Learning in Predominantly White Spaces: Interrogating Development Education through Minority Ethnic Student Perspectives

Shiva R. Joyce, Aram Wahhoud, Jacqueline Moreira da Silva and Chriszine Backhouse

Abstract: This article is the transcription of an interview with three past students from minority ethnic backgrounds who completed the 'Creativity and Change' Special Purpose Award at Munster Technological University (MTU) Crawford College of Art and Design. The interviews discuss the student's experiences as participants from minority ethnic backgrounds on a course where the majority of students were White Irish. The students discuss their personal histories in their countries of origin and the challenges they faced to adapting to the demands of the course with its focus on development education (DE). The conversation reflects on how the DE sector can enhance the participation and inclusion of learners from the minority ethnic sector in its practice.

Key words: Development education; Minority ethnic sector; Social inclusion; Global South; Art and design.

Introduction

This article is the transcription of an interview with three past students from minority ethnic backgrounds who completed the 'Creativity and Change' Special Purpose Award at Munster Technological University (MTU) Crawford College of Art and Design. Creativity and Change is designed to promote creative methodologies in global citizenship (GC) / development education (DE). In it, we use a model of 'transformational learning' developed by Singleton (2015) which proposes that for learning to lead to change, it must involve the 'head, heart and hands'. When we encounter difficult or troubling global justice issues, we can experience an anesthetic, or numbing effect. We

have found that creative experiences are conducive to transformative learning because the aesthetic experience has the power to counteract this anesthetic.

Every year up to 25 students take part in the course, ranging in age from 19 to over 60 and coming from all parts of Ireland. The majority of our students are white Irish. At an alumni event, students identified the lack of racial diversity in our programme as problematic as it doesn't represent the changing demographics of Ireland. To address this issue, we established the 'Amplifying Voices' scholarship, which was designed to support students from ethnic minorities and other under-represented backgrounds to take part in the course. We sat down with the first two scholarship recipients, as well as the student who had identified the issue, to discuss barriers to global citizenship and development education and the importance of ensuring that everyone can participate in and contribute to this field.

Chriszine (course lecturer and interviewer): I'm going to begin with Jacqueline and hear a little bit from you because you were a past participant two years ago on the Creativity and Change course, and you're one of the people that began to bring this issue to our attention. So, could you first of all just tell us about your experience of Creativity and Change and what stood out to you about being on the course?

Jaqueline: Hi everyone. I am Brazilian and I absolutely loved Creativity and Change. I found it fascinating to come together ... where everyone was talking about inequality and global justice, and I loved the way we have learning experiences and there is no right or wrong and how we go deep into the root causes of issues and how complex all those situations and issues can be. I just personally had some kind of complex of inferiority for being Brazilian... I grew up in a country that was called a 'third world' country. And today, it's like a 'developed/developing country', so I think I brought with me ...this inferiority kind of complex that I had to deal with.

Chriszine: Did that shift at all (the inferiority complex)? Were there any insights you made around that during the course?

Jaqueline: I definitely changed my point of view that I'm not inferior or ... we are not inferior. We are not a third world country... People say that we are developing. It doesn't mean that we are not developed in other ways. There are other points of view. This is just one side of a story that is being told and being accepted as the truth and it isn't the truth. It was really good being able to unfold and realise this.

Chriszine: Shiva you look like you want to come in.

Shiva: I just thought that's so powerful. I heard a really interesting comment once that … I think was the First Nations community in Australia ... that said 'we're not developing. This isn't a developing nation or any of that. It's actually in recovery from colonialism', and I loved that. If our development had not been impeded, then where would we be now? So, it really is about how those words frame and shape and place people. And... are intended to make you feel inferior.

Chriszine: Excellent point, thank you... I feel like you're illustrating the importance of having people from different perspectives in this space to show up the blind spots that might be in the language that's being used. Jacqueline to come back to the course and your experience of it… You had some concerns around diversity, the lack of diversity of participants on the course. Do you want to say a little bit more about where that came from and what your concerns might have been?

Jaqueline: I think coming from this place where I was feeling inferior, then I recovered from that and I realised that... I felt a little bit alone, let's say because there was no one else like *me*. I had some, I won't say issues, but I had some concerns … *Was there* anyone of another background that I could share *this with*? Everyone was white, everyone was European. Everyone spoke English for longer than I had for example… We were talking about world inequalities, world issues, so why *was there* one kind of people? Let's say from one specific place in the world, to talk about all the world?

Chriszine: Yeah, absolutely. And one idea you had to redress that was to have a scholarship programme. What made you think that that might be helpful?

Jaqueline: Because Creativity and Change is a course that is designed to address issues. I think we'd be too comfortable just waiting for people to come *apply for the course*. If you are really interested, you have to go and find *students*. Say: 'We need more diversity. Where can we find diversity? What can we do?'

Chriszine: After you made this suggestion, Jacqueline, we went away as a staff to think about this and try to figure out how could we put this into place. We were able to get some funding to put together what we ended up calling the 'Amplifying Voices' scholarship. September 2020 was the first year that we were able to take in students on this scholarship and two of our first students to be able to avail of this scholarship where Shiva and Aram so I might get you both to introduce yourselves. Tell us a little bit about yourselves, how you found your way to Creativity and Change and anything else you'd like to share about yourself. I'll go over to Shiva first and then Aram.

Shiva: I'm based in Cork and I'm a writer and printmaker, but I have quite a long professional background in education from Australia and the UK and in human rights policy and strategy development. I suppose we're talking about how we found our way to Creativity and Change… I'm going to go off on a tangent.... I was looking at this story that just came up recently about National Football League (NFL) players who… when they have a brain injury from the game have historically been given less support… *for* those injuries because they were believed to be cognitively inferior, and I think that's what I've been thinking about...the feeling of being thought of as inferior when you come from a different place and a different background into the Irish education space or into the Irish professional context. And educationally, whatever experience you have and you bring is sort of nullified... I found it really dismissive, directly and indirectly racist... that's added to by the fact that then you've got the Department of Justice which affects your actual status here and means you are a non-national which doubles your *college* fees. If you're going to have to

go and get these qualifications to be recognised for things you're already qualified in and then you also can't get work. It's harder to go and find the funds to pay double the fees. It's like what Jacqueline was saying, when you see that one person in the room, think about... how many barriers that have been created by white Irish systems to keep us out *that* they've already overcome to get there. Anything that's done to address that is just an opportunity that is so needed because it's balancing what is undermining us from those same systems.

Then the other thing I was really looking for was a community that was open and willing to listen. When I walked into spaces, you know I'd get comments like 'the push for diversity is undermining white male Irish voices' and I just sort of thought 'you're a white man with a microphone. I don't think you've got a problem'. But those kinds of things were happening frequently and I thought, ok, if there's a bunch of people who are interested in Creativity and Change, then they're open to listening. This might be the space where I'd find support and at least an openness to talk about issues.

Chriszine: Shiva, there are some important themes you've brought up. You spoke about the additional barriers in both work and in education you've had to overcome. You also spoke about wanting to be part of Creativity and Change because it provided an opportunity to connect with people that might see things similarly, or at least be open to having these conversations. And here's a question you'll have to answer honestly. Did you find *that community* or are you still on the search?

Shiva: Look, when you enter an educational space or actually any space you don't know what lessons you're going to learn. You have an assumption about what you're going to learn, but you might learn a completely different lesson.... There was a really interesting lesson I learned about myself and my capacity to create change in this space… I was in a space where I could be as direct *about racism* as I wanted and as clear and precise as I wanted… I really took time to look at how my energy levels were affected by that. What I was comfortable with and what was I not comfortable with? It was happening in a

safe space where, in other positions there were huge power differentials and my income would be compromised. So this was a really good experimental space for me, which wasn't what I was expecting to do and it helped me to understand as well where people were coming from… So it's not quite the lesson or the thing you might have come in for.

Chriszine: That's really interesting. I want to come back and pick up on that again, but before I do, I want to introduce Aram and hear his voice in this space as well. So Aram would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background, your interest in Creativity and Change, and how you found your way onto this course?

Aram: Well, thank you very much. I am adding to what is mentioned before about finding connections and learning more about ourselves and the environment around us. Those are two key points I would like to *agree with* before introducing myself. My name is Aram Wahoud and I'm a visual artist. I was born in Syria and I fled after the war started. I stayed in Lebanon for eight years as a refugee. There, I found myself advocating for people who live in marginalised areas, including me, because of my refugee status. I was not allowed to work officially in Lebanon or practice my career. I started reading about global citizenship and how the system ignores or excludes some people just because there is no box to tick for them.

And then I've been called for a resettlement in Ireland and I arrived. After one year I found out news about Creativity and Change and at that point I was looking for an opportunity to learn about my new environment. I was totally shocked with the idea of... crossing to the other side of the world where I was... challenging myself to survive as much as I can until I find a place where *people* can accept me as I am… When I applied for Creativity and Change, I found myself *saying* 'yes, this is the place that I want to be and those people that I would like to interact with' because I wanted to learn about myself in my new environment and also know and learn about the country that I'm going to stay *in, for* the rest of my life maybe... I'm here now more empowered.

Chriszine: Thank you Aram. What was it like for you coming into the group as somebody with a different background to the majority of the group?

Aram: At the beginning I found a lot of challenges. One of them is using academic English to learn for the first time in my life, so it took me a while honestly and because I was… discussing deep issues, political opinions and sometimes adding some physical perspectives that was really challenging for me because it was the first time in my life to practice English on that level of intellect... *it* usually takes me time to express it clearly. But then, I started practicing all of those new vocabularies and expressions and started being more aware of the topic that's been discussed and that was also by the help of my *fellow students*, mostly because they tried a lot, sometimes to simplify… The other side of the story is when we used to meet face to face during our sessions in Cork I was also at the beginning a little bit hesitant, a little bit shaky, a little bit confused because I couldn't navigate with a new city. Some *of the other students* used to cycle with me even if I am the last one in the cycling line just to make sure that we are all together and… that would maintain trust... So those were two different challenges. One of them was logistic and one of them was linguistic.

Chriszine: Thanks Aram. Would, anyone else like to add to this question about what it was like for you to come from a different background than the majority of the group?

Jaqueline: I will speak to this now. Apart from the inferiority that I already mentioned that I had in the beginning, I think that there was something else I wasn't expecting... I felt I had the responsibility of speaking always from another point of view. I always had to bring my experience, always talking about the place where I'm from, or the continent where I'm from. *It...* was like a heavy responsibility. *I told myself* 'I'm here representing these people and I have to remind myself and always speak up... I have to speak up because I *am* the only one. I have to, you know I had to.

Shiva: I'd follow on from that… The burden of this responsibility is dual. *It's* about how you will be judged because you're the first person allowed in, or you're the first person present there. But then also *the question is,* how to help others have access as well… I was just thanking Jacqueline for using her voice. Because of that, we're here, you know. And when I was looking at the course, it was like 'this must be OK, because they've at least put out support for people who are coming from minority backgrounds. So that means that it might be a place that listens' and all of that factored into my decision making.

I did the same thing Jacqueline did when she was in the class, saying, 'why is there no one else here? You're talking about the world'. I *asked* 'why are you entitled to make all these decisions with no input from somebody who's actually going to be experiencing the repercussions of the decisions you make?' I'd sort of question or follow up on… something that I felt didn't sit right with me. But afterwards, I would get messages from fellow students who were saying 'thank you for saying that. Thank you for bringing that up. I didn't know how to say that. I didn't know I could say that'... Well, that's really powerful and I think it's similar to what Jacqueline was saying that you know, you ended up without wanting or asking for a role of educating.

Chriszine: Aram, do you want to jump in and say anything about that? If you experienced that? Or maybe have a different perspective?

Aram: Well, when I was in Lebanon I used art principles as a means to create a safe place and I was part of many different organisations that were working in Lebanon to create a diverse place where we can have a group of participants and to explore with them in a non-formal education… I'm not here just for studying this topic and to be a receiver. I'm here to interact and to act as well as a practitioner. In Lebanon *I gained* field experience and *I'm* shaping it up now in this safe environment in the College on that academic level *which* helped me... to understand and figure out what I can take for later and what can I leave as well.

Chriszine: Thank you Aram. You have all raised important points regarding the need for diversity in development and citizenship education. Are there any other changes you think we could make to lower the barriers for students from ethnic minorities?

Jaqueline: I will just once again *agree* with what Shiva said about the recruitment *and how there should be* diversity everywhere. There should be diversity in all levels *of an organisation* not only within *the student population*. And I know it is really, really hard for people coming from other backgrounds to get into the Irish system of education. So that… should be addressed, either by putting *in a* change or... it's a conversation that needs to be had.

Shiva: But another part of that, that would be good to look at is how you implement leadership yourself and what barriers you are creating and where your gaps in knowledge are creating those barriers. Things like what Aram was talking about, *such as* academic engagement with English as a second language. *You need to ask yourselves if* you are maximising people who have incredible skills in other areas and are allowing them to flourish with the strengths they have? *The course was* heavy text based, *which* was creating its own barrier and that was a leadership decision or a planning decision that was made that became another barrier... Some of that will be solved by bringing in leadership that is diverse.

Aram: The other point is for people on this scholarship and this is related to the donation issue, I think at some point because I arrived... one year and a few months before applying to this school and I had to leave everything behind I had no tools to do anything and I struggle to find basic materials, even a pen and paper sometimes was a struggle for me because I just arrived with two pieces of luggage. So maybe that would be taken into consideration. Or, I would allow them to access Internet as well because our year was totally *an* exception and I had to update my devices to be able to connect with the Internet because when I assigned to the course I thought that I'm going to do it face to face and not online and then the pandemic started and I had to figure it out myself.

Chriszine: Thank you so much Aram, Shiva and Jaqueline. We appreciate the time you've given to us in this interview and we hope we can continue to develop this course, and our practice as development and citizenship educators, to become more inclusive and diverse.

References
Singleton, J (2015) 'Head, Heart and hands model of transformative learning: Place as a context for Changing sustainability values', *Journal of Sustainability Education*, Vol. 9, pp. 1-16.

Shiva R Joyce is a writer, poet and printmaker. She received a University Medal, Dean's Award for Excellence and David Kilmartin Literary Award for her studies in accessible and inclusive education. She holds a Masters in International Public Policy and Diplomacy from University College Cork (UCC) and is currently reading at Oxford University in creative writing and completing an ethno-ecological poetry collection. She is a current Transform Associate Artist at Mermaid Arts Centre, a Dublin Fringe Festival WEFT Studio Artist and features editor of *Good Day Cork* which began amplifying underrepresented voices in Irish media, arts and poetry in 2018. https://linktr.ee/ShivaRJoyce

Aram Wahhoud is a visual artist based in Lismore, Co. Waterford. He was born in Damascus and spent around eight years in Lebanon as a refugee. He uses a multidisciplinary approach to produce art projects that focus on social justice and human connections. Aram did many experimental artworks creating sculptures, performances and interactive puppet shows. He found two independent projects to produce visual artworks

and arranged many developmental workshops that focused on wellness and self-expression during his residency in Lebanon. He designed, managed and facilitated activities using a non-formal educational method for people with various disabilities. In addition, Aram has received awards from the Arts Council, Lismore Castile Art, Ettijat-Independent Culture and the Goethe-Institute. He has been recognised as a professional visual artist by Visual Artist Ireland and become a member of Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA).

Jacqueline Moreira da Silva is an early years' practitioner, writer and an arts enthusiast. She is a former student of Creativity and Change at CIT and is supporting the volunteering group 'It's OK Cork' (at the Kabin Studio) which focuses on well-being, mental health and community. She is completing her first poetry collection in Brazilian Portuguese.

Chriszine Backhouse is a course lecturer on the Creativity and Change programme, MTU. She has an MA in Dramatherapy from Concordia University, Montreal, Canada and has researched how theatre can expand and strengthen connection to community and nature resulting in a deeper commitment to environmental actions. She is co-founder of Speak Out: Theatre for Transformation, a Cork-based theatre company that has been working in the area of community development since 2008.