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**The role of critical imagination in research with young people**

*Abstract*

The postmodern world of difference and uncertainty invites people to dream and to “imagine the unimaginable” (O’Farrell, 1999, p. 15) to maximise choices and freedoms, particularly within the otherwise constraining systems of education. Various forms of imagination can be applied to ways of working with disadvantaged high school students as researchers, helping them to reconnect their lifeworlds with the education systems to which they are subject. The SARUA (Student Action Research for University Access) project is presented here as an example of such activity in which a disciplined and critical imagination can help to empower young people. Critical theory provides a framework for empowering research with young people, such as in the SARUA project, and it too can be strengthened through the “art of imagining” (Grundy, 1996) to increase its relevance to students living in postmodern times.

## **The role of critical imagination in research with young people**

Today's youth inhabit a world where roles, traditions and understandings are shifting at an unprecedented rate. In these postmodern times, the only certainty left is that of uncertainty and risk. The postmodern world of difference and uncertainty, however, invites people to dream and to "imagine the unimaginable" to maximise choices and freedoms, particularly within the otherwise constraining systems of education (O'Farrell, 1999). This paper, based on a current PhD research project, should be understood as a work-in-progress leading to discussion and enlargement of the ideas out forward. The paper considers the role of imagination in various forms applied to working with young people as researchers, exemplified by the SARUA (Student Action Research for University Access) Project at Queensland University of Technology. The paper also looks at the "art of imagining" (Grundy, 1996) in bridging critical theory, which underpins the SARUA project, with the new times in which students are living and researching.

Bland and Atweh (2003) argued that high school students' involvement in relevant research provides opportunities for them to find creative ways to deal with and improve aspects of their lives, participating in meaningful and empowering communicative action where they work collaboratively with other students, teachers and academic researchers to pose their own questions and problems. In doing so, the students are not only developing some technical knowledge about survival in the lifeworld and the systems that affect them, but are also developing practical knowledge about the world, and, arguably, developing a sense of empowered agency as active participants or actors in the world. One of the tools for this agency may be a

“power literacy” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998a, p. 2), enabling them to not only recognise the ways in which power is enacted, but to challenge taken-for-granted viewpoints.

The Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project, operating out of Queensland University of Technology, is one example of participatory research with young people that can lead to the development of a power literacy, or critical imagination. SARUA is particularly aimed at revealing the localised barriers to tertiary education that exist for students from recognised disadvantaged groups (Atweh & Dornan, 1999). In this project, the students are the principal researchers, using their local knowledge to inform action to overcome the problems identified by them. The processes embraced by the SARUA project allow not only for the students’ local knowledge to be represented in meaningful ways but for their imaginative responses to be given credence within a disciplined research system.

The sense of agency derived from participatory research equates to Habermas’s (1984) concept of emancipation (autonomy and responsibility) from the confines of ideology and instrumental reason. He argued that such empowerment can be attained through “communicative action” (1984) in which different actors reach an understanding by sharing and coordinating their plans through language.

Of particular relevance to working with marginalised students is the two-level theory in which communicative action takes place: *lifeworld* and *systems* (Habermas, 1987). Through the lifeworld, or the taken for granted, pre-interpreted, everyday life existence, individuals construct their own identities, create social solidarity and participate in, and create culture. Its aim is mutual understanding through communication. The systems level of society aims at instrumental control and

efficiency, and functions to coordinate natural and social forces as well as the resources and organisations to administer them through bureaucratic structures (Seidman, 1998).

Two key observations made by Habermas about the interaction between the two spheres are of importance here. The first he termed the *uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld* which refers to the ways in which systems have become increasingly autonomous from the concerns of the lifeworld. In this view, systems seem to have developed a rationality of their own and act according to their own imperatives, even at times contradicting the processes of the lifeworld that sustain them. The second observation relates to the *colonisation of the lifeworld by the system imperatives*. This is seen, for example, in the dominance of the systems language of efficiency, productivity, goals and roles on the lifeworld on people. For instance, our roles in social systems functioning contribute to our notions of our own personal identity, for example as clients and consumers. For high school students who do not meet mainstream expectations of class or ethnicity, these concepts may materialise as disempowerment and distancing from the education system.

### ***Imagination for empowerment***

Participatory research processes support a facility to imagine new futures based on the first-hand experiences of problems that occur for young people who are do not feel accommodated by mainstream schooling. Such an application of imaginative faculties is more than a rekindling of a sense of wonder (Berry, 1998). Applying a critical and “social imagination” (Greene, 1995) can help to challenge education systems to “imagine a world that is not yet imagined” (Fine, 1994, p. 30). It is important to stress at the outset that this is not to say that the vain imaginings of disaffected youth have

implicit merit. Indeed, Maxcy (1991) differentiated between imagination that is simply daydreams (reverie, déjà vu, or remembrance) and imagination that is “inspirational, creative, innovative, and problem-solving in nature” (p. 112). It is this second type, though, that can become “critically pragmatic imagination” (p. 126) through being reflexive and purposeful and that can lead to genuine empowerment, through which the students gain increased agency over their own life choices.

Students’ involvement in meaningful research activities serves two purposes with reference to the two observations that Habermas made on the interactions of the lifeworld and systems. Firstly, it allows the students, who may be generally constructed as recipients of the benefits deriving from the education system world’s knowledge and policy, to be active agents in that world. Moreover, young people engaging in deep participation as researchers may find empowerment through having a direct impact on systems’ processes. Secondly, the students’ participation in meaningful research assists in reconnecting the system and lifeworlds, making the system more responsive to their own lifeworld. Involving students in this way challenges the educational system’s construction of students as clients of research and educational services and positions them as active agents in their own education.

The SARUA project is fully described elsewhere (see, for instance, Atweh, 2003) and it is not possible to go into detail in this paper. The process, however, provides spaces and resources for critical thinking and imaginative responses to real life problems confronted by educationally disadvantaged high school students. The students, together with their coordinating teachers and university facilitators, work through various stages in the SARUA cycle: planning, data collection, writing, implementation, and reflection. The planning stage takes place at the university and

includes identification by the students of the major school and community based issues impeding progress to tertiary education as well as basic instruction in action research techniques. The students carry out the data collection in their schools and then write up their findings with the assistance of the university facilitators. Reflection on the recommendations and their implementation should then form the basis for on-going application of the action research cycle.

Action research, like all research disciplines, may become reified as a system of regulatory power impounding knowledge “within arbitrary and exclusive boundaries” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 684). In Habermasian terms, research disciplines have the potential as systems to become uncoupled from the lifeworlds of the researchers (Kemmis, 2000). Not only do researchers need to be aware of the potential uncoupling of the research system from their own lifeworlds, but also to continuously question whether systems of research are imposing constraints that colonise the lifeworld of researchers in order to meet their own or others’ agendas, such as the needs of external agencies.

Such considerations are central in working with novice high school student researchers, in particular requiring facilitators to be aware of the possibilities of placing unnecessary constraints or imposing values on their co-researchers in the name of sound research. They must, for instance, ensure that the students are able to openly question the value of formal education; ensure that no potential research participants are excluded in order to avoid having to address issues that are perceived by authorities as inappropriate for research (e.g., refugees with traumatic real life experience); ensure that no linguistic patterns are privileged, thus denying genuine

voice to, for instance, Indigenous Creole, working-class vernacular, visual imagery; and ensure time lines are flexible to avoid limiting the investigations to “safe” issues.

Further, a rationalist interpretation of communicative competence could lead to the negation of equality by those with greatest access to supporting evidence (Grundy, 1996). Validity claims can, though, be contested through questioning data and decisions from a social justice standpoint, such as: Could it be otherwise? Is this true in every instance and for those on the margins of the organisation? Is this appropriate for all those who will be affected by the decision?

Through such acts of “empathic imagination” (p. 113), or questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised and absent others, those whose voices could otherwise be drowned by the voices of authority can be drawn vicariously into the debate and possibilities are opened up for the voicing of experience by other means than scholastically presented argument. Craig (1993) referred to this as “moral imagination” through which students can make connections with social justice issues by shedding light on the tension between their own private beliefs and real life behaviours.

Winter (2003) stresses that it is not possible to empathise with others unless one is feeling positive towards oneself. He presented a practical method of accomplishing imaginative empathy based on the stages of the Buddhist meditative principle of “metta” through which one firstly wishes well to oneself, then to a close friend, then a lesser known acquaintance and finally towards someone to whom one feels some hostility. These feelings are then focussed on all parties and all people simultaneously. This empathic imagination then makes possible the Habermasian “ideal speech

situation” (p. 144), in which all participants have the right to be heard, on which much action research is based.

Empathic imagination can help bridge the fine line that exists between postmodern scepticism and the loss of a “properly *human* imagination” (Kearney, 1988, p. 361). Kearney offered a revised version of imagination rather than submit to a postmodern pessimism and paralysis, believing that an “ethical imagination” (p. 361) requires that the inalienable right of the other to be recognised and heard is respected. In this concept, the metaphor of “play” in the writings of postmodernists such as Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan, and Barthes suggests a means to balance ethical imagination with “poiesis” (p. 367) or inventiveness in a postmodern hermeneutic. It also “animates and enlarges our response to the other” (p. 366) enabling us to empathise with their joys as well as their suffering.

### ***Applying imagination to critical theory***

The critical theory that underpins participatory research and the SARUA project can be strengthened through the “art of imagining”, and not just “the science of reasoning” (Grundy, 1996, p. 109. See also, Calhoun, 1995). For example, the concepts of disciplined and empathic imaginations may provide means to overcome a frequent criticism of critical theory in that, through its modernist philosophy, it fails to take account of difference and to connect with the postmodern world of fractured and multiple identities. Although Habermas (1993) has emphasised that discourse ethics require the overcoming of egocentric viewpoints, his social theories have been questioned for their apparent failure to deal with issues of difference (Agger, 1998; Calhoun, 1995; Coole, 1996; Park, 2001; Webb, 1996). For instance, Coole (1996) suggested that Habermas is hostile to the postmodern discourse precisely because of

its appeal to otherness. By marginalizing alterity to art and religion, Habermas is able to discount difference from rational communicative action. Further, Habermas appears to view unconscious processes as negative and constraining (Elliott, 1996), thereby overlooking “the more positive and creative dimensions of unconscious fantasy and affect ... which are fundamental to social life and critical self-reflection” (p. 189). The result of suppressing the non-discursive, such as emotions and imagination, is the exclusion of those groups that have insignificant voices within the dominant, western traditions of sociological thought. Mobilising those voices and challenging the boundaries between reason and non-reason are among the challenges of postmodernism to the limitations of the modern.

One way of overcoming this limitation within critical theory is by utilising the concept of “bricolage” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001) and by playing around at the boundaries between the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive by acknowledging imagination and the spiritual. Bricolage, according to Kincheloe, cultivates difference “as a spark to researcher creativity” and is “sensitive to multivocality” (2001, p.687). Thus extending critical theory towards postmodernism, it could take account of difference, and allow an opening up of more relativist approaches.

This opening up was, perhaps, behind what Reason and Bradbury (2001) described as “a more adequate and creative paradigm for our times” (p. 7), proposing a participatory worldview that sees people as co-creators of their world yet embodied within the world. As with Kearney’s concept of imagination, this emergent participatory paradigm was offered as an alternative to both the limitations of modernism and the deconstruction of postmodernism, but draws on both these

paradigms. As the authors put it: “the human bodymind actively participates in a co-creative dance which gives rise to the reality we experience. Subject and object are interdependent” (p. 8). Participation is, therefore, an “ontological given” (p. 8) – we are necessarily and unavoidably engaged in a web of communication with other humans and the rest of creation.

Reason and Bradbury are then possibly pointing the way forward for critical theory through their linking of imagination and spirituality and restoration to discourses of communicative action. In such a worldview, denial of students’ right to participation would be an offence against human justice, denying the possibility of healing the alienation that characterises postmodern experience. This participatory worldview “locates the practical response to human problems in its necessary, wider, spiritual context” (p. 11) requiring “the courage to imagine and reach for our fullest capabilities”.

A participatory worldview combined with a critical imagination may, then, be a means to redeem critical theory of its more limiting modernist ties and provide a path towards postmodern directions and, in particular, to take account of difference. Such direction supports the notion that critical theory is informed by a “strong ethical concern for the individual” and a longing for a better world (Blake & Masschelein, 2003, p. 39).

### ***Imagination in the SARUA project***

The range of views of imaginations presented in this paper provides a means of considering their application at various stages of the research process. The typology suggested in Table 1, below, provides a framework for considering the application of

imagination to the various stages of the SARUA project, to demonstrate the various uses of imaginations in the context of research with young people.

*Table 1: A typology of imaginations*

Type	sub-type	attributes	theorist
critical	empathic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised others</li> <li>voices of the marginalised</li> <li>empowering</li> </ul>	Grundy Greene Wright-Mills Winter
	moral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>viewing broader issues of social justice in relation to private beliefs</li> </ul>	Craig
	ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>inalienable right of the other to be recognised and heard</li> </ul>	Kearney
	disciplined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>restrained</li> <li>rigorous</li> </ul>	Giddens
	critically-pragmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tempered by reflection</li> </ul>	Maxcy
creative	utopian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>trying new ideas</li> <li>radical</li> </ul>	Giddens Halpin
	poetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>inventive</li> <li>increased empathy</li> </ul>	Kearney
	pragmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>problem-solving</li> </ul>	Maxcy
	grounded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>theoretical and practical</li> </ul>	Fielding
reflective		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>unsettling</li> <li>disruptive</li> <li>challenging</li> </ul>	Fine O'Farrell
daydreams		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reverie</li> <li>déjà vu</li> <li>remembrance</li> <li>wonder</li> </ul>	Maxcy Berry

If it is imagination that makes empathy possible, it has a central role in critical research with young students. As Greene (1995) pointed out, imagination enables us to “cross the empty spaces” (p. 3) between ourselves and those we call “others”, a view shared by Wright Mills (2001) who promoted “sociological imagination” as “the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self - and to see the relations between the two” (p. 8).

Such imaginative invention may be considered a form of “utopian” thinking, however this could benefit education policies and lead to the development of radical and previously untried ideas, “putting to one side our assumptions about the existing order of things, and the current supposed limits of change” (Halpin, 1999, p. 347).

It can be argued that, when it is related to serious research, some restraint must be placed on the creative ability of the imagination through the imposition of academic rigour (Giddens, 2001, p. 1). Giddens, however, as well as cautioning restraint, also encouraged the use of “disciplined imagination” to enable sociological thought to “take an imaginative leap beyond the familiar” (p. 1):

Imagination, because the sociologist must distance her- or himself from the here and now in order to grasp how societies have changed in the past and what potential transformations lie in store; discipline, because the creative ability of the imagination has to be restrained by conceptual and empirical rigour. (p. 1)

The role of the professional researcher thus becomes essential in a critical approach to research with students. Included in this role is the necessity to become “a researcher of students, their concerns, their self-perceptions, their relationship with reality” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998a, p. 15) and the ability to guide their analysis of their

“goals and dreams” (p. 2). Through gaining this understanding, the facilitator can help connect the students’ individual needs with larger concerns and to assist the development of an awareness of the forces that shape their lives. Remote, or uncoupled, systems that organise the environment of the researchers need to be bridged in this way for a sense of empowerment to be experienced.

Within students-as-researchers projects such as the SARUA project, empowerment of research participants may be achieved when connections are made between the internal world of individuals, the social worlds that they inhabit, and the empathetically imagined worlds of others. These connections must be found not only with the education system, but with the research paradigms they are presented with to engage with the systems world.

The work of the facilitator, then, includes ensuring that the students’ imaginations are not overly impeded by the strictures of formal research processes but, rather, are extended to include empathic imaginative thinking that considers the needs of all those affected by decisions and processes. In this way, the students’ ideas for action are based on genuine social justice principles and their recommendations for change become as democratic as the systems allow.

At the same time, students who are re-engaging with education systems through the research process may be inclined towards impractical or naïve aspirations, seeing participation in the SARUA scheme as an opportunity to invoke their personal fantasies for an idealised educational environment. One current SARUA group, for instance, has attempted to justify the establishment of a lunch-time radio station as a means of improving school retention. This recommendation was, basically, an attempt to realise a personal desire of a small group rather than a solution to identified needs

of the general student body. In dealing with this example, the SARUA facilitators had to be careful not to quash the hopes of the group, but to build it into the research process. The goal is still on the agenda, but it has now been re-worked as one potential outcome of more disciplined research practice. Employing empathic imagination with the students was essential in considering how such a scheme would impact on the rest of the school, staff as well as students, including those who preferred quiet time and those who do not share the group's passion for hip-hop. The group members are satisfied and there is a chance that the radio station will become a reality.

Other outcomes of the project are of more obvious practical advantage to the students and their schools, such as the establishment of homework centres in schools where the students' research revealed the lack of study space, and therefore limited opportunities to complete homework and gain high grades, for many of their classmates. One group investigated ways to overcome negative publicity surrounding the school and to develop a stronger public image. Seeing the changes to their schools developing from the students' application of empathic and creative imagination increases their sense of agency within the education system.

The changes for students who have participated in SARUA include a better understanding of university, learning new skills, putting more effort into their studies, and gaining social benefits, particularly in working with diverse groups. The project's potential for empowerment was expressed by one Year 12 SARUA student who said "...I sat there looking at [the final report] thinking 'We couldn't have done this!'. It was the biggest thrill to look at it and say 'That is mine!' ... it has boosted my self-esteem ... I'm very proud of myself for this" (Atweh & Dornan, 1999, p. 11). A

teacher from one SARUA school has watched her students enter university and not only successfully graduate, but eventually return to the school as mentors “thus keeping the spirit of SARUA alive” (p. 10).

As the focus of the SARUA project is on the empowerment of students from groups that are identified as disadvantaged within the education system, it is vital that those working with them in the research environment regard them as equals in decision-making at all stages of the process. The roles of their teachers and the university facilitators are clear in that they possess expert knowledge of processes which can combine with the students’ expert knowledge of their cultures. This approach offers opportunities at each stage of the research process for the deployment of imagination and allows for Gidden’s concerns for “disciplined imagination” to be addressed at the appropriate times.

Firstly, the students’ “pipedreams” or idealised visions for reform can find space in the introductory phase of the SARUA process, but with the ideal of recognition of the “other” constantly in view. Second, their problem-solving or creative imaginations are an essential tool in the data-gathering stage as their knowledge of their community and their peers can lead to feasible ways of obtaining deep knowledge from their peers that may be unavailable to those positioned as authority figures in the school or the university.

Third, there is space in the writing stage for the students to deploy reflective modes of imagination, following opportunities to imagine the unimaginable and to offer ideas that disrupt the received wisdom and restrictive practices of their educational environments, within the framework of recognised research practice, and within the boundaries of their research findings. The use of empathic imagination helps the

students again to ensure a disciplined approach to their work and to maintain a broad view of the actions the students' propose as remedies to their situations, or as reforms to the education systems, ensuring the needs of all stakeholders are taken into account.

And, finally, the reflection stage of the action research process requires participants to engage a critically-pragmatic imagination, as proposed by Maxcy, not only critically evaluating the benefits of their initiatives in action, but in being reflexive about their own participation in the research process. Those of us involved as facilitators of the SARUA project believe that this reflexive attitude presents a key moment that can lead to genuine empowerment, through which the students gain more agency over their own life choices.

### ***Conclusion***

When combined with disciplined imagination and a broad world view that encourages empathic imagination, a participative approach to working with students has benefits for the students, empowering them to make connections with and critically reflect on education systems. Critical theory, when extended towards the postmodern by means of empathic imagination, supports such a research paradigm that is empowering and emancipating for high school students and can inform intervention programs, such as SARUA, that are consistent with a social justice agenda. Engaging the imaginations of educationally disadvantaged secondary students through real-world research that is based on their own socio-cultural realities can lead to empowerment of the individual and realistic reforms for their schools and the education system. Genuinely empowering results have been achieved in this way through the SARUA process with

many students, who may otherwise have been confined to the margins of mainstream education, expressing a change of view as regards their futures.

Students-as-researchers come to understand that there is more to experience than initially meets the eye. As student researchers learn to interpret their experience, their imagination is released in a way that allows them to imagine new possibilities for themselves. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998b, p. 230)

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