

A PEBBLE IN THE SHOE: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION.

A CONVERSATION WITH LILIAN NWANZE-AKOBO AND MATTHEW WEAIT

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Ester Cois: An intersectional approach is necessary to counteract the risk that different inequality factors (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, health status, migrant background, etc.) are treated in watertight compartments in university continuous education, inducing one-dimensional policies to combat discrimination and promote diversity. What could help to strengthen a practical intersectional approach from your point of view and position?

Matthew Weait: Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding and addressing inequalities. Research indicates that students' educational experiences and outcomes are not determined by single factors such as gender or socio-economic status but are impacted by the intersection of complex identities and systemic / structural inequalities. For example, a low-income female student from a migrant background may face distinct challenges that are not fully captured when considering these categories in isolation. Her experiences are shaped by the aggregation of economic hardship, gender biases, and possibly language barriers or racial discrimination. There is sometimes a tendency to compartmentalize different forms of inequality, treating them as discrete issues rather than interconnected phenomena. This compartmentalization can lead to strategies that address gender inequality without considering socio-economic status or which support migrant students without acknowledging the unique challenges faced by migrant women or LGBTQI+ migrants, for example.

Strengthening lifelong learning involves the design and implementation of programmes and policies that acknowledge how various inequalities intersect. This demands an evidence-based approach with comprehensive data analysis, aligned with institutional missions and underpinned by a recognition of the importance of social justice. Educators and those responsible for the development of policy need training in intersectionality in order that they can address diverse student needs effectively. Curricula should reflect this diversity, incorporating inclusive materials and perspectives, and, wherever possible, content that addresses both legally protected and (where they are not subject to legal protection) socially, culturally and economically significant characteristics. Collaboration between educators and others responsible for delivering students' learning experience is essential for a holistic approach to inequality. Critically, the involvement of students in policy development can provide insights into the barriers they face and practical solutions. Finally, research and evaluation are important in assessing the effectiveness of these interventions and approaches.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: There is also a tendency for intersectionality to take up a life of its own and attain the dreaded "buzz word" status. So much so that it becomes all strategy, or policy or theory and makes its way into documents and speeches. This is all good only to the extent that the lives and experiences of real people are impacted positively. At the heart of intersectionality should be stories. The different ways identities can intersect are limitless and while we cannot capture all intersectional possibilities at a given time, if we can create avenues where critical conversations (and stories) can be held (and shared) by people who are directly impacted by the intersection of their identities, we can capture and deal with real issues that arise. If we could reframe our focus and look more at what stories people are actually telling about their experiences with oppression and concentrate on attempting to ameliorate the effects of those, we would be practicing intersectionality automatically. It is then that we can theorize, strategize and analyse. Start from stories, then understand intersectionality. Not the other way around.

Matthew Weait: I agree, and in a sense being Director of a Department creates challenges that are intersectional. The role can be understood conceptually, through an academic and political lens, and also as one that has to be concretely implemented in organizational and institutional realities. Adopting an intersectional approach involves attention to the theoretical

literature that addresses it – I'm thinking about Kimberlé Crenshaw's¹ or Patricia Hill Williams'² work here - and the need to understand how this plays out in the practice of education. The distribution of educational opportunities always involves a filtering mechanism. This means that in managing any application, enrolment, or recruitment process, institutions cannot help but necessarily be, to some extent, "reductive". It is not possible to set up an institutional process that is infinitely responsive or sensitive to all possible differences. When an institution addresses the persistence of apparent disparities in who is accessing programmes or opportunities, it must always deal with a management problem, which consists of defining which of the peculiar characteristics of people can be taken into account to promote equity and diversity. However, this necessarily means reducing people to some of their most visible characteristics or to those that are "easier" to address. So, the reality of intersectionality in the classroom or learning space, in all its potential variety, may be different from the institutional imperatives on how to address access and inclusiveness, which must relate to the sole characteristics of the people who have been defined as relevant and detectable.

For example, at the University of Oxford, where for some courses there are around twenty applications for every place, it was well known that admissions from state schools were historically under-represented. Just as it was known that students of Afro-Caribbean heritage or ethnic background were underrepresented. Even more so, the intersection between these two characteristics - coming from state schools and Afro-Caribbean origin - represented very few people. Addressing this problem was *relatively* easy thanks to an access and participation plan that took these two characteristics into account to improve representation. This, however, does not apply to all the possible characteristics. An institution knows the information relating to the school of origin of the applicants and can also ask people for information on their ethnic identity, but everything becomes increasingly difficult to manage the more the spectrum of information to be provided broadens to consider "other" characteristics, which cannot be displayed or easily shared. People have their own privacy, and may not want to share other subjective dimensions, perhaps because they don't want them to become part of how they are identified. Or the intersection between a growing set of characteristics could identify such a small number of people that it would not be possible to report on this without making them immediately recognizable and identifiable. For example, you could identify in any year at Oxford those people who identify as disabled, transgender and who are also Muslim from an ethnic minority background. That would be a very small number, if such a person existed at all (as it would be in, I suspect, in any higher education institution).

There's a real difficulty in institutionally facing the challenge of intersectionality because it introduces a difference between how diversifying the pool of people admitted, based on some selected elements, and how intersectionality manifests itself and could be concretely managed, in the lived experience of people once they enter the learning space.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: I agree with you, Matthew. In my role as an educator who interacts with learners in the classroom, intersectionality plays out in a different way than it would when I wear the hat of Director of an academic program. I agree on the need to distinguish between different dimensions of an intersectional approach. For me, I see three levels of dealing with intersectionality. First, there is a "Macro" level, which is the theoretical or policy level. Then there is a "Meso" level, which could be the "academic" environment. But then there is the often neglected but very important, "Micro" level, that deals with the actual lived experience of an individual. On the policy and theoretical level, we tend to adopt very broad

¹ See, for example, Crenshaw, K. (2017) *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. New York, NY: The New Press

² See, for example, Hill Collins, P. and Bilge, S. (2016) *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

and standardized definitions in order to “encapsulate” everyone. These policies are purportedly created in order to achieve a positive impact on the lives of people. I think there is a need to facilitate those in authority to reflect on the purposes of policies in the first place and to make it clear that if the impact of the policies is not felt at the micro level, the entire policy-making enterprise would have been a waste of time! The major way to find out about the impact (or otherwise) of policy, is by listening to the stories and the experiences of people. We can do this by creating communities of practice or dialogic spaces where people can sit and have authentic critical conversations about their lived experiences within our educational spaces. We must recognise the power and the potential that story telling has to uncover and highlight the different ways people's specific characteristics intersect and how these can continue to change over the course of their individual biographies. Even within people with similar identities, intersectionality can play out very differently. In a seminar where I presented the findings of a research I did with Black migrant women in Ireland, a discussant challenged me about the need to have highlighted the socio-economic identity of the women in my research. The thing is, when I interviewed these women, the issue of class or socio-economic background was not highlighted as an issue for them. For them, irrespective of their occupation or status in society, whether they were medical doctors or people working at the lower levels of the healthcare sector, to be engage with dignity in the society, they had to overcome many obstacles other than class. So, although I know that an intersectional approach must theoretically also take class into account, if the people I talk to tell me that class is not the main problem for them, who am I to say that class must still intersect with the experience of potential marginalization they are facing? Of course, this can undermine the canonical and "macro" approach to intersectionality, yet it is through collecting and listening attentively to the concrete stories of people that we can check whether inclusive policies are working and having an impact on the ground.

Matthew Weait: I agree. When we think about categories of intersectionality, our personal narrative reflects our disciplinary perspective and also our specific academic position, as if it were already filtered through a certain set of privileges. That's why we must always deal with our own experience, which may not coincide with our theoretical framework, even if this leads us to decide whether to include socio-economic status as a relevant distinction. We must also add two further dimensions.

The first is a biographical and temporal dimension because the intersectional experience can change over time. For a female student, for example, it could change when she obtains a doctorate awarded by her university or when she enters a narrower and more privileged group as an associate professor. Any new status will not change her gender or other aspects of her identity, but will certainly mediate them, changing the way she perceives and lives her identity within academia. And it probably will change again when she becomes a full professor.

The second dimension is institutional and has to do with how much the status, role, and space one occupies within an organizational framework matter. If you are a manager, a director, or a leader of an institution, this element is part of your identity, and will inevitably intersect with every other characteristic. It will be easier to negotiate and manage decision-making processes because you already have a voice that is provided by your institutional position, it makes a difference. When you speak in a meeting, people listen to you, and not necessarily because you have something useful to say, but because of a kind of deference to the position you occupy. Yet, even this top institutional space can prove to be more precarious, depending on other characteristics with which it intersects, such as gender or race, as the President of Harvard discovered when she lost her job. Probably, given the same institutional space, if she had been a white man instead of a black woman, this would not have happened to her, and she would still be in her place.

Since the temporal and institutional dimensions of intersectionality make it changeable over the life course, I think that carefully listening to people's stories and giving them the space they deserve is fundamental for those who hold decision-making powers within an institution to understand the impact of their political choices.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: My current academic experience fits well with these remarks. I have experienced greater empowerment since becoming the director of one of the teacher training programmes at my university, but this continues to clash with the fact that I am a black woman. For example, when people refer to the programme, normally they turn to my fellow white male co-director, even though we have the same role. This means constantly undermining my authority, especially in front of students. Although people often don't even realize it, imagine going through this five times a day, five days a week, for many years. It becomes exhausting. It can impact you. Again, these are the little things that a general policy cannot address, but this personal dimension is no less important.

Matthew Weait: Lilian has a fundamental goal, to become a pebble in my shoe, forcing me to be aware that my privileged position does not always guarantee I fully grasp that intersectional mechanisms can work differently for other, more vulnerable people. This is the provocative power of storytelling.

Ester Cois: A possible effect of a superficial adoption of inclusive policies is the so-called "tokenism," i.e., the practice of making only a symbolic effort, for example, by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of gender or racial equality within an organization. Based on your concrete experience, do you think that tokenism is a widespread phenomenon? And if so, what could be done to counter it and by whom?

Matthew Weait: Tokenism can be a real problem, arising from the pressure to demonstrate that action is being taken - a desire or need to be seen to be doing something - or to meet eligibility criteria for specific funding programmes, for example. There's a risk that we make what are merely symbolic efforts rather than delivering genuine, substantive inclusion and change. Institutions may feel compelled to showcase diversity through superficial measures, such as hiring a small number of underrepresented individuals or featuring them prominently in promotional materials, without addressing the underlying structural and other issues that perpetuate and reinforce inequality. This can lead to a situation where the presence of a few diverse individuals is used to occlude ongoing exclusionary practices and policies. It can put additional pressure on educators and students from minority groups - for example on hiring committees - adding to their work.

Addressing tokenism requires a sustained commitment to meaningful change. First and foremost, institutions should focus on long-term structural changes rather than superficial diversity efforts. This means revising hiring practices, creating inclusive curricula, and fostering an institutional culture that genuinely values and supports diversity. While being transparent about areas of under-representation can be risky for universities, leading to negative press and media attention, it can also lead to significant improvements. Support systems are also important. Mentorship programmes, peer groups, and professional development opportunities for those in underrepresented groups can contribute a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for community and solidarity. Inclusive policies must also be developed and enforced to tackle discrimination and bias, with regular diversity training for staff. As far as funding is concerned, institutions should collaborate with funders to develop criteria that prioritise genuine and sustainable inclusion efforts. We could also think more creatively about regulatory frameworks that incentivised genuine inclusion. This might include accreditation standards that emphasise diversity and inclusion outcomes.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: Undoubtedly, tokenism is bad. It reinforces marginalization and oppression and is almost like insult upon an injury. However, I think that there are other ways to frame this issue of tokenism. I like to refer to what Critical Race Theory (CRT)³ calls “interest convergence. Interest convergence is a tenet of CRT that states that the interests of black people (or people who are minoritised) would only be considered when these interests align with the interests of white people (or people of the dominant group). In this sense, tokenism can be used as a strategy. There are times when I am invited to spaces that ordinarily would be inaccessible to a Black person. It is obvious at many of those times that I am invited as a tick box “diversity face.” At times like this, I use tokenism as a strategy, and I take the opportunity to address issues that my host would be embarrassed to ignore or to do nothing about. I am only able to raise these issues and to bring my voice into that space because I was invited in the first place. There is definitely scope to use tokenism in a positive way.

I recently went to my children’s primary school to give a talk to a class of 5th-year students. I was asked to talk about “Nigeria”. It was one of those “cultural day” talks that schools would usually put up once a year, to tick the box of doing diversity. As I walked into the classroom, I noticed a young girl who was obviously of a dual-ethnic heritage. As I got to find out later, her parents were Senegalese and Irish. I introduced myself and mentioned that I taught at Maynooth University. I was immediately struck by her reaction to my very brief introduction. She pulled her hand backwards really dramatically and released it into the air whilst at the same time shouting a loud “Yes”! She was so delighted and proud that someone who looked like her could be a university lecturer and she didn’t hide that. I was very aware that I was entering that space as a “diversity person,” as a Nigerian woman, as “the tokenistic parent”, wanting to get the whole thing over with. Yet, here was a student who didn’t see tokenism but saw that her race wasn’t broken and that she could become anything she wanted, just by me standing in front of the classroom. Even if this was the only thing I could do that day, even if that girl was the only person who benefited from my presence, it was worth it! Of course, this is a big deal, because it means we must consider our impact one person at a time.

So, while tokenism can be damaging, there is usually a hidden opportunity that pops up when people on the margins are brought into spaces they could otherwise not inhabit. Stating that good can come out of the very toxic practice of tokenism is very uncomfortable, and I don’t encourage tokenism in any shape or form. What I would encourage is for us to facilitate people on the margins to see “the tokenistic game” as a space for advocacy and for activism, and to encourage them to take advantage of those spaces in a critical and constructive way.

Matthew Weait: Tokenism could also produce some weird things. In fact, the law requires it sometimes; for example, most HR policies and guidelines oblige to include at least one woman in hiring committees. The goal is to make gender representation in higher education less asymmetrical, but since in some disciplinary fields the women who have seniority and position requirements to be part of these committees are very few, it happens that they will have to bear a larger proportion of the burden. Likewise, this happens to people from different ethnic minorities, because there are still too few who meet the criteria to serve on those committees. I am aware that this is tokenism because to move forward with the procedure for doing that committee, there is no other choice. But, as the chair of that committee, I feel embarrassed when I’m forced to ask the same people again and again because they, too, are aware that have been included as “the token professor” or “the

³ See, for example, Crenshaw, K.W., Gotanda, N.T., Peller, G. and Thomas, K. (eds.) (1995) *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. New York, NY: The New Press

female professor on the panel". This is another challenge: sometimes this mechanism can give the impression of a more diverse pool than the person selected by that commission will experience once joining the institution. The narrative of a diverse group may not correspond to the concrete field experience once recruited.

Moreover, this mechanism makes me feel guilty, so much so that when I am not obliged to ensure a diverse committee, due to institutional policy or the law, I feel pressured to self-police not to do it. I don't want people to feel like they're being invited because they're "the black person on the panel." This is a destabilizing sort of introspection, that often affects the kind of "progressive white male", who tends to internalize a sense of structural guilt whereby he does not want a person to feel that the reason why he/she was included in is his/her specific "protected minority" status, just to give the impression of being part of an intersectional space.

I have a great example of this. In my Department, we invite a guest speaker to our award ceremonies. It is true that in some programmes, we have more minority ethnic students from than in other parts of the university, but we cannot call ourselves a "racially diverse programme". And I'm aware that I tend not to invite a black keynote speaker to appear in front of an almost entirely white audience because I don't want him/her to feel like the only "diversity person" in the room. This is a challenge for people in top positions. And Lilian's words make me think, when she states, "I can exploit this mechanism, I can use it". How should I solve my dilemma? Should I actively give people the opportunity to speak so they can become visible in those environments and not deny them the chance to have a voice? But at the same time, I can't help but be transparent with those people and inform them in advance that the audience will be predominantly white, or middle class or whatever, and maybe give them the choice to participate anyway, or not. Perhaps this is the most appropriate behaviour. But I am also aware that this is a kind of "liberal guilt game," which can have a negative effect on progressive practice, creating an interesting paradox in leadership. It really is "a pebble in my shoe".

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: I think that at the heart of any Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiative should be an ethos of love and the concept of humanity. If we take humanity and love away from EDI initiatives, we would be left with an empty lifeless shell that has no impact on the lives of people. I think the answer to this dilemma Matthew is to simply name it. Say it as it is -, "I feel guilty bringing you into this space, but do you think you want to come here anyway?" Allow people on the margins to consciously choose if they want to be in that 'tokenistic' space or not.

Otherwise, what would happen, is that your sense of guilt, would push you to make the decision for them and even with the best intentions, this would become an action steeped in white privilege. For me, there are times when I turn down requests to be the tokenistic face but every time I get the opportunity to be asked, I am grateful and I can decide, using my own agency, whether I want to be there or not and I can prepare accordingly.

Just a suggestion: Stephen Brookfield (2021)⁴ spoke about cluster hires to counter tokenistic recruitment. So, rather than hire one minority ethnic person, hire a cluster!

⁴ Brookfield S.D. and Hess M.E. (2021) *Becoming a White Anti-Racist. A Practical Guide for Educators, Leaders and Activists*. Sterling, VA: Stylus

Ester Cois: Promoting equity and diversity in the framework of university lifelong learning requires a structural cultural change. Do you think that it should also include specific programmes for staff development to be sustainable? Which concrete actions could constitute good practices in this perspective?

Matthew Weait: To effectively address diversity and promote genuine inclusion we would need to implement a number of things. First, comprehensive diversity training programmes are essential. These should cover unconscious bias, cultural competence, inclusive pedagogy, and the importance of equity in education. Additionally, they would need to include awareness training about the specific demographics of our local and regional student communities. Second inclusive curriculum development is crucial. We need to ensure that our curriculum reflects diverse perspectives. Engaging staff and learners in revising course content can help incorporate materials from underrepresented groups and address issues of inequality and social justice. In our department, we require all new programmes to align with our Mission, Vision, and Values.⁵ Providing teaching resources is another important step. Staff should have access to resources and toolkits to help them design inclusive syllabi and adopt teaching practices that accommodate diverse learning needs and backgrounds. The University of Oxford's Centre for Teaching and Learning offers a range of such toolkits.⁶

Creating peer support networks for staff based on shared identities or interests is also beneficial. These groups can offer peer support, advocacy, and a platform for discussing specific challenges. At the University of Hertfordshire, we had various networks, including a Menopause Network, which addressed important issues impacting people's experiences beyond the standard protected characteristics. Leadership training is vital to fostering an inclusive culture. We need to train and support leaders who are committed to implementing equitable policies and practices. Role modelling inclusive behaviours is crucial for leaders. Having Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) champions can further our efforts. These advocates can lead initiatives and promote best practices within their areas.

Regular policy and practice reviews are necessary to ensure that our institutional policies promote equity and do not inadvertently disadvantage any group. This includes reviewing recruitment, promotion, tenure, and evaluation processes. Finally, developing external partnerships and collaborations with community organisations focusing on equity and diversity can provide valuable insights, resources, and support for our EDI initiatives. In our Department, we have successfully partnered with organizations like Asylum Welcome⁷ and the University of Sanctuary scheme⁸.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: Allow me to bring everything back to stories. Listen to stories from all kinds of people with all sorts of intersecting identities. Let stories inform policy, strategies and plans. And then keep checking. Often, we have robust strategies and plans in place but we forget to check with the people whom these things are meant to "help." So, increase spaces and communities of practice where stories can be told as well as check periodically that these things are achieving the effects they were meant to.

Storytelling is one of the tenets of critical race theory because people are experts in their own lives, and that applies to absolutely anyone: people on the margins, women, men. But not just storytelling as "a rant", because that's one of the criticisms of CRT. What I propose, rather, is that we should facilitate critical storytelling, critical dialogue and normalize it in academia at all levels, both at the administrative level and at the management level,

⁵ <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/mission-vision-and-values>

⁶ <https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/resources-hub>

⁷ <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/news/oxford-continuing-education-awarded-20000-bid-for-diversity-fund>

⁸ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-05-11-oxford-university-awarded-university-sanctuary-status>

supporting those communities of practice where people basically can sit down and critically discuss the things that affect them.

There is a lot of talk about “de-colonizing the curriculum,” but that’s very vague and often used without really defining what it means. Some form of de-colonization of academia generally will be positive, but I also think that beyond the ‘*what*’, the ‘*how*’ we do it is important. The diversifying of the curriculum for instance, should not be tokenistic and superficial. Just putting in your syllabus 3 black or minoritised ethnic authors, as optional reading is not just inadequate but could worsen the inequities in the system.

Matthew Weait: There is not only the “reading list”, but also the buzz word of “de-colonising”. In Oxford, we’ve moved towards kind of not de-colonising so much as not deracialising. In the UK, the phenomenon of colonization has a very particular resonance, given its history, very different from other contexts, such as Ireland, where “de-colonise” would be a very odd and perhaps inappropriate word, given that it was a colonised country. At the University of Stockholm, where I was a visiting fellow ten years ago, as part of a research project with the Department of Criminology, they instituted what I thought was a very smart practice: in their reading lists, they required presumptively a 50% male and 50% female authors. But precisely the impossibility of doing that in some disciplinary fields, due to the absence of a sufficient number of female authors, became an opportunity for critical reflection on those reading lists, because the course leaders were required to write an explanation for why there weren’t 50% of the women. This caused people to pay attention to the absence of the possibility of including if you’re doing a primary sources ancient philosophy course. There are not enough female authors. There might be more poetry; there might be Sappho or some women whose writing survives to the present day. But you know it’s going to be Aristotle, Plato, and all the old Greek philosophers, all men, the ones who got their words saved. The question was: what do you do to rebalance that in your writing? It was a concrete action because even the absence or serious gaps become the opportunity for critical reflection, a learning opportunity, and a chance to think about training programmes for staff.

I also agree with the importance of communities of practice. Think about the Menopause Network at the University of Hertfordshire, or the Women Professional Standards Network, or the LGBTQI+ networks, which are on the list of most institutions now. But, even where there is freedom of expression, in the West, it is interesting that we didn’t have a male-white privilege network. It’s just as important to give people the opportunity to find space to reflect on the advantages that they have as opposed to the things that set them apart, creating the opportunity for critical self-reflection. The only place we managed to do this was in Hertfordshire, in a men’s Health Network framed around physical and mental health and well-being, but apart from a couple of closed-door sessions, it was open to everyone. Men wanted to have spaces where they could talk about their things, in the same way that women wanted to have spaces where they could simply talk without men being present. Sometimes, it became a space where people didn’t exactly beat their chests, but where issues around privilege could be honestly spoken about. Otherwise, privilege will continue to remain just background noise, against which everything else is evaluated and judged, but without self-critical and conscious reflection.

There is another interesting question. Learning, teaching, and education are a dialogue that takes place both between a person and a group or between people in the group, but bilaterally and collectively in a space. It’s very important to open up the space and make the edges of learning more osmotic and more liminal, so as to recognize that learning can also happen in communication with communities beyond the formal institution and standardised learning processes. Take what you have learned with you when you leave the classroom and bring into the classroom what you have learned outside, to break down the barrier between the classroom and the community. This connection with community organizations,

so that they can also bring their experience into the classroom, gets a voice through the power of storytelling.

When Lyndsey El Amoud was working in Cork with the wives of the traveller community, that could not have happened unless they were the voices that determined how it could work. They were active participants in the construction of the learning outcomes and the mode of delivery, also with respect to timetables: at what times of day it needed to be taught so that they could go back in time to make tea or cook or do all those other things which were the concrete reality of those women's lives. It's a really important thing, but very difficult to do, because often the resources for these progressive programmes are not enough, in terms of funding, time and people. Higher education and lifelong learning are creaking at the seams in terms of what resources and capacity are available.

Lillian Nwanze-Akobo: Letting the community lead is how we work in adult education. We need to find a way to mainstream it in the rest of academia. That is definitely a way forward. I also think that communities of practice for privileged people are a great idea. Once the critical framework is well structured and people don't talk just to feed their egos, then the community of practice could really work.

Matthew Weait: To conclude, I'd like to share two inspiring quotes. The first, by the social geographer Nicholas Blomley (1994)⁹, is focused on academic activism and progressive politics. He describes the role of the intellectual as a critical organic catalyst, someone who remains outside academia and progressive organizations but maintains a close relationship with academic developments.

"I am still left with a search for an alternative model, one that navigates between the opposed perils of academic elitism and political disengagement. How can we contribute to and learn from progressive struggles without reinforcing the hierarchies of privilege, silencing those with whom we work? What can I offer? What do grass roots activists stand to lose from such an exchange? Does my status and economic power necessarily create distance? Is our role that of catalyst, facilitator, or student? How much of my angst entails a quest for self-validation or "holier-than-thou" status? How much of ourselves are we willing to put on the line, given an institutional system that rewards docility and obedience?"

The second quote comes from my inaugural lesson as a Professor¹⁰, a long time ago now.

"For me, nowhere is the importance of taking account of the experience of those directly involved in combating unsafe law at the grassroots and of acknowledging the academy's debt to their work in making law safer more clearly illustrated than in the following, personal, experience. In 2010 Jennifer Gatsi, an activist and member of the International Community of Women Living with HIV, gave a talk at the World AIDS Conference in Vienna. Her presentation was to be about the widespread forced sterilisation of women and girls with HIV and AIDS in Namibia - one of the most egregious human rights violations in the history of the epidemic (ICW, 2009), and not a story whose horror is easy to communicate, not least in the artificial, air-conditioned confines of a windowless seminar room in the former capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those of us in the audience waited, each in his or her straight-backed chair, pens and notebooks at the ready. And then, from a seat in the front row - not from the podium, not from a position of formal, staged, authority - Ms Gatsi stood up. And she looked around. She looked at each person in the audience in the eye, one by one, black and white, positive and negative, old and young, gay and straight, man and woman,

⁹ Blomley, N.K. (1994) 'Editorial', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12(4), pp. 383-385. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d120383>

¹⁰ Weait, M. (2013) 'Unsafe law: health, rights and the legal response to HIV', *International Journal of Law in Context*, 9(4) pp. 535-564. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552313000293>

academic and activist, and then she spoke in a voice just loud enough for all of us to hear: 'My brothers and my sisters', she said. 'Listen. Listen and you will understand.'

This is what the power of storytelling is. There wasn't a dry eye in that room. Jennifer Gatsi is an amazing person, and her experience as a woman living with HIV, as an activist, as someone living in Africa and managing this total destruction of women's bodies through coercive biomedical interventions, was incredibly inspiring. As educators we learned more from that conversation, about how we should refer to lived experience, than we could ever get from any book written by anyone. And it happened in an instant, in a seminar room in Vienna, in 2010. And I have never forgotten it. We all have a different voice, maybe not as extraordinary and powerful as Jennifer's, but unique. What if we could stand up and say, "Listen, just listen. And maybe you will understand," that would be a really good message. This is the very meaning of lifelong learning, because you never know whether, right now, you are a learner, a facilitator, a catalyst, or all of these roles at once. This is intersectionality: you are all those identities.

Ester Cois: Thank you very much for this inspiring conversation.