

Demanding the Impossible? An experiment in engaging urban working class youth with radical politics

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Introduction

In this article we report on and discuss Demand the Impossible, a London-based summer school about radical politics and activism for 16-19 year-olds. Demand the Impossible (DI) has run twice – a week-long course in 2012 at Goldsmiths University and another in 2013 at City University (hereafter DI #1 and DI #2). We believe the courses have been of pedagogical and political interest for a variety of reasons, but the most striking outcome of DI so far is that it has led to the formation of a new political group called Unite the Youth (UTY), the core of which is currently comprised of people who have attended DI events. UTY describes itself as “a movement for the marginalised, misrepresented and disenfranchised youth, against inequality and systems of oppression.” This points to the distinctive nature of UTY in the context of the UK political scene – it is a group of working class, ethnically diverse young people aiming to advance radical goals which, in our experience, is sadly all too uncommon.

To date, UTY's activities include: participating in demonstrations and direct actions organised by Disabled People Against Cuts and student activists occupying Senate House; organising a debate on Tory plans to cut housing and unemployment benefit for the under-25s; a social event and the development of social media platforms. Following these initial activities, Unite the Youth launched on March 22nd with Uprise: a six hour long youth-led political festival featuring political discussion, interactive workshops, live dance and rap. The event was planned by around ten young UTY activists, with support from us, and was facilitated on the day entirely by Unite the Youth members. Around 120 young people from inner-city London attended. Uprise was a great success in terms of providing the space, atmosphere and platform for working class young people to express their views (and anger) on political and social issues; it was slightly less successful in achieving another of its stated aims – establishing the group identity of Unite the Youth and producing concrete plans for future action.

We regard these developments as exciting and potentially important. In this article we discuss the context and development of DI to the point where we were able to create the conditions for the development of UTY. As we will show, although DI #1 had a number of strengths, it took significant revisions in our pedagogical approach, implemented in DI #2, to create these conditions. We conclude by tentatively offering some general lessons about political pedagogy that we draw from our experience.

Context

A distinctive feature of DI is that it is an attempt to discuss left and radical approaches with young people who had shown little prior interest in such ideas. Application forms and initial comments suggested the most common reasons for taking part in DI were for instrumental reasons, such as to enhance university applications, and to have “something to do” during the summer. Few of the young people on the course had previously taken part in any political activity or expressed typically “left” opinions. On the first summer school, we were struck by the way most participants were adamant that British society was fair and meritocratic. One young person, thought it self-evident that capitalism was “a system based on exploitation”, but simultaneously argued that “anyone could get to the top”. DI #2 attracted some young people with slightly more critical perspectives, but in some cases this sat alongside a belief in the inherent fairness of Britain. Intriguingly, this notion seemed linked to the fact that many participants were first, second or third generation migrants. An Afghani-British young man who saw conscious rapper Immortal Technique and Che Guevara as role models insisted that – although capitalism should be overthrown – Britain was fair and egalitarian compared to other countries, and that private schools should not be abolished.

Almost all of our participants met “Widening Participation” criteria used by universities to identify those under-represented in higher education: they came from postcode areas associated with social deprivation, were eligible for financial support such as free school meals or did not have parents who attended university. They were overwhelmingly from ethnic minority backgrounds, and a majority were Muslim. Among the 30 participants on our second summer school, we counted thirteen different ethnicities and national origins. An overwhelming majority of participants were young women, although the gender ratio was slightly less skewed on the second summer school. Most of the young people were currently studying A Levels, but academic achievement varied widely – two participants had offers from elite (Russell Group) universities, others were planning to take an enforced “gap year” after failing to receive any university offers.

In summary, then, the typical Demand the Impossible participant was a young woman aged 16-20, from a working class, ethnic minority background who attended an inner London state school or sixth form college, and who had little prior interest in radical politics or activism. Our experience suggests that young people from these backgrounds are not well represented in organisations describing themselves as “socialist”, “radical” or “left-wing.” Despite the current interest in intersectionality on the British Left, which of the recent radical initiatives of any significant scale – from Occupy, to the Peoples' Assembly, to Left Unity – can boast large numbers of non-white, working class young women and men at the heart of their organisation?

It is not our intention here to present a comprehensive critique of what we feel is the failure of radical social movements and Left groups in the UK to engage with a broad demographic. Our own involvement in activism over the last

decade does, however, point to a disjuncture between the Left's professed aims and the reality of its practice. All groups on the Left want to mobilise the most oppressed groups in society, but few have been able to engage with the way urban, working class young people see themselves and their world.

As humanities teachers in urban state schools, we have noticed a disconnect between the values, assumptions and discourses of the contemporary radical Left and those of the young people we work with. We have found that many young people tend not to offer criticisms of “the cuts”, economic inequality or individualism, and that alienation from mainstream politics does not tend to provoke a radical response. We consistently find that anti-immigrant feeling, hostility to benefit claimants and opposition to taxation can coexist with a strong commitment to fairness, justice, and even “revolution” (Russell Brand's interview with Jeremy Paxman was especially popular). In Politics lessons we have taught, some have expressed sympathy with critiques of capitalism, but have rarely seemed particularly motivated by this as they appear to regard capitalism as natural and inevitable.

We had also previously worked with some young people of a similar demographic in activist projects – the anti-fees activism as part of the 2010-11 student movement and Shake!, an arts-activism project coordinated by the charity Platform. We found them to be enthusiastic participants in these initiatives, but, at the same time this did not generally lead to more sustained involvement with social movements, let alone the radical Left.

Thus, our decision to create Demand the Impossible emerged from our sense that an experiment in engaging working class youth with radical politics would be possible, but that this would require an approach different from that of many activist groups. It was also an opportunity for two experienced humanities teachers to escape the bureaucratic and ideological constraints of the British educational system whilst simultaneously utilising some of the pedagogical skills that we have gained within that same system, in the service of radical goals.

Demand the Impossible #1: Goldsmiths College, summer 2012

DI #1 primarily consisted of a week-long series of sessions that aimed to develop a critical engagement with the broad outlines of a radical worldview – critique of existing social structures, visions of alternative possible futures and strategies for social transformation. Sessions were either delivered by us or by outside speakers. In addition to this, participants had the opportunity to carry out some political activism on the fourth morning, and the course finished with participants devising their own campaign project. Through these elements we hoped that participants would develop a more critical perspective of social structures, a greater sense of the possibility of radical social change and the motivation to become politically active – leading ultimately to the development of a network of activists.

In retrospect we see that our general pedagogical approach was to create a kind of radical version of formal school. The main way in which it reflected formal education was the use of various pedagogical techniques drawn from that field – the sessions that we ran mostly consisted of a variety of highly structured activities, using some of the repertoire of 'active learning' techniques that are in vogue in mainstream education. Some examples: we used different debating formats to debate both capitalism and alternatives to capitalism; participants analysed case studies about activism in small groups before engaging in 'peer teaching' about them; participants' ideas about the 'shape' of society were physicalised using ribbon and the arrangement of bodies; 'graffiti walls' about society as it is and how it could be were created; there were also 'activist show-and-tells', where participants talked about anything to do with activism that was of interest or importance to them. Also in the mould of formal education, most of the content of the course came 'from outside' – the ideas, case studies and facts were mostly introduced to participants, rather than coming from their experiences. There were exceptions to this – such as the activist show-and-tells – and participants often brought their own experiences into discussions, but those experiences were not generally starting points for the sessions.

Another way in which our pedagogical approach reflected formal education was that, beyond being clear that we thought that there was value to the material we were introducing, we did not reveal or seek to argue for our own views – just as we typically do not in the school or college classroom. Rather, we positioned ourselves as facilitators of the participants' engagement with the material. We were at pains to ensure that this was a critical engagement, which we achieved in part through ensuring that our sessions always involved the presentation of a range of perspectives. The speakers we invited did have the freedom to advocate for their views, but here again, to facilitate a critical distance from the material, we ensured a diversity of views – speakers represented anarchist, revolutionary socialist, feminist and other radical traditions.

It is important to note, however, that there were important ways in which our pedagogy broke with mainstream conventions. The most obvious manifestation of this was the activism session, where we gave young people an opportunity to take some political action themselves. This was probably the most innovative and distinctive feature of the course, especially since over 75% of the participants had never engaged in any activism before. Evaluation feedback showed that it was also the most popular part. Given participants' inexperience and age, we ensured that most actions were quite gentle – most groups petitioned members of the public around one of the issues that we had discussed on the course. With the help of some experienced adult activists, however, one group carried out a much more ambitious action – performing a 'flashmob' about the living wage in a Sainsbury's store, where they stayed until they were ushered out by security. The actions were then integrated into the theoretical aspect of the course, as they were used as a way of discussing different strategies for social change.

DI #1 was a success in many ways. Participants had almost no prior investment in the course (having not had to pay anything and having had the simplest of application processes) and often had long journeys to get to Goldsmiths, but most attended every day of the week, with almost all of them attending at least four days. The evaluation feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with participants reporting changes in their views, satisfaction and motivation from having participated in political activity and in many cases that it was a personally important experience. Some were extremely effusive, such as the two participants who gave the following answers:

Q: How significant has this experience been for you, if at all?

A: It has been educative, enlightening, fascinating, fun and thoughtful. I would recommend my friends. It was not for a second boring like in the class. Just after learning about the pussy rioters [sic][it was written in lower case on the original form] it came up in the news the next day and I could relate. It made me feel good.

Q: Has this course increased the likelihood of you engaging in more political activism in the future?

A: Yes, particularly the active demonstrations as they have showed me I can do it and this week has made me feel a lot more compassionate so I care a lot more now and because of this and my prior principles I want to do as much as I can to help others. You could say I want to change the world.

Indeed, all participants said that they were more likely to engage in more political activity in the future. This was further discussed on the final afternoon, where there were high levels of interest in carrying out further political activity as a whole group and continuing the process of learning more about radical politics.

However, as noted above, no network or group did in fact emerge from DI #1. This stemmed, we think, from a number of weaknesses of DI #1 – primarily from our adoption of a relatively conventional pedagogy. The most obvious problem with this was the degree to which the material for the course was externally generated, which inhibited the extent to which participants related the material to their own lives – their engagement seemed more driven by curiosity (no bad thing) than any sense of personal investment or recognition of their own relationship to structures of oppression and domination. We should note that in the initial planning stages we had discussed the importance of drawing on the personal experience of participants directly but this became marginalised in the process of prioritising and concretising our plans – reflecting the influence of the familiar (the role of the teacher), as well, perhaps, as a somewhat rationalist set of assumptions about what motivates political engagement.

Demand the Impossible #2: City University London, summer 2013

As a consequence of these and other reflections on DI #1 the second course was designed significantly differently. In this section, we identify the main points of contrast between the two summer schools.

One important development from DI #1 that enabled this was that three of the young people who had enjoyed the first summer school returned in the role of “organisers”. They were to feed back on how other participants felt about the week as well as take the lead in facilitating, provoking and mediating in discussions and other activities. The presence of these organisers (who, along with three other 20 year old volunteers, were slightly more experienced and politically committed than most participants) was crucial, since it helped establish the skeleton of the organisation that would emerge from DI #2: Unite the Youth.

The prospect of the development of a new youth organisation (or, as we and the participants somewhat grandiosely called it, a “movement”) meant the motivations, behaviour, and experiences of all involved were very different from the first summer school. While DI #1 had been conceived as something of a laboratory where radical ideas could be sampled and tested, DI #2 was framed as both an exploration of ideas and at the same time an exercise in political organising and movement building. Participants, organisers and facilitators quickly began to think and behave as though they were already part of a new collectivity. We should stress that the notion of a new youth organisation did not emerge spontaneously from the young people on the course. In a meeting with the organisers just before the start of the course, we tentatively suggested the idea that a movement could be formed. The organisers enthusiastically adopted the idea, and before long all participants were talking about “our movement” even though they (and we!) did not yet fully understand what this meant.

One reason participants felt like they were taking part in a movement was that we drew on the practices and processes of political organising as well as education. Throughout the week, the young people used consensus techniques to create a collective statement of beliefs, aims and identities. When given the option of abandoning the search for consensus in favour of majority decision making, participants almost always refused. They seemed to value the negotiation and exploration required to use consensus processes. Consensus was not the only mode in which they operated; antagonism and robust debate were also encouraged. It was here that, despite the significant changes to our pedagogy from DI #1, some of the techniques of the classroom again came in handy: various debate formats helped create dialogic and dialectical discussion that allowed participants to explore their own politics and relate this to that of others in the group.

Other parts of the week resembled a political rally, with emotional testimony, supportive applause and motivational chanting all featuring (we christened one such activity the “raucous caucus”). These varied practices enhanced

participation and fostered a strong sense of group identity. This togetherness was apparent in the way the young people sat in a large circle discussing politics (but not only that, unsurprisingly) during lunchtimes and breaks. It could be seen most clearly during the activism session in the way most of the group chose to join forces to plan a protest in the City of London: smaller groups combined their concerns to produce a mini-demonstration against tax evasion, welfare cuts, increased tuition fees and spending on war. In DI #1, by contrast, all the actions had been carried out by small groups, who did not show the same will to work together as part of a larger collective.

Reflecting on DI #1, we realised that it involved too little discussion of the social and political identities of those involved. For the second summer school, we addressed this by ending the first day with a prolonged discussion focussed on participants' identities in relation to race, class, age, gender and their relationship to wider society and the state. Although many participants were initially reluctant to identify themselves in relation to these categories (preferring to see themselves as autonomous agents), this changed during the course of the week. We also invited speakers who would focus more on their own identities than the speakers for DI #1 had – disabled, transgender, feminist and migrant activists spoke openly about their own identities and political struggles. And we ourselves discussed our own experiences of education (as both teachers and students), class barriers and gender identity. The demonstration in the City of London raised the question of how the young, multi-ethnic, working class protesters were seen by relatively privileged City workers: several participants spoke of feeling “like a stranger in my own city” after the demo. These inputs and experiences seemed to cause many of the participants to re-assess their socio-political identity. The group's collectively-agreed declaration on the final day that they were “a movement of marginalised and misrepresented youth” serves as a striking testament to the way conceptions of identity developed during the course.

For the second summer school, we decided both to surrender some control over what “learning outcomes” would be met, and to remove at times our own mask of objectivity. We – along with our organisers and external speakers – often made provocative interventions in discussions and challenged participants to respond. The course began, for instance, with a session led by a Marxist anti-fees activist on capitalism and anti-capitalism, which fed into a lively debate on the merits and demerits of capitalism today. The neat activities of DI #1, with their relatively pre-determined outcomes, were largely replaced by structured but open-ended discussions and debates. Overall, there was much more “talk” than on the first course: from us, from our speakers, from the organisers and – most of all – from participants themselves. For us, this was an unsettling but exhilarating experience.

For our participants, the mode of operation on DI #2 seemed to give them the confidence to think and act politically. This can be seen in the actions the young people planned. Unlike on DI #1, participants were given complete freedom to come up with an issue to protest over and the format of the action to be taken.

We were delighted when the two groups reported back to us on what they had planned: a protest against rape culture in the mass media and the occupation of a bank headquarters! (Unfortunately, the constraints imposed by our relationship with City University meant we had to reluctantly suggest that this latter action be changed to a demonstration on the streets outside the bank.)

Conclusions

What, if anything, can be learned from the experience of Demand the Impossible? The most obvious point is that we have shown that it is possible to engage urban working class youth with radical ideas – something which happens all too rarely. But the more interesting question is what kind of pedagogical approach is best suited to this task. To consider the approach we have developed it will be useful to contrast it with other positions. In our experience, radical political organisations and groups often have pedagogical approaches that lie near, or are some variant of, one of two poles. Presented simplistically, the first of these is a didactic approach in which the task of radicals is to bring revolutionary consciousness to the working class and oppressed groups, who will be otherwise unable to attain it. The second is a libertarian one in which radicalism is held to develop spontaneously from within, given appropriate conditions, as expressed by a woman from the radical funding body Edge Fund, who was sceptical of our role in DI: “why don't you just give them the resources and leave them to it?”

In retrospect, we can see that, despite its participatory nature and our positioning ourselves as neutral facilitators, DI #1 was closer to the didactic pole, given the predetermination of ideas and concepts to be engaged with. In learning from that experience and redeveloping the course, however, we would not say that we simply moved closer to the libertarian pole. After all, despite the greater freedom and ownership that participants had in the discussions of DI #2, a good deal of content was still externally generated – and deliberately so. Rather, what we sought to bring about was an articulation between radical ideas and everyday experiences and political understandings. This contrasts with the didactic approach by adopting a more flexible attitude to matters of doctrine and theory, but it is also unlike the libertarian approach in having a disruptive quality – participants were encouraged to express and explore their political ideas and identities, but had many of their assumptions challenged by ideas, perspectives and identities they had not encountered. So if there is any pedagogical message to take from our work so far, it may be that a pedagogy based on articulations and disruptions of this sort is worthy of consideration.

These conclusions need qualifying, however. Firstly, there was a large set of contingencies that has made DI possible. We both work with working class young people, have experience of activism and are reasonably well networked on the Left, which has been useful in attracting speakers. We were also able to obtain free space at Goldsmiths for DI #1 because Jacob was studying there part-time. Second, our approach is still in development, and we expect DI #3 to

be different yet again from its forerunners, as we continue to reflect on our pedagogy and learn from others, not least former DI participants. Lastly, it remains to be seen what will happen with respect to Unite the Youth. Our hope is that the group will soon be able to organise without our support, but they have not yet reached this stage. This creates certain tensions and difficulties around our role: how do we ensure that the “scaffolding” we provide builds, rather than limits, Unite the Youth’s capacity for autonomy? How do we respond to the deference the young people involved sometimes show to us as older adults and teachers? How much strategic and political advice should we offer as the group attempts to establish itself? Much of the next few months will be about dealing with these questions. And as we go through the process of reducing and ultimately withdrawing our involvement in the group, we will also see how well they are able to operate as an autonomous youth organisation. In terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches we have adopted, this will be the most significant test yet.

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