

## Article

# Re-Imagining Approaches to Learning and Teaching: Youth and Community Work Education Post COVID-19

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**Abstract:** This article draws on research undertaken by the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work (PALYCW) in collaboration with the Open University, University of Glasgow and the University of Hull. The authors are all part of a community of practice of lecturers teaching in higher education on Community and Youth Work (CYW) degree programmes. These CYW programmes are professionally endorsed by Youth Work and Community Development professional bodies across the UK. They adopt informal methodologies and have a strong focus on preparing students to work as informal educators with young people and communities. The unique contribution of this paper is highlighting the experiences, issues and challenges presented and exploring creative approaches that have been developed by programmes that adopt these approaches to educate professional practitioners. Looking forward in a context of great uncertainty, the research also set out to consider what the future might look like for CYW programmes, located in the neoliberal university. Questions explored included the extent to which the pandemic might lead to longer term changes in learning and teaching methodologies in CYW in higher education (HE) and how CYW programmes should be preparing students for navigating practice in the society that unfolds post COVID-19 as the basis for taking action in communities in response to new formations of social injustice and inequality with conscious intent.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; community and youth work; higher education; teaching; research informed practice



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## 1. Introduction

The world is in a time of profound change and extraordinary uncertainty, with the fourth industrial revolution [1] and its complexities colliding with the impact of COVID-19. The fallout from this collision is destabilising society, calling into question the utility of social institutions. Inequalities and exploitation have been made inescapably visible for marginalised groups and those living in poverty, in poorly paid insecure jobs and living in inadequate housing [2].

At a micro level, the recent pandemic has shaken up everyone's lived experiences, patterns and routines. We are having to rethink how we experience social relationships and arrangements to the way we live, work and socialise. For Butler [3], 'However differently we register this pandemic we understand it as global; it brings home the fact that we are implicated in a shared world.' She puts forward the imperative that to 'create an inhabitable world means to dismantle rigid forms of individuality which we argue is a prerequisite for 'breaking through' [4] new formations of social injustice and working collaboratively to deepen democracy.

The current situation has opened up different spaces and places in different contexts to explore what type of other world we want to live in, how we work to build for now, the

future and what our legacies might be [3]. Through the pandemic there has been increased mutual self-help building solidarity from the grass roots in the face of state failure [5].

The context of the pandemic provides a strong foundation and rationale for the profession of Community and Youth Work (CYW) Programmes in facilitating informal and community education-led recovery in practice. Organising differently and co-operatively in the creation of alternative approaches to learning and teaching in CYW education in response to such challenges requires a deep questioning of the role of universities. The research drew on Participatory Action Research methodology to pursue multiple lines of inquiry including exploring how research participants are positioned as academic subjects. This provided a context for research participants to explore possibilities for using their positions of relative privilege and the platforms that this provides as the basis for analysis, advocacy and action about learning and teaching practices in CYW education. The research opened space to begin to explore pressing questions that hold implications for informal education, including, how do we continue to commit to being active in the creation of intentional teaching and learning spaces alongside each other, CYW students and practitioners? How do CYW educators in HE learn alongside local communities about new forms of organising, solidarity and mutual help as the basis for refreshing how and what is taught as part of professionalising CYW education? The research inquiry into CYW is both situated and contextual, located in a particular historical moment in time capturing the perspectives of lecturers in CYW teaching in UK-based universities. This paper critically reflects on the initial themes generated through the process of inquiry. The themes explored in the paper are not intended to be understood as fixed claims to knowledge but consistent with the principles of Participatory Action Research offer an opening for further investigation and a focus for the further development of informal education methodology in CYW teaching practices.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. COVID-19 Context

The emergence of COVID-19 in 2020 changed society and the way in which people conducted their lives. The vast inequalities in social and economic conditions prior to the pandemic have had a direct impact on the unequal death toll [6]. In this context, Williams connects a critical and intersectional analysis of multiple social inequalities and social justice with questions of political practice and: 'not only how to 'do' social politics but also how our lives together might be better lived' [7] (p. 1). Such questions are significant at a time when the UK's austerity agenda, deeply criticised for subjecting 'great misery' with 'punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous' policies [8], intensified the impact of COVID-19. The '... fatal weakening of the community's capacity to cope and respond over the past 10 years ...' [9] (p. 4) ensured that COVID-19 had devastating impacts on the most vulnerable in society. 'Many of those groups, already struggling to stay afloat, have also borne the brunt of the economic and health impacts of COVID-19' [10] (p. 2).

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on some social groups more than others is situated within a series of hostile social policies, forcing a crisis in social welfare that provides insights and analysis into the treatment of vulnerable groups. This holds specific implications for CYW educators and students who often are classified as non-traditional students, may be from disadvantaged groups and who almost certainly work alongside them. This provides unique contributions to the knowledge as to how HE programmes, working with non-traditional students and disadvantaged communities, have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and how they envisage their future working practices in establishing the society they want. With this critical reflection at the forefront of our mind, Arundhati Roy [11] writes, historically, that pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers

and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world—and ready to fight for it.

The portal that Roy discusses, and what happens next in terms of informal education, can be reflected upon via the views gathered from CYW lecturers and is therefore the focus of this paper. Making new meanings for the world, critically questioning experiences during these times whilst considering, can we walk lightly together and contribute to a reimagined world, or will it be ‘back to normal’ as quickly as possible? seems pertinent not just now but for CYW practice in HE in general.

## 2.2. *The Current HE Context*

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on teaching and learning in HE, on the lives of students studying and on the work of academics teaching and researching in universities [12,13]. Lockdown across the UK in March 2020 resulted in a cessation of face-to-face teaching across the HE sectors and a rapid transition to online learning and teaching. Since this time, as COVID-19 rates have continued to fluctuate, university teaching across the UK and globally [13] have increasingly shifted to more ‘hybrid’ models of learning and teaching, with elements of face-to-face teaching being offered alongside teaching delivered online. At the time of writing, in March 2022, the UK is slowly emerging from all imposed lockdown restrictions. The future trajectory of the impact of the pandemic and what will emerge as the ‘new normal’ as a lasting legacy for HE learning and teaching continues to be emergent and therefore uncertain.

The impact of the pandemic on the lives and the learning of students has been highlighted in academic publications as well as in the UK media. Particular concerns have been raised about the effect the pandemic has had on students’ mental health [14]. The Sutton Trust has highlighted the disadvantages some students faced due to COVID-19 across their university journey, with the poorest hit hard [15]. Among Scottish students, for example, 73% were concerned about managing financially during the pandemic, and 14% reported using foodbanks [15]. In a difficult economic context, students graduating from university programmes are also facing a challenging entry into the labour market.

Challenges were faced by all those teaching on degree programmes. In this paper, we suggest, however, that programmes such as CYW have a unique insight into the impact on students from non-traditional backgrounds as well as the communities in which these students live and work. Therefore, analysing the views of lecturers committed to a more socially just world, who educate professional practitioners to work alongside the most disadvantaged communities, is vital in understanding HE’s social responsibility more broadly.

The experience of COVID-19 has ‘revealed much of the deficiencies of the higher education sector and much perhaps of what needs to change in universities’ [16] (p. 624). It has highlighted the flaws of the neoliberal model of HE, of a marketised competitive university system where students are positioned as consumers, with institutions focusing on rankings and measuring performance; and the position of academics is becoming more insecure [17]. Existing shifts towards the wide-scale digitisation of university learning and teaching, and of university processes and practices, have been accelerated in the circumstances of the pandemic [17,18]. The impact of COVID-19 on the financial stability of some institutions has been identified as another area of concern [19]. As we emerge into a post-pandemic future, higher education commentators discuss the future of universities and what a re-imagined university might look like. This study focuses on a subset of academics whose practice is underpinned by informal methodologies, adopting critical pedagogical strategies to address social disadvantage and ensure that the voices of the most marginalised are included in policy creation and societal formation. It is for this reason that we now discuss the unique contribution that CYW programmes offer in the current context.

### 2.3. Community and Youth Work—Inside and Outside Higher Education

Many CYW HE programmes explicitly align their practices to critical pedagogy. Critically engaging with the political, cultural and economic context through dialectical theory, critique and praxis should position these programmes in a unique place to address injustices intensified by COVID-19.

Whilst approaches to teaching on such programmes are not alone in this endeavour, they certainly offer valuable insights into how society could be reimaged and how the HE sector can be more responsive to the needs of communities who are most marginalised and those who faced the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of critical pedagogy prior to the pandemic by CYW programmes offers learning for the broader HE sectors both practically, in terms of teaching, and structurally, in terms of policy. The literature demonstrates the discursive and distinctive ways in which critical pedagogy is put to work as a part of a values-driven approach to informal education practices that hold value both for students and in sustaining communities and socially just practices. Darder, Baltodano and Torres [20] (p. 22), for example, optimistically argue that critical pedagogy will continue whilst ‘... there are those who are forced to live under conditions of suffering and alienation—and there are educators who refuse to accept such conditions as a ‘natural’ evolution of humankind.’ The importance of dialectical teaching and ‘starting where the person is at’ does not easily subscribe to pre-set outcomes, agendas or targets in professional practice or broader HE. The neoliberal project of our times has necessitated a formalised shift with a systematic dismantling of informal approaches in favour of increasingly individualised and responsibilised approaches [21–23]. CYW in the broadest sense, as a discipline and as a profession, has struggled to earn public recognition for the social value of its practices.

The value-driven nature of our professions [24,25] align with critical pedagogy in challenging oppression [26] and using education to challenge injustices. Critical pedagogy attempts to make the learners’ experiences meaningful and provides tools for consciousness raising and action. However, often in formal educational institutions ‘the learner is made visible, but power is rendered invisible, and the learner sees only the tasks and the tests which they must undertake’ [27] (p. 48). A mirroring is happening in CYW practice where the data-driven context of ‘performativity’ and pre-defined outcomes often jar with the time required to build relationships and to work with young people at the centre of the process, potentially jeopardising the entire field of CYW [22,27].

In practice, the austerity measures impacted local youth services in England particularly hard, with 4544 local authority youth service jobs cut between 2012 and 2019 and at least 763 youth centres closing their doors since 2012 [28]. Despite this bleak context, COVID-19 reignited an interest in notions of community, in building relationships and in supporting our most vulnerable in society. These are things that CYW’s have been advocating for and doing, day in and day out, despite the systematic dismantling of social protections and services [29–31]. For many, communities have been a ‘hidden good’ during this time. A recent Citizen Enquiry captured youth work stories during the pandemic. The Enquiry highlighted different ways in which practitioners across the country encouraged solidarity and mutual support with young people and communities. Key values of co-operation, connection, compassion, kindness, caring and common good were distinctive through the diaries in the actions taken [32]. It is with this context in mind that the research sought to explore in writing and in dialogue with lecturers of CYW their experiences during these unprecedented times and collectively to reflect on learning through the process and implications for practices going forward.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The researchers are themselves teachers and researchers in the field of CYW and located within the community of practice in which teaching and learning in HE would be explored [33]. From the outset, consideration was given to matters of methodology including the importance of developing an approach to research inquiry, which was consistent with the practices of CYW. A key consideration in the initial stages of research design was

the need to work with a methodology that was developmental and orientated to making a difference in approaches to informal methods of teaching. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was agreed as a methodological approach capable of providing a loose organising structure to the research process that has synergy with CYW principles and practices with an orientation to social justice [34].

PAR can be understood as an approach to research in which the false binary between the researcher and research is collapsed, as both are constituted as being with the process of inquiry. At a level of generality, PAR can be understood as a framework for conducting research that is flexible and responsive to the issues identified by participants themselves. The methodology is underpinned by the premise that those most impacted by the research should be integral to generating questions and setting agendas related to the participant's own teaching practices within their own settings. This is, more broadly, a part of a collective endeavour within a community of practice in which the process of PAR might act as a catalyst for action and serve to narrow the gap between research and action-orientated steps to making a difference [34].

Historically, the theorisation of PAR can be broadly associated with Freirean approaches with an emphasis on democratic processual and relational practices. It has also been widely linked to indigenous epistemologies and anti-racist and feminist theories, which give recognition to the value of making meaning through collective knowledge-making practices in ways that are both situated and contextual [35]. PAR can be further described as a methodological approach that is grass roots, as the process is generated from within communities and, in this instance, from within a community of lecturers in CYW. The methodology is distinctive, as it is orientated to action that advances agendas for social justice, which is of primary concern to lecturers in CYW drawing on the critical pedagogy referred to in the previous section [34]. Drawing on these framings of PAR, the role of critical dialogue and reflection was also considered integral to the generation of themes through the research process, and that would provide the context for action emerging from within our own CYW teaching practices.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from The Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) in December 2020 on behalf of the research team. Data was collected between January and March 2021, during a period of UK-wide lockdown. Information about the project, and an invitation to take part in the research, was circulated to members of the Professional Association of Youth and Community Workers (PALYCW). Information was also shared across professional networks via Twitter. Eighteen participants were recruited from thirteen higher education institutions across the UK; they all had roles teaching on CYW programmes or researching in this area. Participants were given information about the purpose of the research and were informed of their anonymity and right to withdraw in line with BERA guidelines [36].

Participants were able to engage with the project in two ways. They were invited to provide short written accounts, their own stories and narratives of their experiences teaching on CYW programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the issues and challenges that COVID-19 was presenting for them and ways in which they were addressing (or maybe trying to address) these challenges. They were also invited to contribute to two collective discussions that took place online via Microsoft Teams. These collective discussions were facilitated by the researchers and were loosely structured around the research questions. The intention was to create spaces for critical reflection and discussion and to share experiences and understandings. The first discussion focused on experiences of learning and teaching during the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second discussion, participants were asked to look forward, in a context of great uncertainty, and to consider what the future might look like for CYW practice and CYW programmes located in HE. Questions explored included whether the pandemic would lead to longer term changes in learning and teaching methodologies on CYW undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes and how these programmes should be preparing students for navigating and shaping practice as society learns to live with COVID-19. The collective discussions were

recorded and transcribed. A distinctive aspect of the methodological approach was the commitment to create space and time for dialogue about the data generated through the research process, which was distilled into generative themes for analysis and to potentially inform further processes of research inquiry. The use of Teams facilitated a virtual democratic and accessible online space for reflection that removed geographical and time barriers to participation. Information about the project was also equally accessible to researchers who also used Teams as a collaborative writing space to make meaning in relation to generative themes that were emerging. As the research sessions were recorded, there was the intent to watch video footage understood as data. A key limitation in the research process was that the recordings did not save, and it meant that researchers needed to rely on auto-generated transcripts from the research and manual notes taken by researchers. The core research team engaged with a process of thematic analysis to identify commonalities that emerged from the research sessions and writing contributions [37].

Researchers paid particular attention to the affective dimensions of dialogue where an issue, idea or theme appeared to resonate with participants and take off in uncertain and unexpected directions. Themes were cross referenced with writing that participants had submitted. Issues broadly associated to 3 emergent themes that will form a focus for further inquiry over the longer term. The PAR methodology put to work was distinctive in that it was open to the issues and interests that participants brought into the research space drawing on their own practice-based experiences. Questions posed provided a loose organising structure revisable in practice dependent on where participants wanted to take issues identified through the dialogue and writing. The methodology and methods and the researcher and participants' perspectives all informed the meaning making that emerged from within the process in intra action to generate themes. The themes presented in this paper were not the only ones and therefore should be understood as a partial unfolding of areas for inquiry.

A range of ethical dimensions required careful consideration, not the least of which because of the complex relationships that develop through collaborative approaches to research and the need therefore to clarify, and not assume, accountabilities [38]. Ethics in this research was understood as being more than 'following the rules'. The approach to the research required being attuned and open to the possibility that differences may occur within the process of working intra-actively [39]; although we are a community of practice, we are not univocal. Power differentials through the process did arise with different ideas about how the research should be approached and what constituted 'data' within the process. It also raised a more fundamental question about the values and ethical approaches that inform and hold our practices to ensure that differences are encountered with respect and recognition for the 'other'. As the research was based on the principle of collaboration, the team made time and space for debriefing through all aspects of activity, including to consider matters of how to work together through the process and adapt approaches in response to participants [38]. This also held implications for how data was understood in the research process. Here the researcher's engagement with the data was understood as happening through a series of ethical encounters in negotiating meanings. Data in this context was not, therefore, approached as if it was static or fixed but as having agency within the process of inquiry and therefore with the power to influence and shape actions [40].

#### 4. Results

A number of themes were identified through an analysis of the data, which chimed with the principles of CYW practices generally. The themes are: going with the flow and adapting teaching practices; creating spaces for learning; relationships and fun; CYW in HE and the role of the CYW academic in the post-pandemic university.

Data extended beyond the analysis provided in this article given the depth and breadth of discussions. For example, participants reflected on their experiences of living through a pandemic that had had a profound effect on their work and their personal lives. For

some, the precarity of the HE sectors in general was further exacerbated by the pandemic. Work patterns being shaped and mediated through technology, algorithms and metrics without the supportive relationships of working face to face with programme colleagues has impacted everyone within HE. It has been a 'roller coaster journey' with increasing workloads and work intensification.

Across the two research sessions, those teaching in CYW education always referred to the 'doing' of teaching. There was also frequent reference to 'the field', not meaning the academic field per se but the practice field of CYW. The intrinsic connection between higher education and the professional practice field is crucial when considering teaching practices and entanglements with the role of research in shaping a future yet to come.

#### 4.1. Going with the Flow and Adapting Teaching Practices

All participants had been required to make rapid changes to their learning and teaching practices in response to the unfolding COVID-19 crisis in the UK in March 2020. This included the general shift to an online approach to teaching. Participants generally reflected on those changes during the research inquiry conducted in March 2021. Alongside this, the pandemic had 'brought the pastoral relationship to the fore'. They talked at length about the impact that COVID-19 was having on students, particularly non-traditional students or those living in situations without strong social support, with existing health conditions and mental health issues and those who had children and other caring responsibilities. As one participant commented:

*'We are not only teaching very differently, and mixing different processes for teaching and learning, but we're also spending even more than routine time, on kind of one-to-one support for students, and that in itself is quite traumatic, some of the experiences they're going through and we're carrying all that and soaking it in like a big sponge.'*

Another observed that 'I've always felt I've been a bit of a youth worker in this role, and some of the individual struggles of students have been stark.' The professional background many CYW lecturers come from provides them with an existing knowledge base and skill set to draw upon when working with students facing increased difficulties. The amalgamation of roles, part lecturer and part CYW practitioner, came to the fore during the pandemic.

However, amidst the significant challenges of the past year, participants also identified positives and opportunities that had been presented by the experience of the pandemic. Approaches to teaching and learning underpinned by CYW values and principles had equipped them well for being flexible and adaptable in the rapidly changing HE environment, and for developing responses to COVID-19 and meeting institutional requirements. In dealing with the circumstances of the pandemic, they had also drawn on their own professional skills as community and youth workers. Participants noted that the pandemic had led to a renewed 'recognition of the importance of community' and highlighted the strength of approaches driven by CYW, which emphasised the 'mutuality of support' and the value of 'learning through collaboration' within and across 'creative practice partnerships'. As well as highlighting the importance of CYW as a practice and as a profession, the pandemic had presented an opportunity for lecturers in CYW to showcase and share their approaches to learning and teaching with academic colleagues teaching in other disciplines.

Learning and teaching in the context of a global pandemic had also presented opportunities for rich conversations that developed students' critical thinking: to chat and comment on their perspectives about what they saw happening personally, professionally, nationally and globally with big, complex learning debates and discussions. Collectively, CYW lecturers and students had worked to find ways forward; as one commented: 'we problem solved together.' The pandemic had demonstrated students' creativity and ability to be innovative, including in situations where they had been enabled to continue their practice in communities.

#### 4.2. *Creating Spaces for Learning*

The role of technology in shaping and mediating teaching and learning spaces intensified during the pandemic, accelerating changes that were already evident in learning and teaching in HE. Spaces for learning have become increasingly individualised and personalised in ways which unsettle ideas about space as linear or bound by time [27,41]. The research identified that, along with students more generally, CYW students have been given increased choice in when and how to access learning resources synchronously and asynchronously. Participants working in some institutions had been given the autonomy to develop their own creative responses to teaching online, and some of this experience had been positive. However, a number of participants shared how they had been given ‘set formulas’ for the development of learning activities, which potentially undermined the role of the collective and group work in CYW teaching. A key theme explored by participants was the implications for critical pedagogy in hybrid approaches in HE to teaching that may ‘prioritise the individual over the collective’.

Whilst COVID-19 resulted in all HE providers transitioning to online learning, recent research [41] (p. 476) found, ‘The ability of teachers and learners to engage affectively in relationships showed to be central to meaningful educational experiences’. Participants explored and shared different ways in which they had used the distinctive approaches of CYW education, in terms of power sharing, and equity, in the creation of virtual spaces. A key question was raised about the role of the CYW educator in working alongside students to make spaces in which societal and professional change can be imagined. In this context, one research participant talked about the idea of online spaces being conceptualised as ‘laboratories for learning’ that require the enactment of a range of ‘ethical and professional considerations.’ In other words, academics have to be active in space making alongside students to create conditions in which the collective is valued to counter the impact of more individualised, technical–rational approaches [42]. This is a major challenge when utilising informal methodologies mediated through a computer screen. Another participant spoke about the importance of creating unconditional spaces in which educational relationships are prioritised as resistance to the increasing colonisation of space through managerial requirements. Participants were mindful of the dangers and limitations of online working as well as recognising its potential and possibilities. Several participants emphasised the importance of sharing power through democratic practices, drawing on lived experiences to negotiate and make meaning about future-orientated CYW practices. The process of space making becomes pivotal in creating conditions for learning that prioritises relationships and encourages spontaneity, fun, risk and playfulness.

#### 4.3. *Relationships and Fun*

The importance of relationships was highlighted by participants both in discussions and in their written reflections. Cottam [43] supports this, arguing the need to ‘remake relationships and revolutionise the welfare state’. Participants questioned the nature of educational relationships with students and space-making activities that create conditions of possibility in ways which align with Cottam’s manifesto for social revolution, where revolution is understood as a practice that requires ‘all our participation’.

A number of participants spoke about the challenges of forming relationships with colleagues and students that they had only ever met online. However, they had worked to find ways of creating more humanised, informal dialogical spaces. One participant described the introduction of an online drop-in as a positive approach to making educational relationships that were less didactic, more horizontal and where ‘experiences and feelings mattered and were made to count.’ Participants highlighted the importance of working collaboratively with students to make unconditional spaces where relationships could be prioritised over attainment. This was seen to be fundamental at a time where students were struggling to remain engaged with their CYW education, studying in challenging circumstances, including living in overcrowded spaces and with limited connectivity. One



area that was discussed extensively in a breakout room was the need to reintegrate ‘fun’ into our work.

‘We do not know what is next because we never anticipated this . . . We are not living in colour at the minute we are living in black and white and how do we start to bring that colour, that fun back? . . . We need to get back to the fun, that UNCRC, right to play, supporting young people to be together, to developing social elements. It is all really serious; everything is serious and where is that fun aspect . . . ?’ Segal [44] agrees, arguing the need for ‘radical happiness’, a process of transformative, collective joy in contrast to the current era of individualism. Community and youth workers have always known the importance of fun. It is not only vital for development but why people engage, the solidarity, collectivity, relationship building and identifying common purposes for action. Notions of happiness and fun should not be deemed as oppositional to serious and misery; rather, as Segal [44] argues, it is in the recognition of struggles, difficulties, difference and ‘in consciously combating the hierarchies of privilege and power consolidated around difference—creates spaces of excitement, respect and hope’.

Despite this ambition, many participants highlighted concerns that COVID-19 may, in contrast, progress a pathologising, ‘fixing’ agenda which has already been levied at communities and young people. One participant commented: ‘I do think there is a danger because of the narrative of the harm caused, the educational deficit, the mental health epidemic, all of that . . . It is there and it needs to be addressed but it is not the only thing that needs to be addressed in the context of this and how do we balance those very real and immediate needs without being driven by that singular agenda of ‘fixing young people’ or ‘fixing communities.’

The targeting, stigmatisation and placing blame on particular communities and young people is not new. Giroux [45] highlighted the neoliberal promotion of compliance to punitive policies directed at such groups. The deficit discourse on ‘fixing’ young people who do not ‘fit’ [46] has been well documented and challenged in realms of CYW literature [47].

For some participants, the current context was an opportunity to tell others what ‘we have always known’ and cited an example that ‘fixing a family for a fortnight for a fiver is the world we have been living in and I wonder because of elements of the pandemic it is forcing, not necessarily us because we have always known that is shoddy way of going about stuff, but forcing people to acknowledge that that doesn’t work’.

A common narrative that came from the conversations on future was that collectively people working in the area ‘know’ what is needed, and that relationships are central. As one research participant stated: ‘if there is a shift towards placing more value on the relational stuff, which of course we know is what it was all about anyway and it has been what it’s about since the 1840s, despite what the Government says, no it is about buildings or targeting resources to the neediest, or it is about getting young people into jobs. We have known the whole time it is really about those relationships. So, if funders and I include the government in this as well, if they have taken this on board and if COVID-19 has helped them recognise that ‘it’s about relationships stupid’, as they said about the economy . . . if there is a shift towards that type of targeted funding then it could be quite exciting’.

Another participant noted that the pandemic had already disrupted the status quo and routine practices within HE ‘enabling new alliances and understandings of CYW education teaching practices in the context of COVID-19 to emerge between partners beyond the UK.’ Participants also identified the precarious nature of their practice from within their own university but how new relational formations had renewed a sense of identity and dynamism about what is possible working across institutions.

#### 4.4. CYW in HE

In relation to the future of CYW within HE, participants identified a difficult dichotomy between maintaining the prerequisites required in the HE environment whilst still meeting the needs of organisations and, fundamentally, communities and young people. The lack of understanding of some HE providers in recognising the importance of this professional

field is not new, but for some it felt heightened under the current context. However, our focus on the field of practice does potentially raise issues in meeting the requirements within HE. As one participant noted, 'the HE agenda is a corporate business and if you don't meet this line, we get rid of you'.

Questions around how to address these challenges collectively and strategically were raised by participants. The need to support each other within the field of CYW particularly in relation to conducting and producing research was often discussed. Reflections on how CYW academics have come together over the last few years to support one another, to promote the field and to further our academic standing was noted. However, for others, the current context made us question whether HE is conflictual with our underpinning values and practice history illustrated when one participant stated that 'we might get caught up in just being a part of the HE machines and whether when you look back on our roots of how CYW emerged, responded to, whether at times we might even become blind to the fact that we are trying to prop up something that we probably shouldn't be trying to prop up and do we need to make are there are other routes that exist outside the HE machine'.

This raised some interesting discussions about the need for parity of professional esteem, how informal educators work within the formal HE environment and how to ensure that, as academics with a professional focus, we can meet the requirements of both HE and the field. For some, it felt like they needed to work doubly hard in meeting the demands of both, when one is not always fully recognised by the other.

Nevertheless, a mantra of collective action, of supporting each other and of being seen as not quite professional enough, not quite academic enough and not quite good enough to have sustainable investment in our practices is not new. Working at the margins is what we have always maintained, and as one participant reminded us, 'is this not the perennial issue for youth and community workers? It has always been like this; we have always been fighting against the tide ... From that kind of adversity and disinvestment, creativity happens, people coalesce and come together and fight for what is important and in a sense that has made us stronger I think ...'

This strength was articulated through the distinctiveness of approaches to teaching underpinned by the values and principles of CYW. This had equipped participants to be adaptable and flexible in responding to the rapid changes that were unfolding in the HE environment. Seeing lecturers in CYW as a professional community of practice creates conditions where it was possible to plan and to negotiate [48], 'local ways of belonging to broader constellations' [48] (p. 149). These local connections to broader structures and practice became evidently important to participants throughout the research. That we have unique, yet at times comparable, experiences to other HE lecturers allows our learning and experiences to be jointly shared in creating a space and vision for informal methodologies to be used effectively in HE environments.

#### *4.5. The Role of the CYW Academic in the Post-Pandemic University*

One participant asked, 'What are we here for within all of this—including as a Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work?' The driver for this question featured implicitly and explicitly through discussions across both research sessions and in written accounts. Participants raised concerns about the changing nature of HE and the continued precarity of CYW programmes generally. Whilst recognising the many and varied benefits of teaching and learning both driven and mediated by technology, academics expressed concern about the potential for a shift too far in which the academic role could be replaced with automated functions supported by technicians and instructional designers. Those concerns are more broadly reflected in wider research (see for example [17]).

Fraser and Sunkara's [49] book 'The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born' takes its title from a quote from Gramsci's analysis of the crisis of the 1930's. As the world emerges from the current crisis of the pandemic, there will again be a need for education to act as an 'emancipatory social force as something that clearly aligns with CYW aims and

values.’ Situating teaching practices across CYW programmes in critical pedagogy is an explicit attempt to raise consciousness and challenge hegemonic norms, enabling people to challenge the ‘taken-for-granted without experiencing paralysing anxiety’ [50] (p. 13). Without such approaches, there is also a danger that lived experiences are diminished, and that intolerance of differences and processes of othering sharpen as unequal power dynamics are accepted uncritically. As Darder [20] (p. 100) notes, the unacknowledged conformity of the classroom and economy are perpetuated by way of contradictory hegemonic structures and social mechanisms that condition students to think of themselves as solely individual possessors and consumers with little regard for the common good or sense of responsibility for our communal existence.

Critical pedagogy has continuing relevance in the shaping and making of educational relationships and in the professional formation of CYW students as agentic professionals, but it also shares this in common with other informal CYW educators [51]. CYW lecturers located in universities have a key role to play in preparing community and youth workers for practice in a post-pandemic future and in the process of re-imagining and shaping that future. Working collaboratively, within and across different HE institutions, they can act as catalysts in opening HE spaces in ways that are accessible to marginalised groups. They are also well placed to work co-operatively, and to create alliances with, adult educators, community and youth workers, young people and communities to create change.

## 5. Conclusions

This research has opened up a space to continue dialogue about the role of CYW educators in exploring possibilities of teaching in CYW as we learn to live with COVID-19 and its impact. It is hoped that the process of research has acted as a developmental tool to support collaboration and collective working across the CYW sector. PALYCW, as a member-led professional association, has a key role to play in opening up spaces for collaboration. It also promotes collective approaches to research inquiry in relation to learning and teaching practices.

Reimagining CYW education teaching practices is a complex process. It is relational, processual, situated and contextual. The challenge of our times is how we can continue to work collaboratively as a community of practice? Emerging from this is an imperative to explore strategies to build a shared understanding of the current context for teaching CYW education and to understand the intended and unintended consequences on the professional formation of future generations of CYW’s. CYW educators must find ways to work co-operatively, collectively and in situated ways to make differences orientated to the creation of socially just practices. We suggest that there is a political and ethical imperative to make connections and political alliances with other educators struggling with the same emancipatory goals, in and across educational contexts, including trade unions and allied professions, such as adult education. Our resistance must ensure that we do not subscribe to anti-intellectual ways [52] and focus on what our teaching practices are doing in material and concrete ways.

The research has explored some of the challenges and possibilities that have occurred through lockdown during the global pandemic. Inevitably, the research produces more questions than provides answers. The data and themes that have emerged through this research inquiry have agency beyond the parameters of this paper, which offers an initial and partial exploration of challenges in the current context of teaching in CYW. The paper concludes by suggesting that there is an ongoing need to continue to explore ways of teaching CYW that resists the instrumentalism of the neo liberal university more broadly. One of the issues that has emerged through the research process and that requires further exploration beyond this paper is the need to ‘start somewhere else’ in research inquiry and, in doing so, counter the impact of increased formalisation and administration of learning relationships [53]. Initial findings from the research have emphasised the affective dimensions of teaching practices and highlighted the potential of the concept of fun in teaching and learning, time space and relationships. All have the power to disrupt the

impact of instrumentalism in the teaching of CYW and perhaps provide an initial way of starting somewhere else that has synergy with the principles and practices of CYW. ‘Starting somewhere else’ [53] will require a continued refusal of linear methodologies and a continued focus on the processual and relational role of research inquiry that informs teaching and alliance-making activities. In this paper, we suggest that such a strategy can create conditions for distributed agency across a variety of networks that enable informal teaching methods to flourish and to set agendas for a new era of theorising teaching practices in CYW education that are mediated by technology, research and practice inquiry. Acknowledging the dialectical synergy between practice and academia places CYW in a unique position as informal educators develop PAR both in grassroots communities and in educational institutions. Highlighting the importance of issues that affect people’s everyday lives, recognising the difference they can make and developing the capacity of those often silenced by formal educational processes and policy creation is key. As one CYW educator articulates, ‘People do not lack the capacity, they lack the opportunity’; and, as Williams [54] reminds us, ‘To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing’.

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