and rehearse. Both during and after the play there is a facilitator or ‘joker’ (myself as teacher-student-researcher in this study) who helps the audience, and later the players, discuss what they have learned from the experience and come to terms with any powerful emotions. Forum Theatre can stimulate reflexivity because theatre allows us ‘to observe ourselves in action’ (Boal, 1998, p. 7). It cultivates agency in a transformational sense because participants come to ‘see the social world as one that can be changed [through]... multiple, sometimes small, sometimes decisive, individual or collective acts’ (Erel et al., 2017, p. 310). In this process a greater assertiveness can arise from a sense of solidarity among participants that they are ‘not alone’ in their experiences (Erel et al., p. 305), a similar development to the one we see in transformational learning studies (Baumgartner, 2002).

In Forum Theatre, moments of transformation can be limited to the research space.

Transformations in participants' identities and agency engendered by Forum and Image Theatre are understood by using Kaptani and Yuval-Davis' (2008) idea of 'becomings', a form of dialogical knowledge (this is applied to the findings in the 'Discussion' section below). This knowledge is found in the narratives and performances in the collective space, which contain contributions from participants and researcher that affect and are affected by each other.

In summary, transformations in identity and agency can occur through challenging students with critical incidents that can be deconstructed afterwards using critical and authentic reflection, which can become reflexive in Forum Theatre and Image Theatre exercises. This develops the concept of pedagogical research (Starkey et al., 2014) in a university context led by a teacher-student-researcher. As a form of personal citizenship education, it contributes to human rights education because it helps students to confront injustice, practice empathy with others, and discover solidarity.

### ***Participant profile and recruitment***

The eleven first-year students came from law, criminology, international relations, politics and sociology. There were eight females and three males; eight of them were White British. All were aged between 18-20, except for one mature student, and mostly non-religious, except for three Christians and one Muslim. They were heterosexual, with no declared disabilities, and their parents' occupations were a split of lower and middle-class ones. Data analysis below refers to how these backgrounds may have coloured the students' experiences.

### ***Data analysis***

The focus of the analysis was on how the students made sense of their experience in the educational intervention. Their prior experiences were taken into account. I was mindful that participants might struggle to make meaning of new experiences. Thematic analysis was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Immersion in the data (through transcribing and repeated listening) led to categorising it as a series of codes, sub-themes and themes that had significance for the research question.

### ***Exploring the data on the students' experiences***

The strongest over-arching transformation was how the students began to challenge existing assumptions and tensions in their beliefs, norms and values concerning marginalised individuals in their community. They also began to form social bonds and resources for collective agency with other participants in Forum Theatre. The students are referred to by their chosen pseudonyms in the data, which comes from focus groups transcripts, interviews and observational notes.

***A felt sense of citizenship and critical reflection on their communities***

When the students returned from their experiences in the charities I observed that '[t]he students had something to say. I could see in their eyes that they were interested in what had happened'. Many of them commented on powerful and immediate experiences of meeting refugees, the homeless, and those in financial hardship:

I think that was the most shocking part of, or like the most memorable part of the experience I guess because it was ... a very personal thing to like go in someone's house...it was quite bare, and like there wasn't beds... they had mattresses on the floor and nothing else, and I found that quite upsetting almost. (Emma)

Emma described vivid experiences that affected her emotionally. She has stepped into someone else's private space. Emma was from a small town where she had not encountered a refugee before. She said refugees were 'something you see on the news... you kind of detach yourself from it. I was like oh there is a person sat right in front of me and ...that was kind of really oh my god for me'. In contrast, May, who lived in Plymouth, and visited the debt clinic, confessed that she had seen 'homeless people, or people with drug problems or mental health issues', but 'then the person was sat in front of me with the back of their chair to me... So, that was again, not surprising but shocking... Kind of like up close and actually talking to them...' There is an immediacy to these experiences conveyed in strong language, an immediacy that comes from face-to-face conversation and seeing inside a private home. Both students had seen individuals up-close who were previously at a distance, on the news or in the street. These individuals had been othered, and so excluded as marginal and less equal (Powell & Menindian, 2016).

The students' understanding of their experiences gave the individuals they met personality, stories, and humanity. As Emma memorably put it: '... were human, they were normal people, chatty, friendly, laughed'. The phrase 'normal people' suggested a person searching for an appropriate term to describe a human being who was no longer excluded as a different other. These were not simply the reactions of young people with little experience of the world. Alex, a mature student who had worked for many years in a high street bank, reflected:

... you sometimes forget about the actual people behind the situations... So actually you think more about the people, does that makes sense? It is not just a homeless person anymore. You actually have a background to this person, and this makes this person come alive more. (Alex)

Here Alex compared her experience with that of other students in the focus group – an example of how reflection and discussion after the event helped students process their experiences. Like Emma and May, she moved from being a citizen-as-a-witness, passive and

distant, whose experience is mediated through norms and prevailing stereotypes, to direct interaction. This disrupts her lens, and stimulates reflection, learning, and empathy. These critical incidents provided a basis for transformation (Merizow, 2009) by giving personality, and dignity to people, and a basis for rights for those excluded as 'refugees' or 'the homeless'. They revised empirical and normative expectations and this led to new perspectives (Biccheri, 2006; Haste, 2010).

In each case, the younger participants referred back to parental influences as a reference point that was overturned. Charlie had a negative experience in her charity when she saw people verbally abusing each other:

[T]o see that people can still treat each other with such animosity [in the homeless shelter], and judge each other even at that low point, I think will stick for me for a very long time. (Charlie)

This was a strong experience for Charlie because it went against what she had 'always been told [by her parents]'. Interestingly, Charlie had volunteered in homeless shelters before, and studied citizenship, but nevertheless learned something new in a profound way – a lasting impression of something that went against her prior beliefs. Emma was the most striking example of a student who explicitly altered her parental perceptions. She said she had been told by her father that refugees were 'taking all our jobs' but she said 'most of them that I saw were struggling to actually find jobs... that was something that has definitely altered my perspective on it, I guess'. This is clear evidence of movement of an empirical and normative expectation, movement emerging from 'becomings' or dialogical knowledge generated in the research space.

Alex found the experience of the debt clinic challenged her prior beliefs about persons in financial hardship. In her role as a financial advisor at a bank she would simply 'shoo them out of the door', as the bank could not help them. Now she critically reflected on this, asking 'who picks it up and where does it go? And should it end there? Should they do more?' She questioned her assumption that she was not able to help individuals. From a very different position, Yaya, from Indonesia, explained how she had come to believe from the media that all refugees were Muslims. Now she had found out that 'most of them are Christian and a lot of [them] come from like another religion. I am a bit surprised... I have to be like you know more open-minded to, I have to tell my friend'. These two students from very different backgrounds in terms of age, social class, nationality, and religion, questioned their empirical expectations, and in doing so, decided on courses of action.

The participants' experiences suggested that they humanised individuals. This was a term several students, in separate focus groups, used in their anonymous feedback. The students'

empirical and normative expectations about marginalised and othered individuals were challenged and, in some cases, possibly altered (e.g., Emma). This was a limited interaction that lacked voice from those encountered (except as reported by the students), but it is notable how students from very different backgrounds questioned their norms and values. They had empathy into social exclusion and discrimination and how it felt to not be a citizen – ‘they feel alone’ (Jerry). This affected the perspective they used to filter and process information, or their values (Haste, 2010). In seeing marginalised individuals as human beings in need of compassionate social interaction they acknowledged a need for different treatment and discussion with others to undo exclusionary barriers. This leads to a recognition that others are rights holders; they are entitled to humane treatment because they have dignity.

### ***Solidarity and collective senses of agency in Forum Theatre***

The participants formed three groups: mental health (Alex, Charlie, May, Yaya and Fransisco – who acted as a leader with May); pollution (Bella, Archie and Rosie); and discrimination (Emma, Jerry and Julie). The mental health group was the most cohesive and was able to move from a script to a performance. This was arguably because they retained the links between their personal university experience, what they witnessed in the charities, and the script (according to Emma, who struggled in her group but admired the efforts of the mental health one). In the other groups, students did not create a script, either because group members missed a session or because they struggled to find a way to work with their chosen problem. All groups drew a series of structural knock-on factors on flip-chart papers that showed authentic reflections on how their chosen forms of oppression occurred. This meant that these predominantly young groups did not individualise the oppression or focus myopically on student experience (Erel et al., 2017). This suggests the benefit of combining experiential learning with Forum Theatre.

The mental health group performed a memorable play. The protagonist, a student called Delilah, struggled to fit in at university and eventually developed mental health problems, resulting in her losing her accommodation and begging on the street. In each scene, her parents, peers, and student support staff were too busy to listen attentively to her, talked over her, or ignored her. As an academic, I could relate my own experience of a pressurised work environment to this depiction of isolation in a fast-moving world where peers and proximal others appear too preoccupied or indifferent. One student emphatically agreed: ‘they were just like almost re-enacting just what I, what you see, I guess, sometimes around uni and stuff’. After around four hours of preparation and little training in theatre, each performer knew their role and spoke their lines without a script. Encouraging students to express their everyday experience through co-creation, a shared tradition in citizenship and human rights education, helped participants find meaning in activities and understand how rights come to be undermined.

For the performers, there was a sense of catharsis in airing an issue that was hidden and thought to be experienced solely by that individual. May, who played the parent and guidance counsellor, said:

... it was a bit of a relief to get the loneliness aspect kind of heard... Rather than internalising it all the time. Like sharing it with everyone else. And they all get it as well... And it's not just you... It brought us closer together, I think.

In a separate debriefing, others repeated this impression. Bella, who was in the audience, explained what she got out of the play:

More awareness... of the subject that we were on about. Because it is the same thing. Like you always just think 'oh it's just me'. (Bella)

This data could be significant. This form of words 'oh, it's just me' – as if it is not – (Bella) and 'it's not just you' (May), has appeared in two other separate studies of transformational learning and Forum Theatre, with different participants in different contexts (Baumgartner, 2002, pp. 55-56; Erel et al., 2017, p. 305). The realisation that one is not alone in one's experience is a powerful resource for building social bonds and solidarity. It was unsurprising that first year students, who had been at university for about six months, were still trying to fit in and adjust. However, several participants from different disciplines – Bella, May, Archie and Francisco – talked of friendships with other students and involvement in clubs. Arguably, this data suggests that forms of alienation, exclusion and consequent distress are strongly felt. As a practice, Forum Theatre allows individuals to interpret their moment in time, how they fit into their social context, and share their understanding in a way that forms solidarity, a key component of transformative human rights education.

The experience of acting in Image Theatre and Forum Theatre and going into charities in the community were steps into the unknown for the students and myself, the teacher-student-researcher. There was a pronounced power imbalance and inequality between the students and the users of the charities. I tried to address this risk by encouraging students to listen to the stories of others and to play the roles of others in Forum Theatre. It was unsettling and everyone at certain points seemed nervous of performing (even myself as a facilitator), meeting strangers, and not knowing what would happen. Alex, who had had positions of responsibility in society (mortgage advisor), talked of not being 'so afraid' of how one can 'invent all these barriers and you might be a bit apprehensive about doing something'. After one session, my observation was: 'We are all learning together. This is the first time I have run Forum Theatre [with students] ... It was an unknown quantity'. As a teacher-student-researcher, trying new things in the classroom, one was learning possibilities for agency as a citizenship and human rights educator that improved students' understanding of human rights

issues without directly teaching law. It was discomforting that I could not step in as a lecturer with expert knowledge, because the ideas were drawn from participants' experiences.

In summary, the central findings are that the responses indicated 'becomings' in civic identity. Such 'becomings' were manifested in terms of new dialogical knowledge shaping norms and values applied to marginalised members of the community and senses of agency from shared experiences of isolation and exclusion. As a teacher-student-researcher, I shared the students' discomfort as we tried something new in co-creating new stories and encountering strangers (Zembylas, 2015). Let us now consider the answers to the research question and develop the conceptual framework.

## **Discussion**

In answer to the research question, the civic identities and agency of the undergraduate participants were shaped by these students humanising those at the edges of their community, building social bonds with diverse others, and critically reflecting on oppression in the university and the community. The most striking form of oppression took the form of the exclusion or misrepresentation of others. These experiences arose among a diverse group of social science students in community-based experiential learning with participatory theatre. This process was supported by moments for authentic and critical reflection. There were limitations in that participants self-selected, and this was a small sample. Responses could vary with a larger sample because transformational experiences are partly predicated on students' perceptions of the activity rather than the nature of the activity itself (Ashwin et al., 2016). Poignant pieces of data ('it's not just me') emerged, as they have in other transformational learning and Forum Theatre studies, but here the participants identified a form of oppression in their own lives that had parallels in the community, showing perhaps the value of using critical incidents to inform Forum Theatre.

The form of knowledge produced in this transformative pedagogical research will be analysed using the conceptual lenses of civic identity and agency along with the idea of 'becomings' (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). The term 'becomings' represents a relational and dialogic form of knowledge generated by this research design. The incipient transformations emerged from conversational interactions: 'public engagement cannot just be about humans talking to one another, rather their iterations are inextricably linked to provoking one another to become this or that' (Waghid, 2021, p. 3). 'Becomings' are also affective and experiential knowledge. Citizenship was identified as a felt experience, particularly when others were humanised through compassion and empathy. This speaks to the aim of transformative human rights education to foster 'a shared language and an entry point into a moral universe committed to the recognition and thriving of all' (International Commission on Futures of Education, 2021,

p. 73).

This research design provides lessons and challenges for practitioners. First, student input helped. Their wish to explore each other's civic identities led to the formation of new social bonds that accounted for the high level of engagement (according to their feedback). Secondly, the practices and methods worked better in combination: experiential learning in the community offset the tendency for young people in Forum Theatre to individualise oppression because they had no knowledge of unjust social structures. This helped embed knowledge of power relations and social structures in Forum Theatre practice, a problem highlighted by researchers with young participants (Erel et al., 2017). The activity was challenging, in that time pressures constrained how long it could run and it was an uncomfortable change to students' and lecturer's normal modes of interaction. This could deter other academics and students from taking part (Smith et al., 2008). Also, it was incomplete. It focused mainly on the 'becomings' of the students and their potential for transformative action and did not facilitate action against the injustices identified in the university and the community. Consequently, there are further questions to address in future cycles of action research: How can this intervention be expanded to support transformative action? Might other students and staff engage? If so, how? And what will be the results?

## **Conclusions**

Universities have a major, critical role in sustaining and creating the culture of citizenship (Crick, 2000, p. 145) and this entails respect for human rights. In the UK, this culture is under strain from an intolerance of differences and an increasing inequality which leads to the exclusion of others (Yuval Davis et al., p. 2018). These forms of injustice are perpetuated within universities. Research into pedagogy on citizenship and human rights at university demonstrates a need to use pedagogies that can respond to students' concerns about injustice and distance them from institutional pressures (Blanchard & Nix, 2019; Hammond & Keating, 2017; Sen, 2021). This study contributes to this agenda by providing a detailed research design for pedagogical research into how some of the goals of transformative human rights education most relevant to this political context, such as nurturing citizens with empathy for different others and solidarity with peers against injustice, can be realised using personal and cultural citizenship education. This can be achieved by developing Starkey et al.'s (2014) concept of pedagogical research in higher education, whereby academic citizens consult with students about their concerns and provide pedagogical interventions to address them.

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