

Pedagogy of hope: The possibilities for social and personal transformation in an Academic Language and Learning curriculum

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This paper examines the philosophy underpinning an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) curriculum taught to enabling students at a regional Australian university. At a time when there is increasing interest in widening access to university learning as a means of meeting socio-economic objectives – and a growing scepticism about the value of such moves – this discussion provides valuable insights into an established enabling program and its approach to teaching students academic writing. We argue that the philosophy behind this ALL subject resonates with a pedagogy of hope, where “hope” may be construed as a belief that a different future is possible. Students are provided with opportunities to engage in critical dialogue about the world and themselves, and to share such thoughts in a collective forum. At one level, this means encouraging students to adopt a mode of reasoning that can appreciate the constructed nature of all knowledge forms. At another, the curriculum allows students to reflect on the ways in which their personal values and beliefs have been formed, and possibly even changed as a result of their studies. An analysis of the curriculum, using examples of student responses to illustrate key concepts, highlights a range of potential benefits for the individual, pertaining to both social responsibility and personal transformation. These findings show how the process of academic writing is linked to some of the broader aims of university learning, not all of which can be easily quantified, or justified in economic terms.

Key words: hope, transformation, critical thinking, ALL.

1. Introduction

Implementation of recommendations from the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) means that all publicly funded tertiary providers in Australia must consider the ways in which they can broaden access to those students who have been traditionally marginalised in higher education. However, despite policy objectives of economic prosperity and social inclusion, there is a growing concern about the claims that higher education leads to a better quality of life for the individual. As Gale (2010) observes:

the [higher education] sector is awash with rhetoric about *aiming higher* and *raising* aspiration for university as if ... a higher education is self-evidently better in terms of cultural identity, life choices or even economic prosperity. Clearly it is not, at least not necessarily. (p. 2, italics in original)

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the notion of “hope” and its place in higher education discourse. We take, as our focus, the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) curriculum taught within the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at CQUniversity. As an enabling program, STEPS is dedicated to providing an alternative pathway to university for mature-aged learners. Now in its 25th year of operation, it

offers an experienced perspective on some of the assumptions and challenges implicit in governmental agenda to increase participation in university by those who may previously have been marginalised.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of recent policy developments in higher education and the rationale behind such movements. In order to critique the concept of hope and its place in educational policy and practice, we turn to the work of Giroux (1997) and his body of work around a “pedagogy of hope”. We show how at the heart of this pedagogy is a belief in the role of critical thinking as a means to effecting personal and social transformation. This conceptual framework provides the basis of an analysis of the ALL curriculum offered within the STEPS program; in particular, we ask: “What is a pedagogy of hope and what place does it have in an ALL curriculum designed to prepare enabling students for university?” In order to illustrate the transformative aspects of the curriculum (and the program), a selection of quotes from online student discussion forums are included. The implications of these findings are then discussed by way of encouraging a continuing dialogue on the relevance of hope in the context of enabling programs and the broader purposes of a higher education.

2. The changing higher education landscape

The Australian higher education environment, like those in other OECD countries, is being framed within the perceived needs of a competitive knowledge economy “where innovative ideas and technical expertise hold the key to the new global competitive challenge” (Economic and Social Research Council, 2008, p. 4). There has therefore been a steady shift in economic production towards endeavours that focus on promoting human capital and innovation, and a new interest in sectors such as education, government services, and high technology industries. In response to such global movements, the Australian Government has aimed to increase the participation of its population in tertiary education. In one sense this aspiration is not a recent phenomenon. The first moves towards making tertiary education more universally available can be traced back to the 1960s, as universities became less elitist and more merit-based (Hare, 2011). However, it is also true to say the proposed expansion of higher education in this country is like none that has come before it in terms of scale and impact (Gale, 2010).

A key impetus for such reforms in Australia has been the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) which advocates participation in tertiary education by a broadening range of the population. There is a particular focus on attracting those from traditionally under-represented groups: “those from remote parts of Australia, Indigenous students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from regional locations” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 27). While such goals have long been on the radar of regional universities and the vocational sector, the Bradley review issues the broader challenge that “social inclusion must be a core responsibility for all institutions that accept public funding, irrespective of history and circumstances” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 33). As Rizvi and Lingard (2011, p. 16) observe, policy-making in current political environments is often driven by the desire to achieve measurable outcomes: “the ‘policy as numbers’ approach to equity”. The assumption here seems to be that the more students who are afforded the opportunity to study at university, the more competitive Australia will be in global markets.

Despite clear links to an economic agenda, the ideal of social inclusion also emerges as a dominant discourse in this politically laden context. In its report on *Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System*, the federal government has given assurances that widening participation will mean that “the benefits of higher education are genuinely available to all Australians with drive and aptitude” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 6). Glyn Davis (2010), Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Melbourne, reiterates such beliefs in suggesting that there is an expectation that access to university should be based on academic merit rather than financial advantage. Commonwealth Tertiary Education Minister, Chris Evans, also talks about the objective of achieving “a truly democratic level of opportunity for higher learning and universities” (cited in Trounson, 2011, p. 1 of 1). Thus, in line with trends throughout the western world, higher education policy has

seen a shift in focus “from universities as elite institutions for the few to higher education as a birthright of the many” (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010, p. 126).

The belief that higher education can lead to an improved quality of life is not without foundation. According to the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), a university graduate earns 70 per cent more over their working life than those whose highest qualification is Year 12 (2008, p. 1). An extensive review of the literature leads Murray (2009, p. 240) to conclude that time spent in education is associated with “better health, better job prospects and higher social status”, as well as self-efficacy, racial tolerance and civil activity. At the very least, there is considerable support for the idea that adult education can lead to meaningful personal transformation if adult learners are encouraged to examine and articulate assumptions about self (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

3. The STEPS program at CQUniversity

Enabling programs, which provide an alternative pathway to tertiary study, are predicated on the assumption that higher education is a noble and worthy pursuit. CQUniversity, through a suite of access programs, has been pursuing the goal of educating students from non-traditional university backgrounds for many years. The STEPS program has been operating since 1986 with distance education being made available since 2006. This enabling program, which is offered across five domestic campuses in Central Queensland as well as externally to students dispersed throughout Australia, provides adult learners, 18 years and over, an alternative pathway into tertiary study. Many who enrol have negative associations with their schooling experiences while some were previously never given the opportunity to fulfil their academic potential because of economic or social constraints. An increasing number of migrants, including those on humanitarian visas, are also enrolling. As a holistic program, STEPS recognises the background knowledge, skills and experiences that these students bring with them into the study environment and seeks to provide a supportive learning environment to optimise the likelihood of successfully transitioning into university study. The philosophy of the program is one which embraces the concept of transformation, from a personal as well as an academic perspective. The current advertising slogan adopted by CQUniversity confirms such an ideology: “Be what you want to be.”

The assumption that higher education provides the key to a better future is, of course, open to contestation. Despite assertions that Australia’s economic future lies in knowledge and technology-based industries, in Central Queensland, the mining boom connected with the Bowen Basin coal reserves has generated attractive employment opportunities in a variety of trades. When an unskilled 18 year old (a family member of one of the authors of this paper) can earn more than \$150 000 a year in mining related industries, for example, it is difficult to argue the case that university degrees enhance earning capacities. Furthermore, gaining higher education qualifications is no guarantee of obtaining a job appropriate to that level of study. As Ian Young, Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, observes: “To what end are we developing a more educated society? ...Without basic structural reform of our economy, we could end up with the best educated shop assistants in the world” (cited in Hare, 2011, p. 6). The reality may well be that the needs of Australian society are better served in promoting a range of training opportunities, beyond those tied to the acquisition of academic qualifications.

There is also a body of scholarship that conceives of universities as institutions dedicated to maintaining existing structures that privilege certain classes educationally, economically and culturally at the expense of others. Gale (2011, p. 16), for example, argues that social systems, such as those that characterise higher education, “tend to produce unequal outcomes (advantage and disadvantage) and ... in part this is because individuals’ starting positions and the processes involved in the production of social and economic outcomes are unfair”. A study by Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) found that low SES students were more likely to experience financial barriers to successful completion and these students also frequently grappled with a sense of uncertainty about expectations and feelings of alienation in the university environment. For one thing, the skills, understandings and literacies that such students bring to university are not necessarily valued in such settings (Priest, 2010). As Gidely et al. (2010) point out, access is

commonly equated with social inclusion, but access is not the same as meaningful participation. Clearly, gaining a higher education offers the hope of a better future for many people, but there are no guarantees in such an exercise.

4. A pedagogy of hope

In further exploring the concept of “hope” and its place in higher education discourse, Henry Giroux’s (2002, p. 39) definition of hope as “a belief that different futures are possible” is used. At one level, this seems a general, quite simple construction of hope that could be applied across a number of contexts. However, the notion of hope to which Giroux refers is one that takes its inspiration from the radical theories of Paulo Freire. These critical theorists have each named an interest in a “pedagogy of hope” (Freire, 2004; Giroux, 2005). Education, from this perspective, is “a pathway to radical democracy involving an effort to expand the possibility for social justice, freedom and egalitarian social relations in the educational, economic, political, and cultural domains that locate men, women and children in contemporary life” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, cited in Giroux, 1997, p. ix). Using these terms of reference, pedagogy is not just effective teaching practices, but a political project. While Giroux’s writing was located in a schooling context, this pedagogy can equally be applied to a university setting.

The basis of this democratic objective lies in what Giroux describes as a critical pedagogy, one that highlights the responsibility of educators to engage students in critical thinking. For Giroux, this kind of thinking may be defined as the ability to step beyond commonsense assumptions and to be able to evaluate them in terms of their genesis, development and purpose, and as such, is a key to the emancipatory process integral to a pedagogy of hope (1997, p. 27). Students are encouraged to engage with knowledge as “border-crossers”: to step outside of the cultural borders that have framed their lives to appreciate how these spaces have been “historically structured and socially organised” (Giroux, 1997, p. 147). This critical lens is used to appreciate the constructed nature of all knowledge forms and their links to “human intentionality and behaviour” (Giroux, 1997, p. 23). From this perspective, critical thinking cannot be viewed as just higher order, analytical thinking, but as a vehicle for political change, enabling students to draw upon individual potential and collective possibilities to, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, “go beyond the created structures in order to create others” (cited in Giroux, 1997, p. 27). Put simply, the possibility of effecting political and social change is borne out of the individual’s capacity for critical thinking.

Therefore, though Giroux’s passion appears to be for changing the collective consciousness, he acknowledges that social transformation begins with the individual. It is through enhanced self-awareness that students can understand how their worldviews and relationships with others have been shaped: “This critical attentiveness to one’s own history represents an important element in examining the socially constructed sources underlying one’s formative processes” (Giroux, 1997, p. 27). It is only through achieving such awareness that the individual may be said to be on their way to reaching their full potential. Just as Freire (1998, p. 69) talked about hope as “a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness”, Giroux observes that hope “gives substance to the recognition that every present is incomplete” (2002, p. 38). According to both Freire and Giroux, the individual’s desire to believe that transformed futures are possible is part of our shared human condition.

At the heart of such transformation is the need for “collective communication and critical dialogue” in order to question the taken-for-granted assumptions that reinforce existing societal structures and hierarchies (Giroux, 1997, p. 27). Such a pedagogy means introducing students to different forms of communication, including specific vocabularies, to negotiate various forms of knowledge. It is through access to particular discourses that students are able to construct new identities and social orders (Giroux, 2005). In drawing attention to the relationship between language and the construction of knowledge and power, Giroux (2005) emphasises the domination of particular ideologies. He argues that the socio-cultural underpinnings of all knowledge forms can be highlighted by using “languages of critique and possibility” (1997, p. 223). Providing access to such discourses may be seen as instrumental in giving students a “voice”. Though education traditionally “legitimises the privileged voices of the white middle

and upper classes” (Giroux, 1997, p. 141), a more progressive pedagogy is one which acknowledges such prejudices and provides opportunities for those from the margins of society to express their viewpoints and share understandings about the world.

Therefore, the other important dimension of this dialogue is providing opportunities for “collective communication” (Giroux, 1997, p. 27). Students need a suitable forum whereby they feel free to share their views:

a concrete set of learning conditions where people come together to speak, to dialogue, to share their stories, and to struggle together with social relations that strengthen rather than weaken the possibility of active citizenship. (Giroux, 1997, p. 106)

In recognition of the situated nature of one’s politics, teachers need to “to listen critically to the voices of their students” in order to develop an understanding of different narratives (Giroux, 2005, pp. 26-27). If students are to have their say, university cultures need to be less elite and more accepting of the experiences and knowledge which students bring with them into the educational setting. As acknowledgement of the student experience is central to critical pedagogy, educators need to validate these experiences, as well as encourage students to challenge the assumptions upon which they are based (Giroux, 1997). Teachers in this sense are also “border crossers” in that they need to be able to understand the situated nature of their own belief systems, as well as to appreciate the cultural domains inhabited by their students. It is the richness of these various, and in many cases “untraditional” backgrounds, that gives rise to the communal learning that takes place.

5. Academic Language and Learning (ALL) curriculum

The question remains then as to what degree the ALL curriculum, one of the four core subjects offered in the STEPS enabling program, may be said to manifest a pedagogy of hope. In this section we unpack the philosophy behind the curriculum and interrogate the ways in which critical thinking frames this subject. In discussing the various aspects of this philosophy, we include some quotes from an online discussion forum from the ALL online site. These online postings, which constituted the data for a larger research project, were contributed by a group of adult learners enrolled in the External STEPS program in 2009. The subject was run over two terms and students were expected to contribute at least one posting per term, using Blackboard as the learning management system. A total of 50 students agreed to make their online contributions available for research purposes, on the understanding that any postings used would be encoded to remove identifying information and that pseudonyms would be used to further protect the identity of the student.

In this instance, these quotes are offered, not as “proof” of our findings, but simply to illustrate the different aspects of the curriculum being described. These responses also highlight the significance of the student voice in this subject. In line with Giroux’s (1997) belief in a pedagogy that allows for “dialogue, questioning and communication” (p. 24), creating opportunities for sharing of ideas on a range of issues, sometimes quite contentious, has always been an essential part of ALL. One of the over-arching objectives of this course is “to consider new ideas and reflect on how these ideas relate to personal and academic learning”. Encouraging discussions that potentially challenge personal values and beliefs is an important part of this objective of broadening worldviews. Many of these students have felt marginalised in the past because of their lack of educational experiences, in addition to societal dimensions such as coming from low SES backgrounds. Therefore, the opportunities to express personal viewpoints – and challenge those of others – in an academic context may be seen as particularly significant. In class, these discussions might take the form of group or whole class responses to a variety of stimuli, including texts from popular culture, news and research. Scenarios, role-plays, brainstorming, provocations and informal debates are also used to draw students out, and to encourage them to see topics from different viewpoints.

For external students, it is mainly the online discussion forums that provide an opportunity for such “collective communication and critical dialogue” (Giroux, 1997, p. 27). For some students,

the honest exchange of thoughts in this learning environment may be confronting, but over time, most students who do engage in this discussion find a genuine empathy in the group. The role of the lecturer provides an important key here, as open sharing of ideas can only take place in an environment in which the lecturer has established a safe and supportive communication space (McDougall, Sturgess, & Danaher, 2011). Students show respect for one another's views as they seek to develop critical thinking by comparing, relating and synthesising the values of others:

I can't believe how many threads I am reading from Steppies from broken families. It is quite humbling (if that's the right word?) I am blessed as I have come from a very 'intact' background. You are right, 'Home is where the Heart is' and don't forget you can't choose your (biological) family but you can choose your friends and make them your family just as you have done!

This comment illustrates the student's awareness of her own cultural background in comparison to others. Such revelations come about as students share their personal experiences and other ways of viewing the world.

The ALL subject employs two potent narratives to provoke this kind of critical dialogue. These provide a philosophical underpinning to the curriculum, as well as a conceptual framework which students can use to think and write analytically. The first is the "circles of concern" (STEPS Teaching Staff, 2011): issues are discussed and reflected on from the inner circle (becoming a writer – my worldview), middle circle (becoming an academic writer – other worldviews) and the outer circle (becoming a reflective writer and thinker – changing worldviews). Students begin their writing journey by drawing on their prior knowledge and personal experiences. As their research skills and knowledge of academic conventions are honed, they read more broadly and draw on a range of sources to consider different viewpoints. All the while, students are encouraged to reflect on how their own beliefs – about themselves and the world around them – might be changing.

The "circles of concern" approach aims to foster the recognition of multiple viewpoints and underlying prejudices rather than finding neat solutions to problems. To this end, learning experiences take as their focus various contemporary Australian issues which impact on students' lives. They are required to produce referenced paragraphs on topics that include: the significance of volunteering, changing roles within families, and environmental challenges, all written within an Australian context. The culminating assessment task is a research essay where students are asked to choose from a range of topics, including changing gender roles, the impact of new technologies on society, environmental issues, and social issues such as substance abuse and obesity. To help students recognise that there can be more than one perspective on any given topic, and that they can exist side by side, they are introduced to Edward de Bono's "thinking hats" (1985). This conceptual framework provides a critical dialogue for analysing arguments, for example, recognising the difference between "red hat" (emotive) arguments from "white hat" (objective) reasoning. This helps students recognise their own emotional responses to certain topics:

I am also finding it hard to separate my feelings and thoughts on the issue of consumerism of waste and electricity. This is making it difficult for me to research the topic fully from all sides. Any tips?

As well as recognising their own biases, students are encouraged to question the validity of the information they find in their research. This is in line with another of the course's key objectives, which is "to find, retrieve, evaluate and record relevant, scholarly research to support academic writing". Such analytical thinking informs the annotated bibliography task, which is used as part of the scaffolding for the research essay. In making assessments about issues to do with trustworthiness and objectivity, students must consider the constructed, value-laden nature of the research presented. In Giroux's terms, they explore "questions concerning how ... layers of meaning are mediated and in whose interest they function" (1997, p. 25).

As students question their own attitudes, a collective consciousness emerges, and then is shaped, through online discussions. In the following response, the student reflects on their desire to transform their own environmental habits:

Researching for this assignment has made me stop and think 'What am I doing to help the environment?' I looked around my bathroom this morning and counted 18 plastic containers of one sort or another and that's not including what's in the cupboard! I'll throw them in the recycle bin when there're empty and feel good because I'm helping the environment! Needless to say I NEED to do MORE for the environment.

Though there are no guarantees that such students will change their behaviour, there is, at least, an indication of greater awareness of these issues. Such exercises in thinking and writing encourage students to consider how they can make a difference in the world as opposed to merely being a bystander in life, thus reflecting “the possibility of active citizenship” to which Giroux (1997, p. 106) refers.

While the “circles of concern” framework assists students in developing their awareness of and analytical approach to a range of contemporary issues, on a deeper, more personal level, it is the Hero’s Journey narrative, embedded within the curriculum, which provides a language for critical self-reflection. Students are introduced to Vogler’s (1998) concept of the Hero’s Journey as a philosophical framework to guide their personal reflections on their learning experiences. Vogler (1998), who adapted the conceptual framework of Campbell (1993), distils a long cultural tradition of myths and fables into the key stages of the Hero’s Journey, beginning with the “call to adventure” and progressing through “meeting the mentor” and encounters with “allies and enemies” to arrive at “the supreme ordeal” from which the hero emerges victorious. All students are required to write a self-reflection on their learning journey as their final task in ALL. The language of the Hero’s Journey narrative is frequently used in students’ reflections; the word “orphan” in the following online contribution is a direct reference to this philosophical framework:

I have learnt many things about myself along the way that have been a bit of an eye opener.... am more aware of how I think about things, that I am a planner, a bit of an orphan but have many more abilities than I originally thought.

The philosophy of supporting students in their belief in a hopeful future is borne out of respect for the STEPS student as a learner and an appreciation for their individual biographies. As Giroux (1997, p. 140) observes, critical educators must appreciate the cultural capital of all students, and develop pedagogies that remain “attentive to the histories, dreams and experiences” that students bring to the learning environment.

Therefore, the learning and teaching in this ALL curriculum does provide the opportunity for a “border crossing” whereby students can leave their environment of a known and lived experience to a milieu of new ideas, often at odds with the safety of established beliefs and values (Giroux, 2005). As a result, the journey through this curriculum (and the STEPS program generally) can be transformational for many students:

This experience has made a life changing impression on the way I think and look at the world; STEPS [Academic Language and Learning] has had had a huge impact on my life and has challenged my once narrow view of the world.

Specifically, transformation occurs because the curriculum teaches critical thought, which is central to not only university learning but also to a student’s ability to forge new perceptions of a hopeful personal future. Overall, many students feel powerful and in control of a destiny where they are positioned as lifelong learners and not passive recipients of fate. A final inclusion from the online contributions illustrates this point:

Four years into the future may seem like a faraway dream right now. Closer to home was the experience I had last week. As I filled in my child’s prep school application I realised that for the first year since becoming a mother,

I would tick the box that recorded my education level as 'year twelve or equivalent'. I almost cried.

As with the other responses presented here, this comment represents the power of the student voice: the capacity to articulate the changes in perspective that have resulted from their critical thinking and, in so doing, going some way to transcending the limitations of personal histories.

6. Implications

Our discussion of the pedagogy of hope as applied to an ALL subject in an enabling program has a number of implications. The first relates to the aims and aspirations of such a program. If the capacity to engage in critical thinking is a key learning outcome of many university programs, then enabling programs also have an obligation to pursue this objective; those students who do successfully transition to university will be better prepared to engage in this higher level thinking when it is expected of them. One of the graduate attributes of CQUniversity is to develop “critical thinking”; as such, critical thinking is considered one of the “qualities and skills that a university defines as core outcomes for their [graduating] students” and is therefore embedded in Undergraduate programs (CQUniversity, 2009). However, there is a range of reasons why students might not go on to university or whose pathway is delayed, including changes in circumstances, family pressures, or economic necessities to defer study in favour of work. In certain cases, students might decide on the basis of their experience that university is not for them. From a managerial perspective, those students who do not complete this pathway might be viewed as “failures” who ultimately threaten the viability of government investment in the program. However, the potential benefits of an enabling program will always be broader than evidence of successful transitions. The commitment towards teaching students to reflect critically on the world around them and to question their personal belief systems could have benefits for these individuals, and society more generally, beyond the economic interests. While development of self-awareness and a capacity for critical thought are viewed as central to the mission of preparing students adequately for university life and learning, such attributes would seem also to have considerable value in other spheres of life.

Engaging in critical self-reflection is also significant in that it gives students a chance to re-evaluate their personal potential and their place in society. By encouraging students to consider the changes within them as individuals, they are given the opportunity to articulate the ways in which their previously held assumptions about themselves have changed. In this way, the concept of “hope” is therefore closely aligned with “transformation”. Many students in enabling programs have felt marginalised in the past because of various positionings within society, including a lack of education. The practice of critical self-reflection and the language of critique to which they are exposed allow them to express their changing perspectives about themselves and the world around them. This, in combination with encouragement to share their views in public forums, goes some way to giving them a “voice” in a university setting. It is hoped that the confidence they find to express their views then translates into broader social contexts.

It might be conjectured that the possibility of individual transformation is given greater emphasis within the ALL curriculum than challenging collective possibilities and that a fundamental or revolutionary transformation of social relations and power structures, as advocated by Giroux (and Freire), lies beyond its remit. However, from a more modest perspective, it can be argued that the philosophy underpinning the curriculum does resonate with such democratic principles. Students are encouraged to extend beyond their own worldview to consider the perspective of others, and as such, this “other-sided perspective” becomes absorbed into their own mode of thinking. Therefore, in examining the distinction between individual and collective transformation, the lines become increasingly blurred and the purpose of establishing such a delineation uncertain. However this change is defined, there remains the possibility that exposure to critical thinking might result in a more discerning approach to information and more tolerant attitudes in a range of contexts.

It is for the above reasons that we would argue for the continued importance of promoting critical thinking in the face of challenges within the Australian university sector. The drive to

make universities more vocationally oriented, in combination with moves to attract more non-traditional students, might tend to encourage a focus on building practical skills and capacities. There is an implicit suggestion that critical thinking has an integral place in a traditional academic curriculum but it may struggle to find traction in such a skills-based environment. However, there is good reason to suggest that critical thinking should remain a core responsibility of universities and that subjects such as ALL are well-positioned to provide such learning experiences. While there are no guarantees that students will make a meaningful contribution to the “knowledge economy”, that is not to say that their immersion in a university culture cannot have long-lasting impressions on the way they think and act. Thus, there is scope for further research that focuses on the broader influence of the values of a pedagogy of hope on students’ transformational learning, regardless of whether they successfully complete undergraduate studies.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have explored the notion of hope and its relevance to recent debates about the value of higher education, especially in light of government agendas to broaden access to non-traditional learners. A discourse of “hope” frequently emerges in such discussions, although it is likely that the central driver of government policy is more to do with economic aspirations than the fulfilment of individual potential. For Giroux, however, the concept of a hope – “a belief that different futures are possible” (2002, p. 39) – is central to a pedagogy that aims to free individuals, and the social structures they inhabit, from historical biases. The key to this transformation lies with a capacity for critical thinking, whereby students learn to acknowledge the social and cultural foundations of their own worldviews and of all knowledge forms. Our analysis of the ALL curriculum in this paper, reinforced by students’ reflections, suggests that there is potential to achieve such goals in an enabling program. This curriculum may not embody the kind of radical hope for social change which Giroux espoused, but it does put considerable emphasis on critical thinking as a means to personal transformation.

While there are no guarantees that such students will go on to complete university study successfully, it can be argued that at least there is hope that some might be more discerning in their views and more socially responsible in their actions. Those who do go onto university will be better equipped for the critical thinking that is expected of them. There is also hope that the confidence students gain from such thinking and discussion might help them feel a more valued member of society and have more of a “voice”; to have transgressed the stigma of “never having finished high-school” is, in itself, a huge achievement for many of these students. Such outcomes may not sit well with a neo-liberal focus on measurable products and accountability – “the ‘policy as numbers’ approach to equity” described by Rizvi and Lingard (2011, p. 16) – but they do resonate with socially democratic constructions of the broader purposes of education.

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