

Gallery: Tate Modern & Tate Britain

Filed under: Research

Created by: Emily Pringle on 1 September, 2014

Exploring the 'Cs': Cultural Capital, Critical Race Theory and *Circuit*

Recently I have been reading a colleague's thesis on interventions to improve retention and achievement on Fine Art courses amongst non-traditional student groups. In the thesis I came across the concept of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which was new to me, but which I think is relevant and interesting in relation to *Circuit* and particularly to how we are evaluating the programme.

Very briefly, CRT when applied in education contexts (according to the writer Tara J Yosso*) challenges the traditional interpretation of cultural capital and provides an alternative lens through which to position socially marginalized groups. Yosso cites the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu whose writings on cultural capital are frequently quoted in relation to debates around different social groups' knowledge and how this relates to social mobility. Yosso takes issue with Bourdieu's argument that *'the knowledges of the upper and middle classes are considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society. If one is not born into a family whose knowledge is already deemed valuable, one could then access the knowledges of the middle and upper classes through formal schooling'*, since this assumes that those outside of the middle and upper classes are inherently lacking. Yosso's concern is that, from this basis schools work towards helping *'disadvantaged'* students who are seen as culturally deficient rather than focusing on the wealth of *'cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalised groups that often go unrecognised and unacknowledged'*. In doing so educators seek to transmit the values and expertise of the dominant class to those that are seen to be in need of improvement, rather than recognising the varied cultural capital that students possess.



Lorna Simpson, 1991, *Five Day Forecast*

For Yosso, CRT (which emerged from the racial emancipation movement in America) provides a means of challenging this deficit model and drawing attention to the liberatory potential of education. Within CRT, culture (and hence cultural capital) is understood more broadly and accommodates rich and varied forms of knowledge and experience. Thus students who may not have access to white upper and middle class resources are nonetheless seen to possess skills and knowledge which they bring to any educational scenario. From a CRT perspective it is the responsibility of educators to acknowledge this innate expertise; we must not just transmit knowledge but instead work with students to build on their existing competences to explore and develop new knowledge that may potentially challenge dominant forms of culture and thereby broaden our shared pot of cultural capital.

We must not just transmit knowledge but instead work with students to build on their existing competences...

So why is this relevant to *Circuit*? *Circuit's* core aims include making a positive difference with and for young people and improving access and opportunities for harder to reach young people. The Programme is committed to providing opportunities for young people to steer their own learning and create cultural activity across art disciplines within the context of the art gallery. Ignoring for a moment the thorny issue of the term 'harder to reach', it would seem that *Circuit's* aspirations are in line with CRT, in that the focus is on enabling student-led learning and promoting young people's cultural agency through engaging with multiple forms of art production. In simple terms, *Circuit* does not foreground the transmission of cultural capital through art history lectures for young people, for example, but rather champions young people as cultural producers by supporting them to develop and participate in varied cultural events and programmes. Furthermore, in line with CRT, *Circuit* has a strong social justice agenda rooted in the recognition that all young people have the right to create and participate in culture.



Jason Evans 1991 [no title]

To achieve these aims from a CRT perspective *Circuit* needs to challenge the deficit model of cultural participation – young people should not be framed as lacking cultural capital as narrowly defined, but rather in possession of strengths and competences that should be acknowledged and built on. This in turn suggests that *Circuit* needs to pay close attention to how it understands the impact the programme has on young people, particularly as the programme aspires to benefit young people through supporting them to change.

In other words, we need to be mindful of how we understand what young people bring to the programme and what changes are deemed to be beneficial and by whom. We need to recognise what young people value, both in themselves and in the programme, even if we may not place the same degree of value on these elements and we need to acknowledge the changes young people identify for themselves as much as the changes that others identify in them. For these reasons it is vital that young people's voices and views are at the forefront of *Circuit*.

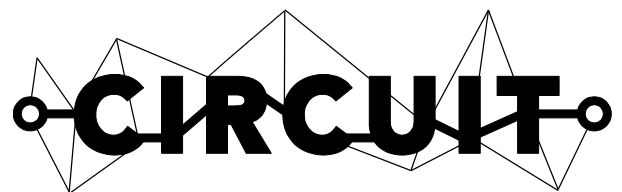
It is also why young people are active agents within the evaluation of the programme. We want young people to document and articulate their experiences of the programme and their learning for themselves as much as possible. The 'Circulate' group of young evaluators play a vital role in this process but in addition throughout the programme there is an emphasis on participants developing and using creative ways to evaluate what has happened. This process takes time and commitment and is not without challenges but it is essential. Enabling young people to become involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation process helps ensure that the participants' cultural agency extends to any assessment of the achievements of the programme; young people can determine what worked and what didn't on their terms. It also helps to foreground young people's own cultural capital brought from their homes and communities and reminds us that young people may be determined to be 'harder to reach' but that this does not equate to lack of skills and knowledge.

Young people may be determined to be 'harder to reach' but this does not equate to lack of skills and knowledge.



Adam Broomberg Oliver Chanarin 2010 *Untitled (Boy on tip toes)*

* Tara J Yosso, *Whose Culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth.* In 'Race, Ethnicity and Education' Vol 8, No 1, March 2005, pp. 69 – 91



phf Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

PLUS TATE